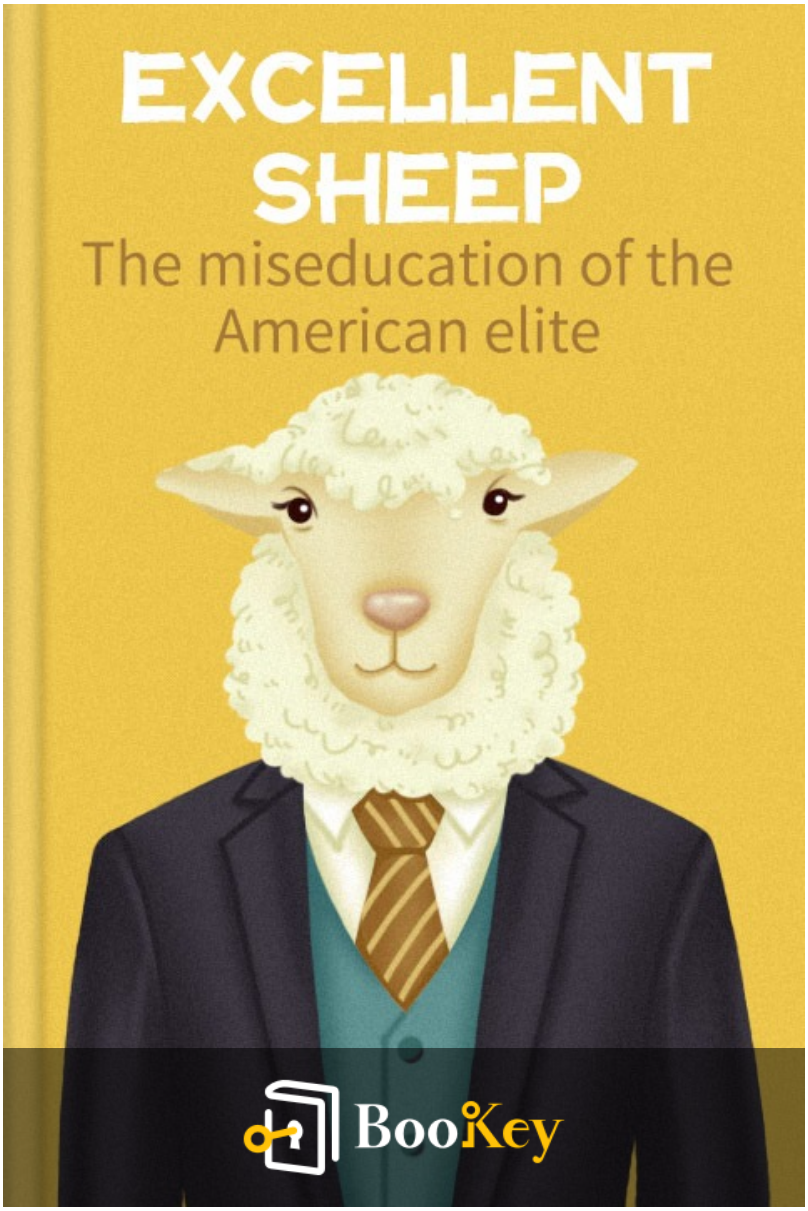
Excellent Sheep PDF

William Deresiewicz



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Excellent Sheep

Reclaiming Purpose and Imagination in Education's Competitive Landscape.

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About the book

In *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz, a former Yale professor, exposes the troubling reality faced by some of the nation’s brightest students, who find themselves lost when it comes to critical thinking, creativity, and a sense of purpose. With a keen eye on the rigorous pressures from parents and counselors, Deresiewicz critiques the high-stakes academic environment that prioritizes perfect grades and prestigious college admissions over genuine self-discovery. He highlights the detrimental shift in education that favors practical disciplines over the humanities, leading students to overlook their true passions and values. Combining insights from real students and graduates, Deresiewicz not only reveals the flaws in the current system but also offers thoughtful solutions aimed at reshaping the college experience into a transformative journey of personal growth and independent thinking.

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About the author

William Deresiewicz is an acclaimed essayist and book critic, known for his insightful commentary on modern education and society. A former associate professor of English at Yale University, he has contributed widely to major publications such as The New York Times, The New Republic, and The Nation. Deresiewicz has received multiple nominations for prestigious awards, including the National Magazine Awards and the National Book Critics Circle's Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. His best-selling work, Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life, reflects his deep understanding of contemporary academic culture. Since leaving academia in 2008, he has engaged audiences as a sought-after speaker at colleges across the country.

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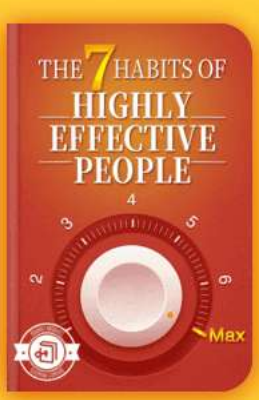

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Summary Content List

Chapter 1 : 1. The Students

Chapter 2 : 2. The History

Chapter 3 : 3. The Training

Chapter 4 : 4. The Institutions

Chapter 5 : 5. What Is College For?

Chapter 6 : 6. Inventing Your Life

Chapter 7 : 7. Leadership

Chapter 8 : 8. Great Books

Chapter 9 : 9. Spirit Guides

Chapter 10 : 10. Your Guide to the Rankings

Chapter 11 : 11. Welcome to the Club

Chapter 12 : 12. The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy

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Chapter 1 Summary : 1. The Students

Section	Summary
Overview of Elite College Students	Elite students appear successful and confident but face anxiety, depression, and isolation beneath the surface.
Mental Health Crisis	Surveys show rising hopelessness and mental health issues among students, resulting in overwhelmed counseling services.
Pressure and Isolation	High expectations create burnout and lead students to sacrifice personal connections for academic success.
Lack of Purpose and Authenticity	Students struggle to explore passions and identities, losing sight of what truly matters amidst competition for grades.
Credentialism and Limited Choices	The pursuit of credentials drives students to conventional career paths, lacking purpose and fearing failure.
The Global Nature of the Issue	This crisis is global, affecting students in various prestigious educational systems with shared pressures.
The Irony of Elite Education	Despite achievements, students feel inadequate and fear failure, leading to risk aversion and questioning the value of their pursuits.
Conclusion	A disconnect exists between academic success and personal fulfillment, resulting in uncertainty regarding aspirations and identities.

Overview of Elite College Students

The chapter opens with a description of today's elite college

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students as overachievers, excelling in academics, extracurriculars, and personal growth. They are outwardly confident and appear to be successful, leading to a perception that they have mastered life. However, beneath this façade lies a troubling reality marked by anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation.

Mental Health Crisis

Surveys reveal that college students report increased levels of hopelessness and severe mental health issues. College counseling services are overwhelmed as many students struggle with their mental health, leading to a crisis that often worsens in the college environment after years of pressure to achieve.

Pressure and Isolation

Amidst high expectations, many students feel immense pressure to maintain their achievements, often leading to burnout. They cope through medication or by withdrawing socially, complicating their ability to form meaningful relationships. Students report sacrificing personal connections and self-exploration in favor of grades and

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resumes.

Lack of Purpose and Authenticity

There is a prevalent disconnection between students' experiences and genuine learning. Many feel unprepared to explore their passions or discover their identities. As they engage in a competition for grades and accolades, they often lose sight of what truly matters and what they enjoy.

Credentialism and Limited Choices

The relentless pursuit of credentials shapes their understanding of success. Students feel pressured to pursue traditional paths like consulting or finance because they lack a defined sense of purpose or fear of failure. This phenomenon is termed "cookie-cutter" career choices driven by a desire for safety in familiar, highly competitive fields.

The Global Nature of the Issue

This crisis is not isolated to the U.S.; it's a global issue affecting students across various prestigious educational systems. The pressure to succeed and conform has become a

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universal experience, often leading to existential questions about the worth of such an education.

The Irony of Elite Education

Despite their achievements, many elite students grapple with feelings of inadequacy and a fear of failure instilled from an early age. This fear leads to risk aversion and a reluctance to venture outside their safe, predefined paths. Graduates often reflect on the emptiness of their pursuits, questioning the value of their efforts in the grand scheme of life.

Conclusion

The chapter concludes by highlighting the disconnect between high academic success and a genuine sense of purpose or personal fulfillment in students' lives. Many finish their education with commendable achievements yet remain lost when it comes to their aspirations and identities, leading to an uncertain future.

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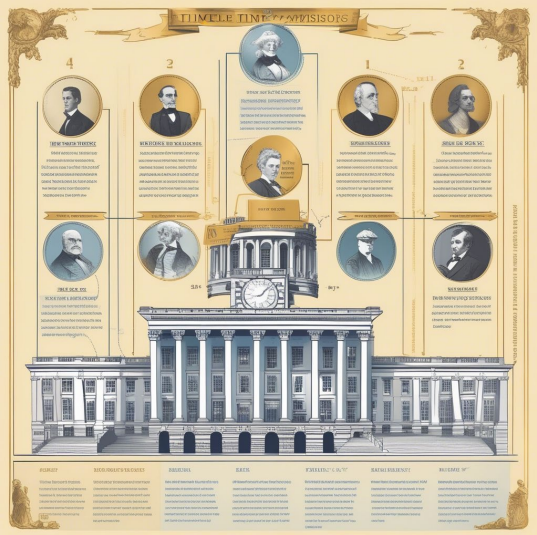
Chapter 2 Summary : 2. The History



Section	Summary
Origins of the College Admissions System	The college admissions process has historical roots from the late 19th century, when elite institutions were not solely for the wealthy and served a more limited clientele.
Transformation Post-Civil War	The industrial boom after the Civil War led to the rise of a plutocratic class, maintaining class distinctions through anti-Semitism and exclusivity.
Admissions and the Emergence of New Criteria	By the early 20th century, admissions favored wealthy students from prestigious schools despite poor exam performances, leading to a decline in academic standards.
Meritocracy and its Implications	The transition to a meritocratic system in the 1960s expanded access but intensified competition with a broader mix of achievements required.
The Evolution of Admissions Practices	With increasing demand for elite education, students began participating in a competitive "resume arms race," showcasing both academic and extracurricular achievements.
The Current Landscape	The introduction of college rankings in 1983 created a complex admissions process, exacerbating competition and leading to the growth of preparatory services.
Conclusion	The evolution of the college admissions system reflects societal changes, with intensified pressures affecting both elite institutions and broader educational contexts.

Chapter 2: The History

Origins of the College Admissions System

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The current college admissions process has deep historical roots, tracing back to the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. Contrary to popular belief, elite institutions like Ivy League colleges were not always the exclusive finishing schools for the wealthy they have become. Before the Civil War, these colleges served a limited, local population, mainly comprised of gentlemen's sons.

Transformation Post-Civil War

The post-Civil War industrial boom led to the emergence of a new wealthy class, the plutocracy. As regional elites transitioned into a national elite, measures were taken to maintain class distinctions. During this time, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism surfaced among the upper class, crystallizing the WASP identity and promoting exclusive social clubs and preparatory schools.

Admissions and the Emergence of New Criteria

By the early 20th century, the elite colleges began to cater to a wealthier demographic through admissions policies that favored students from prestigious feeder schools, even if they

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performed poorly on entrance exams. While they maintained social exclusivity, academic standards began to decline. By the 1960s, colleges started reforming their admissions processes, introducing measures like the SAT to enhance access and increase academic standards.

Meritocracy and its Implications

The shift from aristocracy to meritocracy in college admissions in the 1960s expanded access but paradoxically intensified competition. New admissions criteria demanded a mix of achievements: not only academic excellence but also leadership skills, extracurricular involvement, and personal character—further increasing pressure on students.

The Evolution of Admissions Practices

As the demand for elite education grew, so did the competitive standards, making it necessary for students to build extensive resumes that showcased both academic and extracurricular excellence. This "resume arms race" reflects broader societal pressures, with the college admissions process becoming more intense and convoluted over time.

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The Current Landscape

The introduction of college rankings by U.S. News & World Report in 1983 further exacerbated the situation, fueling an industry around college admissions that includes test prep services and consultants. Today, the admissions processes and demands have become so complex that they are largely unrecognizable compared to past decades, reflecting a cultural shift towards extreme competition among students.

