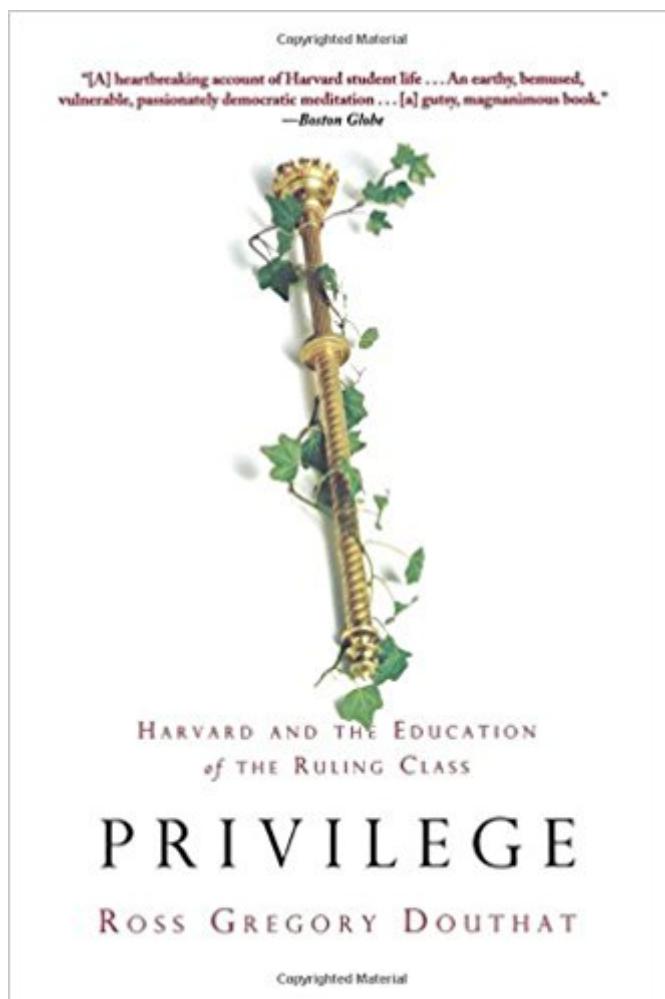


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Privilege: Harvard And The Education Of The Ruling Class



Synopsis

Now in paperback, the penetrating critique of elite universities and the culture of privilege they perpetuate Ross Gregory Douthat arrived at Harvard University in the fall of 1998 carrying an idealized vision of Ivy League life. But the Harvard of his dreams, an institution fueled by intellectual curiosity and entrusted with the keys to liberal education, never materialized. Instead, he found himself in a school rife with elitism and moneyed excess, an incubator for the grasping and ambitious, a college seduced by the religion of success. So Douthat was educated at Harvard, but what Harvard taught him was not what he had gone there to learn. Instead, he was immersed in the culture of America's ever-swelling ruling class--a culture of privilege, of ambition and entitlement, in which a vast network of elite schools are viewed by students, parents, administrators, and professors more as stepping-stones to high salaries and coveted social networks than as institutions entrusted with academic excellence. Privilege is a powerfully rendered portrait of a young manhood, a pointed social critique of this country's most esteemed institutions, and an exploration of issues such as affirmative action, grade inflation, political correctness, and curriculum reform.

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Customer Reviews

"Harvard is a terrible mess of a place," Douthat writes, "an incubator for an American ruling class that is smug, self-congratulatory, and intellectually adrift." It is also Douthat's beloved alma mater (he was class of 2002), a place where a young man sneered at by the "high school jockocracy"

could finally become "cool." Or so he thought. In this memoir—âœcum—âœpop-sociological investigation, Douthat reflects on campus academics, diversity, class and sex, "the lunatic schedules and sleepless nights, the angst and the ambition, the protests and rÃfÃ©sumÃfÃ©-building." He comes down against grade inflation and mourns the "smog of sexual frustration" that floated over Harvard's campus; he reflects longingly (though with mixed feelings) on the tony clubs to which he did not gain entrance; he explains the lack of real diversity on campus (most students are privileged blue-staters, despite differences in race); and he serves up anecdotes about the homeless man masquerading as a Harvard student, the senior who embezzled from the Hasty Pudding Theatricals, and his failed trip to Smith College to look for girls. It's an interesting book, if a little self-centered and self-serving (it was "written as much in ambition as in idealism"), and it'll no doubt be read eagerly by Crimson students—at least the ones like Douthat, who are not quite "the privileged among the privileged, the rulers of the ruling class." (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Close on the heels of Tom Wolfe's "I Am Charlotte Simmons" and the flap surrounding Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, comes this memoir-cum-polemic about Harvard by a 2002 graduate. Douthat critiques his peers' sense of entitlement from the perspective of a cultural conservative, although his high moral tone is somewhat compromised by an eagerness to bolster this account of campus life with salacious anecdotes of debauchery, greed, and snobbery. Douthat skewers the political and sexual shenanigans of his classmates and provides a thoughtful analysis of the prevailing liberal politics of the campus. But his righteous indignation can seem misplaced, when so many of the injustices that exercise him are so petty. It's hard to get really upset about charges of button-stealing in a campus election. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I didn't go to Harvard, but I almost did. I got wait-listed and was eventually rejected, before going to a state school. In some ways that was a blessing, as Douthat's sharp pen reveals. I missed out on a lot of the posturing and nasty political debates, even if I am now doomed to a non-elite life of not so helpful connections. I think it was good for my soul. As Douthat's narrative progresses, you can see his mixed feelings on that count. This book is great because it captures so many key issues of our generation. Douthat is an insider's outsider. He is not a Democrat or a liberal, even if most of this country's elite are. But he knows them. You can also see the sources of some his continuing pet

interests as a NYT columnist (supporting the working classes, the Blue Families model only being made possible be abortion, the split in American liberalism, etc.) Most importantly, though, it is well-written. Douthat should consider taking a few years off to get out of the political bubble, experience a few new things and then write a novel. It would be a good one.

