

THE
OVERACHIEVERS

THE SECRET LIVES OF DRIVEN KIDS



Alexandra Robbins

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Pledged*

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The bestselling author of *Pledged* returns with a groundbreaking look at the pressure to achieve faced by America's teens. In *Pledged*, Alexandra Robbins followed four college girls to produce a riveting narrative that reads like fiction. Now, in *The Overachievers*, Robbins uses the same captivating style to explore how our high-stakes educational culture has spiraled out of control. During the year of her ten-year reunion, Robbins goes back to her high school, where she follows heart-tuggingly likeable students including "AP" Frank, who grapples with horrifying parental pressure to succeed; Audrey, whose panicked perfectionism overshadows her life; Sam, who worries his years of overachieving will be wasted if he doesn't attend a name-brand college; Taylor, whose ambition threatens her popular girl status; and The Stealth Overachiever, a mystery junior who flies under the radar. Robbins tackles teen issues such as intense stress, the student and teacher cheating epidemic, sports rage, parental guilt, the black market for study drugs, and a college admissions process so cutthroat that students are driven to suicide and depression because of a B. With a compelling mix of fast-paced narrative and fascinating investigative journalism, *The Overachievers* aims both to calm the admissions frenzy and to expose its escalating dangers.

The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids Details

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Sharon says

Alexandra Robbins' *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids* is a poignant, non-fiction work that touches upon the modern competitive education system, which has seemingly gone out of control. Rather than earning grades for learning, students are obtaining artificial grades through cheating, and even resorting to non-prescribed medications to facilitate their study habits in order to get into their dream college. During Alexandra's 10-year high school reunion, she gathers a group of her friends' high school experiences and puts them in her book. It includes stereotypes such as the overachieving scholar, the popular athlete, those who are can never seem to fulfill their parents' expectations, and others who struggle to put on a flawless and well-rounded facade. These high school students engage themselves in numerous extracurricular activities, and also manage to balance seventeen AP classes throughout high school - all in attempt to get into their dream college.

The Overachievers is an enticing story which combines the conflicts of both man vs. society and man vs. himself. For example, Julie, a young student who portrays the typical overachieving scholar, gives her best effort to do extraordinarily well in school to get into her dream college, Stanford. She faces fierce competition among the other overachievers at school, and feels the need to maintain their perfect impressions of her. On the other hand, one of Julie's peers, AP Frank, feels pressured to fulfill his mother's harsh expectations. He is important to the novel because he shows that the lack of time and energy required to live up to these expectations, both shared by the students and their parents, is a product of the pressure of trying to live up to societal standards. Other overachievers compete to maintain a meticulous academic record in order to be accepted into a prestigious university. Each student invests hours of his or her personal time studying for each test, which slowly wears away at the character's sanity as they try to make room for a social life as well. With every club activity and study session he or she participates in, the student begins to feel the stress as they watch his/her time and energy dwindle to almost nothing. In retrospect, the driving force behind each character's actions is in response to the pressure and stress that acts as a constant motif throughout the novel. Julie and AP Frank are merely a few examples of the victims who suffer from the excruciating standards set by society and their parents in a desperate attempt to be accepted into an ideal college institution. College acts as the overpowering symbol of success that drives each character into a dismal and debilitating whirlwind of stress. However, Robbins exhibits a crucial theme in her book: Getting into a prestigious university does not determine whether one will be successful or not. She is reminding all high school students who constantly feel anxiety of getting into a name-brand college that school should be a place for learning - not a place for competing to be "number one."

Overall, *The Overachievers* is a compelling book that I was recommended to read in English class. It attracted me because I was able to relate to the high school experience in the story. This book has helped me constantly remind myself that grades are not an accurate judgment of what the potential an average student like I may have, and that school is just an environment to learn and grow. Robbins' diary-style writing makes the book feel a lot more personal, as if the reader were reading a friend's journal about the everyday stress from school. In between entries, Robbins intervenes and provides startling statistics on the various aspects of modern education, such as kids resorting to drugs to attain better performance in school and suicide rates. She also gives her opinion of what she thinks of the current education system - bad and inefficient. I would definitely recommend this book to all high school students today (especially juniors and seniors) who are looking for an easy-to-read book to relate to. Robbins' accessible style of writing keeps the audience captivated to want to continue reading on. *The Overachievers* is by far one of my favorite books - earning a

rating of five out of five stars.