Conclusion

The evolution of the college admissions system is a reflection of societal changes from the Gilded Age to the present day. While the methods have changed, the underlying pressures and expectations have only intensified, creating a system that affects not only elite institutions but education at large. The cumulative impact of these changes necessitates a closer examination of the experiences of contemporary students navigating this challenging landscape.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point:Meritocracy versus Exclusivity

Critical Interpretation:The chapter highlights the tension between the ideals of meritocracy and the realities of elitism within college admissions. Deresiewicz suggests that the meritocratic framework, which ostensibly aims to democratize access to elite education, has often ultimately perpetuated exclusivity among a select group, largely due to socio-economic factors and historical biases. This perspective, while compelling, invites skepticism; critics argue that meritocratic systems can indeed provide opportunities for talented individuals from diverse backgrounds, despite existing inequalities. Academic sources such as "The Meritocracy Trap" by Daniel Markovits delve deeper into this debate, questioning whether the pursuit of meritocracy truly addresses issues of accessibility and inclusion, suggesting that while the college admissions process has evolved, the inherent biases may still persist. Readers should critically assess Deresiewicz's claims, recognizing that the landscape of higher education is complex and multifaceted, and the quest for fairness in admissions is an ongoing challenge.

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Chapter 3 Summary : 3. The Training

Summary of Chapter 3: The Training

Societal Pressures and Parenting Anxiety

Families are increasingly anxious about social mobility and competition, highlighting fears of maintaining or achieving status in a shrinking middle class. The relentless push for prestigious college admissions reflects a deep-rooted belief among upper-middle-class parents that attaining higher education is essential for their children's success. This frenzy, which has persisted for decades, revolves more around status within the upper-middle class than genuine opportunity for lower classes.

Contradictory Parenting Styles

Upper-middle-class parenting often exhibits two extremes: the overbearing "helicopter" parent who emphasizes achievement, and the overindulgent parent who encourages freedom and exploration. Both styles emerge from a

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misguided effort to protect children, ultimately treating them as extensions of parental aspirations rather than fostering individuality. This form of parenting leads to infantilization, as children grow up without meaningful independence.

The Pressure of Perfection and Achievement

The connection between parental expectations and children's mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, is profound. Statistics reveal that affluent students often suffer from high levels of emotional distress, fueled by the belief that worthiness is tied to achievement. This results in a cycle where children's self-esteem is heavily reliant on external validation, perpetuating anxiety around their performance.

The Influence of Amy Chua's Approach

Amy Chua's "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" epitomizes

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Chapter 4 Summary : 4. The Institutions

Section	Summary
Overview of Current Higher Education Culture	Colleges recognize issues in education but lack effective solutions. Educational systems fail to promote moral awareness and intellectual growth, focusing instead on bureaucratic processes rather than addressing deeper student needs.
Historical Context of American Higher Education	American higher education combines elements from English and German models, shifting from character formation education to specialized and research-focused approaches, leading to a fragmented curriculum.
The Compromised Educational Ideals	The tension between liberal arts and research emphasis causes problems, with professors prioritizing research over undergraduate teaching, resulting in disconnected and unchallenging student experiences.
Impact of Commercialization on Education	Education's commercialization treats students as customers, prioritizing amenities over educational quality, focusing on grades, and complicating student-professor relationships, leading to superficial learning.
Challenges for Contemporary Students	Students are not adequately challenged to explore meaningful questions, often leading to feelings of abandonment. The model favors economic success over personal fulfillment and intellectual inquiry.
Conclusion: Seeking Transformation in Higher Education	Despite challenges, students yearn for education that aligns with their experiences and goals. Significant transformation is needed to provide a holistic educational experience that promotes critical thinking and purposeful living.

Four The Institutions

Overview of Current Higher Education Culture

Colleges and universities are aware of issues in higher education but lack the will to address them effectively. Current educational systems often fail to cultivate moral

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awareness or intellectual growth in students. While there are career services and advising available, they predominantly serve to guide students through the bureaucratic processes without engaging with their deeper educational needs. Institutions generally overlook the fundamental questions students face in developing their identities and purposes.

Historical Context of American Higher Education

American higher education combines elements from the English college model and the German research university. There was a shift from education focused on character formation to a more specialized and research-oriented approach. Although the ideals of liberal arts persist, institutional pressures have led to a fragmented curriculum dominated by professional training.

The Compromised Educational Ideals

The compromise between liberal arts education and research focus has proven problematic. Professors prioritize research over undergraduate education, leading to specialized courses lacking coherence. While education's core ideal may still exist, it often fails to align with the actual experience of

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students, who leave feeling disconnected and unchallenged.

Impact of Commercialization on Education

The commercialization of education conceptualizes students as customers, leading institutions to prioritize amenities over educational ideals. With a focus on grades and immediate demands, schools often cater to superficial needs rather than fostering critical inquiry or personal growth. The increasing emphasis on GPA and graduation rates further complicates the relationship between students and professors, resulting in a lack of rigorous, meaningful instruction.

Challenges for Contemporary Students

While students may engage in rigorous academic work, the system as a whole fails to challenge them to explore deeper questions about meaning and purpose. Many college experiences do not equip students to address these larger life questions, which often leads to feelings of abandonment and disappointment. The institutional model tends to favor economic success over personal fulfillment and intellectual exploration.

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Conclusion: Seeking Transformation in Higher Education

Despite existing frustrations and challenges, there remains a yearning among students for an education that resonates with their human experiences and aspirations. The current system must undergo significant transformation to better serve the needs of students, fostering not just vocational training but a holistic educational experience that encourages critical thinking and purposeful living.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point:Critique of Higher Education's Focus on Commercialization

Critical Interpretation:Deresiewicz critiques the commercialization of higher education, asserting that it transforms students into mere customers who prioritize grades over genuine learning and personal growth. He suggests this shift has contributed to a disconnection between students and their educational experience, neglecting the deeper inquiries about identity and purpose that are essential for a fulfilling life. While the author's perspective highlights significant systemic issues, critics may argue that the pressures of modern employment landscapes necessitate some alignment of education with marketable skills. Sources such as 'Academically Adrift' by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa discuss similar concerns regarding the efficacy of degree programs in fostering critical thinking, yet suggest alternative solutions that also consider economic realities.

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Chapter 5 Summary : 5. What Is College For?

What Is College For?

The concept of college is increasingly framed in terms of "return on investment," focusing primarily on financial outcomes rather than the broader purpose of education. The prevalent discourse emphasizes tuition costs, student debt, and job readiness, often neglecting essential questions about the true value of education. While financial security and jobs are important, they should not dominate the conversation about the role of college in cultivating a fulfilling life and society.

The Purpose of Education

College should primarily teach students how to think critically and independently. This includes developing the habit of skepticism, questioning accepted norms, and navigating the complexities of thought. The educational process involves unlearning ingrained assumptions and

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engaging deeply with narratives around us. A liberal arts education aims to liberate students from conventional thinking, fostering a space for self-exploration.

Self-Discovery and Reflection

Beyond critical thinking, college is also a setting for personal growth and self-discovery. Education should help individuals build a self, engaging in introspection and reflection. Developing a strong inner identity is not just a personal journey but also serves the greater good of society. The process is often uncomfortable yet transformative, encouraging individuals to confront their beliefs and values.

The Role of College in Life Preparation

College represents a unique opportunity for young adults to step back from societal pressures and reflect on their aspirations. It is essential not just for career preparation, but for evolving into self-aware and thoughtful individuals. The liberal arts encourage students to engage deeply with their interests and beliefs, allowing them to cultivate a rich inner life.

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Conclusion: The Essence of True Education

True education is about more than academic achievements; it involves a continuous quest for personal growth and understanding how to live a meaningful life. College should facilitate this journey, urging students to embrace introspection and change, ultimately shaping them into more interesting and engaged citizens. The aim is not to merely acquire knowledge, but to undergo a profound transformation that leaves a lasting impact on the self.

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Example

Key Point:The importance of self-discovery in college education.

Example:Imagine stepping onto your college campus, where you're not just aiming for a diploma but seeking a deeper understanding of who you are. As you navigate various courses and engage with diverse ideas, you begin to question your previously held beliefs about success and happiness. You participate in discussions that challenge your worldview, reflecting on your values and aspirations, ultimately leading to a transformative journey of self-discovery. This process is essential; it's not only about preparing for a job but about cultivating your identity in a way that enriches both your life and the world around you. Such introspection becomes a cornerstone of your college experience, promoting growth that transcends mere academic achievement.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point:The Financial Focus of Education

Critical Interpretation:The author critiques the prevailing notion that college should be primarily viewed through the lens of financial gain and job acquisition. While this perspective undoubtedly holds weight in a society pressured by student debt and economic realities, it is essential to recognize that the purpose of education extends beyond mere monetary return. By framing education solely as a transactional relationship, we risk undermining its intrinsic value in cultivating critical citizens capable of thoughtful engagement and personal growth. This critique invites a deeper exploration of the multifaceted role of higher education, which includes fostering creativity, ethical reasoning, and a commitment to the common good. However, one could argue that considering financial outcomes is necessary in today's economy, as recent discussions in publications such as The Atlantic and debates surrounding student debt reforms highlight the pragmatic needs of students and families.

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Chapter 6 Summary : 6. Inventing Your Life

Chapter 6: Inventing Your Life

Direction

Self-knowledge is vital in finding the right career. Asking questions about one’s passions, beliefs, and capabilities is essential, particularly at life’s inflection points. William Damon emphasizes that knowing oneself is key to happiness and purpose. Vocation, stemming from the Latin for "calling," signifies a path that chooses an individual rather than the reverse. To find this calling, one must first liberate themselves from societal expectations and pressures defined by institutions like Harvard, which often instill a sense of self-efficacy tied to external validation.

Imagination and Innovation

Both practical and moral imagination are important. The

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former relates to traditional notions of success, while the latter encompasses the creative capacity to envision alternative life paths. Choices in life extend beyond preset options, and taking moral risks often leads to personal fulfillment. George Eliot's "Middlemarch" illustrates the tension between social expectations and individual desires through the character Dorothea Brooke, who courageously pursues her ideals despite societal pressures.

The Need for Courage

Moral courage is crucial when breaking away from conventional paths. Being morally courageous often isolates individuals but can lead to more authentic lives. This chapter reflects on social pressures that encourage conformity and highlights the importance of pursuing what one truly values, even if it diverges from societal norms.

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Chapter 7 Summary : 7. Leadership

Seven Leadership

Purpose of College Education

The primary purpose of college education is often expressed in terms of social responsibility, with students encouraged to "give back" and "make a difference." Leadership has become a central focus at prestigious institutions, emphasizing the need for students to see themselves as future leaders. However, the leadership they are taught to aspire to is largely about achieving status and power within existing hierarchical structures, rather than contributing to social good.

The Nature of Leadership

Today’s definition of leadership often equates to reaching the top of the corporate or political ladder, devoid of substantive content related to ethics or social impact. This notion leads students to prioritize titles over meaningful contributions, with many engaging in a race to assume leadership roles

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without understanding their significance.

Conrad's Critique of Leadership

Drawing from Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," the text likens current bureaucratic leadership to characters in the novel, who are characterized by mediocrity and compliance rather than true leadership qualities. The critique extends to the educational systems that cultivate such leaders, prioritizing conformity over innovation.

Recommendations for Change

Instead of focusing solely on training leaders, institutions should emphasize cultivating thoughtful citizens capable of critical reflection. The best leaders are those who can question norms and envision new solutions—traits not nurtured in today's education system, which often rewards compliance over independent thought.

Addressing the Disconnect

The text calls for a reassessment of how service and leadership are defined, advocating for justice-oriented actions

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that empower communities rather than patronizing them. It encourages moving beyond superficial volunteerism to deeper engagement with systemic issues of inequality and injustice.

The Role of Individual Thought

Students are urged to embrace skepticism and critical thinking rather than simply conforming to societal expectations. The text emphasizes that true leadership involves questioning prevailing assumptions and beliefs, advocating for a more profound engagement with societal issues.

Final Thoughts on Purpose

College education should not only prepare students for professional success but also instill a sense of moral obligation to think and act responsibly within society. Future leaders must engage with and challenge the systemic conditions they inherit, striving for progress and ethical engagement.

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Chapter 8 Summary : 8. Great Books

Chapter 8 Summary: The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

Introduction to Liberal Arts Education

A liberal arts education, emphasizing the humanities and conducted in smaller, dedicated settings, is vital for fostering independent thought, creativity, and self-invention. Contrary to perceptions of practicality, liberal arts focus on knowledge for its own sake and equip students with skills that transcend vocational training.

