

## iz r childrens lrrng?

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### *High School Confidential*

by Jeremy Iversen

Atria, 464 pp., \$25.00

### *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*

by Rebekah Nathan

Penguin, 208 pp., \$14.00 (paper reprint)

Some of our most formative years are spent in schools, odd places whose ostensible goal is adult-directed education but in reality are controlled by student-culture peer groups of which adults have little actual understanding. Adults run examinations and programs, try to be “hip” to teen culture, but ultimately, we must admit, we have little idea what really goes on, making it easy for rumors to run wild.

Jeremy Iversen and Rebekah Nathan decided to see for themselves what school life was really like, by going undercover and experiencing it themselves. While they went to different places, in different guises, in entirely different situations (Iversen was a senior in high school, while Nathan was a freshman in college), the pictures they draw are startlingly similar: a world where genuine education is absolutely the last thing on everyone’s mind.

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Jeremy Iversen grew up in New York, attended a prestigious boarding school, and went to college at Stanford. But, he says, life after school didn’t have the same appeal. So he decided to go back and get the typical high school education he never had. The result — *High School Confidential* — is a gripping memoir of what life is actually like for the cool kids in a southern California high school.

The general outlines are perhaps less than shocking to those who have been paying attention. High school kids routinely have casual sex with each other, for example. (“There’s nothing else to do in this town,” one student comments, “except start drama with everybody.”) They take drugs — marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, speed — right under their parents noses. (In one scene, Travis, the class’s drug dealer, and Alexis, his sister, are confronted by their father. “I’m going to give you a drug test,” he warns them. “But I’ve been clean since nursery!” Travis replies. “Oh, it’s only your sister I’m worried about,” explains the father.) The kids cheat, not just by copying on tests, but by taking copious steroids and human growth hormone to compete in sports. (“I read an article

about high school steroid use in *Sports Illustrated*", comments the team coach, as the kids who are using look away. "Good thing that's not a problem in our school.")

Despite living in a very diverse community, many of the kids are full of casual racism and right-wing politics (white people need to stand up for their heritage, nuke all the Arabs), although they're far more liberal in practice (doing drugs with their Middle Eastern friends). When they get mad at each other, they aren't afraid to take it out in violent brawls. And when the school throws parties, everybody gets totally hammered. (There's a brilliant scene where some kids throw up on Richard Nixon's grave.)

However, the novel is gripping in its details, with more amusing characters and fascinating stories than any television show imitation of high school life. The teachers are such characters that were this fiction you might accuse them of being overwritten. School events are so lavish (a band performs every day at lunch, large coordinated dance-and-light shows are done for spirit rallies) that they seem like TV exaggerations. School assignments are so inane (cut apart this cat) that you might think the kid telling you this was exaggerating. But Iversen was there, the dialogue in the book is copied down verbatim, the description of events was taken first-hand.<sup>1</sup>

And, indeed, the most shocking components are not the tales of the kids, but of the schools. Iversen draws a picture of an institution that is not just failing at learning, but antithetical to it. Thea, the only girl in the book with any academic passion, is routinely discouraged by the actions of both peers and adults. But no other student even gets that far. The school's student culture makes caring about class unthinkable; the school's classes make learning near-impossible.

But the grandest component of Iversen's tale is how he dismantles our previous methods for trying to understand how schools operate. First, there is Derrick, the school board's secret weapon. Derrick is an articulate and popular student, admired by all, and elected class president. But it slowly becomes clear that student government, including him, is nothing but the administration's pawn. The regulations are designed to make genuine complaints impossible to bring before the administration, while the administration uses Derrick at every opportunity as a mouthpiece for their lies about what the children really think. Thus the only student representative most outside adults see is no representative at all.

Then there are the standards regulations, around which the curriculum is supposedly organized. The state school accreditation team is coming to verify that it is, and the adults worry that they're quite likely to fail. So the principal goes all-out, bribing, threatening, and faking the school into appearing good. Any kid who ever caused a problem is locked away in a hidden trailer for the duration of the inspector's visit, every class is replaced with fake, scripted, standards-compliant material. Every child puts on fake happy faces under severe duress. And the school passes with flying colors. "I wish every kid in the state could

have an education this good”, insists the lead inspector.

The reality is that between adult and student, there is a vast gulf in mentality. Iversen’s genius is that he can get us inside the heads of both sides.

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Around the same time, Rebekah Nathan, an anthropology professor at AnyU (both pseudonyms), was sitting in on some classes herself. She noticed that simply by acting like a student — sitting in class, taking notes, etc. — her fellow students began treating her like one, sharing gossip and trading facts she never got to see as a professor. Eager to cross that same mental gulf, she decided to spend her sabbatical the following year doing an undercover anthropological study of her own university.

Nathan enrolled as a freshman, lived in a dorm, and took a full load of courses. Despite looking like a mom, the other students accepted her as their own. She probably couldn’t get involved in the party scene and didn’t try — she stuck to studying the academic and intellectual side of college life — but pretty much everything she says fits with my impressions as a freshman Stanford student around the same time and I can even confirm a couple of her more surprising specific points.

After confining her focus to the intellectual, Nathan discovers that there simply isn’t much there. Students have their own culture with regard to class, a language known as “Undergraduate Cynical”, where actually caring about the material is deeply frowned upon, and the only questions you’re permitted to ask of a teacher are about the details of grading and assignments:

A good question, I learned, is one that voices a concern shared by other students or that asks for clarifications of upcoming work. “Will there be more questions on the test from the text or the lecture?” “Should the paper be double- or single- spaced?” [...]

[...] “What does that mean?” is, incredibly, just not the kind of question that an American college student would ask.

