

CONFESSIONS OF A PREP SCHOOL COLLEGE COUNSELOR

Our author looks at books about college admissions—and at the unexamined prejudices fueling the “elite” college admissions frenzy

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

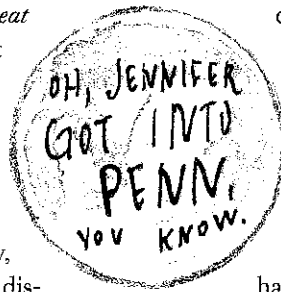
Illustrations by Steve Brodner

Several years ago I was teaching *The Great Gatsby* to a class of eleventh-graders at Harvard-Westlake, a private school in Los Angeles. We began our discussion with a consideration of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The students more or less understood Daisy. These were teenagers from Beverly Hills and Brentwood and Encino, kids for whom Daisy, with her particular collection of pleasures and discontents, her fluttering dress and her voice like money, was not entirely beyond the realm of experience. Tom was another matter.

“What’s he like?” I asked. A hand shot up: “He’s highly intelligent.” I looked at the boy who said this with some puzzlement. He had just read the chapter in which Tom sputters out the theories—“scientific stuff”—that he has gleaned from a book called *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, among them that “it’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.” This is not the sort of opinion with which children from Beverly Hills and Brentwood and Encino tend to be sympathetic.

“What makes you think he’s so smart?” I asked. The boy replied, “Because he went to Yale.” I burst out laughing and then gave the class a little lecture regarding the way that Ivy League schools have changed in the past several decades—about what a Yale degree suggested about someone fifty years ago as opposed to what it suggests today. That despite the current admissions crunch there are still plenty of nimrods collecting Yale diplomas was a life lesson I decided to let them learn out in the field.

A couple of years later, when I became a college counselor at the school, I was introduced to such odd and inexplicable notions about colleges that I felt nostalgic for the good old days of explaining that holding a Yale degree doesn’t make Tom Buchanan a genius. I had assumed, naively, that the new job would be easy. By every objective measure our students were among the best-prepared for



college in North America; in a typical year a quarter of the class attends either an Ivy League school or Stanford University. More impressive, the ones from the bitter bottom of the class were going off to colleges that most high school seniors can only dream about.

I had no idea what I was in for—no idea that the confident, buoyant students for whom I’d had such great affection when I encountered them

in the classroom would so often turn into complete neurotics the moment they crossed the threshold of the college-counseling office. Or that their parents, who had always been lovely and appreciative when I was teaching their children, would become irritable and demanding once I was helping them all select a college. Granted, every year there were families who impressed me with their good cheer and resourcefulness in the face of the thorny admissions climate. But invariably a core group seemed to be teetering on the brink of emotional collapse. What I was observing, I later discovered, was a common phenomenon among the families of college-bound students of a certain social class, one aptly described by the psychologist Michael Thompson in a justly famous 1990 essay titled “College Admission as a Failed Rite of Passage.” College admissions, Thompson wrote, “can make normal people act nutty, and nutty people act quite crazy.” Bingo. I had inherited a Rolodex full of useful phone numbers (the College Board, a helpful counselor in the UCLA admissions office), but the number I kept handing out was that of a family therapist. “Maybe he could help you a bit,” I would say gently after yet another unexpectedly combustive family meeting. I could have understood the forceful nature of the families’ emotions if the stakes had been higher. If the child had a single shot at a scholarship and a college education, and a letter of rejection meant that he or she would lead a fundamentally different life—that was a situation I could imagine being rife with heartache and regret. But when the sting of a Bowdoin rejection was lessened (the same day) by the salve of a

Colby acceptance, when a rejection from Dartmouth meant the student would be off to Penn—where was the horror? If a family had the wherewithal to send a beloved and supremely well prepared child off to one of the hundred or so first-rate colleges in America, the resources to offer a semester abroad, the connections necessary to facilitate a wonderful summer internship in New York or Hollywood or Costa Rica, and the ability to bankroll, without blinking, all of graduate school, then what was the source of these unstoppable tears?

