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## Dear Committee Members

*Julie Schumacher*

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**NATIONAL BESTSELLER**

"A smart-as-hell, fun-as-heck novel." —*Newsweek*



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**Julie Schumacher : Dear Committee Members** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dear Committee Members:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. What we want to say By wiredweird... but don't. Or at least, shouldn't. This starts as a series of passive-aggressive letters of recommendation, seemingly designed to assure the failure of whoever is being described - in fact, the writer is quite blunt about having written at least one sabotage letter, feeling that the subject could do better than what she was applying to. (God save us from such 'help.') But, as the book

wears on, the fictional author seems to become increasingly whiny and self-centered, somehow making each LoR more about himself, his failed love life, and the daily grind of departmental dysfunction. Regarding his amatory failures - well, they follow naturally enough from the jagged edges of his personality, from horrendous and sometimes public gaffes, and from his tendency to date (or even marry), then piss off people important to his professional life - perhaps his tendency to sabotage others springs naturally and easily from what he does to himself. I've spent enough time in academia to have met a few difficult types. If the mythical English department were filled with such, irremovably embedded by tenure, one can easily see why the administration is basically leaving it to wither, hoping that enough members will die off or wander off that a fresh start becomes possible. Somewhat amusing, yes, but ultimately dreary, desperate, and ineffectual. I haven't seen such delusions of usefulness since *The Dwarf*.--wiredweird0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Wickedly funny By Wing This is one of the most delightful works I've read in ages. A wonderful wry takedown of a university English department, its personalities and politics. It consists of many pieces of correspondence by one cynical and jaded English prof who must deal with an endless series of requests for letters of recommendation from many less-than-stellar students. His forbearance is remarkably funny while he does what he can for them. Yet there is one student he feels is brilliant and steadily tries to find him some kind of paying work so the young man can finish his novel. Between these epistles, he struggles to save his department from being demolished while another more worthy department gets everything but gold toilets. Offsetting the snark is a touching thread of the professor's humanity and compassion. If you've ever lived in the tight little world of a university department, you must read this! 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A wry smile. but bored. By Mary Ann Beattie This book was mildly amusing in its presentation of letters written as references for students or faculty by an English professor. They are sometimes letters one wishes he could write but wouldn't dare. It also reveals some of the internal politics of a university. However, it became tiresome after a while, and didn't seem to shed any new light on the subject. This is a novel, but there was no real character development or plot arc. A mildly amusing read.

A Best Book of the Year: NPR and Boston Globe Finally a novel that puts the "pissed" back into "epistolary." Jason Fitger is a beleaguered professor of creative writing and literature at Payne University, a small and not very distinguished liberal arts college in the midwest. His department is facing draconian cuts and squalid quarters, while one floor above them the Economics Department is getting lavishly remodeled offices. His once-promising writing career is in the doldrums, as is his romantic life, in part as the result of his unwise use of his private affairs for his novels. His star (he thinks) student can't catch a break with his brilliant (he thinks) work *Accountant in a Bordello*, based on Melville's *Bartleby*. In short, his life is a tale of woe, and the vehicle this droll and inventive novel uses to tell that tale is a series of hilarious letters of recommendation that Fitger is endlessly called upon by his students and colleagues to produce, each one of which is a small masterpiece of high dudgeon, low spirits, and passive-aggressive strategies. We recommend *Dear Committee Members* to you in the strongest possible terms.

