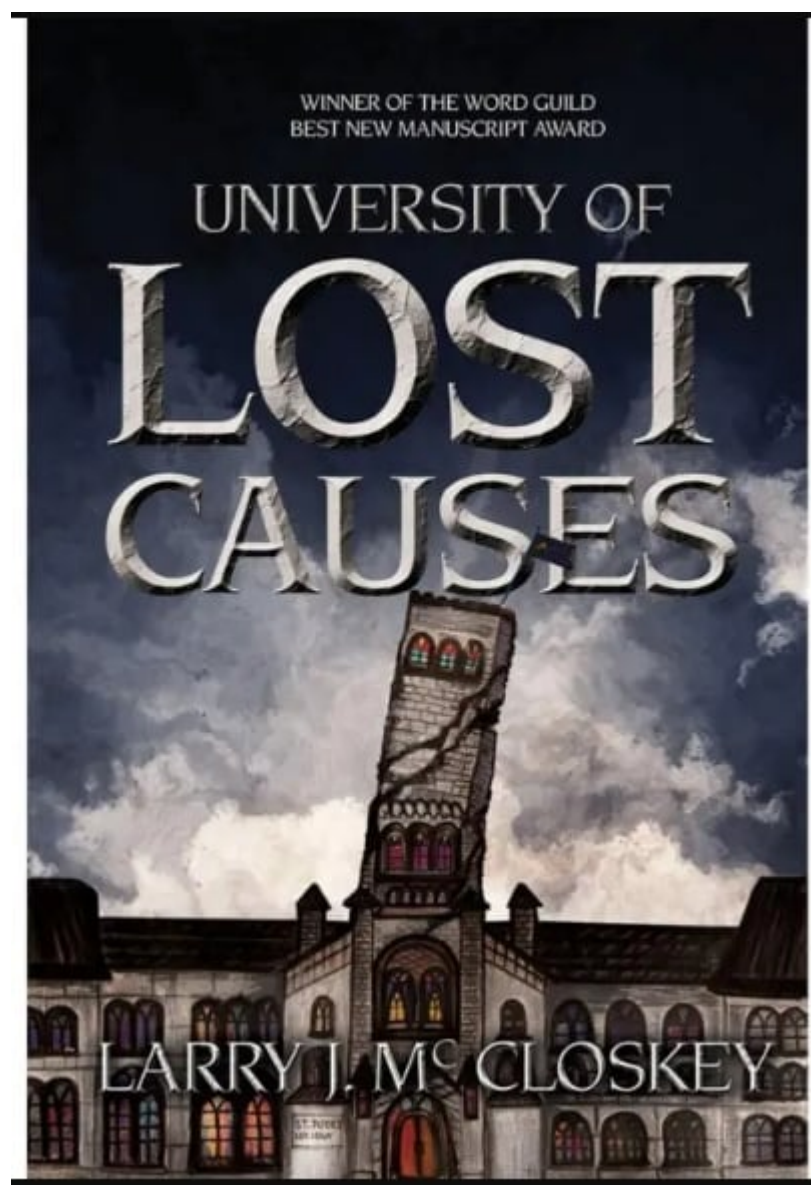


'University of Lost Causes': Illustrating Absurdity With Absurdity

By Dean George

Author Larry J. McCloskey weaves a farcical tale of a fictional university, narrated by a quadriplegic administrator.



Civil unrest and cultural politicization on university campuses today is ongoing, but author Larry J. McCloskey has managed to weave those happenings into a humorous storyline in his satirical new novel, "[University of Lost Causes](#)." His book is to university culture what Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" was to the contradictions of war and the military chain of command.

The book is written as a [tongue-in-cheek farce](#) on today's hypersensitive college environment. McCloskey sets his story in the near future at St. Jude's University, a fictional New

England school striving to become the world's most progressive institution of higher learning. The institution is named for the Catholic saint of lost or hopeless causes. But this school is a thoroughly secular institution that worships at the altar of utopian ideals. Here, we have a big dose of diversity, equity and inclusion, intersectionality, and nonsensical contradictions, such as mandating electric cars without the ability to charge them.

The author worked for decades in higher education. He was director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. He says he loves universities and students, but regrets what those institutions have become.

