



# **A Class Apart: Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion Inside One of America's Best High Schools**

*Alec Klein*

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# A Class Apart: Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion Inside One of America's Best High Schools

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**A Class Apart: Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion Inside One of America's Best High Schools** Alec Klein Enter Stuyvesant High, one of the most extraordinary schools in America, a place where the brainiacs prevail and jocks are embarrassed to admit they play on the woeful football team. Academic competition is so intense that students say they can have only two of these three things: good grades, a social life, or sleep. About one in four Stuyvesant students gains admission to the Ivy League. And the school's alumni include several Nobel laureates, Academy Award winners, and luminaries in the arts, business, and public service. "A Class Apart" follows the lives of Stuyvesant's remarkable students, such as Romeo, the football team captain who teaches himself calculus and strives to make it into Harvard; Jane, a world-weary poet at seventeen, battling the demon of drug addiction; Milo, a ten-year-old prodigy trying to fit in among high-school students who are literally twice his size; Mariya, a first-generation American beginning to resist parental pressure for ever-higher grades so that she can enjoy her sophomore year. And then there is the faculty, such as math chairman Mr. Jaye, who is determined not to let bureaucratic red tape stop him from helping his teachers. He even finds a job for a depressed math genius who lacks a college degree but possesses the gift of teaching.

This is the story of the American dream, a New York City school that inspires immigrants to come to these shores so that their children can attend Stuyvesant in the first step to a better life. It's also the controversial story of elitism in education. Stuyvesant is a public school, but children must pass a rigorous entrance exam to get in. Only about 3 percent do so, which, Stuyvesant students and faculty point out, makes admission to their high school tougher than to Harvard.

On the eve of the hundredth anniversary of Stuyvesant's first graduating class, reporter Alec Klein, an alumnus, was given unfettered access to the school and the students and faculty who inhabit it. What emerges is a book filled with stunning, raw, and heartrending personalities, whose stories are hilarious, sad, and powerfully moving.

## A Class Apart: Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion Inside One of America's Best High Schools Details

Date : Published August 1st 2007 by Simon & Schuster (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9780743299442

Author : Alec Klein

Format : Hardcover 323 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Education, Academic, College

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# **From Reader Review A Class Apart: Prodigies, Pressure, and Passion Inside One of America's Best High Schools for online ebook**

## **Clare says**

I enjoyed this interesting book about a year at Stuyvesant High, a public school for gifted kids in New York. Though I was envious of the brains and talent of these students (including the author who graduated from Stuyvesant 20 years before writing the book), I was certainly not envious of the pressure put on them by parents to produce consistently high grades. The author follows several students and how their lives are played out at this unique public school. It was fun to read about Romeo, the football player brainiac whose team loses one game, 60-1 (athletics are not particularly valued at this institution of learning) and also about Milo, the 10-year old prodigy, who attends Stuyvesant as a sort of non-student.

For anyone interested in education and who wants to revisit teenage life (God, it was miserable remembering some of the anguish of being 15!), this book is just wonderful.

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## **Mike Mcfarland says**

I was deathly afraid that this book would be smug and self-congratulatory. Look how many graduates go to Ivy League schools! Look how many win national awards! The building has escalators and a pool! All of these things may be true, but the school was more than just a list of accomplishments.

Klein captured the spirit really well: the ridiculous yearly SING! competition (each class writes and produces its own musical every year) that did more to unite students than anything, the excitement of a really well-run classroom, the way different cliques congregated on different floors (your influence was directly related to your proximity to the second-floor entrance), "traditions" that seemed eternal at the time and then died after a couple classes graduated, and the way the entrance exam fostered a weird kind of diversity.

Klein also didn't shy away from the more problematic aspects of Stuyvesant. The same entrance exam that made it possible for dedicated immigrants and first-generation Americans to attend in high numbers was also responsible for the shamefully low number of minority students. Many of the teachers, as in other schools across the City, were more interested in marking time until retirement than in challenging the students. And, perhaps most importantly, the extremely high-pressure environment really warped many students (cheating is rampant).

In the end, Klein's message is less about trumpeting achievements, and more about conveying that Stuyvesant is a pretty remarkable place. It's not necessarily the greatest place, or the only place worth going to high school, but it's pretty remarkable.

