

A tale of two professions in the Swedish campus novel *Vård, skola och omsorg*

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DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.1.11

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Linn Spross. Campus novel. Quit lit. Swedish literature. Academic fiction.
Work environment.

This article examines the depiction of two different professions in the Swedish novel *Vård, skola och omsorg* (Healthcare, schools, and social services, 2021) by Linn Spross. The narrator-protagonist quits her job as postdoctoral researcher at a prestigious university and begins working as a home care aide. The novel's chapters alternate between these two work environments, implicitly inviting the reader to compare and contrast them. The article analyzes the novel in relation to the genres of campus fiction and quit lit, showing how conventions from both contribute to the novel's critique of academic working conditions.

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A recent Swedish novel puts a new twist on the genre of campus fiction. Entitled *Vård, skola och omsorg* (Healthcare, schools, and social services, 2021), it depicts not only the academic profession, but also life after leaving it. The narrator-protagonist Julia Malmberg has held positions as a PhD student and later postdoctoral researcher at a prestigious university. One day, however, after enduring cruel criticism at a departmental research seminar, she throws her laptop out the window and vows never to return. Instead, she takes a job in home care services (called “Hemtjänst” in Swedish), providing assistance to elderly clients in their homes. The novel’s chapters alternate between Julia’s memories of academic life and descriptions of her new work as a home care aide, thus juxtaposing the two professions and implicitly inviting the reader to compare the two. As this article will show, the academic profession does not come out well in this comparison.

Author Linn Spross (born 1989) grew up in the Swedish university town of Uppsala. She debuted as a novelist in 2013 with *Grundläggande studier i hoppfullhet och hopplöshet* (Basic lessons in hopefulness and hopelessness).¹ In 2016, she completed a doctorate in economic history and subsequently held a research position at Uppsala University. After the birth of her child in 2019, however, Spross decided to switch careers for the sake of job security. “Academia is very competitive”, she notes in an interview, “There are many people with PhDs and few positions” (Annell 2021, n.p.).² Like the protagonist of *Vård, skola och omsorg*, she enrolled in a nursing program and took a job in home care services. Although the plot of the novel bears some resemblance to the author’s own life, she explains that “[t]he book is not an autobiography, although its basic story is like my own. The appeal of writing fiction is that you can dramatize, make up things, and exaggerate as much as you like. It would have been a very boring book if I had written an accurate and nuanced account of my time in academia” (Annell 2021, n.p.).

The result exhibits several features of the academic novel: partly set on a university campus, it depicts hallmarks of academic life such as research seminars and a dissertation defense, with comical and satirical elements. At the same time, Spross’s novel launches a critique of working conditions in academia today and proposes an alternative work ethic. I will examine how Spross develops this critique by drawing on two different genres: campus fiction and the more recent genre of “quit lit” essays, in which authors explain why they have left academia.

CAMPUS FICTION AS A WINDOW ON ACADEMIC LIFE

The campus novel arose as a distinct genre in Great Britain and the United States after World War II, when universities in these countries were expanding rapidly (Showalter 2005, 1). Novels in this genre are typically set on a university or college campus, with faculty members as the main characters.³ Their plots reflect the particular rhythms of the academic year with semesters, exam periods, and summer breaks. Frequent motifs include competition, power struggles, departmental politics, gatekeeping, and exclusion (Rossen 1993, 3–5). In some works of campus fiction, faculty rivalry even serves as a motive for murder, as Elżbieta Perkowska-Gawlik (2021) has shown in her study of the subgenre of academic mysteries.

Campus fiction is often written by academics who have first-hand experience of the worlds they depict (Parini 2000). They bring to it a high level of self-awareness, often with meta-fictional and meta-critical commentary (Fuchs and Klepuszewski 2019, 7). Janice Rossen reasons that it “makes sense for those who wish to comment on academe to choose the novel form; the activities of writing and reading are so closely bound together that it seems natural to write and read about ourselves as academics – even to write and read about others who write *about* our profession” (1993, 9). Merritt Moseley argues that the “academic novel can be considered the canary in the coal mine, a sensitive monitor warning of poisonous gases of which the ordinary miner is as yet unaware” (2019, 27).