Each of the hot hundred colleges held a certain position in a vast and inscrutable cosmology that only the students and their parents seemed to understand. The very names of schools I had always considered excellent made many students shudder—Kenyon, for example. They would snap briskly to attention if I said “Williams” or “Amherst.” So why not Kenyon?

On the other hand, schools that I had never considered particularly dazzling turned out to be white-hot centers of the universe. In vast, high-achieving droves, for example, these kids wanted to go to Duke. Fine, but here’s where I couldn’t figure them out: they were dying to go to Duke, but Chapel Hill left them cold. Why? They couldn’t put it into words exactly; it was as inexplicable and irreducible as falling in love. They would do whatever it took to get themselves to Duke—enroll in as many AP classes as they could, stuff their heads full of Robert Lowell poems and differential equations and plein air paintings, invest untold, unrecoverable hours cramming for standardized tests that a growing number of admissions experts hope to abolish altogether.

Certainly, I understood why students who had worked so hard and done so well would want to go to schools like Harvard and Princeton, but many places seem to be prestigious simply because student fads and crazes have made them hard to get into. Brazenly capitalizing on the whims and passions of teenagers seems a questionable practice for institutions dedicated, in part, to the well-being of young people. Here’s how Rachel Toor describes her former job as an admissions officer at Duke in her new book, *Admissions Confidential*:

I travel around the country whipping kids (and their parents) into a frenzy so that they will apply. I tell them how great a school Duke is academically and how much fun they will have socially. Then, come April, we reject most of them.

The university devotes a considerable amount of money and effort to recruiting BWRKs (“bright, well-rounded kids”) only because denying them boosts the school’s selectivity rating. Although Toor seems disillusioned by the task of pumping up application rates, she also seems to believe that some measure of a school’s worth can be found in the number of students it rejects.

Although the books devoted to “elite” and “top” and

“highly selective” college admissions currently make up a vast literature, the very notion of a how-to manual devoted to the secrets of blasting one’s way into the Ivy League is, in fact, a relatively recent phenomenon. The 1961 book *The Ivy League Today*, for example, was much more concerned with “Ivy mores and conduct” than with test scores and personal essays. The first chapter, “The Couth and the Uncouth,” approvingly described the Ivy Leaguer’s “amused tolerance” of the nationwide craze for all things Ivy that had begun in the late fifties. Ivy fashion “became an absolute uniform among the college students of the nation,” Frederic Birmingham, the book’s author, wrote. “It was also adopted by nightclub comics, prizefighters, delivery boys, and gangsters appearing before Senate committees, although these usually muscular gentlemen emphasized a snugger fit at hips and thigh.”

This newly heightened national interest in the Ivy League was probably the impetus for the publication of another 1961 book on the subject, this one a bit less insouciant in tone and nature: *How an Ivy League College Decides on Admissions*. It was the culmination of a year-long investigation of admissions practices at Yale, and was first published, in shorter form, as an essay in *The New Yorker* (it may in fact be the ur-text for the sort of book of which *Admissions Confidential* is the most recent). Although the Yale depicted in the book seems to have given longer shrift to grades and scores than *The Ivy League Today* would have one believe, great care was taken not to admit a class composed entirely of “successful test-takers” and (to use the dean of admissions’s telling term) “little twerps.” Pushiness, overeagerness, any display of uncouthly aggressive behavior, was an unpardonable sin to the admissions office. One boy’s future at Yale was grievously jeopardized by his zealous father, who used a chance encounter with an admissions officer to brandish a scrapbook of his son’s accomplishments. The admissions officer on whom the scrapbook was foisted sadly remarked,

“The pitiful thing is that the boy is a great kid. The whole incident, which will do him no good, will have to be brought out at the committee meeting. The parental strategy here gives a slight insight into the boy’s home life and background.”

This chilling use of the word “background” is more revealing of what did or did not constitute Ivy material than anything else in the book.

