Salmon (P.) *Achieving a PhD: Ten Students' Experience*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 1992. 122 pp. £11.95 (pbk). ISBN 0-94080-59-0

There is much to commend in the sentiments and attitude motivating this book, commencing as it does with a very sharp sense that 'as yet, no answers have been found to the widespread and well-documented problems of failure, drop-out and low morale amongst PhD students' (p. 4). The author, a social scientist with extensive experience supervising doctoral projects, has no trouble identifying what all too often goes wrong. Everyone will pay lip-service to the idea that PhD work should be innovative and creative, she correctly observes, nevertheless, nobody dares to address the difficulty that 'the intellectual qualities it calls for are those of imaginative boldness, not slavish obedience to given forms' (p. 10). Since our academic structures routinely subordinate student to supervisor during the process while the doctoral student is 'establishing a unique personal standpoint from which previous work is consciously considered', far too few supervisors can adjust to the realization that 'when this is achieved, it is the student rather than the supervisor who has become the expert' (p. 24). Salmon proposes, as an essential first step in formulating a more productive approach, that we all 'listen to the voices of the PhD students themselves, speaking about the meaning which this undertaking has for them' (p. 4).

Regrettably, however, it is at this key point where the book loses a significant measure of credibility. To whose voices, precisely, should we listen? Phillida Salmon's sample, oddly for a social scientist, is scarcely representative of doctoral students in her discipline – let alone graduate students in all disciplines, throughout the United Kingdom. She offers the views of ten of her students, all 'members of an ongoing group for at least the last three years' (p.4), and all fully supportive of the prevailing British system of doctoral studies as they encountered it under the effective and sympathetic direction of Professor Salmon. Three of these students have already earned their degrees, and chances are that most of the others will do likewise: hence, it is not surprising that they should endorse the author's conclusion that the British *status quo*, suitably modified as she suggests, is the way of the future for doctoral studies.

The Winfield Task Force, to which Salmon briefly refers, offers relatively high non-completion estimates among British students doing doctoral studies in the social sciences. Only two pages, at the very end of this book, are devoted to a summation of six such 'unhappy outcomes' in her lengthy supervisory career: and the voices of these students, as always in books of this type, consistently across the entire Western academic world, are the voices we do not hear. 'We should like to know more about these departed ones,' Donald Cameron Allen mused in his 1968 study *The PhD in English and American Literature*: 'their voices – critical, frustrated, sour, desperate, and discouraged – would make an excellent antiphonal chorus to the chanting of those who have succeeded.' Over the quarter-century since Cameron's book, almost everywhere in the extensive Western literature on graduate studies, these are the voices that are never heard. If Salmon had heard them, reporting them in the same detail that she reserved for the 'mostly positive' (p. 114) side of her supervisory practice, would all her conclusions have followed so neatly from the evidence thus surveyed?

It is still to her credit that Salmon, spurred perhaps by the Winfield non-complete estimates, at least mentions her own 'unhappy outcomes', but she does not dwell on them, intimating in the standard fashion that they are really atypical. Because the Winfield estimates might suggest otherwise, Salmon also hints that those estimates might be misleading, since some successful candidates take longer than the stipulated time limits for completion, and 'there is often a sense that work over a lengthy period may result in something of exceptional quality' (p. 3). One must wonder how three of Salmon's 'unhappy outcomes', each a highly educated woman who had devoted years of futile effort to a study that went nowhere, would respond to this line of argument.

But the blunt truth of the matter remains, in academe as elsewhere, that we simply do not listen to those we do not even bother to count. And it is an increasing scandal that, as the Winfield Task Force contended, there are no reliable statistics on attrition from doctoral programmes anywhere in the Western world. This is so despite decades of academic analysis on graduate studies, despite the relative simplicity of the statistical problem, and despite the easy accessibility of all necessary data. Until we measure the real attrition problem honestly and accurately, we will have more books like this, which cannot help but minimize the import of those 'unhappy outcomes'. And that really is not listening to all of the voices.

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