In the monograph *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005), Elaine Showalter traces the development of the Anglo-American campus genre, arguing that campus novels can be read as windows on academic life. She holds that they offer readers “a full social history of the university, as well as a spiritual, political, and psychological guide to the profession” (145). Showalter’s chronological survey of the campus genre begins with works such as C. P. Snow’s idyllic depiction of Cambridge in *The Masters* (1951) and ends with early 21st-century novels such as Francine Prose’s *Blue Angel* (2000), at which point, according to Showalter, “the last vestiges of idealism” had disappeared from the genre (107). She identifies a shift during the first few years of the 21st century (which is where the monograph’s survey of Anglo-American campus fiction ends) to “cosmic, mythic, and vengeful” plots (123).

Showalter concludes that literary responses to changes in higher education tend to appear about ten years later. “Academic novels are rarely in synch with their decade of publication”, she observes, hence “most reflect the preceding decade’s issues, crises, and changes” (15). Given the significant reforms to higher education in Europe and North America since the 1990s, it is interesting to consider how campus fiction has evolved in the 21st century. As literary sociologist Jan Váňa argues, “Fictional writing embraces aesthetic devices [...], which can refer beyond concrete experience and are thus able to mediate a deeper understanding of the social landscape where this experience occurs” (2020, 182). It is also interesting to see how academic fiction has developed beyond Anglo-American contexts; as demonstrated by the volume *The Campus Novel: Regional or Global?* (Fuchs and Klepuszewski 2019), examples from different countries reflect differences between higher education systems. This article will contribute a perspective from the Swedish context by analyzing Spross’s depiction of the academic work environment.

Swedish higher education has undergone significant reforms in recent decades, including the introduction of neoliberal management practices. This follows the general trend at European universities “from a loosely coupled, decentralized expert organization to a strategically acting, managed organization”, in which “academic missions are carried out by means of increased reliance on the organization itself, and not solely by the academic community and its members” (Krücken 2020, 165). Organizational scholar Lars Engwall argues that Swedish universities and colleges have come to resemble commercial businesses (2024, 11), and he notes a resulting focus on cost-efficiency to the detriment of academic freedom, collegial governance,

and working conditions (2024). Beginning with Bill Readings's critique of the contemporary university in *The University in Ruins* (1997), a number of academic participant-observers have painted a picture of a general decline in working conditions since the turn of the millennium (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2020; Collini 2017; Fleming 2021; Ginsberg 2011; Hil 2012; Rolfe 2012; Zawadzki and Jensen 2020). A recent essay in the Swedish daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* by Ola Sigurdson, professor of systematic theology, sums up the situation in the following way:

The experience of working for over twenty years at a Swedish university has entailed not only international dialogue and mutual intellectual exchange, but also less stimulating things: a workday comprised of increased centralization and less collegial decision-making, ever more administrative systems and a heavier teaching load, more short-sighted publication strategies and policy documents full of empty phrases, more online teaching and less contact between teachers and students. (2024, n.p.)

With this background in mind, let us now consider Spross's fictional representation of academic working conditions in the 21st century.

VÅRD, SKOLA OCH OMSORG

The novel opens in medias res with a scene out of Julia's workday as a home care aide:

It has a special taste, another person's urine. A taste containing lots of information, different tones ranging from sour to sweet. With a little bitterness at its base. But I don't have time to think so much about this, because I suspect he'll be angry if too much pee splatters on the floor. It requires a hell of a lot of concentration, even though it should be a fairly easy task. "Empty CAD", it said in my schedule, and by googling I learned that it stands for *catheter à demeure*, which is a plastic tube inserted in the bladder, and which collects the urine a human produces in a bag fastened to the leg with the help of a kind of woven stocking. (Spross 2021, 5)

After testing the reader's tolerance for graphic bodily description, the narrator proceeds to explain how a urinary catheter works. In this opening passage, Julia has difficulty emptying one and urine sprays in her face. "It might sound disgusting", she remarks, "but that is not what worries me most. I'm afraid it will become embarrassingly obvious just how bad I am at my job" (5). As we will see, this fear of failure on the job is a recurring motif in the novel – especially in connection with Julia's previous life as an academic.

