

MFA Thesis Novel: A Book Club Guide

A Q&A with author Ian M. Rogers

Q: What inspired you to write *MFA Thesis Novel*?

A: As the novel itself hints, *MFA Thesis Novel* sprang from my experience in graduate school at the University of Nebraska, though my program was technically an MA. I was workshopping a novel based on my time working in Japan, but the subject matter and the style I was writing in were so foreign that people around me couldn't relate to the book. At the same time, the program seemed to be pushing us to build up longer and more impressive CVs rather than improve our writing, which I found disconcerting. Like *Flip*, it took me a long time to realize which parts of the program were helpful and which parts weren't conducive to the career path I was looking for.

Q: When did you actually start the novel?

A: I started toying with the idea of a novel satirizing academia during my second year of grad school, but it wasn't until after graduation when I'd distanced myself from the program that I felt confident enough to start outlining it. That distance helped a lot: if I'd worked on the novel when I was still in the program, not only would it have been impossible to workshop, but the text would have included a lot more bitterness. The takeaways of the novel also would have been a lot murkier, because I needed time to reflect on my experiences and how the program wasn't functioning to its full potential. Without that time and distance from something that's affected you emotionally, it can be easier for bitterness or frustration to make their way into the text, and that doesn't necessarily read well—though of course, there are exceptions to this.

Q: Are the characters in *MFA Thesis Novel* based on real people?

A: At one point in the story, Jackson tells Flip that novels are really distorted fun house mirrors of reality (an observation I should attribute to the writer Christopher Miller, one of my undergraduate teachers), and that figuring out the inspiration for a book involves undistorting its events. In that respect, none of the characters in *MFA Thesis Novel* are stand-ins for real people, but they do embody different mindsets that people I met in graduate school held about academia. I borrowed from a lot of different—and in my view, unhealthy—viewpoints to create Kendall's character, chief among them the idea that status is the most important measure of whether someone is worth talking to. Jackson and Melvin were actually characters I cut from an early draft of my first, unpublished novel, and I think they found a much better home in *MFA Thesis Novel* than they did there.

Q: Did the novel go through many changes when you were writing it?

A: I usually start writing with a bare-bones rough draft that captures the basics of what I want to convey, then focus the story and characters during revision. In earlier drafts, Flip came across as much more sarcastic and naïve than in the finished novel, and I rewrote the Lawrence and Brad chapters several times to capture the exact sentiments I wanted. Because the middle portion of the novel consists of disparate scenes separated by days or weeks, these sections felt aimless in earlier drafts, so I connected them more closely using the story thread of Flip striking bargains to push back his workshop deadlines.

Q: Many characters in the novel embrace a level of hopelessness about academia and the job prospects there. To what extent does this match your own views?

A: Don't get me wrong; there are still well-paying, stable positions in academia that are quite good—there are just far fewer of them now than there used to be, and the competition for them is fiercer, especially for young graduates without a lot of publications. I became aware of this almost immediately after starting graduate school, but even though everyone else knew this too, no one was willing to talk about it directly unless we were out drinking, or felt comfortable opening up one-on-one. The other graduate students never voiced these concerns during class or in their writing, and they certainly weren't altering their career goals based on these realities (though several of them did after finishing the program). This awareness of the difficult job market created an atmosphere of competition throughout the department, where instead of helping each other and sharing information, people would seek out opportunities for themselves and try to develop their careers in a very individual way. Over time, I found that this isolated most of the graduate students and prevented them from bonding over their actual writing or creating a stronger sense of community, as Derzen points out during the bar scene.

Q: How do you think people in academia can create a healthier atmosphere?