The Essence of Liberal Arts

Liberal arts prioritize inquiry and understanding over practical utility, encouraging students to debate, analyze, and extract meaning. This process empowers learners to appreciate the complexity of truth, pushing them to question their beliefs and the intricacies of various disciplines from the sciences to literature.

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Importance of Diverse Perspectives

A liberal arts education includes exposure to multiple fields, fostering a broad-minded approach that enhances critical thinking and adaptability. Such breadth encourages creative problem-solving and cultivates a more rigorous and skeptical mindset.

Workforce Relevance

Research indicates that employers value critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills—attributes honed by a liberal arts education—over specific majors. Despite persistent myths, liberal arts graduates are actively sought after in various industries, as a comprehensive education prepares individuals for diverse challenges.

Skills for the Future

In a rapidly changing economy, soft skills developed through liberal arts studies are crucial. Employers increasingly prefer candidates who can navigate complexity, think creatively, and communicate effectively. Liberal arts graduates display

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strong performance in standardized tests and exhibit a broader understanding than vocational peers.

The Role of Humanities

The humanities play a crucial role in enabling reflective thinking about life's deeper questions. They teach appreciation of rich human experiences through literature, history, and philosophy, akin to how religious studies once did. The contemplation of moral and existential issues is informed by engagement with great works of art and literature.

Art as a Path to Truth

Art and literature allow individuals to explore and understand themselves and society through diverse experiences, provoking empathy and greater emotional intelligence. The intersection of personal insights with artistic narratives fosters a sense of shared humanity.

Integrating Specialized Knowledge with Broad Understanding

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While specializing in a chosen field is necessary, maintaining a connection to the humanities enriches that specialization, allowing professionals to approach their work with a holistic perspective. Understanding the human experience empowers professions that require substantial interpersonal interaction, like medicine and law.

Conclusion: A Call for Educational Reform

The need for a well-rounded education focusing on the humanities is underscored as society becomes more specialized. To create effective leaders and engaged citizens, educational systems must emphasize not just technical skills but also the fundamental understanding of human experiences.

Final Thoughts

Liberal arts education is not merely an intellectual luxury; it is essential for nurturing reflective, thoughtful individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society. Engaging with the broad spectrum of human thought helps individuals navigate the complexities of modern life and leads to the cultivation of not only better professionals but better people.

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Chapter 9 Summary : 9. Spirit Guides

Chapter 9: Guides

Importance of Teachers in Education

Good education fundamentally relies on the presence and influence of quality teachers. The decline in meaningful pedagogical engagement, due to the rise of adjunct faculty and online instruction, undermines the core learning experience.

The Role of Teaching

Teaching is not just about transferring information; it is an active process of leading students to awaken their inherent potential through inspiration and personal interaction. Effective learning demands direct engagement with knowledgeable instructors, similar to mastering a skill through hands-on experience.

Small Class Settings and Individual Attention

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Small class sizes allow for tailored instruction, fostering individual growth and deeper exploration of ideas. This intimate educational environment enables one-on-one mentorship, essential for students to develop thinking skills and critical analysis.

The Need for Mentorship

Students crave mentorship more than entertainment or easy grades from their professors. Guidance from educators positions them to navigate their intellectual and career paths with confidence.

Institutional Challenges in Education

Institutions often prioritize research and prestige over teaching quality and student engagement. The system

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Chapter 10 Summary : 10. Your Guide to the Rankings

Your Guide to the Rankings

Choosing the Right College

The decision between prestigious universities like Harvard, Stanford, and Yale often comes down to superficial differences, as many attributes of these institutions are quite similar. The bigger question is whether one wants to engage in the existing educational system and if not, what alternatives exist for an enriching educational experience.

Understanding Education Value

It's crucial not to romanticize the idea that all colleges provide equal education; elite institutions offer distinct advantages primarily through their student quality, which influences classroom discussions and social dynamics. This chapter emphasizes the value of less prestigious institutions

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that still provide diverse experiences and less competitive environments.

Alternatives to Elite Universities

There are many reputable public universities that can provide quality education at a lower cost. These institutions can foster a diverse range of experiences and skill sets. Students are encouraged to explore liberal arts colleges, which focus on teaching and offer intimate learning environments, promoting closer relationships between students and professors.

Public Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges

Public universities often present a more affordable alternative while still providing solid education. They occasionally host honors programs that deliver a liberal arts education. In contrast, liberal arts colleges are recommended for their emphasis on teaching, smaller class sizes, and involvement in community decisions, though the author warns about potential insularity.

Critical Reflection for College Choice

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While students may feel pressured by the competitive atmosphere of elite schools, those at less prestigious colleges may demonstrate a more genuine curiosity, friendliness, and passion for learning. It's essential to discern which institution aligns with personal values and educational goals rather than succumbing to prestige-driven choices.

Encouraging an Engaged Experience

Regardless of the institution chosen, students should seek meaningful educational experiences. One should look for institutions that facilitate personal growth, encourage exploration, and engage with big questions of life. A helpful indicator includes colleges that actively support innovation, social change, and provide hands-on learning opportunities.

The Centrality of Active Engagement

Students need to take an active role in their education and seek professors who prioritize student involvement. Rather than relying on rankings or superficial metrics, prospective students should evaluate colleges based on their values, teaching styles, and community atmosphere.

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Final Thoughts on College Selection

Ultimately, while the institution is important, the student's engagement and willingness to actively participate in their educational journey are paramount. College should be a transformative experience where students can grow and discover their potential.

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Chapter 11 Summary : 11. Welcome to the Club

Chapter 11: Welcome to the Club

Overview of Elite Education's Impact

The chapter discusses the detrimental effects of elite education on society, highlighting how it perpetuates class divisions, exacerbates inequality, and fosters an isolated elite class.

Reproduction of Class System

The educational system mainly benefits students from wealthy backgrounds, with statistics showing a significant percentage of elite college students coming from the top income brackets, while lower-income students have increasingly limited access to these institutions.

Economic Factors Influencing Education

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Rising costs of preparation for college admissions have made it easier for affluent families to secure spots for their children. Educational inequality begins at a young age, with wealthy families investing heavily in their children's development.

Inequities in Higher Education

Even with outreach efforts, elite institutions remain largely inaccessible to low-income students. The notion of meritocracy is questioned as admissions policies favor students from privileged backgrounds, including legacies and athletes.

Diversity as a Cover for Inequality

While diversity policies have diversified student bodies based on race and gender, they often mask deeper economic disparities. The illusion of fairness in admissions doesn't change the economic models that continue to favor the rich.

Entitlement and Isolation

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Students at elite institutions develop a sense of entitlement and a disconnect from the broader society, leading to an inability to interact with people outside their socioeconomic class. The educational experience reinforces a narrow worldview that excludes the realities faced by the less privileged.

Self-Identity of Elite Students

Students are often praised excessively, fostering a sense of superiority. This confidence, however, is based on a precarious foundation of privilege and lacks accountability.

The Disparity in Educational Experiences

The chapter contrasts the supportive environment of elite schools with the lack of resources in public institutions, where students face stricter conditions without backup, reinforcing class distinctions.

Work Ethic and Achievement

The belief that hard work automatically leads to success is challenged, with the notion that true value often lies in

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privilege rather than effort.

Recommendations for Change

The author suggests that students should engage with diverse backgrounds and experiences, advocating for an understanding of social inequities and the benefits of a more equitable system.

Conclusion

The chapter concludes that while striving for personal humility is valuable, the broader system of elite education sustains class disparities that need addressing. The final chapter will discuss potential solutions to these systemic issues.

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Example

Key Point:Understanding the Disconnect of Elite Education

Example:Imagine walking through the campus of an elite university, where students discuss their summer internships, all acquired through family connections. As you observe, you realize that while they revel in their achievements, they are largely disconnected from the struggles of those from lower-income backgrounds, who might not even have access to the same learning resources or networking opportunities. This disparity illustrates the isolation of privilege, showcasing not only a disparity in opportunities but also the sense of entitlement that develops among students, reinforcing a worldview that is narrow and disconnected from the realities faced by the broader society.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point:The Impact of Elite Education on Social Class Reinforcement

Critical Interpretation:Deresiewicz claims that elite education fortifies economic disparities, benefiting primarily affluent students while limiting access for others, which raises questions about the validity of meritocracy in such institutions. This perspective, however, could be challenged by alternative views that advocate for the potential of elite schools to innovate and provide resources that may eventually lead to societal upliftment. Critics, like Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in 'Academically Adrift', argue that while disparities exist, elite education can still foster critical skills and perspectives among students that could be transformative within socio-economic classes.

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Chapter 12 Summary : 12. The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy

The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy

Irony of Leadership

The phrase "the best and the brightest" serves as an ironic reflection of our current leadership class, which has led society into decline. The contemporary meritocracy, despite its self-proclaimed virtues, showcases a deep failure in leadership, demanding a comprehensive reform of the educational system and a reimagining of societal values.

Merit and Self-Advancement

The meritocratic ethos prioritizes individual success and self-advancement over duty or leadership. This belief propagates a flawed ideology suggesting that 'merit' equates to moral superiority, leading to an unjustification of

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socio-economic inequalities.

Elites and Their Disconnect

The memoirs of political figures reveal a recurring elite disconnect from common experiences. Candidates often lack the ability to empathize with the struggles of average citizens, creating a leadership class that is increasingly out of touch.

Failure and Impunity

Failures in governance and leadership are met with impunity, as elite individuals escape responsibility for their actions, leading to systemic errors and a declining trust in institutions.

Technocracy vs. Leadership

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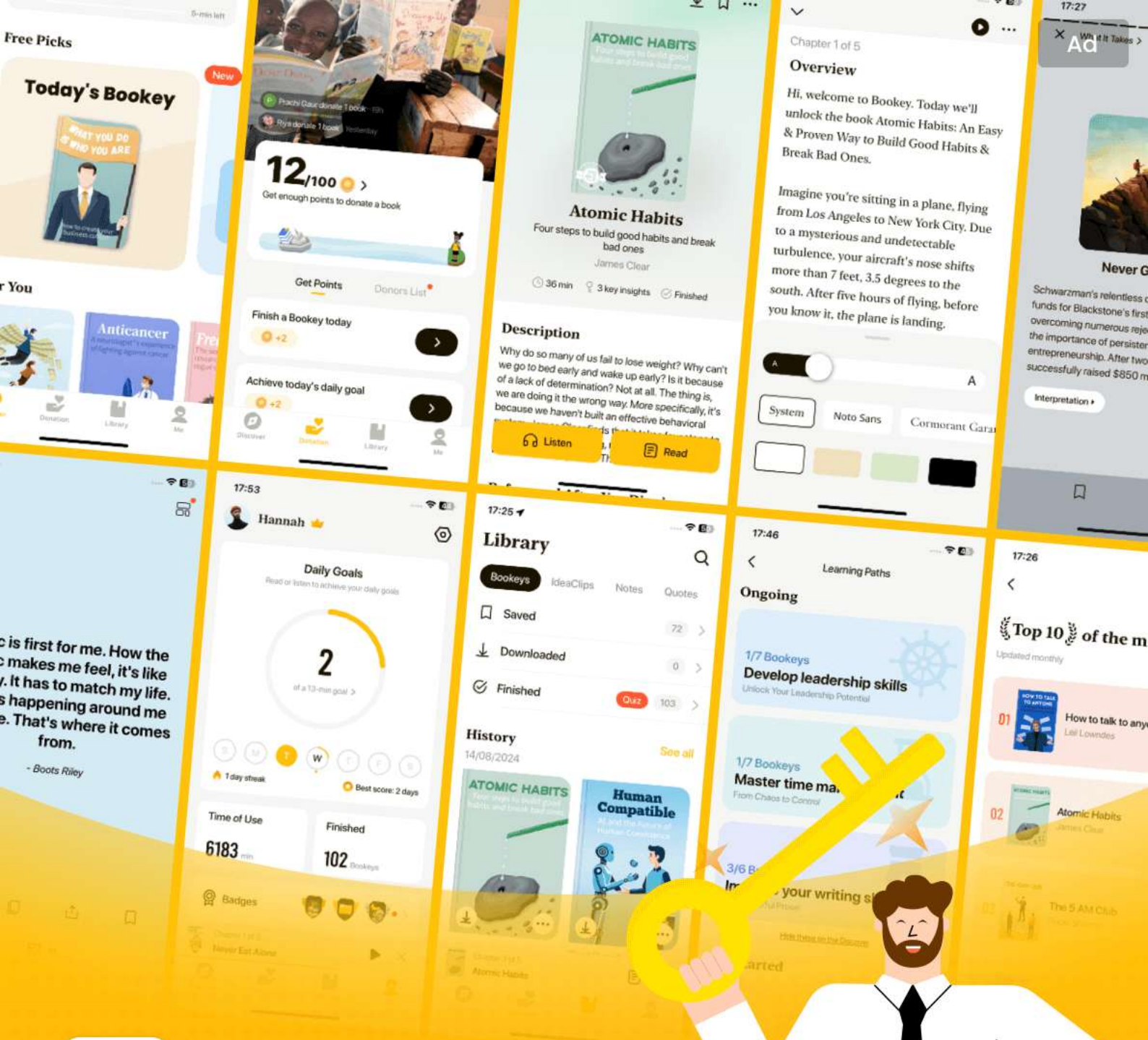

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Best Quotes from Excellent Sheep by William Deresiewicz with Page Numbers

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Chapter 1 | Quotes From Pages 10-40

1. The reality—as I have witnessed it, among my former students, heard about it from the hundreds of young people who have written to me over the last few years or whom I have met on campuses across the country, and read about it in places where these kids confide their feelings—is something very different.
2. A large-scale survey of college freshmen recently found that self-reports of emotional well-being have fallen to their lowest level in the twenty-five-year history of the study.
3. Students at Stanford talk about 'Stanford Duck Syndrome': serene on the surface, paddling madly underneath.
4. If love of money tends to win out, that is largely because so many kids leave college without a sense of inner purpose—in other words, of what else might be worth their

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time.

