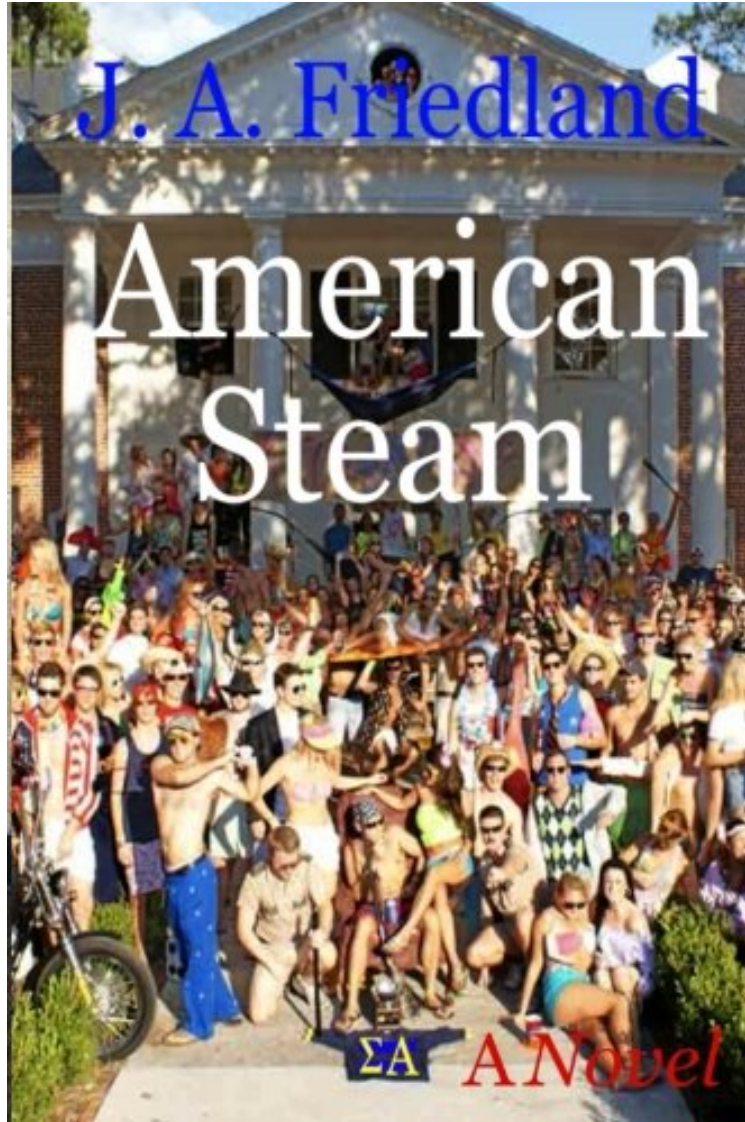


American Steam

J.A. Friedland

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J.A. Friedland : American Steam before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised American Steam:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. David Lodge meets Ayn RandBy Ethan CooperGoogle professor J.A. Friedland and a web page listing his books and published articles appear. Besides AMERICAN STEAM, the books include DOING WELL AND GOOD: THE HUMAN FACE OF THE NEW CAPITALISM. Meanwhile, two of his published articles are “Beyond Empiricism: Realizing the Ethical Mission of Management” and “Expanding the Motivations for Altruism: A Philosophical Perspective”. In STEAM, professor Friedland joins such important