A: The novel never offers a real answer to this question, partly because I didn't have an answer when I wrote it, but partly because I think posing simple answers to complicated problems in fiction can come across as preachy or idealistic. Creating more and better opportunities in academia—especially within the humanities—would, unfortunately, require drastically restructuring the systems we have in place now. Academic unions have made tremendous strides for better working conditions in recent years, but a lot of institutions aren't unionized, and many

people in academia aren't aware of what unions are doing or how they can help. Increasing the stipends for graduate students and the pay rates for lecturers would certainly alleviate a lot of the financial pressures these groups are under, and this could be done by obtaining more funding from states and cutting back on bloated administrator salaries, which have skyrocketed in the past few decades. Adjunct faculty are often just as qualified as tenure-track faculty but aren't paid nearly as well, and they often have little job security, no health insurance, and little to no voice in making decisions in the department. I'd also love to see federal or state legislation limiting institutions' ability to rely too heavily on adjunct labor, which has directly contributed to the elimination of full-time faculty positions over the past few decades.

Q: Do you recommend graduate school as a path for emerging writers?

A: As with so many other things, the answer is, it depends. There are a lot of different MFA and other writing programs now, especially low-residency ones, as well as writing communities and learning opportunities that aren't connected to a degree at all, so finding the best solution for you is easier now than it was one or two decades ago. That said, it can be hard to tell whether a program will be worthwhile going in, so I recommend doing your research carefully and talking to people who've actually been through it.

Q: Should emerging writers take on debt for a graduate degree?

A: Like Flip's program, the one I went to at the University of Nebraska offered a tuition waiver and a small living stipend, which was an excellent solution for me, especially since I was okay with moving halfway across the country. In general, I don't recommend that writers go into debt for an MFA if they can help it, but I do recommend that they look for other job opportunities

available through their programs. In my case, during grad school I started picking up editing gigs through the listserv emails that would go out to everyone in the department, and those jobs helped me build up an academic client base over the years through word of mouth. That client base is where most of my income comes from today, and while I couldn't have predicted this when I started, these were opportunities I was open to, and that have benefitted me in the long run.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like readers to take away from *MFA Thesis Novel*?

A: In writing the novel, of course I wanted to make people laugh and give them an enjoyable reading experience, but I also wanted to capture that feeling of being a young person who doesn't know which path is right for you when you're surrounded by people telling you to do it their way. At the end of the book, Flip has this decision somewhat made for him by others, but in another, bigger way, he brings the novel's consequences on himself by prioritizing meaningful art and relationships above everything else. The world can be a very difficult place for people like Flip and Derzen, and navigating life's hazards can lead to bitter disappointments and hardships, even if it's ultimately the path we really want to take.

Discussion Questions

1. *MFA Thesis Novel* includes numerous excerpts of novels written by characters within the story. What effect do these excerpts have on the novel as a whole?
2. In Chapter 37, Flip talks with Derzen about the different stresses they face in graduate school and how these stresses wear away at their confidence. What stresses mentioned in the novel resonated most with you, and how do they differ from those faced by people on other career paths?
3. In the Q&A, the author notes that the characters in the novel embody different mindsets that people hold about academia. Which of these mindsets resonated with you? Which ones felt ridiculous?
4. Flip spends much of the novel pursuing Derzen even though she's in a relationship with Kendall. Why does he do this? Does this affect your opinion of Flip as a character?
5. Jackson's bio in Chapter 2 explains that after his nervous breakdown, he started copying the kinds of short stories other people were writing, then stopped writing entirely. What do you think about this? Where does this kind of attitude come from?
6. In Chapter 31, Brad dismisses Flip's novel as "a bunch of first-world white-people problems." Is this description accurate? Is there room for this type of book in today's publishing world?
7. The Prairie Fire football team, along with their bright orange merchandise, holds a strong presence in the novel, though Flip and Derzen aren't interested in football. What effect

does this presence have on you as a reader, or on Flip and Derzen's experience in the Midwest?

8. Derzen mentions Sylvia Plath's fig tree from *The Bell Jar* several times throughout the novel, and in Chapter 37 she notes that going after some figs prevents you from going after others. Is this true, either for the characters in the novel, or in real life?
9. *MFA Thesis Novel* includes numerous references to other novels, as well as to movies and TV shows. Why does the author include these references, and what effect do they create for the reader?
10. Why is the book called *MFA Thesis Novel*? Is it a fitting title?
11. How do Flip, Derzen, and Kendall react to the conflicts that arise in the novel's final chapters? Are their reactions justified?
12. After reading the novel's final sentence, what do you think the future holds for Flip?