5. You cannot say to a Yalie, 'find your passion.' Most of us do not know how.

6. The irony, then, is this. Elite students are told that they can be whatever they want, but most of them end up choosing to be one of a few very similar things.

Chapter 2 | Quotes From Pages 41-63

1. The difference between today's elite students and those of twenty or forty years ago, despite what many like to think, is only one of degree.

2. If we want to understand where the system comes from—which means, where we come from—because at this point most of the American professional class has gone through it, we need to go back to the start.

3. The ideal of the well-rounded man in favor of the 'brilliant specialist'... the old boy, handshake, feeder-school culture remained in place.

4. What was once an opportunity has become a necessity. There is only one definition of happiness, and only one

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way to get it.

5.The resume arms race... is just like the nuclear one. The only point of having more is having more than everybody else.

Chapter 3 | Quotes From Pages 64-92

1.The admissions frenzy has been raging... for close to fifty years, not six. It is not primarily about the lower and middle classes seeking to rise... It is about determining the exact hierarchy of status within the upper middle class itself.

2.Both kinds of parenting, finally, are forms of overidentification. The helicopter parent turns the child into an instrument of her will. The overindulgent parent projects his own need for limitless freedom and security.

3.‘My parents think there are only two things to be in the world: a doctor or a lawyer.’

4.The self that forms in response to parental expectations is, in Miller’s terms, a 'false self.' Because the child’s feelings and desires are not validated or acknowledged, she learns

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to ignore them.

5. What can such a circumstance produce, if not the full demonology of psychological suffering?

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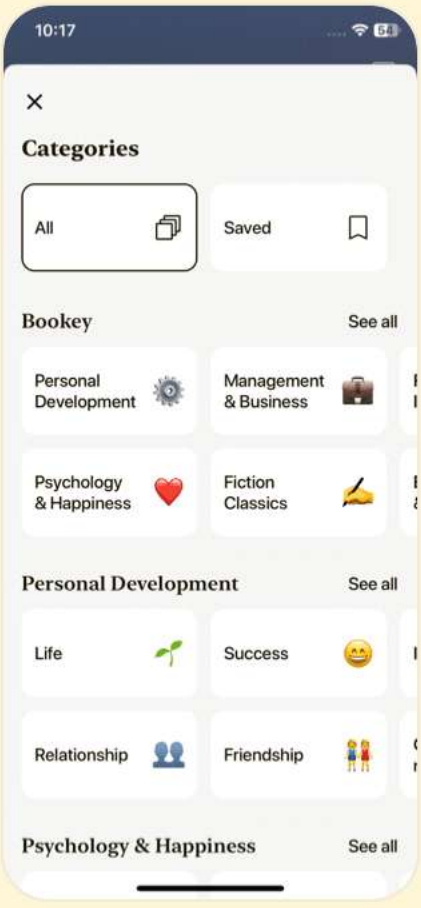

Chapter 4 | Quotes From Pages 93-118

1. Universities have forgotten their larger educational role for college students: to help them figure out who they are and what their purpose in the world should be.
2. What we do know is that elite schools still dimly recollect their responsibility to provide a general education, to teach the whole person, to be something more than expensive vocational schools.
3. To get an education, you're probably going to have to fight against the institution that you find yourself in—no matter how prestigious it may be.
4. The fact is that elite schools have strong incentives not to produce too many seekers and thinkers, too many poets, teachers, ministers, public-interest lawyers, nonprofit workers, or even professors—too much selflessness, creativity, intellectuality, or idealism.
5. Students want to do as little as possible. Professors are rewarded for research, especially at elite schools, so they

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want to spend as little time on their classes as they can.

6....the more you do, the less you do well and the less well you do everything.

7.Imagine a hospital that operated on such a basis, or a grocery store. It’s the kids who hope to get an education, not the ones who want to shirk the job, who find themselves confronting an inimical environment.

8.What they told me, invariably, was that they felt abandoned by their institution, that the education they were being offered had nothing to say to them.

9.Teaching, said Socrates, is the reeducation of desire. If that sounds paternalistic, it is.

Chapter 5 | Quotes From Pages 119-137

1.What’s the return on investment of college? What’s the return on investment of having children, spending time with friends, listening to music, reading a book? The things that are most worth doing are worth doing for their own sake.

2.The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think...

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It means developing the habit of skepticism and the capacity to put it into practice. It means learning not to take things for granted, so you can reach your own conclusions.

3. The point was not to replace his students' opinions with his own. The point was to bring his charges into the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and endlessly fertile condition of doubt.

4. The purpose of college is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully.

5. A real education sends you into the world bearing questions, not resumes.

6. To change the way you look at the world is inevitably to change the way you look at your life, and vice versa. They are not even really separate things.

7. The world is a 'vale of soul-making.'

8. If you find yourself to be the same person at the end of college as you were at the beginning... then you did it wrong.

Chapter 6 | Quotes From Pages 138-203

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1. What are you good at? What do you care about? What do you believe in?
2. Vocation is Latin for calling: it means the thing you're called to do. It isn't something that you choose, in other words; it chooses you.
3. You have to do the work to make yourself receptive to it.
4. The qualities [moral imagination] calls upon are those of character, not intellect.
5. But you must live in the tension between society's expectations and what you feel called to do.
6. The most common regret her patients express is that "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
7. Moral courage, the bravery to act on your imagination in the face of what your family and friends are going to say, to try to stop you.
8. You can invent your life. Instead of following a path, you can make your own path.
9. You don't want to sit in your dorm room and create a self.

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College is only the start of the process...

10. The only real grade is this: how well you've lived your life.

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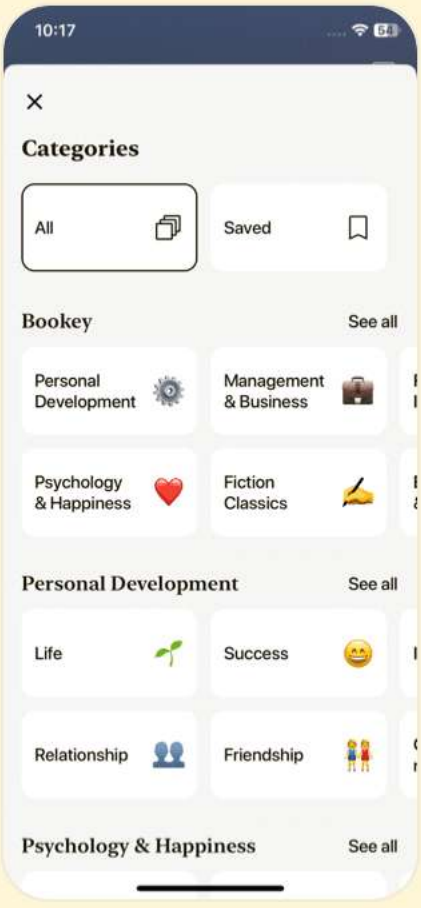

Chapter 7 | Quotes From Pages 204-231

1. The purpose of a college education, as everyone at least pretends to recognize, does not terminate with the individual.
2. What they mean is nothing more than getting to the top.
3. Instead of training 'leaders', how about training citizens?
4. The crucial elements are courage and imagination.
5. What good does it do if you make it to the top, if by the time you get there you are just another 'leader'—another opportunist, another genial conformist, another mediocrity?
6. We don’t need students to be radicals; we only need them to be skeptical.
7. Independence, revolution, tyranny, freedom: concepts that are essential to America’s collective history.
8. If you are going to be the leader that your education is supposedly preparing you to be, then you need to question the very terms of that education itself.

Chapter 8 | Quotes From Pages 232-269

1. You don’t acquire information; you debate it.

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2.To receive a liberal arts education is to begin to appreciate this.

3.The humanities are what we have, in a secular society, instead of religion.

4.What the habit of reflection will enable you to do... is bring the full range of human experience... to bear upon your work.

5.The ultimate purpose is to help you to learn to reflect in the widest and deepest sense... for the sake of living well with others, above all, for the sake of building a self that is strong and creative and free.

6.If you want to be a leader... then that is where you need to start.

7.Art does not make you a better person; it only makes you a freer one.

8.Books are maps of possible futures. They help endow you with exactly that imagination that it takes to invent your life.

9.You build it, that is, with the help of the past.

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10.If you want to be a leader, if you want to find a new direction, then that is where you need to start.

Chapter 9 | Quotes From Pages 270-381

1.If you want a good education, you need to have good teachers.

2.A teacher’s job is to lead forth the powers that lie asleep within her students. A teacher awakens; a teacher inspires.

3.What they really want is that their teachers challenge them and that they care about them. They don’t want fun and games; they want the real thing.

4.Teaching is an emotional experience, and mentorship is rooted in the intimacy of intellectual exchange.

5.The only genuine solution to the crisis in the classroom is for colleges to bring back teaching to the center of their mission.

6.What we need is to create one where you don’t have to go to the Ivy League, or any private college, to get a first-rate education.

7.The time has come...to begin to plot our exit to another

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form of leadership, another kind of society, altogether.

8. We must create a society where children can learn for the love of learning and people can work for the love of work.

9. What does it matter, when you come to think about it, whether a child is yours by blood or not?

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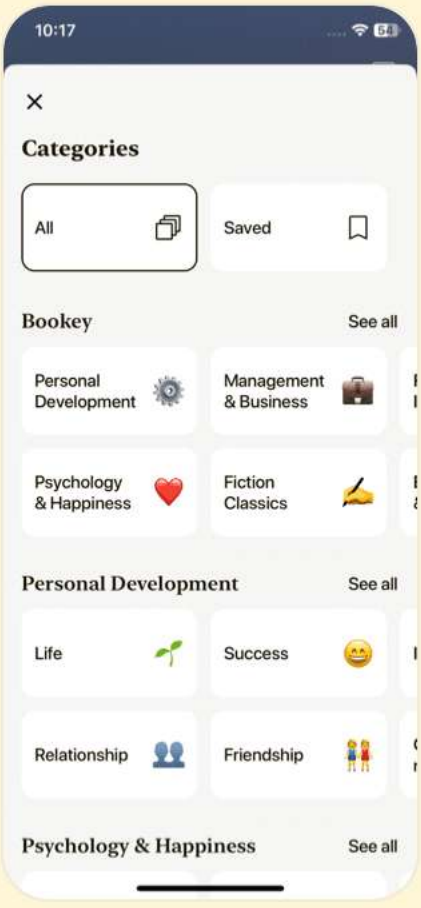

Chapter 10 | Quotes From Pages 382-399

1. The real question is whether you want to continue to participate in the system that these institutions form the apex of, and if you don’t—if you want to get the kind of education I’ve been talking about—then what are the alternatives?
2. They’re the people you spend almost all of your time interacting with when you’re not in class. They shape your values and expectations, for good and ill ("it’s hard to build your soul when everyone around you is trying to sell theirs").
3. But, if getting an inadequate education is bad, then getting none at all is even worse. You need to get a base, before you can take off on your own.
4. The most important factor, when you go to college, isn’t the college. It’s you.
5. Look for a school that’s going to care about you, not the new MBA program in the Gulf.
6. Choose a major that excites you: right now, about being a

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student. It's your time; this is your shot.