philosophical concerns with his insights, developed at various universities, about today's dilemmas in higher education. The result is a narrative that is usually insightful, sometimes funny, and, in its conclusion, deliberately implausible. Friedland examines academia through the experiences and perspectives of three professors. Jules, the narrator of STEAM, is an old-school professor, smug and demanding, and concerned about tenure. Susan, who has the office next to Jules, inverts traditional academic mores—she entertains, not teaches; she facilitates, not lectures; and she consorts recklessly with students, violating her university's policies on conduct. Finally, Burton, a fine teacher but mediocre researcher, is an adjunct professor. He is working to revise the university's shameful exploitation of teachers who are not on the tenure track. Initially, STEAM seems a little dry as Friedland shows the dyspeptic Jules leading a class and complaining about his students. The students want to be entertained. They want to text and surf during lectures. They are unscrupulous in their lazy pursuit of good grades. For this reason, Jules calls the student zombies—human husks that mindlessly destroy a rigorous and passionate approach to learning. Further, Jules is deeply concerned about the egotists and what he deems “narcissi” in the student body. These believe “everyone should only pursue their own self-interest...” and are “blind to all but personal satisfaction.” Observes Jules: “...the only reason any of them will devote any effort is to get something tangible in return...” It is through such shallow and selfish students that Friedland joins his concerns about academia with his philosophical concerns about the selfishness in American politics and life. These students, Jules observes, “...think we're all just rational egoists duking it out in the open market of self-interest.” There's a lot of sex in STEAM. For Jules, sex swings from sadism to self-absorption to fantasy. For Susan, the sex is neurotic and exploitive. The sex is not gratuitous, however. Instead, it's a tool Friedland uses to explore ethical responsibilities and Libertarian philosophy. Fans of Ayn Rand will not be pleased. STEAM is entertaining. But, be warned, you must enjoy talking heads. Recommended. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This book explodes myths of life at American universities in a hilarious series of mishaps on a fun journey of enlightenment. By David Balkin Jules Stern is an untenured professor educated in France and attempting to learn the ropes of teaching philosophy to students in an American state university. His French sensibilities and educational values are put to the extreme stress test while he attempts to encourage critical thinking and intellectual rigor in his students while fighting against the overarching culture of narcissism, entitlement, and grade inflation that puts his goals at cross purposes with those of the students, faculty colleagues and university administrators with hilarious results. Jules' eye opening experiences in what he refers to as a zombie culture told as a first person narrator will ring true to anyone who has spent time in an American university in the 21st century. Like a modern day Candide in Voltaire's classic satire that debunks overly optimistic thinking, Jules is clearly a fish out of water and a stranger in a strange land in America trying to make sense out of the crazy encounters he has with some funny characters he has to deal with on his journey of personal enlightenment. Among the crazy situations in American university life that befuddles and confuses Jules in his clumsy attempts to cope with them, include faculty who view students as customers and pamper them with softball questions on exams to reinforce their inflated self-images so they can continue to perpetuate the self-delusion that they are all above average. In one of the opening vignettes in the book Jules tries to give students honest feedback in his class on their performance to benefit their personal growth and unexpectedly he receives hostility from some of the alpha male fraternity boys who are the self-appointed protectors of the pseudo culture that the students want to perpetuate. This is a fun read that you will not want to put down and it plays on multiple levels so that the reader can enjoy the humor that is infused throughout the book and also learn about the ironies and wrong-headed policies that are practiced in American universities who still like to view themselves as the “envy of the world” rather than institutions badly in need of reform. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Good stuff! By Customer An entertaining and fast-paced plot focused on the sexual peccadillos of several members of a university faculty provides the space for philosophical reflection on the cultural trends characterizing late capitalism. In the spirit of Christopher Lasch's classic “The Culture of Narcissism,” Friedland narrates the adventures of an authentic person living and working among superficial selves. The reader is presented with an image of the examined life in the contemporary academy. You will laugh out loud at the foibles and triumphs of the all-too-human protagonist. Good stuff!

A sexy hyperrealist satire set on a college campus and depicting how advanced consumer capitalism is twisting human nature into a Frankenstein creation of narcissistic self-interest. We laugh and gasp as we discover just how low colleges are stooping as their mission is reshaped by market forces. The story follows Professor Jules Stern as he comes to the realization that his world is being overtaken by a zombie-like epidemic of narcissism. It's a place where pampered students blackmail compromised faculty in a madcap mix of raging hormones, political correctness, and consumer entitlement. Jules valiantly beats back the disease in his interactions with students, colleagues, and romantic interests. But when his walls start to crumble, he struggles to distinguish integrity from corruption and his fight becomes a battle to save himself.

"Very funny and slightly disturbing for a college professor." - John Kaag, author of *American Philosophy: A Love Story*
"A fantastic and timely book!" - Clancy Martin, author of *Love and Lies*
"A little bit like eating a nice meal with

Curb Your Enthusiasm's Larry David, if Larry David were a college professor." - Jon Cogburn, co-author of Philosophy Through Video Games

"A sexy and funny read, American Steam is laced with biting commentary about today's college campus scene. Here is a brutally honest look at a system loaded with academic and sexual dysfunction." - Jim Barnes, Editor and Awards Director, IndependentPublisher.com

"If you are an adult and unshockable, then read along with this explicit private tour of twisted and narcissistic attitudes found right now in today's American Universities. See the good, the bad, and the bizarre in Friedland's vivid fantasy." -Matthew Griffiths, co-author of the forthcoming Tricking the Impossible About the Author

J.A. Friedland is a Franco-American philosopher who has spent nearly two decades teaching in American universities. He lives in the Connecticut River Valley. When he's not writing or corrupting the youth with his teachings, he can often be found kayaking, swimming, ice skating, or crawling out of a frozen pond.

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Interview by Philosophical Percolations

Can you tell me something about yourself, and how you got into writing speculative fiction?

