

David Lansky, **The Cutting Edge**. Xlibris, 2013. ISBN-978-1-4931-2127-4. 200 pages.

Between 1945 and 1964, the private sector and federal government joined forces to create the dispersed geographies and infrastructures responsible for facilitating what would later be known as the “American way of life.” This period would see a rise in individual automobile ownership, a massive expansion of the freeway systems and suburbs, as well as a shift in American cultural ethos towards what Michel Foucault describes in *The Birth of Biopolitics* as “entrepreneurial life.” Subsequently, the newly emerging white middleclass began envisioning themselves as individual entrepreneurs, whose homes in the suburbs and automobiles became both markers of success and necessities of life. Furthermore, this new emphasis on entrepreneurial life would see attitudes towards education shift to meet the logic of a post-war economy driven by capital. Rather than a lifelong journey of self-discovery or even a luxury for a privileged few, higher education became a way to mass-produce the next generation of *homo economicus*—whose lifestyle would then become dependent on the continued existence of suburbs, freeways, strip-malls, commodities and cheap energies.

*The Cutting Edge* is a satirical epistolary novel about academia and college life, heavily marked by the culturally and ecologically transformative period described above. Written by David Lansky, the novel tells the story of an idealistic sociology professor named Fred Snyder, who mourns the death of universities as centers of critique almost as much as he despises the suburbs, strip-malls and consumer culture he holds responsible for it. Snyder’s university of Old Windsor is a caricature of what happens when idealism is replaced by utilitarianism, and intellectual life is subsumed by the commodifying logic of capital. With its protagonist’s fixations on suburban sprawl, declining academic standards, rising tuition fees, and 1984-esque campus security systems, *The Cutting Edge* portrays a miniature Orwellian nightmare not too far removed from today’s headlines.

The novel is divided into two main parts, the first being the alleged “College Essays of Jenny Delight,” and the second a memoir entitled “Bill of Sale,” supposedly written by Fred Snyder himself. While “The College Essays of Jenny Delight” claim to be written by a student who finds a source of inspiration in the unconventional methods and ideas of her professor, it is suggested in the introduction (allegedly written by a reference librarian/ colleague of Snyder’s named Jillian Spamaro) that they were somehow written by the deceased Snyder and left in the library after his murder at the hands of a deranged student.

Certainly the style and language employed in “The College Essays of Jenny Delight” suggest that they are intended to appear as if they were written by an older, slightly out-of-touch individual attempting to impersonate a hip young woman—“I wonder if Sociology professors chill out when we students are not around. I wonder if my Sociology Professor chills with his homies like professor Bluestone, Keller, Zooman or Paradoxo” (32)—and this makes for both a humorous and disconcerting read. Furthermore, much of the subject matter comprising Jenny’s essays seems to

be heavily influenced by Snyder's own preoccupations and idiosyncrasies, however, if we are to accept that Snyder is meant to be the actual author, we have to also entertain the unlikely possibility that he somehow predicted his own death.

Regardless of who—David Lansky/Fred Snyder/Jillian Spamaro/Jenny Delight—we are expected to believe wrote the first section, Jenny's essays paint a very complex portrait of university culture and politics, while also introducing readers to the fascinating world-view of her professor.

Jenny is a quick-witted, starry-eyed student from the working class, who at times seems torn between the radicalism of her professor and the "mall culture" they have both been interpellated by. Many of Jenny's friends and classmates appear to be preoccupied with achieving the American Dream, but face an unenviable future of job insecurity and endless debt—brought on, in part, by overly expensive college tuitions and declining educational standards.

Jenny sets Snyder up as an authentic radical intellectual, while the vast majority of his colleagues appear to be petty charlatans who compromised their ideals long ago. Jenny sometimes channels the voice of her professor when reflecting on her own life and surroundings, resulting in poignant, yet humorous commentaries: "Our Professor was silent about the issue of the new cell phone tower so I suspect that he sees cell phones as an expression of mall culture and a crime against humanity. Both Nicola and I disagree with him on this point because we understand the importance of staying connected!" (82). Such passages also suggest that the implied author is attempting to establish some distance between the characters of Jenny and Snyder, but this distance is never consistent throughout "The College Essays of Jenny Delight."

The next section of *The Cutting Edge*, entitled "Bill of Sale," takes on a much more serious tone. In my estimation, this is the true heart of the novel, showcasing Lansky's ability to combine wit, dark humor, touching segments of personal reflection, social commentary and narrative story telling into a fictional memoir reminiscent of an episode from Henry Miller's *Black Spring* (minus all of the stream-of-consciousness babbling). Snyder's alleged memoir gives insight into his preoccupations with suburbanization and consumer capitalism, linking his own idiosyncrasies with the plight of rural Americans such as his parents, who were duped into the newly emerging American way of life. In the case of the Snyders, the loss of their farm marked the beginning of a painful transitional period for both the family and their county of Middlesex, NJ. Fred confesses, "As I reflect back upon it, I think the most important event in my childhood, even if I did not fully understand it at the time was when the real estate speculators knocked on the door of our farmhouse and announced that they wanted to buy the farm"(170).

When I encountered such passages in "Bill of Sale," Nathaniel's Hawthorne's quote about how "the past lies on the present like a giants dead body" kept coming to mind. Snyder obviously mourns the loss of the older American lifestyle he associates with his rural upbringing, and his memoir documents his country's gradual transition to the modern dystopia portrayed in "The College Essays of Jenny Delight." While Jenny's alleged essays document the aftermath of what

Snyder would call “a crime against humanity,” “Bill of Sale” pieces together disparate anecdotes from the past that weigh heavily on the first half of the novel. This results in a unique reading experience, similar to what I imagine it must be like to investigate the aftermath of a crime scene.

Despite being very well written, funny and insightful, I cannot help but wonder if the novel would be even more effective had “The College Essays of Jenny Delight” been written in a manner consistent with how young students might actually speak or write. The introduction to the novel already sets up the possibility that Jenny’s essays were written by either Fred Snyder or another faculty member, and the actual essays themselves seem to want to confirm this. Although this sometimes works on a satirical level, it also makes the first section of the book feel like an ironic, inside joke written for the eyes an exclusive group of middle-aged academics. Subsequently, I was not always sure if I should be laughing *with* or *at* passages such as, “I love my Sociology Professor because he is so cool that he chills me to the bone” (23), but I found them to be amusing nonetheless. Bearing this in mind, I cannot help but think that the novel’s satire and humor might reach a wider audience had Lansky given Jenny a more authentic and distinct voice.

That one criticism aside, I would say that *The Cutting Edge* is a very fun and worthwhile read, particularly for those interested in the current state of higher education and the darker side of consumerism, suburbanization, and the American way of life. The implied author certainly seems to have first-hand experience with all of the above, while Fred Snyder’s commentaries help the reader connect the dots and link these various “crimes against humanity” to historical and cultural changes fueled by capital.

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