The novel consists of 35 short chapters which alternate between two periods in the narrator-protagonist's life. In the chapters narrated in the present tense, Julia is a home care aide and mother of a toddler. The chapters narrated in the past tense tell of Julia's life as an academic, when she was a graduate student and later a postdoctoral researcher in the fictional Department of Cultural History at Uppsala University. By switching between present and past tense, as well as between settings, the novel's form creates a contrast between the two different kinds of work. The alternating chapters depict Julia's workdays with a focus on past interactions with her mentor and colleagues at the university on the one hand, and with current co-workers and clients in home care services on the other hand. I will refer to these

two narrative strands as the campus narrative and the post-campus narrative, respectively.

While the narrator-protagonist describes work as a home care aide as stressful and challenging at times, it is the academic work environment that comes across as most difficult. Julia's worklife as a postdoc researcher is characterized by job insecurity, unwritten rules, destructive criticism, and dependency on colleagues higher up in the academic hierarchy:

After the PhD you are expected to be able to stand on your own two feet and develop your own career. That is what they say anyway. In reality nearly everyone is dependent on having a professor, perhaps your dissertation supervisor, draw in money for them by getting big research grants. Thus, you are required to build a good relationship with one of the silverbacks. (23)

The "silverbacks", i.e. influential colleagues higher up in the academic hierarchy, are epitomized by the character of Christer Widemar, a professor at Julia's department who is her mentor yet plays the role as gatekeeper (89).

ACADEMIC WORKING CONDITIONS AND THE ETHOS OF SUFFERING

Spross's published research focuses on working conditions. Her doctoral dissertation examines the question of worktime reduction in the 20th-century Swedish welfare state.⁴ In an article on labor issues, she links this same issue to quality of life, arguing that "the question of worktime concerns [...] what kind of life is worth living" (2013, 104). This research specialization can be seen to carry over to the novel *Vård, skola och omsorg*, which uses irony to question academics' attitudes toward their profession.

Julia relates that she entered academia with high ideals, dreaming of "[a] place where you could be enthusiastic, excited. [...] Where you could help one another, take hold of various ideas and together bring them to fruition. An intellectual collective founded on knowledge that strives to be free and shared. But in reality, it was something else altogether" (Spross 2021, 39). She refers to the university town of Uppsala as a place "where fiction, fantasy, and expectations coincide" (42). Her mentor Christer also espouses a romantic view of academia and implies at the same time that Julia may not be suited for it. When she states, in reply to a question about her career plans after the PhD, that "I enjoy writing, perhaps I will write a collection of essays, perhaps something for a general audience on political history. Perhaps a novel sometime", Christer suggests that she quit: "If you don't see research as a calling, a life mission, you can just as well give up your place to someone more motivated" (24–25). Ironic passages such as the following serve to question this view:

The problem with me wasn't that I didn't work hard enough, or that I failed at writing a dissertation. It was that I suffered too little. This became increasingly obvious during the years I spent within the walls of Academe. [...] I wrote my dissertation too quickly, and I finished within my four years of allotted funding. This led the abovementioned professor to declare, without having read my manuscript, that I was virtually guaranteed to fail. Don't come here and think you can just write – that's not the way research works.

It has to cost you more. The effort must be more visible, you should be marked by it, be able to show scars and blood in order for it to have any worth. (25)

Irony is also evident in the following passage, in which the narrator addresses the reader directly with the following tongue-in-cheek advice:

There's one thing you need to know about Academia: you should feel like shit. If you don't, pretend for god's sake that you do. Mention sleepless nights, injuries from typing on the computer, stress-related illnesses, and nutritional deficiencies. Complain about the times, about the students, about all those idiots who don't understand the important production of knowing that goes on in the ivory tower. (26)

The idea of academic work as a calling that requires sacrifice is critiqued in a non-fiction book by journalist Sarah Jaffe, entitled *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* and published the same year as Spross's novel. One chapter focuses on the academic profession, which Jaffe criticizes for "a labor-of-love rhetoric that claims certain work is not work at all" (2021, 173). Jaffe traces a downward trend with regard to academics' working conditions:

all over the world, academics face the increase of part-time positions and the loss of autonomy and power. [...] While European universities still offer more security than many US institutions, the situation of part-time faculty in the Americas [...] is a bellwether for the rest of the world. By 1999, an estimated one-fifth to one-half of European countries' academic staff were "nonpermanent". (171)

In such a precarious labor market, argues Jaffe, the long-standing romantic view of academia and its culture of self-sacrifice renders non-tenured academics vulnerable to exploitation, encouraging them to do unremunerated labor in the hope that it will eventually lead to a tenured position.