The timing of my reading this book was fortuitous. I finished the book within a few days of my very moving experience of being at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government for the tribute to the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.[...] That event, in my opinion, represented Harvard at its best. Ross Gregory Douthat's moving memoir of his four years as an undergraduate student at the Ivy League's flagship institution paints a more complex and ambivalent picture of the university. There can be no doubt that Douthat loves his alma mater, but it clearly has been a tempestuous affair. I view this book as a love letter written by Douthat to a paramour who has not always been faithful, but to whom the author will nevertheless remain in lifelong thrall, despite his keen awareness of her failings. As I read this very balanced and insightful glimpse inside the kimono of Dame Harvard, I was reminded of Senator James Webb and of Winston Churchill! After he graduated from the United States Naval Academy, Jim Webb wrote "A Sense of Honor," a novel that was a thinly-veiled rendering of his four years as a midshipman - revealing the good, the bad and the ugly about life at Annapolis. The book was, in a phrase that Webb used in explaining to me his view of his controversial book, "A Valentine to a flawed lover." Churchill, in a 1947 reflection on the post-war state of the world and of the institution of democracy, made this memorable quotation: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." Churchill's sardonic observation seems to capture perfectly Douthat's ultimate message: Harvard is the worst possible liberal arts environment - except for all the rest! I found his writing style to be compelling and vividly descriptive. I almost felt as if he had mounted a literary Web cam on his shoulder and allowed me to see the nooks and crannies of Harvard through his eyes. He is unblinking in his self-criticism and self-observation. I felt his ambivalence when he was simultaneously repulsed by the notion of auditioning to join of the prestige "final clubs" and disappointed when he did not make the final cut. These anachronistic societies continue to exert a strong gravitational pull on what passes for social life on campus. His personal anecdotes of the dating scene among the students at Harvard were revealing and fascinating - the sexual revolution demythologized and deconstructed. The saga of Winston, the homeless man who squatted in Douthat's dormitory for most of the school year, serves as a wonderful microcosm for taking a fresh look at the traditional

"town vs. gown" tensions that are part of the fabric of most university towns. The juxtaposition of the disenfranchised camping out with the ruling class is rife with irony and pathos. The author makes a strong case for the need for reform of the Harvard Core Curriculum and grading system. He points out with wonderful specificity the folly of focusing on arcane minutia within an academic discipline, while failing to give students a broad grounding in the basics of that discipline. The struggle by students to help the university's custodial staff earn a living wage serves as a center of Douthat's consideration of the perennial tensions between the street liberals and the armchair liberals. As a conservative - a rare breed in the People's Republic of Cambridge - Douthat casts an outsider's bemused eye at his left-leaning compatriots and their internecine warfare. As one who has walked most of Harvard's vast campus and who spends time with many friends who are Harvard alumni, I found this book to be a valuable read. I recommend enthusiastically. Douthat currently works as an editor at the Atlantic Monthly. Enjoy! AI

I read this book over the past weekend and it gets my absolute highest, six star recommendation. I am sure it will wind up as one of my favorite one or two books of the year. Don't think of it as some dry tome giving postmodernism a kick. It's not that. It's really a fun, current, personal and thoughtful college memoir with terrific writing. Think of it as the best Ivy League memoir since Prozac Nation (though actually, it's much better than Prozac Nation). The book kind of has two aspects. First, the book is about the culture of the modern university. So it involves political dialogue on campus, academic standards, the ideology of postmodernism, the culture of irony, grade inflation and attitudes toward sex, diversity and political correctness. Douthat's discussion of these issues is always rooted in real situations with real people involved, so the discussions are not dry at all. This aspect of the book is a very interesting survey of the key issues on campus today. It is specifically about Harvard but the observations are applicable to almost any major US university. Then there is a much more personal story about an individual, an outsider really, growing up in the social environment of the American elite in the 90's and 2000's, pre and immediately post 9/11, which yields a fabulous mix of privilege, competition, disappointment and elation, much of which is relatable to anyone who has been through that time of life and all of which is fascinating.

Much better than anticipated, I loved Douthat's prose. His is an all too true but incisive commentary on what and who Harvard and Harvard undergrads have on their minds other than academics.

As an early 90s Harvard grad, I must admit that I enjoyed reading this book. Douthat does a great

job of describing in detail life in Cambridge. What amazes me is that non-Harvard grads would find this even mildly amusing. I attended a large state school in the South for my graduate work and, incredibly, it wasn't that different from Harvard. The teachers were inaccessible, grades were inflated, students cared more about getting a job than getting an education. Don't get me wrong - I'm not defending Harvard. Most of what Douthat says is true and I share many of his opinions. I just think it's arrogant to think that anyone else would give a rip. Kudos to him for getting a book published in his early 20s and getting friends to review it positively on . In 10 years he'll learn that the world doesn't revolve around him and his classmates and most people really don't care. Bottom line - Harvard is like most other colleges in the US only it accepts a higher percentage of the anti-social, high IQ, over-achievers that exist on any campus but in fewer numbers. If someone wants a Harvard experience, go hang out with the nerdy types at your school. Most people choose not to because they have something better to do.

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