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[Book Review]: *The Pernicious PhD Supervisor* by Tara Brabazon

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> I was in a pretty high-powered research meeting with research leaders . . . and one of these senior women described her students as "slaves." And the people in the room laughed. So this type of behaviour is known. It's validated and it's being protected. No empathy. No care for students. (Brabazon 2024, 5.10:55–11:16)[1]

Amidst the pressures and negativity of academic life, reading scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has mostly been a buoyant experience for me. Listening to Professor Tara Brabazon's (2024) *The Pernicious PhD Supervisor*, however, was not buoyant; it was five straight hours of a gothic scholarly séance. Brabazon's voice, often drenched with sorrow or dark humour, conjured up memories of my coworkers, peers, and friends who have been severely damaged by their PhD supervision (Moss and Mahmoudi 2021; Woolston 2019). SoTL is frequently written and practiced as steady, positive progress. This audiobook prompts all of us as SoTL researchers to ask: how much change can we really instil when the doctoral education system, in charge of filtering the next generation of higher education teachers, is so sick?

SoTL has extended its scope to include doctoral education (Dineen, Thelen, and Santucci 2024; Stevens and Caskey 2023), with the aim of developing discipline-embedded, evidenced-based teaching for higher degree research students. Brabazon refers to this specific field as the scholarship of supervision (SoS). As a young field, SoS has rarely examined the harm that malicious supervision can inflict on disempowered PhD students in full gore. The reasons for this are obvious: SoS often examines students at the author's own institution, generating a conflict of interest for these institutions if they were to support research that showcases their negligence. Instead of progressive, open scholarship, the topic of PhD student abuse has historically been relegated to hushed conversations in corridors and confidential institutional investigations. Many of us, including Brabazon (who has occupied research leadership roles for decades), continue to witness the abuse of PhD students. With such uneven power dynamics between supervisors and their students (Goddiksen et al. 2023), the darker side of SoS has remained silent. In her audiobook, Brabazon shared her witnessed accounts of pernicious supervision, her expertise in higher education studies, and the sonic medium to rend this silence.

The Pernicious PhD Supervisor is, structurally, a bestiary. By reflecting on the pernicious supervisors and student victims she has encountered, Brabazon identifies 10 categories using predominately animal metaphors to symbolise their behaviour. Like a Carl Linnaeus of the academic underbelly, Brabazon has spent her career cataloguing these creatures. This audiobook classified pernicious PhD supervisors into 10 types which are all briefly introduced in Table 1. Each chapter detailed the ways these supervisors harm PhD candidatures and multiple strategies students can enact to manage or escape from each type of pernicious supervision.

Table 1. Brabazon's taxonomy of pernicious PhD supervisors

Chapter	Taxonomic classification	Concise summary of behaviour	Malicious?
3	The white pointer shark	The apex predators of academia, feeding off other's work and maintaining their position through leadership and grants	Yes
4	The helicopter	Often absent from the supervisory relationship, until the helicopter lands to displace the consequences of their absence onto the student	Yes
5	The battery hen farmer	Concerned only with increasing the rate at which students produce co-authored papers (eggs), and therefore actively work against their students' completion/escape	Yes
6	The Loch Ness monster	Unintentionally absent supervisors, usually due to their overwhelming workload as high-profile academics	No
7	The bower bird	Lures students through the construction of an illusionary bower (a series of deceptive techniques to convince students they are a good supervisor). Once students enrol, they are neglected.	Yes
8	The parent	Supervisors and students misunderstand, or willingly ignore, the professionalism required in their relationship and therefore default to an often disastrous parent-child mode of communication	Yes[2]
9	The predator	Isolates students from their support systems and disconnects them from reality to establish and maintain total power over the relationship	Yes
10	The chihuahua supervisor	Supervisors constantly crave validation by "barking" due to their own insecurity and sense of precarity	No
11	The flamingo	Inserts and associates themselves with others' success to sheath their own lack of achievements	Yes
12	The wizard	The supervisor behind the curtain. Inspired by the Wizard of Oz, this supervisor is similar to the bower bird, however the illusion of competence is maintained at all costs, even after the student enrols.	Yes

Importantly, of the 10 pernicious supervisor types, two have no malicious intent. The Loch Ness monster supervisor (overwhelmed with work commitments) and the chihuahua supervisor (overcome with insecurity) demonstrate that academics are themselves also victims of the contemporary, neoliberal university. Additionally, the parent supervisor can only materialise if students themselves also actively construct their role in the supervisory relationship as that of a child. Together, these three pernicious supervisors provide an important balance to this book: they remind

listeners that students also shoulder responsibility for ensuring healthy supervisory relationships and a successful candidature. These responsibilities are outlined by Brabazon in the introduction (2.3:40–15:09), where students are asked to reflect on their shortcomings in constructing a healthy supervisory relationship. As a result, a mindset of student ownership over their candidature is facilitated throughout the book, which empowers students to enact the strategies that Brabazon suggested.

The SoS movement can help prevent malicious PhD supervision (Dineen, Thelen, and Santucci 2024). Brabazon provided explicit strategies in each chapter to manage pernicious PhD supervisors as a guide for students, yet this advice also reveals important future research directions for SoS. For example, changing supervisors is a potential strategy suggested in nearly all chapters of this book, yet Brabazon also acknowledged the profound difficulty and danger of attempting this (Brabazon and Redhead 2017; Schmidt and Hansson 2021; Wang et al. in press). What are the risks of supervisory change? How do they differ between disciplines? SoS researchers need to answer questions like these to ensure that every doctoral student, in every department, working under every national policy suite, is able to escape malicious supervision. Ultimately, *The Pernicious PhD Supervisor* provides the language and framework to design research to prevent PhD student harm.

Doctoral education is the filter of the academy. It is the point where the widening participation agenda of higher education continues to fail (Grant-Smith, Irmer, and Mayes 2020; Larcombe, Ryan, and Baik 2022). Doctoral supervision, the key determinant of success in doctoral programs (Lovitts 2001), is therefore a site where the reproduction of power in the academy occurs. *The Pernicious PhD Supervisor* provides one of the first accurate snapshots of the monsters that lurk within this space. SoTL cannot help PhD students when the frameworks we use to examine supervision are all too human.

NOTES

1. The book reviewed here is an audiobook. Timestamps provided in the quotations refer to the Audible version of the book, with the chapter number, followed by time. Therefore, "5.10:55–11:16" refers to the timestamp 10:55–11:16 in Chapter 5. While the author does cite other literature verbally within the audiobook, written reference lists for each chapter are also provided in an earlier vlog version of the audiobook content accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7ho3JDYbmU.
2. While malicious, this supervisory configuration is only possible with reciprocating unprofessional conduct from the student.

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