As if echoing Jaffe's argument, the narrator of Spross's novel invokes Max Weber in her critique of the ethos of suffering:

It is a narrative that can easily be incorporated into the general protestant work ethic that tells us that suffering in this life leads to higher rewards later. The sociologist Max Weber held that it was precisely this ethic that made it possible to establish capitalism so quickly in Northern Europe. [...] Today we have removed heavenly salvation from the equation, but we still say that he who sacrifices something will succeed. (148)

By contrast, Julia views her work as a home care aide as an opportunity to relieve the suffering of others, "instead of suffering myself" (27). Towards the end of the novel, she confirms this alternative work ethic when she once again addresses the reader directly:

Perhaps we will meet out there. If you should need me sometime, I'll be there. Maybe we'll meet in an emergency room if you've broken your leg. In a hospital ward if you're seriously ill. When your mother develops dementia, or when your sister for some reason no longer wants to live. It doesn't matter who you are. You could be my worst enemy. You could be a stranger. You could be someone I once loved. We'll meet when you for one reason or another have difficulty, and I promise I'll do my best to help you. (186)

Thus while the campus narrative in *Vård, skola och omsorg* portrays the academic work ethic as destructive, the post-campus narrative proposes a positive alternative, as we will see further in the following section.

A STORY OF QUITTING

If campus novels offer a window on universities, academic quit lit can be said to show academia in the rearview mirror. Lukas Moe offers the following explanation for the recent rise of this essayistic genre in blogs, social media, and publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “As conditions deteriorate, and the call of vocation grows harder to hear, academics have written more about work. The confessional strains of this literature belong to the subgenre of ‘quit lit’, which ranges from bitter anguish to wrenching grief” (2022, n.p.).

Quit lit contains more than personal complaints, however, as many authors use individual experiences and disappointed ideals of academia as a starting point for a more systematic critique of the academic workplace. As Lara McKenzie points out, “much of what is called quit lit is written in hindsight – months after academics’ departures”, and should thus “be understood as exposing patterns in people’s departures, pointing us to why and how they leave” (2021, n.p.).⁵ Francesca Coin argues that quit lit “transform[s] the act of quitting into a political process whereby the subject abdicates its competitive rationality to embrace a fundamental loyalty to different values and principles” (2017, 707).

Although fictional, Spross’s text recalls the quit lit genre in that its post-campus narrative strand depicts not only how the protagonist leaves academia, but also why. The end of Chapter 5 reveals that nearly six months have passed since Julia left academia, thus giving the novel a retrospective dimension similar to that found in quit lit. And like the authors of quit lit, Spross’s narrator Julia reflects in hindsight on her negative experiences of academia and offers a critique of its problems. For example, she comments on a high rate of mental illness among academics, attributing it to the work environment: “It’s not actually scholarly work as such that destroys people, it’s Academia. Academia is to blame for the fact that PhD students are strongly overrepresented among patients at the psychiatric emergency room” (63). She offers the following commentary on the hostile environment at departmental higher research seminars:

There is a principle in hermeneutics called *the principle of mercy*. It means that you should always choose the most benevolent and generous interpretation of a text, in order to attain as correct an understanding of it as possible. We might say that an opposite principle reigned at the higher seminar – the principle of cruelty and ruthlessness. The criticism was always merciless because it was impossible to defend oneself against it. There were always objections to the project itself, its basic idea. (138)

Chapter 28, in particular, recalls the quit lit genre. It has the form of a farewell letter to a psychologist. Here Julia reflects on her post-academic life, concluding that she is less afraid than before: “It no longer feels as if I have to swim as fast and hard as I can just to stay afloat” (163). That Julia has moved on emotionally from her negative experiences of academia is confirmed in the novel’s penultimate chapter, when

she is sent, in her new professional role, to the home of Christer, now incapacitated by a stroke:

We find ourselves in the same room, just he and I. It occurs to me that I could kill him. It would be rather easy now that he's at a disadvantage. [...] He's wearing a bathrobe that looks a little soiled, and I think he should be given clean clothes and wonder where I'll find some. I decide to let him live. More than that, I'm going to do what I can to improve his quality of life. (190)

The earlier hierarchy between professor and postdoc researcher is thereby reversed, and Julia now has both the power and opportunity to seek revenge, yet she chooses instead to help her former nemesis, in accordance with her own ethos of care.