Two decades later the world had changed. By the 1980s being able to wear a pair of khakis with a certain casual elegance no longer greased the skids in an Ivy League admissions office, because suddenly numberless ruffians with all manner of more substantial accomplishments were gumming up the works. By the 1980s admissions guidebooks no longer took the form of sociological surveys; they had become utterly prescriptive in nature. The subtitle of

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the first chapter of *How to Get Into an Ivy League School* (1985) was "A Gate Crasher's Guide to the Ivy League," and the chapter described an admissions scene in which eagerness and grinding preparation were the very stuff of which an Ivy League admission was made. This was the beginning of the era in which Ivy League applicants needed almost ludicrously impressive bona fides if they were to be alive in the water. Even a girl who was "streamlined Ivy, prepped from the cradle," needed not only a high school visit to Israel to give her the stuff of a winning essay but a visit that happened to occur (some kids are just born lucky) "during the invasion of Lebanon."

Had the current admissions climate existed back then, of course, her trip wouldn't have clinched the deal unless her *destination* had been Lebanon. Nothing makes today's Ivy League admissions officer sit up and take notice more than a flak jacket and flying shrapnel—that is, as long as it's accompanied by a 5 on the AP physics exam and a combined SAT score of 1420 or better. For the most part, the current books on the subject of elite-college admissions share a numbing sameness, although I did find *The Princeton Review's College Admissions* remarkable for its rather caustic counsel: "Misspellings in your application can make you look like a moron," it advises, and "You probably should not attach a photograph to your application if you are very overweight." I'd like to have most of these books burned. They

explain that if kids are to have any chance at a top college, they must pursue the most rigorous curriculum available to them, both within and without the walls of their secondary schools. That's true. It is also true that such a curriculum is going to crush a lot of kids. A regimen of brutal academic hazing may be appropriate in some disciplines, for medical students or Ph.D. candidates, but it is not appropriate for fifteen-year-olds.

A subcategory of this genre of books is composed of in-depth narrative accounts of the experiences of individual students applying to Ivy League colleges, their every emotional nuance dwelled on in luxuriant detail. It's a kind of admissions porn, which, like all pornography produced for a niche market, can seem simultaneously comical and befuddling to those outside the niche. Bill Paul's *Getting In* (even the title is suggestive) describes the experiences of five Princeton applicants. Paul recounts his interviews with these teenagers in a style appropriate to, say, a Sue Grafton novel ("Lucy spoke with the hard, nasal accent of southern New Jersey as she held aloft a solitary French fry and pointed it at me"), adding to the impression that these kids are not merely applying to college but are in fact involved in a drama of almost life-and-death consequence. The teenagers described in such books have transferred the most profound and elemental of adolescent emotions—romantic attraction—onto the most unromantic of pursuits: college selection. *Getting*

Into Yale is, according to its jacket copy, "the tale of Josh Berezin, who after only one visit, became obsessed with entering the hallowed halls and tree-lined yards of Yale." What happened during this visit to turn the poor boy into an obsessive? Well, he loved the Gothic architecture, and he had a good meal ("the best calzone ever") at a restaurant five minutes from campus, and an admissions person told him that Yale students like to argue vehemently and then go out and play Frisbee. (Were these arguments perhaps about whether or not to play Frisbee? Unclear.) Although its rather misleading subtitle—"How One Student Wrote *THIS* Book and Got Into the School of His Dreams"—suggests that Berezin's admission was the result of a stunt, in fact he had the goods, carrying a healthy number of APs (four in his junior year), scoring notably well on his boards (all but one of his scores were in the 700s), and participating on the varsity football and wrestling teams. He did the requisite bit of community service, including a stint with Habitat for Humanity ("the most exciting moment was when I got called a 'white bitch' by some kid on a bike"), and also endured an arduous Outward Bound program ("I'm talking *Deliverance* backwoods here"). The most revealing part of the book consists of diary entries, which clearly show just how hard high school students bound for elite colleges must work. The busy roster of extracurricular activities that Berezin pursued during the summer after his junior year was brutal enough ("For the past four days I've been running from football to the ghetto and back again"). But the demands of the coursework itself are what really command attention. Late one night in the midst of his studies he wonders,

Where the hell did the time go? The only way I could finish all my homework would be to stay up till about 3 a.m., but if I do there's no way I'll be productive tomorrow. I suppose I probably should get used to it now if I plan to go to medical school.