Chapter 11 | Quotes From Pages 400-429

1. It’s true that elite schools, especially the richest, have reached out more in recent years to low- and middle-income students.
2. Smart, poor kids are less likely than dumb, rich kids to get a degree.
3. Colleges are not primarily to blame, but their policies do little to counteract these trends and a very great deal to make them worse.
4. They need a critical mass of full payers, they need to tend to their donor base, and they need to serve their primary constituency, which is not the nation so much as the nation’s—and increasingly, the world’s—upper and upper middle classes.
5. We live in a meritocracy, after all. Doesn’t everybody have an equal chance?
6. The message is, you have arrived. Welcome to the club.
7. They are meeting the same kind of people; they just happen

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to come from all kinds of places.

8.Once you've been admitted to the club, the feeling seems to be, you've got a God-given right to stay in the club.

9.It's not your fault you grew up affluent and sheltered. But now you need to take responsibility for it.

10.The real problem, once again, is the system itself.

Chapter 12 | Quotes From Pages 430-466

1.The meritocracy purports, like every ruling class, to act for the good of all.

2.If we are to create a decent society, a just society, a wise and prosperous society, [...] we need to love our neighbor's children as our own.

3.The system isn't working anymore, no matter how just or good or inevitable it seems to those it flatters and benefits.

4.Social justice means you give up some of what you have so others can have more.

5.We have tried aristocracy. We have tried meritocracy. Now it's time to try democracy.

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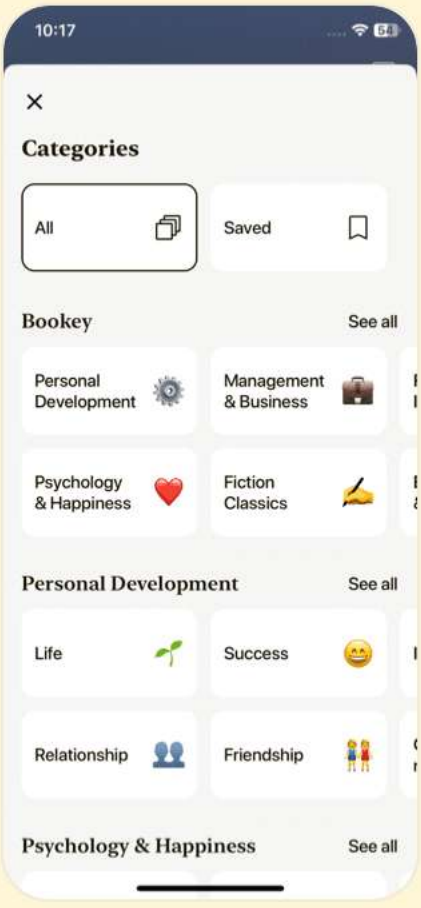

Excellent Sheep Questions

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Chapter 1 | 1. The Students| Q&A

1.Question

What are the common characteristics of today's elite college students?

Answer:They often possess a double major, play a sport, engage in music, speak multiple languages, participate in service work, and engage in various hobbies. They project a confident and competent image, often admired by others.

2.Question

What is the underlying reality of these students despite their apparent success?

Answer:Beneath the façade of confidence, many elite students experience fear, anxiety, depression, emptiness, and isolation.

3.Question

Why do college students suffer from increased emotional distress?

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Answer:The pressures they face do not diminish in college; rather, the overwhelming environment and responsibilities contribute to deteriorated mental health.

4.Question

How is mental health among college students currently characterized?

Answer:Surveys indicate a significant increase in feelings of hopelessness, depression, and a troubling rise in severe psychological issues among students.

5.Question

What emotional challenges do elite college students often face?

Answer:They grapple with pressure from academic demands, fear of failure, and a pervasive sense of isolation, leading to a crisis in understanding their purpose and identity.

6.Question

How does the academic culture at elite universities impact students?

Answer:Students are pressured to prioritize grades over genuine learning, leading to a mindset where success is

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measured solely by external achievements.

7.Question

What does the term 'credentialism' refer to in the context of elite education?

Answer:Credentialism describes a focus on accumulating accolades like GPAs and prestigious internships to define self-worth rather than fostering a genuine love for learning.

8.Question

What fears do elite students face that affect their career choices?

Answer:They often fear the prospect of failure and are conditioned to pursue paths with clear, successful outcomes, which limits their exploration of diverse and fulfilling options.

9.Question

What paradox do students encounter regarding their potential and career choices?

Answer:Although students are told they have limitless potential, many end up choosing familiar, high-status jobs as a default due to pressure and fear, straying from their

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personal passions.

10.Question

How can the expectations imposed by elite education systems limit individual fulfillment?

Answer:The pressure to succeed in certain career paths can close off exploration of alternative, potentially rewarding paths, leading to dissatisfaction and unfulfilled potential.

11.Question

What is the overarching message of the chapter regarding elite education and student outcomes?

Answer:The chapter suggests that elite education, rather than nurturing genuine intellect and passion, often perpetuates a cycle of anxiety, superficial achievement, and a disconnection from true self-discovery.

Chapter 2 | 2. The History| Q&A

1.Question

How has the college admissions process evolved over time?

Answer:The college admissions process has not changed significantly in its underlying principles

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since its inception in the 1960s. Initially, it was dominated by social class distinctions, favoring wealthy students from elite backgrounds. While reforms in the 1960s aimed to create a merit-based system that assessed academic potential (e.g., standardized testing like the SAT), the process has since become more competitive, with higher expectations and increased pressure on students to stand out academically and extracurricularly. The emphasis is now on both elite social profiles as well as academic excellence, leading to a complexity that makes the process more rigorous and stressful.

2.Question

What socio-economic factors influenced the original college admissions system?

Answer:The original college admissions system was heavily influenced by the emergence of a new American aristocracy in the Gilded Age, where wealth and social class were prioritized. The old regional elites looked to create a national

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elite that could maintain social boundaries, creating exclusionary practices based on culture and religion, including anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism. Schools catered primarily to the wealthy, embedding these social distinctions into their admissions practices.

3.Question

How did the shift from character-based criteria to merit-based criteria reflect broader societal changes?

Answer:The transition from character-driven admissions to merit-based evaluations mirrored the democratization trends in American society during the mid-20th century. As broader social changes occurred, including civil rights movements and the rise of the middle class, colleges like Yale and Harvard adapted their admissions criteria to attract more academically talented candidates from diverse backgrounds, moving towards a focus on test scores and academic achievement while still attempting to uphold some traditional selective criteria.

4.Question

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Why do students feel more pressure during the college admissions process today compared to previous decades?

Answer:Today's students face greater pressure largely due to increased competition; as acceptance rates at elite schools have plummeted, the stakes have been raised. Additionally, the rise of standardized testing and the expectation of well-rounded extracurricular engagement have created a 'resume arms race' among students, leading to unrealistic demands for extensive qualifications. This intensifying competition is compounded by parental expectations and the prevalence of college rankings, placing undue stress on young applicants.

5.Question

How have college admissions criteria changed since the 1960s?

Answer:Since the 1960s, while there has been a move toward meritocracy with an emphasis on academic excellence (like the SAT), admissions processes have retained many traditional criteria such as legacy status and athletic prowess.

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Modern criteria now expect students to combine attributes of both elite aristocrats (social skills, leadership, etc.) and academic technocrats (high grades, extensive coursework), leading to an increasingly crowded and rigorous application process.

6.Question

In what ways has the college admissions landscape become more global?

Answer:The college admissions landscape has become more global due to the increasing pool of international applicants, pushing competition beyond national borders. The use of technology and communication improvements has allowed colleges to reach students in distant countries, creating a more diverse and competitive applicant pool. However, this has also led to more pressure on students to meet higher standards in education and qualifications.

7.Question

What does the term 'Super Person' signify in the context of college admissions?

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Answer:The term 'Super Person' refers to the ideal student profile that has emerged within the competitive landscape of college admissions—students who excel academically while simultaneously demonstrating leadership, extensive extracurricular involvement, and unique talents, often making them appear over-achieving and perfectly packaged for elite institutions.

8.Question

What impact did U.S. News & World Report rankings have on college admissions?

Answer:The introduction of U.S. News & World Report college rankings in 1983 created a shift in how schools positioned themselves in relation to one another, emphasizing admissions statistics as a measure of prestige. This led to a heightened competitive environment as institutions began to prioritize acceptance rates and application numbers, fostering an intense focus on marketing and admissions strategies that reinforced the race for elite status.

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9.Question

How do admissions trends impact the mental well-being of students?

Answer:The escalating demands and pressures of the college admissions process contribute significantly to student anxiety and stress, with many feeling the need to exceed their limits to secure acceptance into elite institutions. This culture of competition can lead to mental health challenges, as students struggle to balance academic, social, and extracurricular obligations, potentially fostering burnout and diminishing overall well-being.

Chapter 3 | 3. The Training| Q&A

1.Question

What are the main pressures that parents of high-achieving students face?

Answer:Parents are primarily pressured by the need to ensure their children maintain or improve their status within the upper-middle class. This includes pushing them into elite colleges to signal success and

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status, often overlooking their children's individual needs and mental health.

2.Question

How does the competitive environment affect children’s emotional well-being?

Answer:The relentless pursuit of achievement leads to high rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout among students. Children feel immense pressure to succeed, often leading to mental health issues such as eating disorders, substance abuse, and feelings of emptiness.

3.Question

What is the difference between 'self-esteem' and 'self-efficacy' as described in the text?

Answer:Self-esteem is seen as an inflated sense of worth based solely on external validation, while self-efficacy involves a realistic belief in one’s capabilities to achieve tasks independently.

4.Question

What impact does the admissions process have on students?

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Answer:The admissions process can be devastating for students who are used to nothing but success. For the first time, they face rejection, which can lead to a harsh confrontation with failure and contribute to a crisis of identity and self-worth.

5.Question

How does over-parenting manifest in today's families?

Answer:Over-parenting can be seen in both the helicopter parents who pressure their children relentlessly and the overindulgent parents who coddle them. Both stem from a misguided belief that control and protection from failure can prevent pain and ensure success.

6.Question

What does the author suggest is a more constructive approach to raising children?

Answer:The author suggests fostering independence, allowing children to experience failure, and supporting their personal interests rather than solely focusing on prestige and achievement in education.

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7.Question

What does the term 'false self' mean in the context of parental expectations?

Answer:The 'false self' refers to a persona created by children in response to their parents' expectations, which ignores their true feelings and desires in favor of what parents want.

8.Question

How should parents and educators rethink their approach to education and achievement?

Answer:Parents and educators should consider prioritizing intrinsic values, love of learning, and the individual's happiness over external achievements and social status.

9.Question

What is the significance of Amy Chua’s parenting style as presented in the text?

Answer:Chua's parenting is depicted as an extreme version of societal pressures on children, emphasizing success at the expense of happiness and personal fulfillment, thus highlighting the flaws in high-achievement parenting.

10.Question

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How does the author relate personal experiences to the themes discussed?

Answer:The author reflects on their own struggles with perfectionism and the need for parental approval, illustrating how these pressures shaped their identity and highlighting the broader implications for all children in similar environments.

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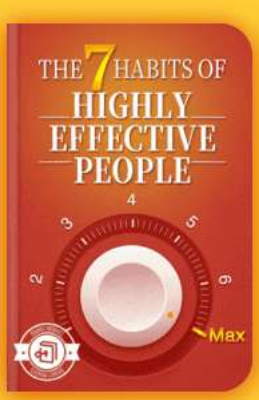

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Chapter 4 | 4. The Institutions| Q&A

1.Question

What overarching issues does the author identify in higher education today?

Answer:The author highlights a general disconnection between students' educational aspirations and the offerings of colleges. Curricula lack coherence and do not facilitate students' growth in moral awareness or personal purpose. Colleges often prioritize research and specialized skills over comprehensive education, which leaves students grappling with existential questions without substantial institutional support.