A Best Book of the Year: NPR and Boston Globe Praise for *Dear Committee Members*: "A hilarious academic novel that'll send you laughing (albeit ruefully) back into the trenches of the classroom. . . . [A] mordant minor masterpiece. . . Like the best works of farce, academic or otherwise, *Dear Committee Members* deftly mixes comedy with social criticism and righteous outrage. By the end, you may well find yourself laughing so hard it hurts." —Maureen Corrigan, NPR "If you like academic satires, you'll love this novel, which is written as a series of recommendation letters by a cranky, long-suffering English professor. Like Richard Russo's *Straight Man* this book has a lot to say about the humanities in American colleges and universities. It's very funny and also moving." —Tom Perrotta "In My Library", *New York Post* "For that reason, I entreat you, now that you've reviewed my précis, to read Ms. Schumacher's book. It is easily consumed in small pieces, like a tray of sweets and savories. It is ideal for passing the time between innings of a baseball game, waiting for a long red light to change, or sitting in a warm bath. As for Jason Fitger, I implore you to take a leap of faith and offer him admission to your next available residency. The worlds of business and academia will be poorer for lack of his letters, but perhaps, with your support, he can find a way to channel his energy and inventiveness into a new novel—one that will hopefully be as entertaining and as sharply written as Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members*." —Jon Michaud, *The New Yorker* "A smart-as-hell, fun-as-heck novel composed entirely of recommendation letters. . . . Beyond the moribund state of academia, Schumacher touches on more universal themes about growing old and facing failure: not necessarily the dramatic failure of a batter striking out with two on and two out in the bottom of the ninth, but the quieter failure that accrues over time, until we are finally forced to admit that we are not who we wanted to become." —Alexander Nazaryan, *Newsweek* "The book is hilarious. . . . [Schumacher's] scabrous book reminds me of Sam Lipsyte's *Home Land*, Richard Russo's *Straight Man* and Jincy Willett's *Winner of the National Book Award*. If you didn't find those books funny, well, that means you're a corpse. But you're also, apparently, a corpse who reads, so there's hope for you yet. You should read *Dear Committee Members*; maybe it will bring you back to life." —Brock Clarke, *The New York Times Book* "Bitterly hilarious. If you are looking for a witty, original cri de coeur over the oft-lamented decline of the humanities, I

