

Academic Diary

Or Why Higher Education Still Matters

Les Back

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On the outside of this book the spine is now broken. The plastic red covering is beginning to curl away slightly from the edges of cover. This is a book which I have carried with me; jammed into bags and packed into luggage for those moments when a good thought would make a difference. Inside my copy is littered with notes and notes and highlights (I would have to own up to being one of those book violators you hear about). Reviewing my notes and those instances that seemed to connect with my thinking I can trace some of the many links between the expositions of an academic life held within these pages and the experience of my own. This book feels personal.

Structurally the book covers the life of one academic through three terms of an academic year in one institution. There are 21 entries for autumn and spring. Summer is somewhat shorter at only 10. Rather than references at the end there are practical suggestions for relevant follow up materials. Additionally there is a nice contextualisation in the afterward which explains the book's genesis. It's a useful package.

The year and diary format are central to the book's construction. The academic year operates as an overarching framework or holding place for particular types of reflection about the tasks and processes that go on within a university. Importantly not all entries link to each other (more critical readers might be looking expectantly for some sort of progress in-between). Each entry forms a 'silent conversation' (pg 236) around the academic practice of the author and the reader's experience of this. The entries act almost as field notes from a phenomenological perspective (albeit well polished ones). The focus on 'small experiences' (Pg 96) woven into the larger discourses important in the world of academia ensures this book is lively and relevant. It does and becomes

This is not a book to read in blocks. Sometimes the variation in length of entries alongside their independence meant that ideas piled in on top of each other as I read. Yet individual entries are insufficient for planned reading time. Each entry really is just meant to be read serendipitously within the space of a couple of minutes. Ideas develop. This variation sometimes threw me and I would read too many entries and feel overwhelmed. I should have stopped reading but I didn't. The subject was too compelling.

Call me Les

I'm going to break academic conventions and call Les by his name for the rest of this book review. This is because having read the book I think Les would approve. Les Back's style is a collegial and open one and I hope I'm joining him in the conversation he explicitly states he is opening.

What follows is a personal account of what stood out for me. You may well find other connections and that is the strength of this book.

For academics Les highlights the importance of vocation, slowing things down and widening what counts as academic writing (whilst not forgetting what counts and who is doing the counting). Les espouses the central and ongoing value of teaching alongside the importance of passing on a love of reading.

For the university Les highlights how we scatter our academic self through the complex paths of our academic roles and notices how this increases the value of those more present in students' lives.

What grounds this book are the ideas it contains: technical ideas (like grade inflation, the arguments of using the full range marks and the issues around peer review), esoteric ideas (Writers desks, pens, the library angel), political ideas (tuition fees didn't fix the problems of US universities Pg 82) and conceptual ideas (the need for students and teachers to spend time with difficult ideas and put in the intellectual efforts required for understanding and writing). These are ideas I think that many of us are thinking about already. The book feels like it slips into the present moment and allows us to point at it. 'Aha' I found myself often nodding. 'That's so interesting' and 'Hmm, I've been thinking about that'.

Les suggests that this is a book to 'dip in and out of' and that is how I ended up reading it. One small bite at a time (usually with coffee). The book is something to savour.

Bridget Hanna

PS

Les's discussion of working with Stuart Hall was unexpectedly personal. Stuart Hall was a bright star in my own early thinking when I studied with the Open University. I spent many long dark winter evenings in the watching Stuart explain his theoretical thinking on video. I have kept some of the tapes long after the technology in which they were housed became obsolete simply because of their importance to my own journey in academia. Many have written wonderful things but I will now remember sitting on a bus reading Les Black's words and thinking about Stuart Hall.