2.Question

How does the commercialization of higher education affect the student experience?

Answer:The commercialization of higher education leads institutions to view students as customers rather than learners. This shift results in a focus on catering to immediate

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demands through amenities, rather than fostering an environment that nurtures critical thinking, personal growth, and the pursuit of deeper questions about meaning and purpose in life.

3.Question

What does the author mean by "students have to fight for their education?"

Answer:The author suggests that in elite institutions, students must actively seek out educational opportunities and advocate for themselves. They face an environment that is often indifferent or unhelpful in guiding their intellectual journeys, compelling them to insist on meaningful experiences and to pursue engagements that challenge and enrich their learning.

4.Question

Why does the author believe that elite colleges fail to serve the most intellectually curious students?

Answer:The author posits that elite colleges prioritize societal norms that equate success with lucrative careers,

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thereby neglecting students who seek more fulfilling and altruistic paths. As a result, students with aspirations for creativity, selflessness, and intellectual engagement often find themselves feeling abandoned, with institutions providing minimal guidance on how to fulfill their ideals.

5.Question

What role does grade inflation play in the current academic environment?

Answer:Grade inflation, according to the author, diminishes academic rigor and standards, thereby affecting the quality of education. It creates a situation where students receive higher marks for less substantive work, leading to a lack of genuine dedication to studying or academic excellence, as they feel entitled to good grades simply for attendance.

6.Question

How does the author characterize the ideal liberal arts education?

Answer:The author characterizes the ideal liberal arts education as one that not only imparts knowledge but also

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engages students in deep existential questions about life, purpose, and human values. It should challenge them to grow as well-rounded individuals rather than just train them for specific careers.

7.Question

In what way does the chapter criticize the approach to student extracurricular activities?

Answer:The author critiques the culture surrounding extracurricular activities as one wherein students become overwhelmed with commitments, spread too thin, and prioritize busyness over meaningful engagement. This environment fosters mediocrity, where involvement in numerous activities detracts from academic focus and genuine personal development.

8.Question

What are the implications of colleges prioritizing research over undergraduate education?

Answer:The prioritization of research over undergraduate education leads to fragmented curricula that neglect the

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holistic development of students. It emphasizes specialization at the cost of breadth, leaving students unprepared to engage with larger questions of existence and societal contribution.

9.Question

What does the author suggest about the future of education in elite institutions?

Answer:The author expresses concern that without a shift toward recognizing and addressing the deeper educational role—beyond just professional training—elite institutions may continue to disenfranchise students who seek purpose and understanding, ultimately failing to guide them toward meaningful lives.

Chapter 5 | 5. What Is College For?| Q&A

1.Question

What is the primary purpose of a college education according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:The primary purpose of a college education is to teach students how to think critically and to

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develop their own values and identity, rather than simply preparing them for a job.

2.Question

How has the perception of what college is for changed over the past few decades?

Answer:The perception has shifted from a focus on developing a meaningful philosophy of life to primarily seeking financial success and job security.

3.Question

What does Deresiewicz mean by the term "soul-making" in the context of education?

Answer:"Soul-making" refers to the development of one's true self through self-exploration and reflection, where experiences—both good and bad—shape an individual's identity.

4.Question

How does Deresiewicz view the role of professors in the college experience?

Answer:Professors are seen as essential for challenging students to think critically, expose their assumptions, and

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guide them in their intellectual and personal development.

5.Question

What argument does he make against the contemporary emphasis on career-oriented education?

Answer:He argues that focusing exclusively on career preparation neglects the broader purpose of education which is to cultivate a well-rounded, reflective, and fully alive individual.

6.Question

What does it mean to say that college should be a "privilege" rather than just an obligation?

Answer:This suggests that college should be viewed as an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth, rather than merely a step towards job readiness.

7.Question

What does Deresiewicz posit is at stake when asking the question "What is college for?"

Answer:He posits that at stake is not just the career trajectory of students, but their ability to live a fulfilling, meaningful life that goes beyond financial success.

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8.Question

What is the significance of peers in the college experience according to the text?

Answer:Peers are significant because they provide a social environment where students can engage in discussions, debate ideas, and form a supportive community that enhances learning.

9.Question

How does Deresiewicz suggest students should approach their college experience?

Answer:Students should approach their college experience as a time for questioning, exploration, and refining their beliefs and values, thus preparing them for life beyond academics.

10.Question

What is the final takeaway Deresiewicz emphasizes about education?

Answer:The final takeaway is that true education transforms the individual—shaping them into thoughtful, reflective adults, rather than just preparing them to fill jobs.

Chapter 6 | 6. Inventing Your Life| Q&A

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1.Question

What are the key questions one should ask to discover one's vocation?

Answer:To discover your vocation, you should ask yourself: What are you good at? What do you care about? What do you believe in? These questions help illuminate what drives you and where your passions lie.

2.Question

How does self-knowledge contribute to career fulfillment?

Answer:Self-knowledge is crucial for finding a fulfilling career because it allows you to align your work with your true interests and values. Knowing who you are helps you identify a vocation that resonates with your personal identity, leading to a more meaningful life.

3.Question

What does it mean to have 'moral imagination'?

Answer:Moral imagination is the ability to envision and pursue alternatives ways of living that challenge societal norms or expectations. It helps in making choices that reflect

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true desire rather than conforming to prescribed paths.

4.Question

Why is moral courage important in pursuing one's vocation?

Answer:Moral courage is essential because it allows individuals to act on their convictions, even in the face of societal pressure or disapproval from friends and family. It empowers people to live authentically and pursue what truly matters to them, despite potential backlash.

5.Question

How can young people differentiate between passion and societal expectations?

Answer:Young people can differentiate between their true passion and societal expectations by reflecting on what excites them beyond external accolades, such as money or prestige. They should consider what they would do regardless of others' opinions and focus on activities that engage them deeply.

6.Question

What is the significance of embracing the uncertainty that

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comes with inventing one's life?

Answer:Embracing uncertainty is significant because it opens up possibilities and allows for exploration and personal growth. Instead of being paralyzed by the fear of failure or societal judgment, accepting that you may not have all the answers can lead to richer experiences and deeper self-discovery.

7.Question

In what ways does the author suggest that success should be redefined for young people?

Answer:Success should be redefined as a personal journey of discovering and pursuing what matters to you rather than merely achieving societal milestones like high-paying jobs or prestigious positions. True success is living a life true to oneself, with an emphasis on meaningful work and personal fulfillment.

8.Question

What did George Eliot's character Dorothea Brooke symbolize in the context of life choices?

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Answer:Dorothea Brooke symbolizes the quest for a significant life and the courage to make unconventional choices despite societal expectations. Her journey illustrates the importance of following one's ideals, even at great personal cost, and highlights the struggle between individual aspirations and societal norms.

9.Question

According to the text, how should students deal with the pressure of prestigious career paths?

Answer:Students should critically assess the pressure of prestigious career paths by recognizing that their worth is not defined by societal standards. They should focus on what genuinely interests and fulfills them instead of succumbing to the lure of status and financial success. Encouraging self-discovery and personal passions is key.

10.Question

Why is it important for students to take time off, according to the author?

Answer:Taking time off is important for students to slow

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down, reflect, and explore their interests without the structured pressures of academic achievement. This 'gap' experience allows for personal growth and can lead to greater clarity in career and life choices, ultimately enriching their education and future endeavors.

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Chapter 7 | 7. Leadership| Q&A

1.Question

What does the author mean by 'leadership' in the context of elite educational institutions?

Answer:The author suggests that 'leadership' in elite colleges has come to symbolize mere attainment of positions of power and prestige rather than a commitment to social good. It often implies climbing the hierarchical ladder rather than serving the community or advancing ethical ideals.

2.Question

Why does the author criticize the current definition of leadership?

Answer:The author argues that the contemporary definition of leadership reduces it to a superficial competition for titles and status without genuine concern for the welfare of others, thereby distancing it from its original meaning associated with character, duty, and social responsibility.

3.Question

How does the author connect the idea of leadership to the

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bureaucracy in organizations?

Answer:Through the example of Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', the author illustrates how bureaucratic environments often promote individuals who are politically adept rather than genuinely talented or ethical, leading to a culture where conformity trumps creativity and integrity.

4.Question

What qualities does the author believe are necessary for true leadership?

Answer:The author asserts that real leadership requires critical thinking, courage, and imagination, emphasizing the importance of questioning established norms and striving for ethical and equitable visions rather than simply seeking personal advancement.

5.Question

What is the alternative to the concept of 'service' as discussed in the text?

Answer:The author posits that the notion of service should shift from superficial charity and condescension to a focus on

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justice and collective responsibility, emphasizing solidarity and mutual identification to address systemic issues rather than just acting as saviors.

6.Question

How does the author describe the current generation of students in elite colleges regarding their engagement with social issues?

Answer:The author describes these students as often feeling disconnected from significant social activism, focusing instead on individual accomplishments and resume-building rather than tackling larger societal injustices or changes.

7.Question

What does the author mean by stating 'we don’t need students to be radicals; we only need them to be skeptical'?

Answer:This means that the author is calling for students to engage in critical thinking and questioning rather than blindly accepting the status quo or actively rebelling. Skepticism allows for thoughtful analysis and potential for genuine change.

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8.Question

What fundamental change does the author suggest is necessary for effective leadership?

Answer:The author suggests that effective leadership must begin with introspection and the cultivation of independent thought, prioritizing moral and ethical considerations over traditional concepts of success and achievement.

9.Question

What role does hope play in the context of social responsibility as per the author's view?

Answer:Hope is framed as essential for envisioning a better world and motivating action towards achieving it. The author implies that without hope, individuals may resign to complacency instead of striving for meaningful change.

10.Question

Why does the author believe political engagement is essential for students?

Answer:The author argues that political engagement is crucial as it allows individuals to address systemic issues and challenge the inequalities ingrained within society,

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preventing them from becoming passive beneficiaries of existing structures.

Chapter 8 | 8. Great Books| Q&A

1.Question

What is the ultimate goal of a liberal arts education according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:The ultimate goal of a liberal arts education is to help individuals learn to reflect deeply and broadly about life, citizenship, and to build a strong, creative, and free self.

2.Question

How does liberal arts education prepare students for the workforce?

Answer:Liberal arts education fosters critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills, which are highly valued by employers, making graduates adaptable to various job roles.

3.Question

What do graduates learn about knowledge in a liberal arts education?

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Answer:Graduates learn that knowledge is not merely a collection of information, but rather a matter of arguments, analysis, and debate, emphasizing inquiry over vocational utility.

4.Question

Why is encountering the past necessary for building a self, according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:Encountering the past allows individuals to reflect on human experiences and grapple with fundamental questions about love, morality, truth, and existence, aiding in personal growth and understanding.

5.Question

How do the humanities differ from scientific knowledge?

Answer:Humanities relate to our subjective experiences and interpretations of reality, whereas scientific knowledge pertains to objective, empirical observations of the external world.

6.Question

What does Deresiewicz mean by stating that literature helps us find ourselves?

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Answer:Engaging with literary characters and narratives allows readers to see their own experiences and emotions reflected back at them, providing insight into their identity and potential.

7.Question

How do the arts serve as a form of inquiry for humans?

Answer:The arts compel us to question our assumptions and societal norms, fostering empathy and deeper understanding of complex human emotions and relationships.

8.Question

Why does Deresiewicz argue against the belief that a liberal arts education is solely for the elite?

Answer:He argues that the humanities should be accessible to everyone because they provide valuable insights into our shared humanity, fostering a more equitable society and empowering individuals from all backgrounds.

9.Question

What is the relationship between liberal arts education and creativity in the workforce?

Answer:Liberal arts education cultivates creativity and

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innovation, both of which are increasingly essential in today's rapidly evolving job market, where traditional skills may quickly become outdated.

10.Question

What does Deresiewicz suggest about the future of education with regard to the balancing of specialization and general education?

Answer:He suggests that while specialization is necessary, maintaining contact with the liberal arts is critical in order to integrate a broader understanding of human experience into one’s professional practice.

11.Question

How does Deresiewicz view the importance of questioning established beliefs?

Answer:He views questioning established beliefs as fundamental to democracy and personal growth, asserting that education should empower individuals to engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

12.Question

What does the phrase 'art teaches empathy' imply

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according to the text?