urgently recommend this novel.” —Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal* “Julie Schumacher’s *Dear Committee Members* is the best sort of novel: the laugh-out-loud page-turner that also bleeds and breathes, the satire you want to quote to friends, the book that lets you in on the joke so you can better see the truth of the world.” —*The Rumpus* “A funny and lacerating novel of academia written in the form of letters of recommendation. . . . *Dear Committee Members* isn’t really an academic novel, or even an academic satire. It’s a sincere exploration of the depths and breadths of human selfishness, and the contemporary American academy is simply the backdrop. . . . So in the end, it is exactly Fitger’s selfishness that destructs, rather than his life—and although his semi-redemption may not redeem the rank carcass of academic culture that continues to fester around him, it’s more than enough to recommend this mischievous novel.” —*Slate* “[A] richly sardonic epistolary volume.” —*San Francisco Chronicle* “The beauty of *Dear Committee Members* is that Fitger is not just an eloquent professor with a poison pen. He’s previously alienated quite a few of the people whose favor he attempts to curry here, his ex-wife and ex-girlfriend included, and he has a habit of compounding the insults anew with each communication. But for all his corrosiveness, he’s actually one of the good guys: a generous defender of gifted students, underappreciated colleagues, and fine scholarship. He’s a romantic, really, a champion of academia. And he does love being a writer, which, despite its horrors, is possibly one of the few sorts of lives worth living at all.” —*The Boston Globe* “Each letter Fitger writes is imbued with the wisdom and comic chops that make Schumacher a wonderfully entertaining writer. Let this review serve as an LOR for *Dear Committee Members*. If there’s one thing new grads need in addition to the congratulatory check or gift card, it’s a few good laughs before reality sets in.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune* “If Fitger wrote only sarcastic letters, that would be one thing, but in this short tome a man appears between the zingers... Be sure to tag this book with ‘for fans of David Foster Wallace.’” —*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* “Lest you conclude I am merely impressed by a humorous, well-handled gimmick, let me assure you that Ms. Schumacher brilliantly lays bare the tale of Fitger’s stalled career, failed love life, and quixotic championing of a student and his unfinished novel. “*Dear Committee Members*” ends with a blend of sadness and quiet hope that I did not anticipate, but found wholly satisfying. In short, I recommend *Dear Committee Members* without hesitation or caveat.” —*The Iowa Gazette* “A hilarious and surprisingly poignant pleasure to read.” —*Houston Chronicle* “Schumacher’s satire of the petty rivalries, byzantine hierarchies and committee meetings is spot on—scathing and laugh-out-loud funny.” —*The Wichita Eagle* “As back-to-school entertainment, *Dear Committee Members* hits the spot.” —*Santa Fe New Mexican* “[A] very funny epistolary novel composed of recommendation letters. . . . It’s an unusual form for comedy, but it works. Truth is stranger than fiction in this acid satire of the academic doldrums.” —*Kirkus* “Schumacher’s warm satire of the peculiarities of the Ivory Tower will be recognizable to anyone who has encountered the bureaucracy and internal politics of higher education.” —*Booklist* “A creative writing professor herself, Schumacher crafts a suitably verbose but sympathetic voice for Fitger, a man who exudes both humor and heart.” —*Publishers Weekly* “The letters have many funny touches, which carry the novel. The best touches, though, have to do with students. More than a third of the letters recommend students for jobs, and one chord that runs throughout is that they face dubious prospects. . . . It’s not a good time to be an English major, and Fitger’s concern for his students redeems his otherwise questionably epistolary etiquette.” —*Chronicle of Higher Education* “Schumacher revitalizes an under—or maybe just unappreciated art form. . . . [Her] tone is warm and her insight into academia incisive.” —*Bookish.com* “A clever epistolary send-up of academic logrolling.” —*Shelf Awareness* “Let’s not look at this as an epistolary novel about the academic world, but as a laying out of the Tarot cards of our society’s past and future. It’s that indicative. That important. In the end, the future looks not quite so grim, but my reading is that like so many novels that investigate independence and fierce belief (with Melville in the lead), we have to read between the lines, infer, assume, and hope that the American virtues of compassion, empathy, and even wild projection will continue. This is a funny, very sad, disarming novel. My pitch to Hollywood would be: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* meets Padgett Powell’s *The Interrogative Mood* but—and here I’m just another expendable would-be savior, like Ms. Schumacher’s character Jay Fitger—nobody would know what I was talking about. My hat’s off to the author of this flawlessly written, highwire act of a book. Hollywood be damned.” —Ann Beattie, author of *Chilly Scenes of Winter* and *The New Yorker Stories* “*Dear Committee Members* is a brilliant book that, in my head, sits comfortably on my prized shelf of academic novels, right between *Lucky Jim* and *Pictures from an Institution*. But it’s funnier than either, and more wrenching in the end. The conceit of a novel told in letters of reference is inspired, and it is killingly funny because it’s all so killingly true. Truth walks here in the strangest of costumes, and in part because of its guises, we can face it, frown, laugh, cry. I’ve never lost an afternoon so happily.” —Jay Parini, author of *The Last Station* and *The Passages of H.M.* “Julie Schumacher has perfectly rendered a portrait of the artist not as a young man but as the beleaguered tenured has-been surly lovable anachronistic man he’s become. At once satire and tribute, the book alludes to a time in America’s past both in literature and academia, and the passage of that heady heyday is hilariously—and bittersweetly—displayed in this genius borrowed form. Never have letters of recommendation made me happier to encounter them.” —Antonya Nelson, author of *Funny Once: Stories* and *BoundAbout the Author* Julie Schumacher grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and graduated from Oberlin College and Cornell University. Her first novel, *The Body Is Water*, was published by Soho Press in 1995 and was an ALA Notable Book of the Year and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway

Award. Her other books include a short story collection, *An Explanation for Chaos*, and five books for younger readers. She lives in St. Paul and is a faculty member in the Creative Writing Program and the Department of English at the University of Minnesota. Visit her on the web at [julieschumacher.com](http://julieschumacher.com). Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

September 3, 2009  
Bentham Literary Residency Program  
P.O. Box 1572  
Bentham, ME 04976

Dear Committee Members,

Over the past twenty-odd years I've recommended god only knows how many talented candidates for the Bentham January residency--that enviable literary oasis in the woods south of Skowhegan: the solitude, the pristine cabins, the artistic camaraderie, and those exquisite hand-delivered satchels of apples and cheese .??. Well, you can scratch all prior nominees and pretenders from your mailing lists, because none is as provocative or as promising as Darren Browles. Mr. Browles is my advisee; he's taken two of my workshops, and his novel-in-progress, a retelling of Melville's *Bartleby* (but in which the eponymous character is hired to keep the books at a brothel, circa 1960, just outside Las Vegas), is both tender satire and blistering adaptation/homage. In brief: this tour de force is witty, incisive, original, brutally sophisticated, erotic. You don't need me to summarize it--you'll have received his two opening chapters. My agent, Ken Doyle, is apprised of the project and is gnashing his pearly incisors in the hope of receiving the completed manuscript soon. Any additional perks or funding you can provide for Browles during the residency will be appreciated; he's likely to be wooed by editors all over New York.