Kathia says

Alexandra Robbins style is friendly, yet very informative. I like how she didn't just follow the lives of the eight students and analyze their behaviors. She actually became close with her subjects which was very interesting and something I have never seen before. It was very a very interesting book that analyzed the very popular overachiever culture and its flaws. Being an overachiever myself, I was able to relate to the many topics Robbins analyzed. This book made me realize a lot of things about the competitiveness in this very modern overachiever culture. It's definitely getting out of hand, and has become a very big problem in not only the U.S but worldwide. This book is clear and digs very well into the secret lives of overachievers. Alexandra's Robbins work is exciting and captivating.

Steph Lovelady says

My son, a high school junior in a magnet humanities program, was assigned to read this book for his AP English class. I read it along with him. While I was somewhat bitter about my overworked, high-achieving high school student having to read 400+ page book about how high-achieving high school students are overworked on top of everything else he has to do, I did enjoy it. It's highly readable and relatable, both as someone who went to what was a fairly competitive high school in the 80s (though competition at top high schools seems to have gotten worse) and as a current high school parent. These kids represent extreme cases in terms of achievement and stress; they are not typical of your average high school student in the U.S. or even at Walt Whitman High school in Bethesda, Maryland, where it's set, but those extremes are illuminating nonetheless. We struggle for balance in our family and don't always find it, even with a kid who does much less than these kids. It really is hard to know how to best support kids in this high-pressure environment. I hope it gives him some perspective.

Ruby Granger says

Well... This was possibly one of the best books I have ever read. You know that I am stingy with my 5-star book ratings but this one was sorely deserved. The book is non-fiction, following the stories of several high schoolers and providing a commentary on the US education system and the beginning of the Age of the Comparison. It was written around 2008 and so the statistics are obviously outdated but I think one of the most shocking things is that, despite Robbins's clear and factual critique, the same trend in student anxiety continues. This in itself is a cause for concern. Why are we not doing more to investigate and improve student well-being and the corruptness of much of the system?

Not only is this factually interesting, however, but also personally enlightening. I would identify as an overachiever myself (having been called this by multiple people) and I did find myself relating intensely to many of the characters interviewed by Robbins. This was especially powerful, I think, because she wrote it as a story, meaning that there was substance, suspense and progression in a way which is rarely seen in pieces similar to this. If you are frequently anxious about your grades at school, I would definitely recommend this book to you. If you feel as though you always have to be the best, you should read this.

This has made it into my Top Five.

Alec says

A Year Later....

It's close to the end of my senior year of high school, it's about time for me to really decide where I want to go, and it's been a year since I read *The Overachievers* -- yet this book is still sticking in my head. Of all the books that I've read, this is probably one of the most important. Honestly, I don't quite know why because it just gets me so *righteously angry* whenever I think about my own college application experiences in terms of this book -- curse the Early Decision admission track and curse Vanderbilt for having not one but **TWO** Early Decision tracks instead of an Early Action one -- but this book was still so relevant to me. I'm so glad that I picked this to read in English my junior year.

Actual Review

I had to read *The Overachievers* for my AP English class. We were given a list of seventeen books and were told to choose which book we wanted to read the most. I chose this book because, being what my friends call an overachiever, I wanted to read about myself.

The book wasn't quite like that though: Alexandra Robbins, the author, followed several high school- to college-age students who are considered overachievers by their peers. Reading about these people made me ever grateful for one reason: I'm not an overachiever like these students.

My gosh, talk about stress! This book centers on the kind of people who would kill themselves if they didn't get into Harvard or would curl into a ball and flood Earth with their tears if they got a dreaded B. This book is so good because not only does Robbins discuss the overachiever culture and its causes and effects but also how to successfully dismantle this culture. She goes into detail about how students' stress and pressure come from multiple sources -- e.g. class rank, parental involvement/helicopter parenting, college rankings, AP class and extracurricular overload -- and how everyone (students, parents, counselors, even colleges) can contribute to lessen the burden.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who knows or who is an overachiever because this book, despite being several years old, rings as true as ever.

Betsy says

When I read this after college, I felt like I was being transported back to high school. Not only did I know the kinds of kids she was describing - I WAS one of those kids. As a somewhat adult, it's hard to imagine how I could ever pull off everything I did in high school now. I can barely make it through the workday sometimes, how did I go to school, do homework, work at my job and play competitive sports and not simply die of exhaustion? The thought makes me crazy.