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## **Benjy says**

It's weird going to a high school that has a significant amount of literature on it and Alec Klein's book was no exception. Seeing your bitchy assistant principal, your awesome government teacher, and your school musical contests turned into narratives is very weird after you've experienced them as life events. Almost

everyone at the school when the book was written graduated before my time (I think I knew Jane, the heroin addicted poet), so at least I can look at the students with fresh eyes. That said, Alec Klein takes a great approach, focusing on a few extraordinary students and interesting teachers to lend both a micro and macro look at the school. It's really hard not to like these people and Stuyvesant is as unusual a school as they come, except for maybe LaGuardia High School, which surely deserves its own series of books to go with its movie (Fame).

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## **Oliver Kasenne says**

3.5 stars

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## **Amy says**

Narrative nonfiction about one year in the life of Stuyvesant High in New York City, considered to be one of the best in the U.S. Stuyvesant is a public school, but children must pass a rigorous entrance exam to get in. Only about 3 percent do so, which makes admission to the high school tougher than to Harvard. It follows the lives of several students and teachers over the year, providing insight the pressures faced by students at an "elite" institution. I thought it was very well done.

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## **Ellyn says**

The author spends a year at his alma mater, Stuyvesant High School in New York City, an ultracompetitive school for gifted kids that accepts only 3% of applicants based on an exam. The book is an accounting of the author's experience and of the students and teachers that he comes to know along the way. The book does a good job painting the good and bad parts of a high school such as Stuyvesant: it provides an incredible learning environment and foster remarkable achievement, but it's also an intense and high pressure place with a cheating problem and limited diversity. (More than half of the students are Asian and about 40% are white. Many are children of immigrants and come from lower income families.) I agree with other reviewers in that I wish the author had explored some of these issues in more depth. He did choose a unique array of students to profile, and I enjoyed the snapshot of what life is like for each of them. The book dragged a little bit in the middle but picked up towards the end as I become anxious to see how things worked out for each of the profiled students and teachers. Ultimately, I'm not sure that I can support public schools such as this one that separate out all of the gifted kids, but it was an interesting read just the same.

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## **Erik says**

I'm an alum from roughly the time of the author, so we went to Old Stuy on 15th Street instead of the new super mod building, which I recently visited and which is featured here. What never changes is the teachers and their dedication. It's a special place, even if the stress and push to succeed is a little like OCD. I place the blame squarely on the parents for this, a theme which Klein could have addressed a little better. He is very non-judgmental, almost like a camera, and the format is a little too MTV real world or faux documentary style. He did choose interesting kids to follow however, especially Jane the heroin addict, who represents the

dark side of Stuy, making her by far the most interesting person.

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## **Stuart Nachbar says**

*A Class Apart* is about a year in the life of New York's Stuyvesant High School, one of the most competitive and academically successful secondary schools in the country. The author is an alumnus; sometimes he appears more in awe of the school and students than a non-alumnus might be.

Since its founding in 1904, Stuyvesant High School has along with its sister school, the Bronx High School of Science, stayed true to admission by competitive entrance examination. Stuyvesant is more selective than any U.S. college or university; only three percent of applicants gain admission. Klein does an excellent job of explaining past challenges to the admissions process, including claims of elitism and race-bias in using testing as a selection criteria and he points out an example, a parent-funded Korean student academy, of how one group faced the challenge of the test.

Stuyvesant has a student community where practically everyone is an academic star, and its leadership shares governance of the school with the administration. But I was also reminded that Stuyvesant is a public school, subject to arcane bureaucratic policies, especially in teacher assignments and selection. It also helps that Stuyvesant is located within a city that has a wealth of cultural and intellectual resources; home, school and help are easily accessible by public transportation.

*A Class Apart* made me consider the worthiness of ultra-selective public high schools outside of New York, a city with over a century's experience with them. Within my home state of New Jersey, Newark has two such schools: University High and Science High, where students consistently demonstrate exemplary academic performance, despite lacking the resources, including a \$150 million campus, at Stuyvesant High.

I had to ask myself: should suburban school districts follow this lead, and create similarly selective high schools? My answer was yes, assuming that transportation issues could be resolved. The existence of such schools gives parents hope and the best students have incentive to perform well on an examination. They get no such thing from No Child Left Behind.

Three \ stars; the teacher/administrator stories are interesting, but the student stories seemed too similar to numerous other "year in the life of a high school" books.