AN ALTERNATIVE WORK ETHIC

Spross's depiction of home care services is not uncritical; caring for the elderly is described as challenging, and time pressure is part of Julia's workday as she bicycles from one client to another on a tight schedule (10–12). Nevertheless, her job as a home care aide entails better working conditions than what she experienced as a university employee. Julia relates that she was invited to a job interview immediately, rather than having to wait for months for a reply, as when applying for academic positions. And she accepts the job offer in the spirit advocated by Jaffe, namely as work for pay: "I was so happy about the simple logic of selling my labor to a buyer willing to pay the agreed-upon price. It was a simple economic transaction, a far cry from messy social relations with predetermined roles and power hierarchies. [...] It wasn't my soul and dreams that were for sale" (27).

Julia also gains a better work environment, with clear boundaries between work and free time that allow for better work-life balance. Shift work stands in contrast to the grey zones and never-ending work of academia, where the power dynamics in the workplace spill over into social situations as well. Furthermore, caring for the elderly is depicted as a challenging but rewarding and meaningful job. Julia finds more solidarity among her new colleagues, who unlike her former academic colleagues (whom she describes as apolitical) are receptive to her political engagement for better working conditions (78–79).

A HAPPY ENDING

Academics are frequently portrayed negatively in campus novels. As Sally Dalton-Brown notes, "*Homo academicus* is rarely a leader or inspirational teacher, as one might expect, but is very often depicted as a fool, fraud, or philanderer imprisoned within a politically claustrophobic institution, an environment that almost appears to encourage foolishness, fakery, and philandering" (2008, 591). By contrast, Julia Malmberg is a positive hero, depicted in a way that is likely to evoke readers' sympathy. She possesses wit, empathy, and integrity, and by making an active choice to leave academia, she demonstrates agency.

While it is not uncommon for campus novels to depict the protagonist leaving academia, this situation is rarely depicted as a happy ending.⁶ Furthermore, the plot typically ends there, giving at most merely a brief glimpse of post-campus life. In this

way, Spross puts a new twist on the traditional campus novel genre. With regard to the genre of quit lit, Moe argues that such narratives can be difficult to sustain: “only so many pages can be turned with vicarious sympathy for someone quitting or deciding to quit” (2022, n.p.). Spross avoids this pitfall, however, by highlighting in the post-campus narrative what Julia has gained by leaving. In the novel’s final paragraph, she reflects on the importance of her new profession while observing ambulance personnel at work: “For them this is just another day on the job. Yet another day of dealing with life and death, medicine and care. Yet another day when they are needed, when they serve people who really need them. [...] Soon I will be one of you” (196).

In terms of income and social status, Julia’s career switch represents downward mobility, yet it is presented in a positive light in the post-campus narrative. In interviews, Spross has described *Vård, skola och omsorg* as a reversal of the traditional success story of upward mobility through education and hard work.⁷ Here, the protagonist gives up the social status achieved through education in exchange for job security, meaningful work, and work-life balance. Spross’s novel thus has a happy ending – at the individual level at least. Poetic justice comes with the reversal of roles between Christer and Julia, while the fictional university in Spross’s novel remains a closed world that academics must leave to find happiness.

NOTES

- ¹ To date, neither of Spross’s novels has been translated into English.
- ² Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Swedish are by the author of this article.
- ³ A distinction can be drawn between the *Bildungsroman*, which focuses on students, and the campus novel, which focuses on faculty (Dalton-Brown 2008, 599, fn 1).
- ⁴ The title of Spross’s doctoral dissertation, from 2016, is *Ett välfärdsstatligt dilemma: Statens formuleringar av en arbetstidsfråga 1919–2002* (A dilemma for the welfare state: Making time manageable 1919–2002).
- ⁵ Sustained critiques of the academic work environment are also found in recent autoethnographic publications, e.g., *Complaint!* (2021) by Sara Ahmed.
- ⁶ Examples include Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* (1957) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999).
- ⁷ Interview with Spross on the Swedish television channel 4, August 25, 2021. <https://www.tv4play.se/klipp/8b09d20c0f10b71a5023/video-linn-foresprakar-att-ge-upp-maste-sluta-glorifiera-lidande>.

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