

Lost in the Meritocracy: The Undereducation of an Overachiever, by Walter Kirn. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009, 211 pp., \$24.95 hardbound.

Princeton Crack-up

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Critics of the contemporary academy have long decried the degradation of higher education as a result of the intellectual and political trends of recent decades, and they have just as long been accused of exaggerating the effects of these developments. But *Lost in the Meritocracy: The Undereducation of an Overachiever*, Walter Kirn's vivid memoir of his Princeton education in the early 1980s, bears out everything the critics have been saying, and then some. Indeed, his presentation of the nightmarish educational wasteland produced by a lingering counterculture compounded by postmodernism at one of our most prestigious universities may startle even the most jaded observers.

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Kirn is a fiction writer of some reputation, and his fourth novel, *Up in the Air* (Doubleday, 2001), was made into an enthusiastically received film last year starring George Clooney. That title might also have served for this shockingly eye-opening account (an amplification of a 2005 *Atlantic* article), since “up in the air” is where Princeton seems to have had him most of the time. But *Lost in the Meritocracy* does just as well.

A high-achieving kid from a remote and underachieving Minnesota school district, the young Kirn took his early education as a furiously serious game in which coming out on top was both means and end:

A natural-born child of the meritocracy, I'd been amassing momentum my whole life, entering spelling bees, vying for forensics medals, running my mouth in mock United Nations, and I knew only one direction: forward. I lived for prizes, plaques, citations, stars, and I gave no thought to any goal beyond my next appearance on the honor roll. Learning was secondary, promotion was primary. No one ever told me what the point was, except to keep

on accumulating points, and this struck me as sufficient. What else was there?

Kirn was the kind of smart, driven, ambitious student for whom the SATs were made, who, regardless of preparation or background, score impressively enough to climb into the Ivy League. Kirn did so well on his SATs that he was accepted at Macalester College in St. Paul with only three years of high school. Then, inspired by a misreading of *The Great Gatsby* through which he understood that destiny lay in the East, he applied and was accepted at Princeton as a rare transfer student. Thus began his journey from being “a good son of rural Republican Minnesota to citizen of the world.” Or so he hoped.

As related in the book, he soon discovers that if the democratic-meritocratic impulse driving the SATs got him into Princeton, Princeton evidently invests little in sustaining it there. The dormitory suite to which he is assigned becomes for him a kind of microcosm of the school: “a private association of the powerful which I’d been invited to visit on a day pass that, I sensed, might be revoked at any time as arbitrarily as it had been issued.”

Like his fellow Princetonian (and Minnesotan) of bygone days, F.

Scott Fitzgerald, Kirn finds that wealthy folk can be not only eccentric, but selfish and insensible as well. Dorms at Princeton having already been sexually integrated by the time of his arrival, two of Kirn’s suitemates are a couple, he an aspiring pianist who lounges in a dressing gown and plies his black Steinway, she a chubby heiress who hobnobs with celebrities. A third plays the part of their child—he speaks to them in baby talk and at night they tuck him in and read him bedtime stories. One day, the play-mommy’s uniformed chauffeur hauls a carton of fine champagne into the suite, and the heiress offers Kirn some of the bubbly. The two chat and polish off a bottle—whereupon she demands twenty dollars for his share. Embarrassed and humiliated, Kirn sees that “even unbidden privileges must be paid for,” a lesson that will glimmer throughout his Princeton years.

Indeed, he learns it anew not long after this incident, when his wealthy roommates order new furnishings for the living room of the suite without his knowledge and present him with a bill for almost \$700. When he refuses to pay, they forbid him to use the furnishings in any fashion, including walking on the carpet. During a holiday period when no one is there, Kirn gets drunk and, with the

semi-reluctant help of a friend, utterly trashes the place—pouring champagne into the television wiring, cutting the strings of the Steinway, staining the upholstery, dropping burning cigarette ashes on the Persian silk rug, and finally ducking outside to toss dirty, slushy, sopping snowballs through the open window.

His suitemates seethe with anger upon their return and threaten serious legal action. Instead, Kirn is eventually quietly assigned to another living situation; the talk of lawsuits is soon dropped and new furnishings are installed. This is the eighties after all and the adults no doubt shrink from the bother of sorting out right from wrong in an atmosphere of anything goes. Although Kirn can discern little presence of authority at Princeton, he notes that the school nevertheless seems to proceed in an invisibly ordered fashion. We surmise that this is how it's done—maximum license, minimum consequence, with the residue swept under those damaged Persian silk rugs.

The permissive climate supports him in this instance, forestalling possible jail time, but overall Kirn is gradually worn down by the chaos rumbling underneath Princeton's pristine exterior. Students everywhere and in every situation, on campus and at outlets in New York City, make liberal use of alcohol,

pot, speed, cocaine, opiates, narcotics, psychedelics, hallucinogenic mushrooms, hash brownies, water pipes, and whatever. Even the Jello at parties in filthy student residences might be made with vodka instead of water, and laced with some drug on top of that.

"There is no drug scene like an Ivy League drug scene," Kirn explains. "Kids can't just get high; they have to seek epiphanies," hoping "to break down the rigid inner partitions that restricted one's full humanity." Unfortunately Kirn's "mind had few partitions in the first place. It was one big dark and empty room with scraps of paper strewn all over the floor." One drug trip has him and a friend reeling around campus, fleeing from what he groggily misperceives as the chapel's "gaudy" altar, cowering behind the Picasso sculpture of a triangular female head, and smearing themselves with mud to dance like druids in the dark.