This was a great read for someone who had been there, but I also would recommend it to anyone considering having kids or working in the school system. It gives great insight to the difference between motivation and

pressure, and reminds you of what it's really like to be back in high school.

Judy says

The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids, a nonfiction work by Alexandra Robbins, is a book I chose to read because it was a requirement for our English Honors class. Students usually groan at the thought of reading a book because it is a school requirement, but I found *The Overachievers* to be quite an interesting read. In it, Robbins traces the thoughts and lives of several overachieving students, namely juniors and seniors, from Whitman High School located in Bethesda, Maryland, who face various dilemmas that range from being emotional and mental to physical. Most of these problems have been acquired through stress from the rigorous classes and extracurricular activities they take on, which are directly correlated to admissions into top tier universities. The desire to be accepted into the most prestigious colleges of the nation is derived from either the students' ambition to become successful in life or from parental pressure.

I found the central conflict in the novel to be man vs. man. The whole overachieving system, according to Robbins, originates from the ambitions of people to come out at the top; for people to be recognized publicly as *the* number one in whatever they encounter. But since there are only a handful of number one positions open, everyone scrambles wildly to grasp that title, often engaging in unethical behavior just to achieve it. Dishonesty is a major motif of the book; students guiltlessly use it to satisfy their own or their parents' ambitions, which usually constitutes of achieving the highest marks possible, whether it be in academics or in sports. Some students, or parents even, go so far as to attempt to sabotage others' chances for so-called "success." Consequently, a student's intellect can't be judged based on the grades that he or she receives in school. Another result of this recurring dishonesty is that being successful in today's overachieving society is no longer dependent upon an individual's genuine hunger for knowledge and being able to fulfill that hunger by learning well purely for personal benefit. Therefore, the theme that I gathered from this book is that the concerns of overachieving students or their parents to become "successful" by today's societal standards will often hinder their true desires. An example in the book is AP Frank, a graduate of Whitman High School, whose overbearing mother doesn't take into account her son's hopes for his own future. I believe that parents like that thrust a life upon their own children that they wish they had; thus, children are not really viewed as other, separate human beings, but rather symbolize a second chance at life.

Robbins writes the book in a documentary style, often interrupting the stories of the students' lives with her own commentary and carefully researched statistics, as well as comments from students from other schools around the United States. A reader might also get the impression that the novel is a compilation of third-person diary entries, with Robbins providing researched statistics that are directly related to the events of the students' lives. What really sets *The Overachievers* aside from other typical research projects is the emotion and passion that Robbins puts into the subject. For example, it is evident from her writing style that she holds distaste for the No Child Left Behind Act, which she believes contributes to the stressful environment that schools have become.

The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids is a book I would definitely recommend to all the overachievers in America, especially the children under age twelve who are currently being pressured by their parents to learn material far beyond the typical level of learning at their age. Since the novel is quite easy to read, I mainly recommend it to young learners, because children of younger ages have the tendency to more loyally obey their parents' wishes, no matter how strenuous. And eventually, they grow into the habit of acting accordingly with the intentions of their parents. Although reading this book might prove to be a disillusioning experience, I believe it to be better that children know in advance what kind of society they

are growing up in. This novel is also a good read for high school students, who can connect to the overachievers on a personal level.

Lisa says

Robbins' non-fiction reads like a novel. Her characters, real life high school students, tell the story, which Robbins validates with her research, sprinkled between the anecdotes. As the parent of a high school junior who attends a school much like Whitman, I was deeply interested in the subject matter, and as a former school counselor and adjunct professor, I appreciated the thoroughness of Robbins' research. This book should be required reading for high school parents, particularly if their children are college-bound. It's well-written and easy to read, yet it delivers its message clearly and beautifully.

Claudia says

I chose this book for our book club, and I'm eager to see what elementary teachers and parents think of this book. I was impressed! Robbins follows several students from one high-achieving school and connects their concerns and struggles with education issues: NCLB, SAT and ACT testing, the whole test-prep industry; recess and the competition for preschool admission; and how schools' schedules are a mismatch to teenagers' sleep patterns. Her commentary is top-notch! I read fiction for character, so I was drawn in by these amazing kids who are trying so hard to juggle their lives, and have a life. I recommend this to anyone who knows a child!