Students who are up for this kind of rigor should consider doing several things. First, they should buy a single very useful guidebook: *A Is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting Into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges*, by Michele Hernández, a former assistant director of admissions at Dartmouth. In a roundabout way Hernández teaches upper-middle-class kids a lesson that refined mothers used to inculcate from the cradle onward: If you've got it, don't flaunt it.

If your father is the president and CEO of a big-name investment bank, the committee is going to be expecting quite an amazing applicant, one who has gone beyond his comfy lifestyle to make himself known. You might just write down "banker" for occupation. It's not a lie, but at the same time, it doesn't create such a high expectation in terms of wealth and privilege. Rather than saying "chief

neurosurgeon," why not just M.D.? Rather than "chief partner in a major law firm," just put "lawyer."

The second thing applicants ought to consider seriously is that it's a great big PC world out there in Ivy-admissions land, and they can either get hip or go to State. Rachel Toor seems to think that her progressive social views—which she showcases to a curious degree in the book—put her in the minority among admissions people at elite colleges, but this was not my experience of these people as I came to know them during school visits and conventions. In my experience her viewpoint is the norm rather than the exception.

In one sense the fact that such people dominate the field is a good thing. In the past twenty years the elite colleges have made an earnest and highly laudable effort to enroll and graduate significant numbers of black and Hispanic students, and this is the direct result of the hard work and relentless advocacy of people like Rachel Toor. But many of these people don't begin to acknowledge their *own* biases. Toor is to be congratulated, for example, for pointing out the greatly disturbing fact that many teachers' recommendations for female African-American students describe the students physically, with terms such as "beautiful," "striking," "elegant," and "statuesque." She is right to characterize this as "racial stereotyping" to acknowledge that these students have been "sexualized" in their teachers' descriptions of them. But Toor herself describes an applicant whom she has encountered in an interview thus: "She is exquisitely and expensively dressed in a pearl-pink linen sheath. Her shiny WASP-straight hair is pulled into an elegant bun, her makeup simple, emphasizing her natural beauty." As soon as I got to "WASP," I knew we were looking at a loser, and indeed, the girl turns out to be some clunker rich kid who, maddeningly, must be admitted because of Papa's dough—and who may therefore be "sexualized" with impunity. In evaluating students' extracurricular activities Toor is "personally most turned off by Junior Statesmen of America and by kids who started investment clubs at their schools." Pity the poor kid stuck out there in Louisville or Grand Rapids: he knows no better. Get a clue, kid! Dump the Statesmen! Join the Gay/Straight Student Alliance. Enroll in a women's-studies class—I don't care if you have to take two buses to get there. In fact, get to know the people on the bus and become incensed about their oppression (but not so incensed that you liberate the housekeeper while Mom's tied up in moot court).

The goal here is to raise your consciousness enough to attract the attention of an admissions officer at an elite college, but not so much that you find the very idea of an elite college objectionable. It's a fine line. As a PC naïf, you might assume, for example, that it is constructive and worthwhile to read books reflective of cultures different from your own and to try to learn and grow from this experience. Not so



blown careers (many of the most glamorous fields are full of dead-end jobs held by insanely well educated people), they can provide a very nice interlude between college and the pursuit of an M.B.A. or a law degree or whatever other kind of graduate degree is necessary for one of the really "good" jobs of the sort that young people who have endured the rigors and expectations of elite education tend to want for themselves.