A personal aside: I was very sorry to hear of Mike's death. He was a terrific director, and I always enjoyed talking to him in the row of blue rocking chairs out on the porch during the occasions (too rare!) when I was able to escape my academic duties here in the Midwest and accept his invitations to Bentham. He'll be terribly hard to replace. Whoever tries to step into them will find he wore sizeable, generous shoes.

In sadness but looking to the future,  
Jason T. Fitger  
Professor of Creative Writing and English  
Department of English  
Payne University  
September 4, 2009

Theodore Boti, Chair  
Department of English

Dear Ted,

Your memo of August 30 requests that we on the English faculty recommend some luckless colleague for the position of director of graduate studies. (You may have been surprised to find this position vacant upon your assumption of the chairship last month--if so, trust me, you will encounter many such surprises here.)

A quick aside, Ted: god knows what enticements were employed during the heat of summer to persuade you--a sociologist!--to accept the position of chair in a department not your own, an academic unit whose reputation for eccentricity and discord has inspired the upper echelon to punish us by withholding favors as if from a six-year-old at a birthday party: No raises or research funds for you, you ungovernable rascals! And no fudge before dinner! Perhaps, as the subject of a sociological study, you will find the problem of our dwindling status intriguing.

To the matter at hand: though English has traditionally been a largish department, you will find there are very few viable candidates capable of assuming the mantle of DGS. In fact, if I were a betting man, I'd wager that only 10 percent of the English instruction list will answer your call for nominations. Why? First, because more than a third of our faculty now consists of temporary (adjunct) instructors who creep into the building under cover of darkness to teach their graveyard shifts of freshman comp; they are not eligible to vote or to serve. Second, because the remaining two-thirds of the faculty, bearing the scars of disenfranchisement and long-term abuse, are busy tending to personal grudges like scraps of carrion on which they gnaw in the gloom of their offices. Long story short: your options aren't pretty.

After subtracting the names of those who are on leave or close to retirement, and those already serving in the killing fields of administration, you will probably be forced to choose between Franklin Kentrell (NO: spend five consecutive minutes with him and you will understand why); Jennifer Brown-Wilson (a whipping girl for the theory faction--already terrorized, she will decline); Albert Tyne (under no circumstances should you enter his office without several days' warning--more on this later); Donna Lovejoy (poor overworked creature--I hereby nominate her [anonymously please] with this letter); and me. You'll soon find that I make myself unpleasant enough to be safe from nomination.

Enfin: Lovejoy will sag under this additional burden, but she will perform. Ted, in your memo you referred briefly, also, to the need for faculty forbearance during what we were initially told would be the "remodeling" of the second floor for the benefit of our colleagues in the Economics Department. I'm not sure that you noticed, but the Econ faculty were, in early August, evacuated from the building--as if they'd been notified, sotto voce, of an oncoming plague. Not so the faculty in English. With the exception of a few individuals both fleet of foot and quick-witted enough to claim status as asthmatics, we have been Left Behind, almost biblically, expected to begin our classes and meet with students while bulldozers snarl at the door. Yesterday afternoon during my Multicultural American Literature class, I watched a wrecking ball swinging like a hypnotist's watch just past the window. While I am relieved to know that the economists--delicate creatures!--have been safely installed in a wing of the new geology building where their physical comfort and aesthetic needs can be addressed, those of us who remain as castaways here in Willard Hall risk not only deafness but mutation: as of next week we have been instructed to keep our windows tightly closed due to "particulate matter"--but my office window (here's the amusing part, Ted) no longer shuts. One theory here: the deanery is annoyed with our requests for parity and, weary of waiting for us to retire, has decided to kill us. Let the academic year begin!