This isn’t just show; students genuinely aren’t engaged in classes. They don’t do the required reading, they dash off assignments, they ditch classes, they cheat on tests. Some go up and talk to the teacher about things, but they do so with ulterior motives in mind. Signs and talks geared to incoming students explain that one must “work the teachers” by talking to them, getting them to recognize you so they will give you hints about tests and go easy on you when you need exceptions. “I take the information I need from the professor”, one highly-successful student tells Nathan, explaining what that consists of: “how they’re going to grade you and what they think is important”. Everything is seen as part of the game, not worthwhile for its own sake.

But it's all too easy to lament this sad state of student affairs, perhaps complain about the laziness of modern students. But Nathan goes one step further: she shows *why* it is happening. For even she, a professor with a Ph.D, finds herself doing the exact same things. "We don't need to study those things, they won't be on the test", she tells her study partner Rob. It takes Rob, a fellow student, to ask her whether she just cares about learning for its own sake.

The culture of Undergraduate Cynical, you see, is not created by student laziness or a lack of concern for intellectual life. It's created by the necessities of the schedule. Students simply don't have time to care. They take three to five classes, each with separate sections and lab assignments, each with its own schedule of papers and readings and adults to suck up to. That alone is enough to drive Rebekah crazy, despite her thinking she had pretty good time management skills juggling all her commitments as a professor. But on top of that most students go to activities and clubs, work an on- or off-campus job, party in the evenings, and try to maintain relationships. When you run the math, there just isn't enough time to care.

So students instead focus on doing what's required of them: just scraping by. Anything that won't impact their grade much is tossed and a desire to learn becomes a desire to pass. It's hard to imagine any sincere desire to learn surviving such a harried schedule. As soon as you get engrossed or a book or topic, you have to dash off to your next meeting.

Again, this is all something completely invisible to the professors. They spend their days worrying about tomorrow's lecture and are shocked when students don't do the same. But the students haven't had time: they've had two more classes and who knows how many assignments in the interim. And, anyway, they only picked this course because it filled a convenient hole in their schedule, they're not even sure what it's about.

So the students simply don't get engrossed, student discussion groups don't actually discuss things, but instead each student simply makes up a point of view and shares it so they don't get a zero on their in-class participation grade. There is no "meeting of the minds" on any subject; there are hardly any minds.

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Both books, their research being conducted undercover, will no doubt lead some to raise ethical questions. Jeremy Iversen had to deceive and mislead his fellow students — including creating a fake backstory — in order to experience life with them. Rebekah Nathan, while not explicitly lying, led students to believe she was just an older woman going back to school, and certainly not one of their professors.

But deception alone is not an ethical violation. Psychology studies routinely deceive subjects into thinking the experiment is about X, when actually it is about Y. (I myself have been so deceived.) The key difference, and in my

opinion the only possible ethical lapse on Iversen and Nathan's part, is that after the study is over, the psychologists explain what was really going on. Neither Nathan nor Iversen told their friends afterwards, leaving them only to discover it after the project had gone public.

(By contrast, Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Nickeled and Dimed*, her study of low-wage work, told her fellow workers at the end that she was working on a book about the experience. They were "remarkably blasé" about it, she found.)

But more generally, important scientific projects like these might have to step on a few ethical toes. Some of the greatest experiments in psychology — the Milgram experiments on obedience to authority and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment — were easy fodder for armchair ethicists. But while people may have their feelings ruffled, in all of these experiments there was little lasting hurt to the participants, while the educational consequences of the studies themselves have been immense.

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The real ethical question is how we can justify forcing our children into such institutions of anti-intellectualism. Iversen found that high school students were quite conservative politically, even more so than their parents, and perhaps it's not surprising that Bush's anti-intellectual charm appeals to kids who daily experience education as a form of torture.

Perhaps students learn something by going through the necessary motions required to get a degree, but I defy anyone to read both of these accounts and continue to insist that schools are teaching kids to be "critical thinkers" with a "life-long love of learning". If anything, the real education is in the opposite.

Instead of critical thinkers, we have kids willing to accept any requirement, no matter how absurd, without question. "If you write what you want to that prof," explains a successful senior, "you're gonna end up with a bad grade. Whereas, if you write to *them*, you win—you can still have your own mindset and say, hell, I know this isn't the way I feel, but I'll give them what they want." But, as experiments in cognitive dissonance have shown us, if one continues saying what one doesn't feel, one begins feeling it before too long. It's easy to see how this is effective training for professionalism, which actually means doing what you're told, despite what you believe. But it's hard to see how this system is going to generate students who will buck a trend.

Instead of life-long learners, we have kids who learn that genuine learning is a joke. "Education" becomes that stupid thing in classrooms that you have to do to get a decent job, an entirely mercenary perspective that's unhelpfully encouraged by the mercenary pressures of student loans. If the only education you've ever experienced is doing what's necessary to get a good grade, why would you do it when the grades weren't around?

Our public high schools were supposed to make every child a good citizen of the democracy. Our great universities were supposed to show young people our grandest achievements. One could say that these institutions are failing at their jobs, but it might be more accurate to say that they're being all too successful.

#### Notes

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1. Some of the more verbal students at the school, upset at being hoodwinked by an undercover writer and disappointed at their portrayal, have taken to posting nasty comments on web sites and in the school paper suggesting that Iversen's book is fictionalized. But, as far as I can see, everything they claim that he left out, he actually included (with a single exception: one person on the Internet claimed kids called him "Plasticface") and they have failed to dispute any details he included. So, while no doubt Iversen's book contains errors (every book does, especially one as difficult to write as this), I'm compelled to believe it is largely accurate.