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CAMPUS CAPERS: TIM W. BROWN'S BROAD SATIRE OF SMALL-TOWN COLLEGE LIFE

By Cassandra West

On the surface, college towns might seem like tight-knit, self-sufficient little universes where scholarly types spend all their time poring over dusty old texts rescued from ancient civilizations. If you believe that, you've been in the stacks too long. On the other hand, a reading of Tim W. Brown's "Deconstruction Acres" leads you to think that behind the wrought-iron gates and underneath the ivy lies a messy, corrupt world populated by sex-obsessed characters who are so morally bankrupt they make the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah look like good Samaritans. Funny and purposely outrageous, "Deconstruction Acres" is a modern-day parable that centers on one man, in this case a lowly townie, who tries to bring down the giant with his metaphorical slingshot and rock.

Brown spares no one and nothing in this countercultural satire, as he mocks an inept establishment and the people who run it. As he pulls off his comedy of bad manners, he draws cleverly on a couple of '60s TV shows and a cartoon character: In a fictional town in Middle America, "Green Acres" meets "Underdog." But where these shows were wholesome, family-oriented and humorous, "Deconstruction Acres" is merely the latter, offering ample opportunities to laugh out loud at the foibles and follies of Underdog, who "became a townie during the second week he lived in Jasper."

Fictional Jasper is home to Jasper College, surrounded by cornfields and trailer parks and run by the corrupt president, Milton Flaghorn, who lords over the college much like a dictator would a banana republic. In less time than it would take most freshmen to unpack their bags, Underdog is kicked out of school for smoking (something other than tobacco). Rather than return home to live with his mom and irascible dad -- who couldn't wait to leave Underdog in Jasper so he could get back home "to get up and go to work tomorrow and pay for all this" -- Underdog decides to stick it out in Jasper. He moves into a "puke-colored house," with Mona Baine, the landlady, and her daughter, Judy, a sex-crazed, tractor-driving landscaper and Jasper College dropout who develops an irrepressible crush on him.

Rather than return Judy's affections, Underdog falls for Ione Twayblade, who poses in the nude for Jasper College art classes and works at the campus credit union. She lives in Trailerville, where "gangs of unsupervised children throw rocks or punches at one another . . . these were very mean little kids, none of whom were living the happy-go-lucky childhood that they deserved." The place is filled with stereotypes, and Brown piles on all the ones usually associated with poor, rural, uneducated people.

Of course, Ione doesn't respond to Underdog's overtures in quite the way he wishes. She takes one look at dashing celebrity professor William "Race" Fletcher (who was a kind of film star in a former life) and heads off with him on trips to New York, where he goes to flee unsophisticated Jasperites. Race gained academic stardom for his book "Deconstruction Acres: Imploding the Myth of Rural Simplicity," which became a surprise hit after it was republished under the title "The Green Acres Story." Race, with his East Coast sensibilities, never fits into the Jasper milieu, although he professes to admire the simple life. "But

the irony was lost upon him, like it was on his Green Acres book subject, Oliver Douglas, who, in Race Fletcher's own words, never fit in, who belonged to the city wholly, despite his pro-farmer speeches and attempts to farm the old Haney Place."

With Race as his rival and Judy as a juggernaut, life for Underdog becomes a test of will. Still, it doesn't take him long to establish himself as a townie, a desultory denizen whose ambitions stretch no farther than the county line. With his job in the campus print shop, Underdog manages a modest living. He hangs out with his grad-student pal, Reid, drinking beer, and with his easy access to campus documents he becomes a spy for the Jasper College Chronicler, a crusading campus paper out to nail the despicable Flaghorn. And in the end, he discovers talents and interests he never knew he had.

"Deconstruction Acres" is Brown's first novel, and it's apparent he draws on some personal experiences to give life to those issues that annoy him. In the best tradition of farcical literature, he burlesques the foibles and depravities of everyday life and showcases a still maturing talent that we expect, and certainly hope, to see more of in the future.