Cordially and with a hearty welcome to the madhouse,  
Jay  
September 9, 2009

Mary Alice Ingersol,  
Manager  
Wexler Foods, Inc.  
65409 Capitol Drive  
Maplewood, MN 55109

Dear Ms. Ingersol,

This letter is intended to bolster the application to Wexler Foods of my former student John Leszczynski, who completed the Junior/Senior Creative Writing Workshop three months ago. Mr. Leszczynski received a final grade of B, primarily on the basis of

an eleven-page short story about an inebriated man who tumbles into a cave and surfaces from an alcoholic stupor to find that a tentacled monster--a sort of fanged and copiously salivating octopus, if memory serves--is gnawing through the flesh of his lower legs, the monster's spittle burbling ever closer to the victim's groin. Though chaotic and improbable even within the fantasy/horror genre, the story was solidly constructed: dialogue consisted primarily of agonized groans and screaming; the chronology was relentlessly clear. Mr. Leszczynski attended class faithfully, arriving on time, and rarely succumbed to the undergraduate impulse to check his cell phone for messages or relentlessly zip and unzip his backpack in the final minutes of class. Whether punctuality and an enthusiasm for flesh-eating cephalopods are the main attributes of the ideal Wexler employee I have no idea, but Mr. Leszczynski is an affable young man, reliable in his habits, and reasonably bright. You might start him off in produce, rather than seafood or meats. Whimsically, Jason T. Fitger, Professor of Creative Writing/English Payne University September 14, 2009 Ted Boti, Resident Sociologist and Chair Department of English Dear Ted: You've asked me to write a letter seconding the nomination of Franklin Kentrell for Payne's coveted Davidson Chair. I assume Kentrell is behind this request; no sane person would nominate a man whose only recent publications consist of personal genealogical material and who wears visible sock garters in class--all he lacks is a white tin basin to resemble a nineteenth-century barber. But if you want me to endorse his nomination in order to keep him quiet and away from your office (you will find him as persistent and maddening as a fly), you may excerpt the following sentences and affix my name to them: "Professor Franklin Kentrell has a singular mind and a unique approach to the discipline. He is sui generis. The Davidson Chair has never seen his like before." A word on the call for official, written letters of recommendation, Ted: I hope for the sake of all concerned you will cut back on these as much as possible. The LOR has become a rampant absurdity, usurping the place of the quick consultation and the two-minute phone call--not to mention the teaching and research that faculty were supposedly hired to perform. I haven't published a novel in six years; instead, I fill my departmental hours casting words of praise into the bureaucratic abyss. On multiple occasions, serving on awards committees, I was actually required to write LORs to myself. Keeping my temper under wraps for the present, Jay P.S.: I couldn't help but notice, following the departure of the economists, that our Tech Help office has been largely vacated as well, a single employee--the appropriately named Mr. Duffy Napp--left behind to respond to faculty requests for computer assistance. This surly somnambulist rarely deigns to answer the most basic of questions and treats with exhausted dismay any individual who is not a specialist in computer arcana. Might it be possible to exchange "the Napper" for someone more civil and less lethargic? P.P.S.: Thank you for your attention to my office window, which now closes, but due to an impressive crack in the frame--presumably caused by the earsplitting construction on the second floor--rainwater is trickling merrily down the inside of the glass and, as I type these words, entering the rusted slats of the heater. You might want to send someone to take a look. September 17, 2009 Bentham Literary Residency Program P.O. Box 1572 Bentham, ME 04976 Dear Overworked Committee Members, Ms. Vivian Zelles has asked me--three days before your application deadline--to recommend her to your January residency program at Bentham, and herewith I oblige. Ms. Zelles is an apt and diligent writer, a second-year graduate student in comparative literature currently enrolled, as a sort of academic stowaway, in my fiction workshop. Her project, to date, consists of a series of short, linked narratives on the subject of childhood and family and female relationships, romantic and otherwise. The work is young and presumably autobiographical; still, one can discern a spark of energy here and there in the occasional quirks of the tone. Ms. Zelles is not among the top tier of students I generally prefer to send your way (e.g., Darren Browles--see my LOR of September 3), but in the coming year or two her work may mature. Feel free to contact me for further information via phone or e-mail. And forgive the brevity of this letter: I do believe that student writing speaks for itself, and though the academic year has just started I fear I am already losing the never-ending battle to catch up with the recommendations requested of me. Suffice it to say that the LOR has usurped the place of my own work, now adorned with cobwebs and dust in a remote corner of my office. Continuing to wish you well with the search for a new director, Jason T. Fitger Professor of Creative Writing and English Payne University September 22, 2009 Payne University Law School Admissions c/o Janet Matthias (aka Janet Matthias-Fitger) 17 Pitlinger Hall Dear Admissions Committee Members--and Janet: This letter recommends Melanie deRueda for admission to the law school on the well-heeled side of this campus. I've known Ms. deRueda for eleven minutes, ten of which were spent in a fruitless attempt to explain to her that I write letters of recommendation only for students who have signed up for and completed one of my classes. This young woman is certainly tenacious, if that's what you're looking for. A transfer student, she appears to be suffering under the delusion that a recommendation from any random faculty member within our august institution will be the key to her application's success. Janet: I know your committees aren't reading these blasted LORs--under the influence of our final martini in August you told me as much. (I wish I had an ex-wife like you in every department; over in the Fellowship Office, the formerly benevolent Carole continues to maintain an icy distance. I should think her decision to quit our relationship would have filled her with a cheerful burst of self-esteem, but she apparently views the end of our three years together in a different light.) Ms. deRueda claims to be sending her transcripts and LSAT scores at the end of the week. God help you--this is your shot across the bow--should you admit her. Still affectionately your one-time husband, Jay P.S.: I've heard a rumor that Eleanor--yes, that Eleanor, from the Seminar--is a finalist for the directorship at Bentham. You got back in touch with her despite her denunciations of