Answer:The phrase implies that engaging with art helps individuals understand and appreciate the feelings and experiences of others, fostering a deeper emotional intelligence.

13.Question

Consider the implications of a liberal arts education for citizenship. What does Deresiewicz argue?

Answer:He argues that a liberal arts education is crucial for cultivating informed and active citizens who can think critically about societal issues and contribute thoughtfully to democratic discourse.

Chapter 9 | 9. Spirit Guides| Q&A

1.Question

What is the role of teachers in an effective education according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:Teachers are not just information transmitters; they are guides who awaken the latent potential within students. They inspire, lead forth,

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and cultivate curiosity and intellectual growth, much like midwives help bring new life into the world.

2.Question

Why is the seminar model emphasized over traditional lectures in college education?

Answer:Seminars foster discussion, collaboration, and critical thinking, allowing professors to model mental skills while challenging students to elaborate on ideas and engage deeply with the material.

3.Question

How can mentorship affect a student's experience in college?

Answer:Mentorship is crucial for students as it provides personal validation and guidance beyond academic instruction. Effective mentors challenge and support students, helping them navigate their educational paths and life choices.

4.Question

What does Deresiewicz suggest about the differences

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between elite and non-elite educational institutions?

Answer:Elite institutions often prioritize prestige and research over effective teaching, leading to a focus on grades alone rather than holistic learning. In contrast, public universities or liberal arts colleges can provide more diverse interactions and a deeper engagement with ideas.

5.Question

What is the critique of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in higher education?

Answer:MOOCs are seen as exacerbating the current deficits in personalized education, promoting passive learning, and perpetuating inequalities rather than addressing them. They often replace the vital teacher-student connection needed for meaningful education.

6.Question

What changes does Deresiewicz propose for reforming higher education?

Answer:He advocates for a return to prioritizing teaching over research, redefining merit in admissions to favor

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resilience and creativity over mere grades, and ensuring diverse, supportive educational environments that nurture all students equally.

7.Question

What is the fundamental flaw in the current meritocratic system, as described in the text?

Answer:The meritocratic system reproduces privilege rather than dismantling it, often benefiting students from affluent backgrounds while neglecting those from lower socioeconomic statuses, thus perpetuating existing social inequalities.

8.Question

How does Deresiewicz relate the meritocracy of education with the overall societal structure?

Answer:The current educational meritocracy is reflective of a broader societal class system that limits social mobility. It privileges a small elite while excluding many capable individuals based on their background rather than their potential.

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9.Question

What role does the emotional connection between teachers and students play according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:Emotional connections between teachers and students enrich the learning experience, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging deeper intellectual engagement. Through individualized attention and empathy, teachers can significantly impact students' academic and personal growth.

10.Question

What does William Deresiewicz advocate for the future of higher education in America?

Answer:He calls for a fundamental reassessment of educational priorities, focusing on creating a more equitable system that values teaching and mentorship, broadens access to quality education, and fosters a genuine intellectual exchange among all students.

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Chapter 10 | 10. Your Guide to the Rankings| Q&A

1.Question

What should students consider when choosing a college?

Answer:Students should evaluate the educational philosophy of the institution, the types of students and professors present, the opportunities for personal growth, and the emphasis on intellectual curiosity over prestige. They should also avoid focusing solely on rankings but rather look for fit and connection with the school's values.

2.Question

Why does the author warn against the Ivy League and similar institutions?

Answer:The author suggests that while Ivy League schools are often viewed as prestigious, the student bodies can cultivate a competitive and entitled atmosphere. This environment can hinder genuine intellectual engagement and personal growth.

3.Question

What alternatives to top-tier universities does the author

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suggest?

Answer:The author mentions public universities, liberal arts colleges, and second-tier colleges as viable alternatives, emphasizing that these institutions often provide a more diverse student body and nurturing academic relationships.

4.Question

What is the significance of diversity in education as discussed in the chapter?

Answer:Diversity enriches classroom discussions and challenges students to engage with varied perspectives, fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking, which is pivotal for a robust liberal arts education.

5.Question

How can students ensure a meaningful college experience?

Answer:Students should seek schools that prioritize teaching, integrate educational experiences with real-life applications, and emphasize community engagement. They should also immerse themselves in the academic community by actively

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participating in discussions and approaching faculty.

6.Question

What role do professors play in a student's education according to the text?

Answer:Professors are crucial for creating an engaging and supportive learning environment, facilitating intellectual exploration, and helping students navigate their educational paths, making meaningful connections within the college community.

7.Question

What does the author mean by ‘soul-making’ in education?

Answer:'Soul-making' refers to the development of personal values, creativity, and critical thinking that occurs through intellectual exploration and engagement in a supportive educational environment.

8.Question

What should students avoid when selecting a college?

Answer:Students should avoid choosing institutions based solely on marketing or prestige, relying instead on the quality

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of education offered, the community environment, and the fit between their academic and personal aspirations.

9.Question

Why is it important to engage with faculty and take initiative in your education?

Answer:Engaging with faculty outside of class fosters mentorship opportunities, deepens understanding of the subject matter, and encourages a proactive approach to learning, which enhances personal growth and academic success.

10.Question

What final message does the author convey about college choice?

Answer:The most important factor in college choice is the student themselves. Personal agency, curiosity, and a commitment to active engagement in one's education will ultimately define the college experience.

Chapter 11 | 11. Welcome to the Club| Q&A

1.Question

What is the main issue with elite education as discussed in

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this chapter?

Answer:Elite education is perpetuating economic inequality and social stratification, isolating the wealthy from the majority of society, and creating a class of individuals who are disconnected from the experiences and challenges faced by others.

2.Question

How does socioeconomic status affect opportunities for students in elite colleges?

Answer:Students from affluent families have greater access to resources such as tutors, test preparation, extracurricular activities, and private schooling, which skews admission chances in favor of the wealthy and exacerbates social inequality.

3.Question

In what ways do elite colleges contribute to the cycle of privilege?

Answer:Elite colleges preferentially admit students from wealthy backgrounds through systems like legacy admissions

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and athletics, thus maintaining their status and concentrating opportunities among the upper classes, rather than promoting true diversity and merit.

4.Question

What criticism is leveled against the concept of 'diversity' in elite institutions?

Answer:While elite colleges promote diversity in terms of race and gender, they often fail to address economic inequality, leading to a superficial understanding of diversity that does not include meaningful representation of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

5.Question

What analogy does the author use to highlight differences in preparation among students?

Answer:The author compares students from elite institutions to flowers in a well-cultivated garden, suggesting they are sheltered and pampered, while those from less prestigious backgrounds are like weeds that grow resiliently and robustly in harsher conditions.

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6.Question

How does the author suggest elite students can develop empathy and awareness of social class issues?

Answer:The author encourages elite students to engage in real-world experiences, such as working service jobs, interacting with people from different backgrounds, and understanding their perspectives, rather than remaining insulated in their privileged environments.

7.Question

What underlying message is conveyed about elite education and entitlement?

Answer:The chapter argues that elite education nurtures a sense of entitlement among students, leading them to believe they inherently deserve success due to their academic achievements, while ignoring the advantages that afforded them such opportunities.

8.Question

What does the author propose as necessary for true equity in education?

Answer:The author suggests that meaningful changes must

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occur within the overall system of education, promoting genuine equity rather than superficial solutions, to dismantle the entrenched structures of privilege.

9.Question

How does the author contrast past and present attitudes towards students at elite schools?

Answer:Previously, students were reminded of their lucky opportunities and pressured to prove their worth, while now, they are celebrated and assured that they are the most exceptional class, fostering a greater sense of entitlement.

10.Question

What is a significant takeaway about the meritocratic ideal in higher education?

Answer:While meritocracy promises equal opportunity, it often fails to deliver on that promise, as it is skewed in favor of those who can afford the means to succeed within an unfair system.

Chapter 12 | 12. The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy| Q&A

1.Question

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What is the main criticism of contemporary meritocracy according to Deresiewicz?

Answer:Deresiewicz argues that contemporary meritocracy is a self-serving system that prioritizes individual success and self-aggrandizement over collective responsibility and the common good. He highlights that those in leadership within this system feel entitled and disconnected from the struggles of the less fortunate, perpetuating a cycle of privilege that undermines true merit and social mobility.

2.Question

How does Deresiewicz relate meritocracy to the failures of leadership in America?

Answer:He contends that the failures of leaders, who often come from elite educational backgrounds, reflect their inability to connect with the larger populace. Their focus on personal achievements leads to a lack of vision and responsibility, resulting in ineffective governance that fails to address societal issues.

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3.Question

What specific changes does Deresiewicz suggest for the education system to combat inequality?

Answer:He advocates for reforming admissions policies to focus on class rather than race, removing preferences for legacies and wealthy athletes, and rethinking what constitutes 'merit'. He emphasizes the need to recognize the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that contribute to a person's potential.

4.Question

In what way does Deresiewicz view the current elite's approach to social mobility?

Answer:He highlights the hypocrisy within the elite’s views on social mobility, arguing that while they profess support for it, the existing systems they benefit from often limit opportunities for others, effectively maintaining their own privilege at the expense of the broader population.

5.Question

What does Deresiewicz mean by 'self-overcoming' and how is it relevant to leadership?

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Answer:'Self-overcoming' refers to the necessity for the elite to recognize their privilege and make deliberate efforts to dismantle the systems that perpetuate inequality. Deresiewicz suggests that true leadership involves sacrificing personal gain for the welfare of all, demanding a reevaluation of values within society.

6.Question

Why does Deresiewicz believe that elite colleges need to change their admissions processes?

Answer:He argues that elite colleges today produce a homogeneous class of students who ace standardized tests but lack creativity, diversity of thought, and resilience. By changing admissions to value different experiences and backgrounds, schools can cultivate leaders who are more connected to the realities of a diverse society.

7.Question

What larger societal project does Deresiewicz believe is necessary to address the issues raised in his critique?

Answer:Deresiewicz believes that society must move

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towards a more egalitarian vision that promotes public education for all and values collective well-being over individual success. He envisions a system where educational opportunities are accessible to everyone, not just those from affluent backgrounds, fostering a truly democratic society.

8.Question

How does Deresiewicz connect the ideas of individual success and societal well-being?

Answer:He posits that individual success should not come at the expense of others; rather, a prosperous society is one where everyone has the opportunity to succeed. This requires a fundamental shift in how society values education and privilege, moving from a zero-sum perspective to one where everyone benefits.

9.Question

What historical context does Deresiewicz provide to frame the current educational system's shortcomings?

Answer:He juxtaposes the current meritocratic and technocratic trends with historical failures of leadership

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among the elite, citing past societal movements that sought to address inequality, such as the development of public university systems that provided accessible education for all citizens.

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Chapter 1 | 1. The Students| Quiz and Test

1. Elite college students are consistently successful and have mastered life, showing no signs of anxiety or depression.
2. The lack of purpose and authenticity among college students is a significant issue, leading them to prioritize grades over their passions.
3. The pressure to succeed and conform in elite education is a phenomenon limited to students in the U.S.

Chapter 2 | 2. The History| Quiz and Test

1. Before the Civil War, elite colleges like Ivy League institutions primarily served wealthy students exclusively.
2. The college admissions process began to favor wealthier students and their preparatory schools in the early 20th century.
3. The introduction of the SAT in the 1960s was aimed at

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increasing competition and access in college admissions.

Chapter 3 | 3. The Training| Quiz and Test

1. Families are increasingly anxious about social mobility and competition, emphasizing the importance of elite college admissions primarily for securing genuine opportunities for lower classes.
2. Amy Chua’s parenting style in 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother' emphasizes the importance of children’s happiness and friendship over strict achievement standards.
3. The chapter advocates for a shift in parenting practices that prioritize children's well-being over societal expectations and narrow definitions of success.

