

# Hedonists, Sociopaths & Eccentric Dons\*

Degrees 'R' Us

ANONYMOUS



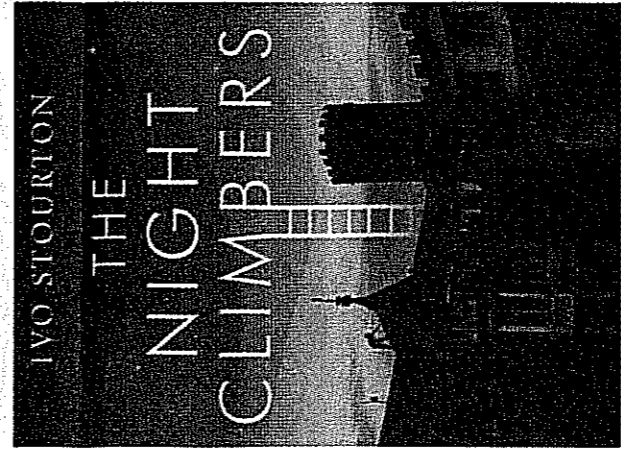
A sequel to the best-selling A Campus Conspiracy

Students come a very poor second to the imperative of making money

**Degrees 'R' Us**  
★★★★★

Initially the title of this satire made me cringe; it seemed bland and certainly didn't inspire me with confidence in the skill of the writer. However, within pages I was laughing out loud at the outrageous yet worryingly recognisable behaviour of the administrators of St Sebastian's University. The new Aussie Vice Chancellor, Professor Alf Flanagan is called in to save the university from financial difficulties. In between occasionally throwing his wife down the stairs, indulging his habit for collecting cuckoo clocks and the odd 'fair dinkum' he builds on his mafia-like contacts in the casino business in order to establish the new casino management course at the university.

The university is convinced to give all manner of odd degrees to suspicious institutions for large sums; hence the title. The unwilling hero of the novel—Mr. Anonymous himself—is drawn in to the hilarious events as his phi-



Ivo Stourton  
**The Night Climbers**  
★★★★★

The premise of Ivo Stourton's debut novel is not an original one: a group of youths with access to obscene amounts of cash embrace a life of decadent hedonism only to find themselves spiralling towards misery and self-destruction. It's a story as old as capitalism itself. A tried-and-tested formula is not an irredeemable flaw, however, and Stourton injects this one with enough new twists to freshen it up and make it his own.

The tale is narrated by James Walker, a lawyer and Cambridge graduate with an addiction to porn and a penchant for prostitutes. When a crush from his student days pays him an unexpected visit at his office he takes her back to his apartment. As the two reminisce, the almost-plausible story of James's undergraduate career is revealed through a series of flashbacks. Stourton handles these transitions from present to past elegantly, subtly contrasting the sweet, naive boy James was when he matriculated and the amoral yuppie he has become.

As a lonely and insecure fresher, James is delighted when he falls in with charismatic

\*Any similarity to persons at the University of Cambridge is purely coincidental

losophy department is phased out, along with other 'old fashioned subjects like Mathematics, English, Physics or Theology' to make room for the new courses, including one in stripping, or rather 'artistic dance'.

Dr. Felix Glass finds himself in several peculiar situations, their comedy only increased by his utter Englishness. His bemused and touching indignance upon being led into a room filled with porn DVDs when he asks to see the academic library in the Vegas based main faculty is just one in a series of increasingly comic events. My favourite was the unveiling of a giant portrait of a very camp St Sebastian being attacked by arrows which pin fifty pound notes to his muscular chest. The perplexed academics proceed to wonder why the university swiftly becomes the top location for civil partnership ceremonies as overjoyed new grooms pose in front of the portrait. After all, says Felix's fellow rebel Magnus, 'Buggers can't be choosers'.

Beyond the enjoyable if slightly schoolboy humour, the novel is a clever and unforgiving attack on the increasing trend in today's universities, in which 'the students come a very poor second to the imperative of making money.'

