

Book Notes

EDUCATED: A MEMOIR

by Tara Westover

New York: Random House, 2018. 352 pp. \$28 (cloth).

In *Educated*, author Tara Westover shares an intimate memoir of her surreal journey from a traumatic upbringing in rural Idaho to the halls of Cambridge University, where she ascended through the ranks of academe to become a rising star in the field of history. Westover pursued a PhD to study the underpinnings of Mormonism as an intellectual movement that has given particular shape to the nation's pious undertones, but *Educated* makes clear how her scholarly preoccupations are in fact deeply autobiographical. While Westover's intellectual journey is an effort to situate her experience as a woman raised in a fundamentalist Mormon family in a secular society in a longer historical perspective, *Educated* is best read as a stirring portrait of the personal and the particular.

The text is organized into three parts, each providing short stories that offer rich insight into the psychological costs associated with “moving up” and “making it out”—costs that mainstream narratives about social mobility and higher education tend to obscure. In Part I, readers are drawn into the patter of everyday life in Buck's Peak, Idaho, where the institution of family towers above all else. Spanning nearly half of the text, Part I is devoted to sketching the familial terrain that shapes the author's upbringing: an entrepreneurial mother whose ambitions must be made pliable to her husband's demands and are always carefully couched within the contours of gendered care work; a slew of siblings who illuminate pathways of limited possibility; and, most consequentially, a mentally ill father whose distorted interpretation of religious doctrine directs the family's oppressive ideology.

When Westover was young, her father's mental illness plunged the family into a deep state of isolation and chaos. Readers bear witness as the family's distrust of public institutions constrain young Tara's ability to understand and engage with the outside world. She is prevented from attending public school, is discouraged from forming relationships outside of her immediate family, and does not receive a birth certificate until she is ten years old—a fact that symbolizes her alienation from life beyond her family's purview. Westover's early education is limited to her family's survivalist preoccupations. Her days are spent at the junkyard scrapping metal, watching her mother mix homeopathic remedies, and waiting for the end of days. And yet, even as she under-

stands that she has come to see the world through her father's eyes, watching her older brother go off to college proves to be a flashpoint. She realizes that if she stays on Buck's Peak, she is bound to "remain a child, in perpetuity, always" (p. 132), and this motivates her quest for self-determination. It is in this context that Westover begins to dream of an escape. An education.

Parts II and III follow Westover's journey through undergraduate studies at Brigham Young University and then graduate studies abroad. Yet, her success entails a painful trade-off: she finds that she must navigate campus life absent the support of her parents, who are deeply suspicious of her formal schooling. As a woman, her thirst for knowledge and intellectual ambition becomes a growing source of tension; it is seen as a pointed rebuke to her family's fundamentalism. Gradually, as it becomes clear that an education cannot coexist with her previous ways of understanding the world, Westover writes about the paralyzing doubts that accompany her journey: "my life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs" (p. 197).

Westover's eloquent and insightful writing lends texture to the mundane yet quietly excruciating encounters she tries to make sense of as she navigates the world of college. Her coursework pushes the limits of her blinkered understandings, and she also struggles to balance keeping up with her cosmopolitan classmates while paying her own way through college. She comes to a poignant realization while reflecting on her newfound sense of security as an impoverished student offered financial aid:

I began to experience the most powerful advantage of money: the ability to think of things besides money. My professors came into focus, suddenly and sharply; it was as if before the grant I'd been looking at them through a blurred lens. My textbooks began to make sense, and I found myself doing more than the required reading. (p. 207)

Reflections like these are scattered throughout the text, offering probing insight into the less-obvious challenges associated with tackling higher education as a first-generation student.

Yet, there is a certain danger in reading *Educated* in the page-turning manner the text's spellbinding prose invites. For readers who understand the limited yet increasingly common purpose of education as one that is inextricably tied with ideas about social mobility, reading *Educated* may only serve to reinforce the illusion of an American "bootstraps" narrative. It's possible that readers who are eager to validate their understanding of the education gospel will undoubtedly see a positive example of meritocracy at work, proof positive that despite impoverished circumstances, a hard-working and perspicacious protagonist can triumph against all odds. From this reviewer's perspective, this seductive, yet overly simplistic takeaway is at times encouraged by the author's uncritical framing—a fact that is difficult to ignore in a memoir written by a scholar. Absent efforts to interrogate the unique factors contributing to her

own “success,” *Educated* risks being read as inspiration porn of sorts, reinforcing tired tropes about school as a panacea for all.

Yet, beneath the school-as-social-mobility veneer lies something far more interesting: a meditation on the tensions, trade-offs, and possibilities that arise when we are confronted with drastically new ideas about the world and our place in it. It is perhaps here that *Educated* is at its best. On one hand, pursuing an education is a measure of empowerment. With it, Westover learns to move through life with an expanded worldview, as a self-determining woman who comes to shape her own reality. On the other hand, this newfound intellectual freedom costs her dearly:

The distance—physical and mental—that had been traversed in the last decade nearly stopped my breath, and I wondered if I had perhaps changed too much. All my studying, reading, thinking, traveling, had it transformed me into someone who no longer belonged anywhere?” (p. 312)

Thus, alongside the more visible forms of mobility Westover describes throughout Parts II and III, readers also learn about the devastating losses that accompany her success—the loss of a sense of kinship and the separation of identity and culture that occur as she becomes alienated by family and regarded as an interlocutor among peers.

While a sharper analytic frame could have rendered the political dimensions of the author’s personal struggles more legible by interrogating the classed, gendered, and racial aspects that shaped her journey, Westover offers a revealing look into the underexplored aspects of what it is like to navigate college as an outsider. And while the particulars of her individual experience are undoubtedly unique, the themes that resonate throughout the text—belonging, struggle, self-determination—speak more broadly to the experiences and aspirations of nontraditional college-goers. As such, *Educated* will likely be a valuable resource to higher education policy makers and practitioners, those who are increasingly tasked with supporting but not necessarily *understanding* the experiences of nontraditional students.

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ABSENT FROM SCHOOL: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

edited by Michael A. Gottfried and Ethan L. Hutt

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019. 288 pp. \$34.00 (paper), \$66.00 (cloth).

For two years, I taught in a high-poverty city school overwhelmed by absenteeism. To be considered “chronically absent,” students had to be absent at least 10 percent (or eighteen days) of the school year. Many students, however, were absent much more than that. Some names on my class rosters I never attached