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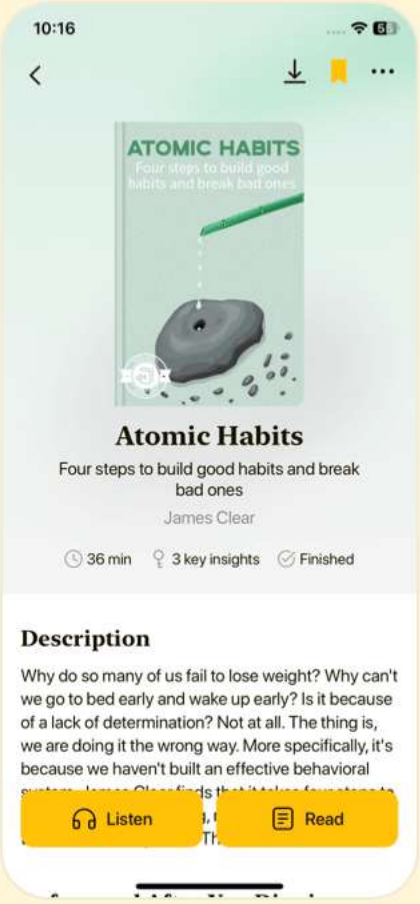

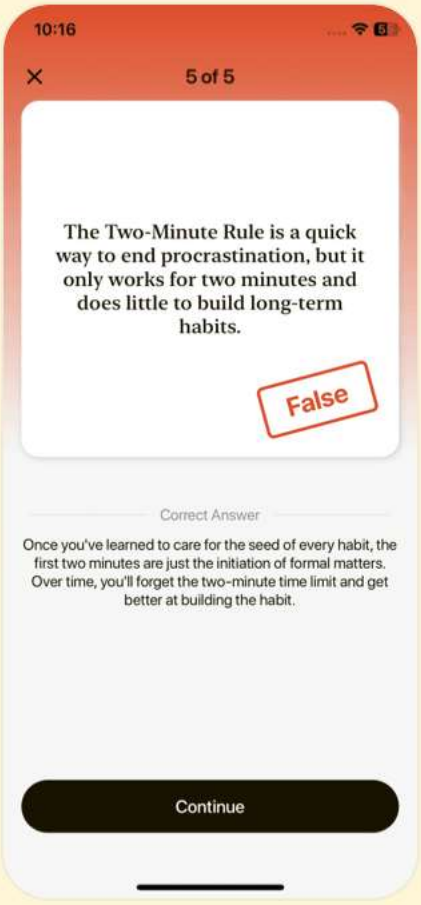

Chapter 4 | 4. The Institutions| Quiz and Test

1. Colleges and universities effectively address issues in higher education and cultivate moral awareness in students.
2. The American higher education system is heavily influenced by both the English college model and the German research university model.
3. Students in contemporary colleges are fully equipped to explore deeper questions about meaning and purpose throughout their education.

Chapter 5 | 5. What Is College For?| Quiz and Test

1. The primary purpose of college is to prepare students for financial success and job readiness.
2. College should help students engage in self-discovery and reflection to develop a strong inner identity.
3. A liberal arts education only focuses on academic knowledge and does not contribute to personal development.

Chapter 6 | 6. Inventing Your Life| Quiz and Test

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1. Self-knowledge is vital when finding the right career according to William Deresiewicz.
2. Moral courage is not necessary for breaking away from conventional paths as per the insights from Chapter 6.
3. Pursuing meaningful work will not lead to true freedom, according to the chapter.

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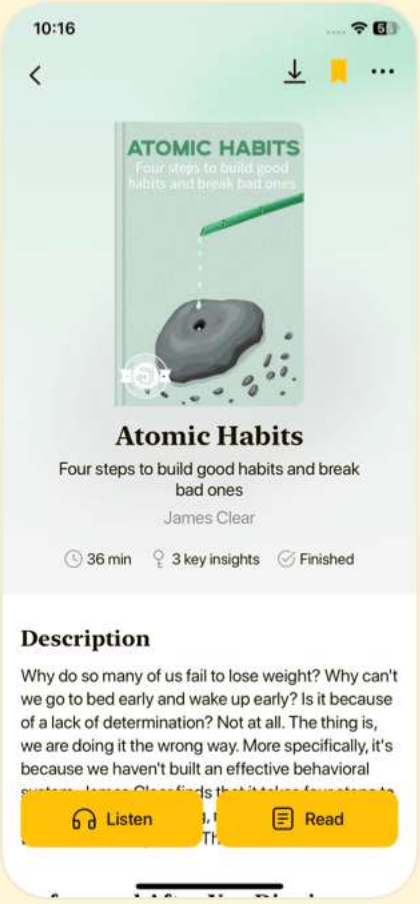

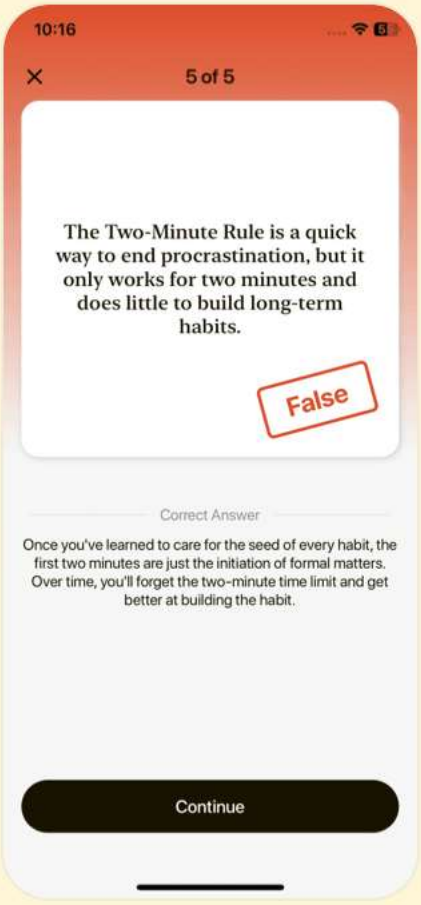

Chapter 7 | 7. Leadership| Quiz and Test

1. The main purpose of college education according to 'Excellent Sheep' is to prepare students for corporate success only.
2. Leadership today is often defined by titles and status rather than ethical considerations or social impact.
3. The educational system encourages independent thought and innovation in developing future leaders.

Chapter 8 | 8. Great Books| Quiz and Test

1. A liberal arts education emphasizes practical utility and vocational training.
2. Employers value soft skills developed through liberal arts education equally or more than specific majors.
3. Integration of specialized knowledge with broad understanding is unnecessary in professional fields.

Chapter 9 | 9. Spirit Guides| Quiz and Test

1. Good education fundamentally relies on the presence and influence of quality teachers.
2. The rise of MOOCs has enhanced the quality of learning by

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providing personalized instruction.

3. Small class sizes foster individual growth and are essential for developing critical analysis skills.

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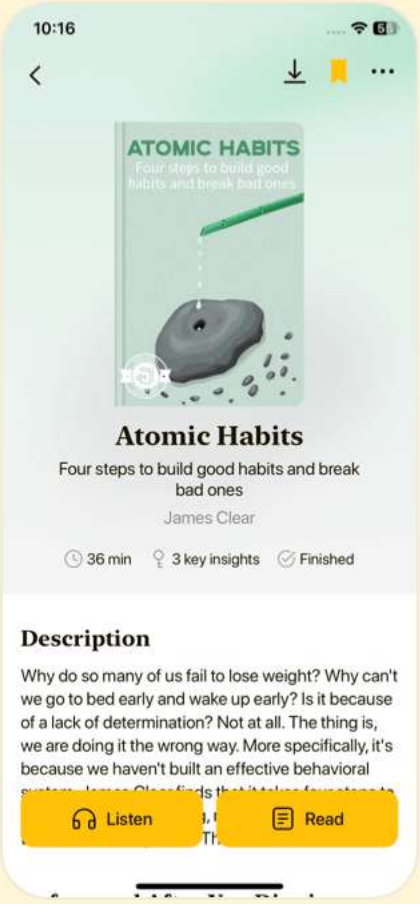

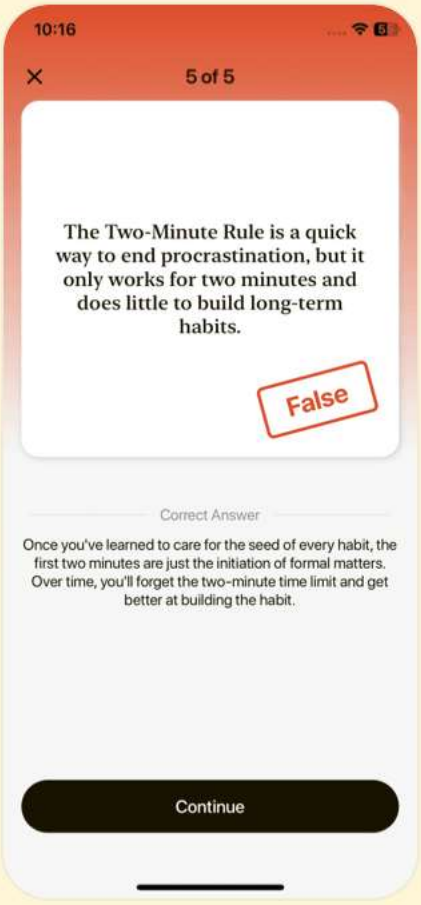

Chapter 10 | 10. Your Guide to the Rankings| Quiz and Test

1. Prestigious universities like Harvard, Stanford, and Yale have very different educational systems and experiences.
2. Elite institutions offer distinct advantages primarily due to their student quality, which enhances classroom discussions and social dynamics.
3. Liberal arts colleges are not recommended because they often have larger class sizes and less community involvement.

Chapter 11 | 11. Welcome to the Club| Quiz and Test

1. Elite education primarily benefits students from wealthy backgrounds, as seen by the high percentage of elite college students coming from top income brackets.
2. Diversity policies in elite institutions effectively address the underlying economic disparities within their admissions processes.

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3.The belief that hard work leads to success is supported in elite educational settings, as all students have equal opportunities to succeed based on effort alone.

Chapter 12 | 12. The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy| Quiz and Test

1.The phrase 'the best and the brightest' positively reflects our current leadership class.

2.The meritocratic ethos equates individual success with moral superiority, promoting socio-economic inequalities.

3.To achieve a truly democratic society, we must maintain the current meritocratic system without changes.

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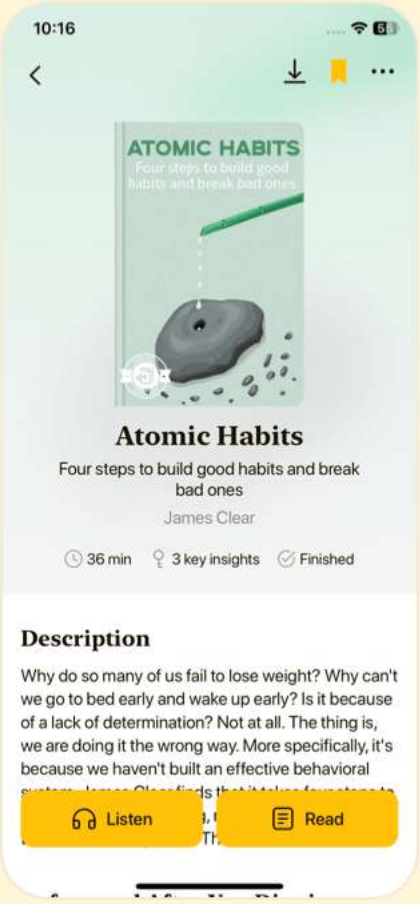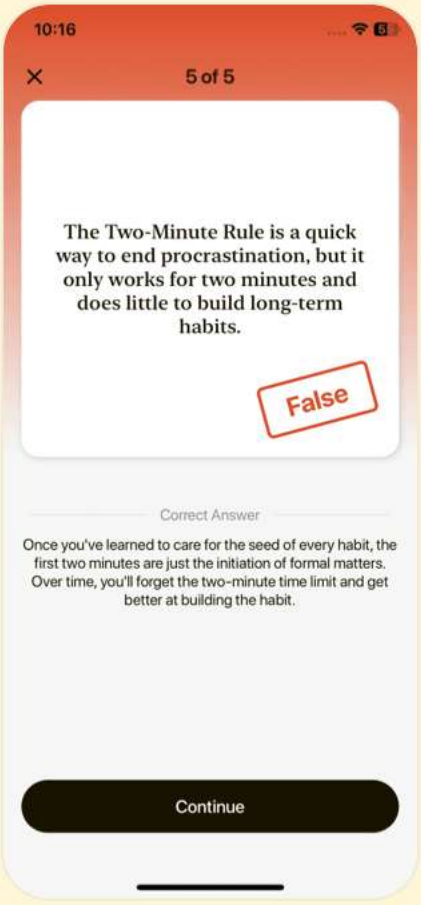
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