Of course, connections aren't going to help when it comes time to apply to those supercompetitive law and business schools, at which point one will be up against not only straight-A students from Yale and Amherst but also ferociously smart applicants from "sub-elite" universities that are nonetheless home to supercompetitive graduate-level programs (for instance, the University of Michigan, whose law school, ranked by academics, judges, and lawyers as the seventh best in the country, is one of the places the Amherst and Yale grads will be clawing to get into). And winning a clerkship on the Court of Appeals or an offer from Goldman Sachs is going to depend on having done extraordinarily well in law or business school—not on where you spent your undergraduate years. And, of course, whether or not you make partner at a tony law firm or investment bank will depend on stellar performance for seven years at those places. *That's* how the world really works in 2001. (By the way, a certain Boston-based, Brahmin-ish, highbrow magazine was edited from 1981 through 1999 by a graduate of the University of Oklahoma and is now edited by a University of New Hampshire grad. The man who preceded both of them never went to college. I have noticed that many organizations are well staffed by Ivy graduates but helmed by graduates of other schools—maybe the *true* "Admissions Confidential" is this: *Ivy Grads Face Glass Ceiling!*)

There is another way to go about all of this. If a student wants a great university, why on earth would Berkeley hold less cachet than Stanford—let alone than such places as Brown and Georgetown, whose admissions selectivity may not reflect a commensurate level of academic quality? If a demonstrably superior academic environment is important, again, why not the University of Chicago? If the atmosphere there is too relentlessly intellectual, what about the world-class University of Michigan or California; or the first-rate University of Texas, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Iowa, or Illinois; or the University of Pittsburgh or Carnegie Mellon? They boast extraordinary faculties and also offer students thriving social lives. And if the superachieving college applicant from, say, Montclair or

Burlingame is really looking for a culturally enriching experience, he or she is far more likely to find it by spending the undergraduate years in flyover country than by spending them on the opposite coast. When it comes to excellent small colleges with reasonable admissions requirements, there are almost too many to list: Occidental, Kenyon, Bucknell, Carleton, Macalester, Reed, University of the South, Hobart and William Smith, New College, Davidson, Washington and Lee, Beloit, Lawrence, Gettysburg, Lewis & Clark, Lafayette, Hamilton, Whitman, Grinnell, Colgate. (Students and their parents might want to compare two columns in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings: "Reputation"—that is, how college and university administrators regard a school—and "Acceptance rate." They'll find a number of schools that are easier to get into than their reputation would suggest, and vice versa.) There are also schools with relaxed admissions standards, such as Pitzer and the University of Massachusetts, that belong to consortiums in which students can take classes at some of the most "elite" and "selective" colleges in the country, such as Pomona and Amherst. Instead of getting so nutty, families might think deeply about what the student really wants to accomplish in college. *Making the Most of College* (2001), by Richard Light, is full of excellent suggestions and might help families to find useful and meaningful criteria for school selection.

Powerful emotions get mixed up in the college-admissions process. Michael Thompson wrote in "College Admission as a Failed Rite of Passage" that central to this experience is "the most important and most difficult transition in all of life: the end of childhood and the late-adolescent separation and individuation from parents." He continued,

The frantic involvement of many parents in the process is, from my perspective, a cover for this profound parental anxiety: Did I do a good job with this child? Did I do everything I needed to do for this child? Is this child prepared? Is this child going to have a good life? ... Such fears about letting go of an unfinished child exist in all families. How can we let go of a child who is still so young in so many ways?

Surely he's right about this. Also lurking uncomfortably beneath the surface of these waters are class anxiety, the culture wars, and a whole set of unexamined prejudices about what does or does not constitute a "good" college. All this drama is nice for admissions offices that like to see applications stacked to the roof and supplicants spilling out into hallways as they wait nervously for information sessions to begin. None of it is good for seventeen-year-olds just taking their first tentative steps into adult life. ▀

Books discussed in this essay:

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A Is for Admission
by Michele Hernández
Warner Books, 1997

Admissions Confidential
by Rachel Toor
St. Martin's Press, 2001

Getting In
by Bill Paul
Addison-Wesley, 1995

Getting Into Yale
by Josh Berezin
Hyperion, 1998

Making the Most of College
by Richard Light
Harvard University Press, 2001

Looks at books about college admissions, and at the unexamined prejudices fueling the elite college admissions frenzy. Powerful emotions, of students and parents alike, get mixed up in the college admissions process. Class anxiety, culture wars and other prejudices, not academic standing or faculty credentials, all contribute to making some colleges more prestigious and desirable. (BF).