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**Mission Statement:** The purpose of An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living is to provide a resource for the dissemination of creative works relevant to the subject of meta-living. The journal welcomes both academic and artistic exercises expressed in any medium capable of being transmitted through the physical mechanisms of the journal. Due consideration also will be given to submissions that do not conform to these mechanisms. The journal explicitly forbids the establishment of a regular publication schedule.

**Meta-Living:** One useful avenue leading toward an understanding of the term meta-living is through analogy, particularly by considering meta-fiction. Wikipedia, the oracle of all contemporary knowledge, defines meta-fiction as “the literary term describing fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.”<sup>1</sup> By straight-forward analogy, meta-living is the existential term describing a manner of living that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between existence and reality, using irony and self-reflection among other devices. These other devices include, but are not limited to, scientific inquiry, ontology, various theologisms, sophistry, rhetoric, tomfoolery, transcendental perspectivism and, of course, the omnipresent specter of post-existential relativism.

<sup>1</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metafiction>, accessed 2014 April 16.

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**A Note on the Font:** This font is Dax Compact Regular, designed by the late Hans Reichel, musician, instrument maker and font designer.

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# Thoughts on the Annual Review

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**Abstract:** This document provides a commentary on the vocabulary often used in institutionalized annual performance reviews. It provides a criticism of the language then offers alternatives intended to create an annual review process not only more palatable but more productive for superiors and subordinates alike.

## Introduction

In the fall of each year, employees of many fine institutions are subject to a process of annual review in which they are categorized into one of five categories, identified with the following designations.

- Falls Far Short of Expectations
- Falls Short of Expectations
- Meets Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations
- Far Exceeds Expectations

The consequences of this categorization can be severe. According to the policy of one institution, falling into one of the lowest two categories not only disqualifies one from merit-based raises (should the finances of the institution that year allow for such a pool) but also from cost-of-living raises (which are available more regularly, though not always). The institution also had codified mechanisms for the revocation of tenure from faculty who fell into the lowest two categories, leading to loss of employment at the institution. For faculty in profitable departments, where the university expects to make money through the

pursuit of federal research funding (by this we particularly eye engineering departments) often the single most critical performance criterion relevant to this categorization is research expenditures.

It is not our intention to render any value judgments on the moral basis of this process. On the contrary, we have learned not to stand against the tide of monetization, which has gripped every aspect of our culture, this fine institution notwithstanding. Here, we concern ourselves with a more modest investigation. We have never liked the language used to describe the five categories. Something about the words themselves disturbs us. In this document we first examine the language then provide suggestions for more appealing alternative phrasings.

## Consideration as Epitaphs

One way to gain perspective on these five categories is to consider them each as an epitaph. Let us begin in the middle. Consider a gravestone in which we find chiseled, "He met expectations," or "She met expectations." Who among us would like to lie beneath such a marker? It is objectionable because it belittles our accomplishments in two ways. First, there is no subtlety in the implication

of failure. It might as well read, "He did no more than meet expectations." It is in fact a condemnation. At the same time, there is a second incriminating aspect of the epitaph, namely, that it assigns to the individual a desire to conform to expectations. Who set these expectations? Of course, it matters not except that they came from an external agent. This epitaph implies a condemnation due the cowardice of a conformist.

"Oh!" our opponents argue, "The world must be measured if progress is to be made." No doubt. Again, we do not seek in this document to set the ways of the world aright.

"You are too sensitive," say our superiors and rightly so. "To cast words meant for a regular bureaucratic evaluation with the gravity of a tombstone is preposterous. Your objections have no basis." To these words, we dare offer some rebuttal. Today, in this country, women on average live eighty-one years and men seventy-six. If we imagine that we might work a mere thirty years at this fine institution, then three-eighths of our lives are subject to this evaluation. If the epitaph was corrected to read, "He met expectations for over three-eighths of his life," or "She met expectations for nearly three-eighths of her life," it would not be an improvement. Even one year, we insist, is too much. At the risk of redundancy, if the phrasing is inappropriate to describe the totality of our lives, it is no more appropriate for a single year.