me; do you have any intel? P.P.S.: A correction: you got back in touch with Eleanor because she denounced me. I remember you quoting what she said when I published *Transfer of Affection*: that I was an egotist prone to repeating his most fatal mistakes. I'll admit to the egotism--which is undeniable--but I'd like to think that, after fourteen years of marriage, you knew me better than Eleanor did. We were happy for some of those fourteen years, especially before *Transfer*; why shouldn't I believe that you were right about me, too?

September 30, 2009  
Field-Bantry College of Government and Public Affairs  
Office of Graduate Admissions  
447 Peck Hall  
Whaylon, PA 19522

Dear Committee Members,

This letter recommends Ms. Stella Castle to your graduate institution in the field of public policy. And to begin this recommendation on the proper footing: no, I will not fill out the inane computerized form that is intended to precede or supplant this letter; ranking a student according to his or her placement among the "top 10 percent," "top 2 percent," or "top 0.000001 percent" is pointless and absurd. No faculty member will rank any student, no matter how severely lacking in ability or reason, below "top 10 percent." This would be tantamount to describing the candidate in question as a witless beast. A human being and his or her caliber, intellect, character, and promise are not reducible to a check mark in a box. Faced with a reductionist formula such as yours, I despair for the future, consoling myself with the thought that I and others of my generation, with its archaic modes of discourse, won't live to see the barren cyberworld the authors of your recommendation form are determined to create.

Ms. Castle was a student in my American Literature Survey a year ago. She is a serious-minded young woman whose analytical skills and arguments demonstrate a subtle acumen. More than once, in class, I saw her politely demolish another student's interpretation of a work of literature by asking a series of seemingly innocent but progressively incisive questions. Perhaps oddly, I remember thinking of Ms. Castle as a highly articulate snake: sliding gracefully into an argument, speaking in lucid, sibilant phrases (she endows the letter S with the faintest suggestion of a whistle), and then striking to inject the requisite venom.

Ms. Castle wrote a final, exquisite essay on Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*--probably a lost tome as far as you policy wonks are concerned--on which she received a well-deserved A. I recommend her to you very highly. She is excellent. She will not fit into any of your miniature boxes. I will now insert this letter in an envelope, maintaining a paper copy for safekeeping in a drawer by my desk, after which I will take a short stroll to the picturesque blue mailbox on the corner, opening its creaking rectangular metal mouth and dropping the envelope within. Trusting the U.S. Postal Service to deliver this missive to you in a timely fashion, I am

J. Fitger  
Professor and Upholder of the Ancient Flame  
Payne University

1 Under whose aegis was it decided that Economics and English should share a building? Were criteria other than the alphabet considered?