Crystal says

In *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids* by the celebrated author Alexandra Robbins, a significant issue of our current society is addressed: the dilemma of how academic and societal pressures are negatively affecting students today. This non-fictional novel retraces the high school lives of real students whose only names have been changed. The frenzied lives of six high school students, which may seem even unbelievable at times, are portrayed. Unfortunately, the different, yet similar, stories behind each person are in fact very real, and they ultimately reflect the hectic, stressful lives of many overachievers in America today.

The six students who are portrayed are all overachievers and are unfavorably affected by the need to fulfill the expectations of other people, such as parents, college admission officers, and other peers, or their own desire to achieve perfection. The obligation for these high schoolers to succeed in everything they do, including academics or other extracurricular activities, lead to their own unhappiness and predicaments. Along with the stress of having to keep up their grades in order to get into a prestigious college, some of them struggle to keep up with their social life as well. An example of an oppressed student is AP Frank, who is pressured by society to fulfill certain expectations. His disciplinary, adamant Asian mother nearly strips AP Frank's freedom away from him as she forces him to take many AP classes and expects him to maintain a high GPA. When AP Frank goes to Harvard, he regains control over his social life and finds happiness as his actions finally reflect his own. The prestigious colleges symbolize the importance of getting into the "right" college. This obsession may change a student's identity, leading to the dejection seen in some of the characters. Both societal and self expectations serve as a reoccurring motif throughout the novel, driving the

students to leap over their limits and setting themselves up for disappointment. Robbins ultimately conveys this theme: Society and other pressures should not define who a person is. Many students do not go to the college that is right for them, but they rather change themselves in order to enter a prestigious college that may not even be suitable for them. The author reminds high school students to stay true to who he or she is despite the possible pressures and stresses that may arrive in life.

Robbins' writing style consists of viewpoints from different characters in each chapter. She often asserts her own opinions and facts into appropriate chapters. This style is useful because it provides anecdotes as well as hard evidence. Both successfully convey the author's message from different levels. I chose this book because I wanted to read a non-fiction novel that I could relate to. *The Overachievers* fulfilled my expectations, and I recommend this five-star novel to anyone who is involved in high school- including students, parents of students, teachers, and others. Alexandra Robbins truly provides an enlightening experience through this eye-opening novel.

Alexandra Robbins says

My favorite of my books!

Matthew Tsvetkov says

The Overachievers: Secret Lives of Driven Kids, gets a 2.5 out of 5 stars from me (although for the sake of the Goodreads website I gave the book a 2). The book had a strong, interesting opening. However, when I reached the halfway point I was really only interested in reading about the characters for a reason I couldn't understand. About 250 pages into the book I discovered that my big problem with the book was that I felt like I was being fed the same information in every section that was not about the kids Robbins was following, making the book repetitive and uninteresting for me in the long run.

Jonathan says

The Overachievers, by Alexandra Robbins, follows the lives of various students in their final years of high school (and one entering his freshman year in university). It details the various pressures and troubles brought about by the effort to succeed and be the best in one of the most competitive high schools in America. I enjoyed this book, not only because it sends a much needed message that the pressure to get into a good university is too high and placing too much stress on students across the world, but also because I could relate exactly to what these people were going through. I agree with Robbins' message that in the effort to get ahead, the joy of learning is left by the wayside.

James Parker says

The Overachievers is overall a great book, being very informative and providing much insight into what really goes on in the educational system. Every page keeps you wanting more, and the shockingly true facts

that this book is replete with only add to this feeling. Alexandra Robbins is a fantastic investigative journalist, and she has done a fantastic job documenting the struggles and challenges in the lives of multiple students. Not only are the stories of the students interesting and engaging, but they each reflect a major flaw in the American educational system.

In short, *The Overachievers* is a great book and should not be missed.

Jackie Carlson says

It's been a while since I've truly liked a book that a teacher assigned me to read. In a little over 400 pages, Robbins discusses the hectic lives of a few teenage "overachievers" while focusing on a broader topic, the dysfunction of the American education system. She touches topics like the overbooked schedule of the American teenager, "helicopter" parents, and the stress of getting into a top rated college. Since I am a teenager in three AP classes, I am able to relate to this book. I myself am not an overachiever, but while reading this I was able to compare the lives of the kids presented in this novel to the lives of peers that I know. Some of them were even carbon copies, minus the names.

The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids is a must-read for anyone in High School.