Then there are the liberated women. In a way Kirn is the kind of young man for whom the sexual revolution was *not* created—he seems rather appalled and flummoxed by female license, as well as resentful that the prettiest girls are reserved for the "rich boys and quarterbacks." At one gathering in New York City, the hostess greets her guests dressed in

a white bathrobe open in front, “exposing all that she offered as a female, from her collarbone on down.” She notes that his first name is common among blacks and hopes that means he has “a big one.” Another lusty damsel wants him to play the primitive and besiege her in bed; yet another, a “fair-haired warrior goddess,” bites his lip and demands service.

Outcast from the upscale suite, Kirn hooks up with the arty dramatics crowd. Inspired by the “mad Frenchman” and playwright Antonin Artaud, he writes a black comedy about nuclear Armageddon, ending in dark, nihilistic ambiguity. The work is performed successfully, however, author and director stoking their creative juices with liquid cocaine.

As disturbing as is the extracurricular scene, Kirn’s courses as an English major are even worse. His undereducation to this point means that the only good novel he has ever read through is, again, *The Great Gatsby*. Yet he arrives at Princeton in the age of postmodernism and the ascension of Jacques Derrida, so instead of having the welcome opportunity to catch up on the great works, he is taught to disdain and deconstruct them. Some of the most clarifying parts of the book

are Kirn’s bracing exposure of the fraud of “theory”:

We toted around books by Roland Barthes, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Walter Benjamin. We spoke of “playfulness” and “textuality” and concluded before we’d read even a hundredth of it that the western canon was “illegitimate,” a veiled expression of powerful group interests that it was our duty to subvert. We skipped straight from ignorance to revisionism, deconstructing a body of literary knowledge that we’d never constructed in the first place.

Kirn finds that his history of gamesmanship serves him well. To the deconstructors,

great literature was an incoherent con, and I—a born con man who knew little about great literature—had every reason to agree with them. In the land of nonreadability, the nonreader was king....Who would have guessed that the essence of high culture would turn out to be teasing the poor sap that still believed in it?

Although Kirn excels at the trickery, it leaves him “feeling hollow and vaguely haunted.” He

begins to unravel, “worn down by loneliness, drugs, and French philosophy.” One evening, a Pakistani friend, whose immersion in deconstruction has unfitted him for any useful work in his native country, rehearses for Kirn the catechism of postmodernism, which goes something like “words referred to other words, not to the world, and the finest, grandest words, such as ‘nature’ and ‘God,’ referred to nothing.” Suddenly Kirn can no longer feel his face. This is the beginning of a crack-up in which he stumbles dazed and distracted for some weeks.

A quiet summer job shelving books in the Princeton library gives him the opportunity for a “self-styled mental reconstruction.” Opening any volume that happens to be in hand at any free moment, he reads slowly and carefully—taking in healthy doses of real information.

Toward the end of his college years, Kirn remains unsure of what step to take next. Princeton once again comes to his rescue and recommends him for a peculiar and plummy fellowship to Oxford, one that by his own admission seems designed for practiced hustlers like himself.

In some ways Kirn was uniquely unequipped for the tumult he

encountered in his Princeton years. His parents were accomplished people—his father a patent lawyer and a Princeton graduate himself, his mother a nurse who taught herself to read in several languages. But they were unable to create a firm and stable family life (and outside the scope of this memoir we know that they eventually divorced). In search of some more tangible identity apart from the corporate world, the senior Kirn moved the family several times, lastly to the remote Minnesota farm and backwater district that Walter was eager to escape. They converted to Mormonism during one troubled period, but not much by way of religious sensibility remained with Kirn, although some thoughts he put together on envy for a church presentation might have been helpful if he could have embraced them. The aspect of Princeton that most enraged him was finding that acceptance in the meritocracy did not guarantee him membership in the “peerage.”

But he did have some positive foundations. For one thing, some part of that good rural Republican Minnesota mettle enabled him to see through a lot of the empty-headed leftism of the privileged liberal East.

For another and more important thing, there was the man known to Kirn from way back in his

childhood as “Uncle Admiral,” the moral and intellectual mainstay of the book. A former naval officer and retired ship’s captain, he offered to watch four-year-old Walter occasionally to help out the young family during an especially harried period. For two years, Uncle Admiral took care of the boy for days at a time, giving him lessons in geography and history, taking him on outings, and feeding him lunch and snacks at regular intervals. The grownup Kim fondly remembers and still relishes the structure this good man provided him, and contrasts it with the frenetic irregularity of his own home.

And in the book Uncle Admiral embodies the polar opposite of what Kim meets at Princeton as well—a modest and integrated sense of personhood, an old-fashioned idea of order and discipline, and a purposeful belief in solid reality, the world’s intelligibility, and the satisfaction of engaging it. As lost as Kim often is, he never quite loses Uncle Admiral’s lesson that life can make sense if we work at it, even as he realizes with irony that the older man would surely be despised as a “patriarch” at Princeton.

Kim dedicates the book to several Princeton educators, among them

Joyce Carol Oates, who helped him find his way out of his hell, but he gives few specifics in the narrative itself. In the end, Princeton does make him a citizen of the world, after a fashion, sending him off to Oxford, but the crying need for authority, standards, order, meaning, guidance, suffuses every page of the book and underlies the author’s unhappy experiences and those, no doubt, of many another young person at that time and long afterward.

In the closing pages, Kim claims some sort of mature resolution of his youthful difficulties, but he tries to tie together too many disparate points and contradictory insights. Even as he asserts his newfound wisdom, he can’t help putting *truth* in quotation marks. He seems to want the good but can’t get there yet. Since one of the epigraphs of this book comes from *The Great Gatsby*—the famous lines about how Westerners may never adapt to the ways of the East—it may not be overdramatic to suggest that Walter Kim is a little like Jay Gatsby, reaching out toward something that still eludes him—still unable to emerge from the malformation of his shameful miseducation.