Perhaps, we would prefer another epitaph. Imagine a daughter walking through a lonely cemetery. She stops at an oak tree, beneath which a pair of graves lie side by side. The tombstone of one of her parents reads, "He exceeded expectations," or "She exceeded expectations." That daughter will find no comfort in these words. They can be read in only one way—to imply a low set of initial expectations. This life, summarized above, turned out just a smidgeon better than anyone had any right to expect. Let me insert this ejaculatory prayer: Lord, let my daughter never find me put to rest beneath such words!

Maybe we just didn't move far enough in the right direction. Think of a cemetery filled with common, average folk, each marked "He met expectations," or "She met expectations." Yet, among them one stands out, "He far exceeded expectations," or "She far exceeded expectations." This man or woman was a leader among people. They accomplished great tasks at the institution that led to the reputation of the institution, as judged by periodicals of the day, increasing by one or more increments. We would shout, "Hurrah!" except such shows of exuberance are not fit for places of quiet internment. We see then that rather than lifting up the accomplishments of the individual, these words merely serve to further diminish the external set of criteria by which they were evaluated. To mistake this for a compliment is, we are afraid, no more than the folly of the self-absorbed.

Let's move in the opposite direction. We imagine now being interned beneath a tombstone bearing the words, "He fell short of expectations," or "She fell short of expectations." In truth, one cannot entirely ignore the intimation of failure in these words. But, at the same time, we sense in these words, the essence of our humanity. Here lies a human being. Some fall short of expectations. Others rise above it. We admire those who manage to do both with humility. Let not the king crow of his power nor the pauper brag of his poverty. Both actions are unseemly. However, to admit that one fell short of expectations possesses its own beauty. If not for the practical consequences related to the loss of our ability to provide for the material needs of our family, we would advocate annually to be described in this way, at least given the four options thus far explored.

We move on to the final category. Imagine now a solitary graveyard. If one travels through farmlands, filled with fields and pastures, one occasionally comes upon a single grave, often surrounded by a grave-sized fence to keep the cattle from treading upon it. Likely, it is a suicide, forbidden by divine law from being buried on the hallowed grounds of the church cemetery. Imagine we stop the car on the side of the road and duck between the strands

of barbwire. We trespass through the pasture to stand at the side of the grave. On this tombstone we read a name and beneath the name, "He fell far short of expectations," or "She fell far short of expectations." Who committed the greater crime here? The poor soul who spends eternity in the company of cattle or those who chiseled these words on the stone at our feet?

"Idiot!" our opponents say and rightly so. "If the world was governed according to your principles nothing would be done. The feckless would be rewarded no less than the competent and motivated. The world you hint at is a dystopian one in which all are judged equal irrespective of merit, talent or deed." We know, we know. We do not deny such accusations. The role with which we have been charged, though it embarrasses us to admit it, is to point out an error, though we have not been gifted with the insight to provide the remedy for it.

## Alternatives

Still, we shall try, though we have little hope of success. Here, we have only concerned ourselves with semantics and intimation. In suggesting alternatives, we limit ourselves only to the words and not to the process itself. "A useless exercise," say those opposed to our endeavor. We accept the appellation useless. We some time ago ceased to think of utility as a virtue.

We shall proceed with our replacement phrases in the same order as our previous examination. Perhaps, "Meets Expectations" should be replaced with "Exists!" Including the exclamation mark is mandatory. I repeat, "Exists!" It certainly is much more affirmative though not entirely free of ambiguity. There are of course negative connotations. One need think no further than Sartre's *Nausea*, a novel written as a diary, with an entry for one innocuous Tuesday: *Rien. Existé*. But we do not suggest that "Meets Expectations" should be replaced with "Nothing. Exists," but rather the much more emphatic "Exists!" One can hardly fail to see the difference. Imagine a tombstone that

reads, "He existed!" or "She existed!" It is an infallible testament, except to those few philosophers who have forsaken the perspective that this life bears any correspondence to reality. While we have a soft spot in our hearts for such folks, we cannot be expected to accommodate their few numbers in matters of such practical significance as the one before us.

