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Updated at 8:30 a.m.

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Righteous idiocy

Suzanne Fields

A full-time professor at a small college in Massachusetts is six weeks into the second semester of his course in the classics when he notices that two names on his roll have never spoken up in class. In fact, he doesn't remember ever seeing them in class.

He opens the class one morning with a question: "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"

Uh, oh. The two missing students who have never attended class are real enough. When they hear of the professor's question they do what post-modern, up-to-date, politically correct students do. They file a complaint charging racism.

The professor, a man who is precise with the language, learned in Latin and Greek and who had never laid eyes on the two students, speaks with the nonchalance of an educated man citing the primary definition of spook to be found in any library: a ghost, a spirit, a specter.

Naturally that doesn't wash with either his colleagues on the faculty or with students who "know" he meant the second definition which is disparaging for "Negro." He is quickly branded a racist and every person who might have defended him against the false accusation runs for the nearest cover. The professor resigns from the college with his name forever dishonored.

This is fiction, and is the pivotal event in the new novel, "The Human Stain" by Philip Roth. But this is fiction that perfectly captures the zeitgeist of political correctness and the "righteous idiocy" that passes for morality and education at some of our finest universities, where stupid people are rewarded for being victims of their own stupidity.

Students talk about their "lack of self-worth" while they actually believe "they're entitled to everything." Incapacity becomes privilege. Innocence redeems ruthlessness. Propriety begets tyranny. When a professor says he'll flunk any student who uses the trendy cliché "closure," the reader cheers.

The reader cheers again when a character, a black high school teacher, recalls her childhood when every student who completed high school in New Jersey got two things at graduation: a diploma and a copy of the Constitution.

"Whatever happened to the First Amendment of the

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Constitution of the United States of America?" she asks. Her students don't even know what it means.

I read this novel the day after I discovered the web page of FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education Inc. based in Philadelphia, which investigates speech codes on college campuses everywhere, codes that not only deprive students and professors of free expression, but ruin lives of those who dare to believe in the First Amendment.

The posted examples of FIRE are not as neat and tidy or as dramatic as those of Philip Roth, but they're alarm bells in the night to everyone concerned that our universities are often making a sham of academic and religious freedom and due process on campuses:

* An undergraduate student at St. Cloud University in Minnesota was sentenced to "sensitivity training" when the PC police disapproved of his analogy in defense of allowing credit card companies to solicit on campus. The student said it would be illegal not to allow such persons on campus, just as "not allowing blacks on campus" would be illegal. Suzanne Williams, president of the university said "the statement — intentional or not — [is] demeaning and totally inappropriate." Says FIRE: Suzanne Williams "suppressed free expression" and instituted "thought reform" at a public university.

* The Tufts Community Union Judiciary, an elected student group, voted to "de-recognize" the Tufts Christian Fellowship for refusing to allow a lesbian to have a leadership position. Says FIRE: What's at stake in this case is the fundamental concept of voluntary organization, especially for religious groups. "You can't expect a Christian fundamentalist group, or an Islamic group or a Catholic group not to follow their deeply held religious beliefs," says Thor Halvorssen, executive director of FIRE. "The very idea of American pluralism depends on voluntary associations based upon chosen religious and secular goals."

In this atmosphere, Philip Roth can expect a shower of stones. A reviewer for the New York Times says his novel "indulges in the sort of tirade against political correctness that is far drearier and more intellectually constricted than political correctness itself." The intellectually constricted reviewer should take a look at www.thefire.org. Pretty dreary reading, but very important.

Suzanne Fields is a columnist for The Washington Times.



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