Mixed in with this is an insight into the dark side of the departmental politics of academia, for example when Felix is systematically bullied out of his department by his new colleagues. Few are left unscathed by the author's witty yet cutting insight. The new chaplain, Friar Chantry-Prigg, for instance, preaches poverty and abstinence yet spends his time eating caviar and groping the members of the choir, whilst being constantly followed by his parade of 'effeminate boys.' This is, however, more than just the bitchy and funny diatribe of a grumpy academic. The author is proficient at creating credible, likeable and quirky characters that I genuinely cared about as well as interlacing several stories which were skilfully brought to resolution.

This is a riotous comedy with a very dark, cynical side as well as an enjoyable story. It provides an enthralling insight into the other side of university life and should be enjoyed by all who have ever been in some way connected to a university. It's also fun to try and recognise characters and places in the novel, although I'm sure the eccentricities of academia are equally comical at universities nationwide.

Katie Gibson

Sebastian Faulks  
**Engleby**  
★★★★★

Engleby is not a comfortable read. Set largely in Cambridge, Faulks's latest offering takes us inside the unstable mind of Michael Engleby and recounts the build up to and the aftermath of his time as an undergraduate, when 'something terrible' happened. Unlike his previous novels, Faulks has not had to venture far beyond his own backyard of memories for historical detail. Where, as *Charlotte Gray* and *The Girl at the Lion D'Or* called for Faulks to flex his Francophile wings and swoop inside military history, Engleby begins in the 1970's and follows the protagonist through a career that largely echoes Faulks's own—aside from the criminal convictions, that is. Public school, Cambridge, Fleet Street; all mark progressive stages in the author's life just as they provide the backdrop for this unnerving tale, and it is in the anecdotal detail of these settings and their inhabitants that Faulks's prose shines.

From early on, however, the protagonist's almost autistic attention to detail and uber-cool attitude creates an uneasy relationship with the reader—one which never quite recovers. Even as we read the narrator's final words we are suspended in a state of ambiguity, unable to decide whether Engleby is inherently evil or criminally insane and while this ambiguity is provocative initially, it results in a kind of apathy towards the character's all-too-predictable fate.

The depictions of bullying in his public school, on the other hand, are harrowing. Michael is frequently subjected to naked baths before dozens of voyeuristic adolescent eyes and is often forced to sleep on a soaking mattress. At one point he is forced to lie still whilst an older boy masturbates over him. In these moments his perverse-

ness in adulthood is somewhat explained and yet his lack of emotional response prevents us from sympathizing with or excusing his actions. It is understandable for a heart to harden as a defence mechanism. It is not quite so easy to understand one born as hard as stone.

His days at Cambridge are spiked with a heady mixture of drugs, precociousness, lonely pub-crawls and narcissism. To see the true beauty of the city we must look through the more sober eyes of Jennifer, the object of Michael's obsession. Her diary entries are refreshing in their youthful innocence: 'I do love the dirty brick of the miniature terraces and the mist from the river and the cold mornings, even now in May,' though even these are tainted by the notion that they are being recollected by a profoundly disturbed mind. For someone who knows Cambridge well there is always the joy of identifying the loosely disguised colleges and local landmarks. The Eagle is referred to as 'The Kestrel', whilst colleges are amusingly decipherable. His own room in college, for example, is 'in courtyard that I reached by a tunnel under the road'. Ideas anyone? The Fleet Street years are enlivened by encounters with such political characters as Jeffrey Archer and Margaret Thatcher yet unfortunately this section bears the distinct feel of the dentist's waiting room as we distract ourselves with celebrity lives whilst awaiting the inevitable. In the midst of clambering up the journalism ladder Michael is finally whisked away to a mental asylum after the truth about the 'terrible' event is discovered by the police, long after the readers have figured it out. Faulks's research into psychiatry for *Human Traces* is well-used in these final chapters and hints of something resembling humanity in Michael—his attempts to spare his sister further pain, his growing fondness for several other patients—are welcome after a read as cold as the Russian winds blowing across the Fens.

Sarah Willkinson