Next, instead of "Exceeds Expectations", we suggest "Wants it more". Stop laughing! We offer these alternatives in all seriousness. There is no denying, given the distribution of the way people are made, that some people desire success and the external affirmation of their success more than others. Here we translate this external evaluation into a more personal statement, better describing the individual. Join us as we tour the cemetery. There, upon the hill, do you see the gravestone in which chiseled we find the words, "He wanted it more," or "She wanted it more"? Okay, it may not be perfect, but, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we some time ago ceased to think of perfection as a virtue. Perhaps, a poet or some other wordsmith might do better. We encourage those so inclined to try. We remain open to suggestions.

As for the presumed highest honor, we opt to replace "Far Exceeds Expectations" with "Exploited Some Combination of Circumstance and Talent for Personal Gain". Just kidding! That's too wordy. Also, it lacks subtlety. Our actual suggestion for "Far Exceeds Expectations" is simply "Fortunate". Some are fortunate by chance. Fortune favors others with natural talents or the determination to see a job done that others did not find worthwhile or productive. While it is true that some unsavory characters may achieve metrics that make them appear to far exceed expectations or to be fortunate through the exploitation of the weakness of others, there is little we can do to thwart this abuse of the system. We accept the ambiguity in "Fortunate" to allow for this possibility, without ignoring the underlying realization that, even in the absence of divine judgment, despicable acts contain their own punishment. Does it pass the graveyard test? We come back to our imaginary cemetery filled with

common, average folk, each marked “He existed!” or “She existed!” Among them we find one gilded tombstone, bearing the words, “He was fortunate” or “She was fortunate.” It seems okay to us. It is neither too favorable nor too distinctly unfavorable to fly in the face of the ambiguity that rules our passage through this life.

We now seek alternative phrases in the other direction. We are tempted to replace “Fell Short of Expectations” with “Existed!” since there honestly isn’t that much difference between meeting expectations and not meeting them. Often this judgment turns on the individual disposition of the superior responsible for the evaluation. However, we understand that the central administrations of fine institutions would never accept a scheme in which their carefully constructed taxonomy was reduced from five to four categories. Instead, we suggest that “Fell Short of Expectations” should be replaced with “Keeps it Real”. Don’t laugh. Put yourself back in the cemetery. Imagine you are surrounded by a thousand markers each bearing the words, “He kept it real” or “She kept it real”. It feels good, doesn’t it? This description shifts the average experience of reality from meeting expectations to sometimes meeting them and sometimes not meeting them, which is actually a much more accurate description of a so-called average experience.

Last, but certainly not least, we suggest that “Falls Far Short of Expectations” be changed to “Fails Spectacularly”. The only problem with this is that if our five categories were presented in this way

- Failed Spectacularly
- Keeps it Real
- Exists!
- Wants it More
- Fortunate

everyone would strive to fail spectacularly. Imagine resting for all eternity or at least the hundred years or so guaranteed by the proprietors of the cemetery under a tombstone that bore the epitaph, “He failed

spectacularly” or “She failed spectacularly”. The act of failure is mitigated by the spectacle it caused. Human life too is often an act of failure. Wisdom, it is said, arises from failure, while those who never fail succumb to arrogance. How often we find ourselves in a moment of weakness uttering the prayer: Lord, let me fail spectacularly today!

If you are not of a religious bent and our references to prayer threaten to provide the obstacle which prevents you from fully embracing our cause, then let us present the same sentiment regarding the virtues of failure in secular terms. We need think no further than the American musician, composer and thinker, Ornette Coleman, to whom the following quote is attributed, “It was when I found out I could make mistakes that I knew I was on to something.”

In conclusion, we hope that those in positions of power within the central administration of progressive institutions across this great land give thought to a revision of the performance descriptors used in their annual review process. We hope that some changes will be made, if not precisely along these lines, then in a similar spirit. It might make the annual review process not only more palatable but more productive for superiors and subordinates alike.



