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The Kids Are All Right

ARE ALARMISTS RIGHT ABOUT KIDS AND THE COLLEGE-ADMISSION CRISIS?

By Ann Hulbert

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As if panic at the ordeal of getting a child into a selective college weren't bad enough, Americans these days also confront a din of alarmist diagnoses of rising admission insanity. The warnings now come even from tutors and test-preppers, as you will discover if you sample a new pop genre—"apps lit," the Washington Monthly calls it—created by former facilitators of the application frenzy who have turned to fiction to tell all, in novels like Academy X and Glamorous Disasters. The satiric exposés of monstrous Manhattan parents who will stop at nothing for a spot at an Ivy have a moral that is not subtle: Poor "organization kids," as David Brooks has labeled the baby boom generation's well-buffed progeny, are in peril. Hence yet more anxiety, no longer just about a suitably prestigious school, but about whether today's fast-track youths can emerge from the pressure cooker of the "College Process" with any sense of identity or genuine purpose left when they arrive on campus. Will they end up mere anxious, status-obsessed, soulless overachievers—a mirror image, indeed, of their machinating elders?

The fate of Harvard student Kaavya Viswanathan—whose contribution to "apps lit," encouraged by her college consultant, turned out to be plagiarized—seemed to clinch the case. But the unexpected answer suggested by The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids—so unexpected that the author, Alexandra Robbins, fails to recognize it herself—is that the apple may not always, or even often, fall so close to the worm-eaten tree after all.

Let's start with Robbins. A self-acknowledged overachiever with an Ivy pedigree and a penchant for alarmist voyeurism (her prolific career includes The Secret Life of Sororities, and Secrets of the Tomb, about Skull and Bones), she has managed a feat of empathy in her latest case. But the unexpected answer suggested by The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids—so unexpected that the author, Alexandra Robbins, fails to recognize it herself—is that the apple may not always, or even often, fall so close to the worm-eaten tree after all.

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