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## **Peter says**

Good overview of Stuyvesant...was good for me to read to catch up with the latest at Stuy. I'd recommend it to alum. It gave me a flavor of what environment my son is going through. I'm not sure how non-alum would find the book, since it spends a good amount of time expounding on how great Stuyvesant was and is, and I wonder if that would be a turn-off. (it is a great school, I still have many fond memories...but devoting many pages to that theme felt excessive.)

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## **Maisha Miles says**

This book provides interesting insight into one of the best public high schools in the country. For one school year, the author follows students and administrators through the halls of the school and into their neighborhoods and homes. I was left wanting more, perhaps a more in-depth perspective of some of the challenges the students face other than whether or not they get a 95.6 or a 95.8 or if they get into Harvard. The students would mobilize when the administration would seek to implement policies that were perceived as invasive (metal detectors). However, I did not get the impression that their activism went beyond the school. The students self-segregate based on race/culture and of course grade (this is still a high school after all). I would have like to see how the student body approached the past election cycle. (Of course the book was written before that, but there were other political issues going on during that time period that could have been addressed.) Overall, this book was easy to read and the stories were interesting. My eyes did glaze over when they approached some of the history of the school. I skimmed those pages.

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## **Danielle says**

It was fun to read this book, just for the nostalgia. Lots of teachers I knew at Stuy were in the book, and I recognized what the students went through. This book highlights several exceptional Stuy students, and in other chapters discusses more general Stuy themes & issues, such as school politics, race, and Sing!. I found the writing a bit overdone, much like an ambitious high school student's college admission essay. It overreached, overdescribed. It came across as fake and hokey.

I liked the treatment of general issues & events much better than the descriptions of individual students. I guess I found some of the highlighted students unlikeable and disturbing, and not always that interesting. They were almost like caricatures.. though I liked the way Klein handled the 10-year old math prodigy and the Ukranian girl.

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## **Shinynickel says**

An interesting exploration of Stuyvesant in New York, one of the best high schools in the U.S. In order to be admitted, students must score incredibly high on a citywide test. The children who go here often attend prep school for years ahead of time to make the cutoff, and are subject to intense demands and expectations throughout their high school career.

It's a fascinating school, and the book was a light, easy read. But the author is a Stuy graduate, and his love for the school, rather than illuminating it, seems to coat it in a warm fuzzy glow. He picks interesting students and school administrators to follow, but unlike *And Still We Rise* by Miles Corwin, he uses a light hand with them, and with the context of the school itself. There is little sense of the intensity of the school, and the amount of pressure the students feel, though we are told often that they must deal with extreme amounts of it. There are some interesting things here, don't get me wrong, but overall it's a pretty fluffy read.

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## **Ebadur says**

lots of memories and reflections reading this book...

can a book ever be representative of all three thousands students and how many hundred teachers? I don't know.. Klein, an alumnus of Stuy from 1985, spends a year at Stuy to write this book. He gives a general sense of what's going on school-wide, but follows around a few particular students and teachers, focusing on their doings and feelings.

It was a nice read. Nostalgic.

The particular students are Romeo, a 97.5 average football team captain non stop hardworking student aspiring to Harvard; Mariya who's family comes from the Ukraine and her mother's constant pressure on her and her studies; Jane, a senior struggling with drug addiction who sort of lives for Mr. Grossman's Great Books class and Milo, a ten year old prodigy taking advanced math classes at Stuy after leaving his fifth grade class..!

Teachers have lives of their own, their own drama. This book focuses on Mr. Teitel, Ms. Damesek, Mr. Jaye, Mr. Grossman, Mr. Polazzo, a student teacher Ms. Lee and Mr. Siwanowicz, a math genius who has to serve as a school aide..

SING, metal detectors, the student government, college night, graduation are some of the events covered.

I enjoyed reading it..

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## **Ms. G says**

Took a break mid-stream--was getting repetitive. Glad I returned to finish. In theory, I am not a fan "screened schools" or elitist schools, such as Stuyvesant --think a mix is always better -- but after reading I must admit I see the value of having high performers in one school--some of these kids were really impressing. Of course, the author, an alum, presented the schools mostly in a positive light, didn't reflect on the downside.

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## **Jared says**

This is a really cool book about the people and places that go on stuyvesant from 12 year old child prodigies to drug addicted geniuses this book explores the craziness that is the hardest high school to get in to in New York. The lore that many outsiders don't get to know the author gets in to the stuyvesant tradition. So many different people and personalities in this humongous school all sharing one thing in common smartness. Great book would should suggest to the world.

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