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Navy Views

Academy English Professor Bruce Fleming Takes Civilian Snapshots of Military Culture



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By **John Dicker**

EDUCATION SNEAKS INTO MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE in one of two general ways: through politically charged winkspeak about test scores and school budgets or via sensationalist grief carnivals after blood orgies of the Columbine model. What actually transpires in the classroom is rarely addressed. Even when popular culture pushes into the classroom, it's usually to watch Michelle Pfeiffer grandstand to the natives or Robin Williams inspire future investment bankers to read Yeats.

In *Annapolis Autumn: Life, Death, and Literature at the U.S. Naval Academy* (The New Press), Bruce Fleming, an English professor with some 20 years under his belt at the U.S. Naval Academy, initiates a no-holds-barred conversation about the often thankless task of teaching literature to Naval cadets. While his grievances are certainly germane to his own predicament, his anecdotes and analyses often speak to a plight that goes beyond an institution whose students are paid to attend class.

What's remarkable, if not from page 1, is that this intermittently episodic and polemical book manages to surpass what Naval loyalists will surely see it as: the fulminations of a bitter civilian

academic. However, Fleming is far less bitter than resigned to walking a weird professional tightrope—and tight it is—between the inquisitive tradition of liberal arts and the crudely pragmatic, deeply hierarchal culture of a military school. This anecdotal first-person account is told from the perspective of an insider’s outsider—the author is not “in” the military so much as he is a pedagogical vendor—and Fleming elucidates hazing rituals and other aspects of the academy’s culture with neither the hushed reverence or snide cynicism that can accompany writing on the military.

As a civilian and presumably a tenured one, the consequences for Fleming’s airing the Naval Academy’s dirty underclothes are less severe than that of, say, a colonel. In fact, he has previously spoken out against the academy’s affirmative-action practices (he’s not a fan) in the pages of *The Washington Post*, among other publications. And at times, *Autumn* is also about the desperate employment prospects for academics. When Fleming compares the Naval Academy to Annapolis’ other college, St. John’s College, the envy is hard to ignore. Perhaps that is because only since the Vietnam era could cadets choose to major in such decidedly nonmilitary subjects as English or history. Adding humanities was a bone the institution threw out to counter the anti-military sentiment of the times. Though humanities were added to the academy, the institutional culture there never fully accepted its legitimacy. In fact, Fleming notes that the school still reserves the right to reassign students majors if it believes it’s “in the best interests of the Navy,” and that the school’s technical purpose—to train the Navy’s engineers, aeronauts, and the like—is stressed in the curriculum.

But the disconnect between what Fleming defines as the Naval Academy’s classic origins is nowhere more apparent than in the classroom. There are some wonderful, if abbreviated, *Stand and Deliver*-style scenes in here that make plain his plight. For instance, in response to anti-war literature from the likes of Erich Maria Remarque and Tim O’Brien, young cadets observe, “It doesn’t make you want to attack.” Yes, certainly.

To his credit, Fleming has been around the Naval Academy quad enough times to comprehend the stark differences between the clear-cut, goal-oriented design of the academy’s curriculum with the morally ambiguous nature of a literature discussion. Hell, even the notion of discussion—without a specific goal—reeks of relativism, something military culture has as much enthusiasm for as National Coming Out Day.

While the classroom is Fleming’s palette and arguably his greatest anecdotal fount, it’s hardly his only concern. The contradictions inherent in the academy make for easy and irresistible pickings. For starters, there’s the thorny fact that an institution funded by taxpayers and dedicated to the protection of the public at large fosters a culture of downright contempt for the very same people. “I wish I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard the phrase ‘civilian scum’ here at Annapolis,” Fleming writes. “The midshipman are told, and most believe, that what they are doing is a higher, purer, better thing than the lives of the people not fortunate enough to live on their side of the Wall that surrounds the Academy.”

Fleming is, however, keenly aware of the mind-sets that wall separates. His students don’t slouch or miss class for keg stand-related injuries. They hardly even pout. And Fleming isn’t shy from defending his school—and his marginalized purpose there—from other academics that

condescendingly question its educational legitimacy. It's an internal debate that appears on the pages of *Annapolis Autumn*'s sprinkling of micro chapters, interrupting their seamless flowing together. One moment Fleming is deconstructing how female cadets' uniforms emphasize their lack of male physical prowess, the next he's in a polemical mode arguing against affirmative action, or at least the Naval Academy's version of it. And then he's on a submarine cruise with students in the Atlantic.

However disruptive, most of these diversions have the benefit of being interesting—precisely because of Fleming the insider/outsider observer. Without any military pedigree himself, he is a witness to the culture of the place but not of it. He has to stop for marching phalanxes of cadets, but without his ID badge or tie they barely offer him the time of day. Clearly, he admires military culture's splendor, but not the intellectual impoverishment, with its endless emphasis on literature as purely motivational exercises—an Oprah's Book Club seized by testosterone pirates.

And what ties this book together are telling anecdotes that hit on the idiosyncratic nature of masculinity. Despite the relatively recent admittance of women, the Naval Academy remains as steeped in penile culture as any Big Ten frat house. Fleming offers the case of one surly cadet who had little time for his English class. One day their paths cross in the pool. Practicing for his swimming exam, the cadet was clearly floundering. Mistaking his English teacher for someone else, he asks for a lesson. Only after Fleming physically positioned the young man's limbs and moved them in the right direction did the cadet catch on—but that was enough. From that day forward, the kid had a newfound respect for his professor and started to do well in his class. What the cadet could not respect intellectually—a bunch of novels that didn't further morale—he could when it translated into the realm of the physical.

Fleming doesn't portray this situation as ideal, but rather for him as inevitable. A working model who tends to his physique, Fleming offers other examples where his physical prowess helped garner the respect he couldn't as master of books. One episode has him doing a double-barrel flex immediately before a lesson on *Madame Bovary*.

Certainly Fleming can come off as self-serving, if not self-righteous, and those who can't stomach criticism of affirmative action will unfortunately stoop to label him a bigot of one sort or another. But these criticisms lose the point. As Fleming notes, military culture remains a mystery because the military wants it that way. Like so many institutions, its selfless purposes mask a more immediate one: self-preservation. Shedding light on it, as Fleming does, is undeniably illuminating. But at the same time, it begs the question of why, for all his mixed feelings, Fleming has bothered to stick it out there? Perhaps injecting brazen cadets with a dose of moral complexity feels more useful or even subversive than being surrounded by like-minded Marxists on the greater American quad.