Writing a novel is something I've always wanted to do. And it's certainly been a liberating change from writing research papers where I have to bend my thoughts around those of everyone who ever said anything along similar lines. This book let me develop a fuller sense of my own literary voice. I'd briefly considered majoring in literature actually, but decided against it because it just seemed like too much fun. I reasoned, perhaps naively at the time, that philosophers strive to describe reality directly and objectively, so had to have more impact on the real world than mere novelists! Having taught philosophy at several American universities over the last two decades, I've amassed quite a store of experiences that I take to be symptomatic of nothing less than an American cultural crisis. So depicting them in a kind of hyperreal dystopian form seemed like the perfect way to stimulate a broader awareness of the phenomenon--a culture or narcissism fueled by a consumer economy and constant electronic interaction. It's a society in which citizens grow up seeing themselves first and foremost as consumers, thus reshaping the mission of the university according to market principles. So while the book is officially a work of fiction, it's closely based on actual events. Imagine a cross between Christopher Lasch's Culture of Narcissism and Joseph Heller's Catch 22, if the latter were set on a college campus instead of a military base. Could you clarify why you thought a novel was the best way to express these ideas, rather than, say a pamphlet or an essay on the same topic?

I hoped it would give the ideas a chance to have more impact than an academic article or a non-fiction text ever could. Some editors actually told me that the story seemed like a good basis for a corky sitcom. So I've started to contact Hollywood agents and a few choice film directors. Also, good fiction has a transportive power that traditional non-fiction can never achieve. If the writing and story are good enough, readers will identify with the characters. Ultimately, my goal is not only to reach the widest audience but to have some psychologically transformative effect on readers who may already be falling into some of the troubling patterns of thought and behavior I am trying to expose. So the target audience is not only other professors who may find it to be an amusing and affirming depiction of their own frustrations as college instructors, but the so-called new adult market, many of which are college students or recent graduates. So, given the audience - the quick, non-thinking new adults who expect things to be pre-chewed, what makes you think the book would help them to reflect on themselves? There's always a nagging self-doubt when doing any kind of cultural criticism that you only reach the converted. And I'm sure that no one can hope to reach everyone. For many have simply stopped reading altogether. And some will always be beyond the pale. Still others will be put off by the protagonist's conceit. But for the rest, what I've done is try to sprinkle as much sugar as possible for the medicine to go down. The fiction format is only the beginning. I've also taken the trouble to write in an engaging style so it feels like a page turner where the ideas can actually become secondary to the pleasure of the read--I've had several readers already report this. There's also a good number of colorful characters, some racy passages, quite a bit of humor, and a dose of real drama in the third act. Of course the irony here is that people might then get through the entire book without actually letting the ideas sink in. I have to hope that doesn't happen. That the seeds are still planted deep down in their minds and will bear fruit later. I've also written almost the entire book in the present tense, which I found to be quite a challenge. There's a reason most novels aren't written this way--it's hard to pull off. But if done well, it can carry the reader into a zen-like state of mindfulness. Some readers have compared the style to Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, which is also in the present tense. Both books have an almost hyperreal feeling to them in which the mundane details of every moment are described. But those details come together to form a compelling experience or picture of reality. My hope is that ultimately, this will help instill mindful habits into readers who tend to bore easily. Our culture is always looking to the next moment. People rarely savor the present anymore. And this to me is also part of what fuels the general psychology of narcissism, which is always looking outward to the next personal gratification. It's also a book that college students and recent graduates may want to pick it up just to get a glimpse of what a professor sees when he looks at them through a critical lens. I've included humorous office-hour experiences for instance that can help them feel what it's like to be on the other side of the desk. And finally, I've included a few mini philosophy lectures, for example, on the nature of bribery and distributive justice that speak indirectly to the underlying ethos of the narcissistic frame of mind, that I hope will help new adults start to think less egoistically. In all, your novel depicts a pretty grim picture. What messages if any of hope do you include? This was a difficult decision. I wasn't sure I should include any hope at all for fear that it would chafe against the darkly satirical thrust of

the book. But since I'm writing from a desire to humanize the culture, I decided I had to include some optimism. Ideally, I'd like the book to make some difference and straight satirical novels don't really do that in my opinion. *American Steam* breaks out of this pattern by folding in a dash of progressive policy around the edges. But it does so in a paradoxically unresolved sense that I don't want to give away here. One of the problems I describe in the book is the growing reliance on underpaid adjuncts and contingent college faculty. This to me is a major crisis in American public education. And I have thought a great deal about it during the decade and a half I have spent as a college professor without a full-time renewing or tenure-stream position. There may finally be some positive change on the horizon as adjuncts increasingly join labor unions and urge their elected officials to take action. I offer a solution to this problem via college accreditation reform. So the book ends by inviting us to imagine how a few plausible policy shifts could humanize the culture and help society work more equally for all.