"Ideology is borrowed thinking, antithetical to what universities used to stand for and were conceived to do. In its closed loop, self-replicating fashion, the university modus operandi is often unhinged and one-sidedly political at the expense of relevance, utility, and inspiration."

"University of Lost Causes" features a recurring theme based on a quote from Voltaire: "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

A Merry Band of Misfits

Written in the first person, McCloskey's narrator is an acerbic, big-hearted quadriplegic named Phelim O'Neill. O'Neill is the longtime director of St. Jude's Center for Students with Disabilities, or what he drolly calls, "Our Island of the Misfits."

O'Neill is a wisecracking administrator who refuses to play mind games but is wholeheartedly dedicated to meeting the needs of his special needs' students. His personality is reminiscent of Hawkeye Pierce, the flippant but brilliant doctor on the television show M*A*S*H. Hawkeye was more focused on doing his job and saving lives than adhering to the military bureaucracy.

Thanks to a loyal and dedicated staff, O'Neill has become an ad hoc national spokesman for assisting students with disabilities. He also becomes a sitting duck in the crosshairs of an administration that would rather cancel him than put up with his refusal to bend a knee to current cultural sensibilities.

O'Neill admits to readers early in the story to being a bit of a character, and it doesn't take long to see why. During faculty meetings he likes to ruminate about a storyline plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. This serves as an escape hatch from ideological diatribes and discussions of male toxicity at university meetings.

When the college created the Department of Mental Wellness, Self-Care, Mindfulness, and Life Balance, O'Neill asked "how a department sounding like a spa might help students with serious mental illness."

Despite his irreverence towards the university's preoccupation of giving students whatever they want rather than teaching them critical thinking and the wonders of civilization, O'Neill stays true to his personal philosophy. He claims, "I'm not against human rights, but the notion that everything is a human right is not helping twenty-year-olds figure out this life and where they might fit into it."

As the story unfolds, O'Neill and his close friend John Staffal, professor of English literature, prove to be flies in the ointment of St. Jude's plans to become the most progressive Ivory Tower environment anywhere. Because of that, they're the archnemeses of the special adviser to the president (SAP) of Exceptional Student Experience.

"Our simple efforts are about people; her equity appropriation is about power," O'Neill says. "That dehumanized Machiavellian rendition—the one that has taken the country by storm—promises what can never be delivered and will be injurious to those who believe, while the purveyors of manipulation will never suffer the consequences of their actions."

Tension mounts as St. Jude's identity politics clashes with the immovable object of O'Neill and his outnumbered compatriots. The feud culminates with three campus deaths; there are also administration accounting shenanigans involving millions intended for O'Neill's department to be redirected for DEI initiatives. The battle finds the wheelchair bound hero living to fight another day in his inimitable, inclusive way.

'Farcetopian Tale'

The book offers a full complement of colorful and memorable characters that McCloskey expertly uses to parody university politics and gratuitous virtue signaling. It's through the eyes and actions of those characters that the author pointedly satirizes his subject in a unique, page-turning tale that is less rant and more parody, comedy, and tragedy.

"I've come up with the term 'farcetopian'—what else could account for the absurdity of our times," McCloskey said in an email. "Though the satire is biting, it's a character driven novel. It's not simply a rant. Oftentimes, the best argument is simply to lay bare what is with a nudge towards the absurdity of what could soon be," he added.

The storyline begins on Halloween and concludes at Christmas. In between, readers are treated to several stories. There is a compelling tale involving O'Neill taking in two nuns evicted from the campus convent. A wedding is hastily arranged for a larger than life staff member with terminal cancer. On-campus security must be set up for a debate involving Canadian psychologist and cultural lightning rod Jordan Peterson. And O'Neill bonds with Pearl, a precocious 8-year-old wunderkind, who is his attendant's daughter.

In a compelling plot twist, three campus tragedies pit the university elite against the old school diehards ("the drool of cool vs the mold of old"). The ensuing tug-of-war produces

some surprising and unanticipated results.

Readers who enjoyed Dr. Stanley Ridgley's "[Brutal Minds](#)" will find McCloskey's book a fictionalized complement to the former.

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