## About The Poison Pie Publishing House

The Poison Pie Publishing House<sup>1</sup> is an independent publisher specializing in post-existential fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational writing process. In addition to serving as a publishing house, PPPH hosts an arts blog,<sup>1</sup> “An Unofficial Keiji Haino Website”<sup>2</sup> and “An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living”.<sup>3</sup>

## References

1. *The Poison Pie Publishing House*, <http://www.poisonpie.com/publishing/index.html>, accessed Feb. 5, 2015.
2. Keffer, D.J., *An Unofficial Keiji Haino Website*, <http://www.poisonpie.com/sounds/haino/index.html>, accessed Feb. 5, 2015.
3. Staff, *An International Journal of Exploratory Meta-Living*, <http://www.poisonpie.com/IJEML/index.html>, accessed Feb. 5, 2015.

# Wouldn't the Wood Weird

or

Impractical Prayers from the Spindle of the Void  
by David J. Keffer



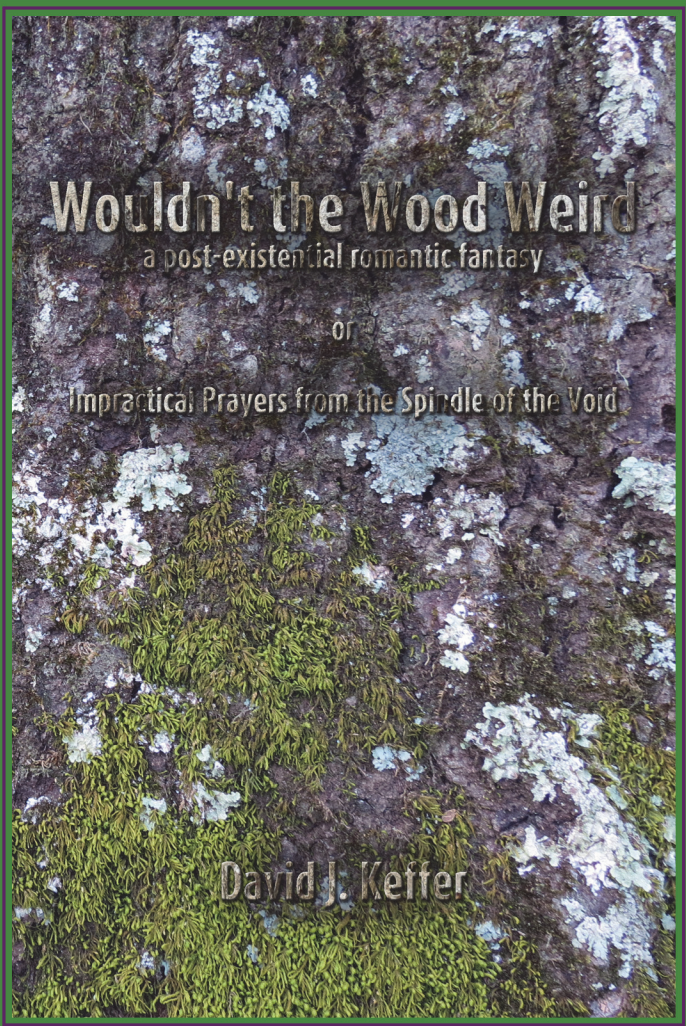
Reality is defined reluctantly by common consensus. Each of us participates in the process in a unique way and contributes our own idiosyncratic slant to the reality that emerges. *Wouldn't the Wood Weird* follows four individuals--a drowned woman, a psychic, an astronaut and *Wouldn't* himself--each of whom spent some time in the care of the staff of the Lake View Sanitarium, where they were recuperated and returned, ostensibly whole, to society. Having conquered their inner demons, they join forces to participate in the externally directed enterprise often described as "making the world a better place". This short novel follows them on their first adventure in this arena, the search for the astronaut's missing wife.

*Wouldn't the Wood Weird* is a post-existential (romantic) fantasy generated through a non-idiomatic improvisational creative process.



#### About the Author

David Keffer is a professor at the University of Tennessee and an autodidact in the realm of world literature. He has currently published 19 novels, 6 illustrated books and 2 prayer books with the Poison Pie Publishing House.



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