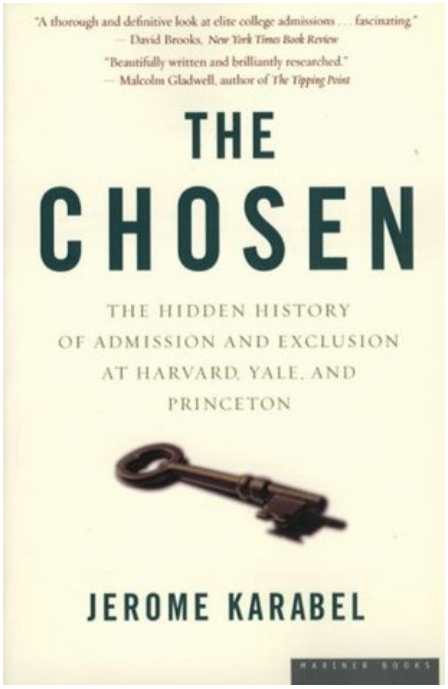

The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton

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A landmark work of social and cultural history, *The Chosen* vividly reveals the changing dynamics of power and privilege in America over the past century. Full of colorful characters (including Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, James Bryant Conant, and Kingman Brewster), it shows how the ferocious battles over admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton shaped the American elite and bequeathed to us the peculiar system of college admissions that we have today.

From the bitter anti-Semitism of the 1920s to the rise of the “meritocracy" at midcentury to the debate over affirmative action today, Jerome Karabel sheds surprising new light on the main events and social movements of the twentieth century. No one who reads this remarkable book will ever think about college admissions -- or America -- in the same way again.

The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton Details

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From Reader Review The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton for online ebook

Kyle says

Elite colleges are no different than any other status seeking organization. They do what's necessary to gain/preserve power using the currency of prestige. Contrary to what I was led to believe as a kid, only about 15% of incoming freshman at the Big Three are selected on the basis of academic achievement. Their explicit goal is to select the future political, social and economic leaders of the U.S. The author reveals that this is accomplished by utilizing a definition of "merit" that has evolved to consider things like specific personality traits, legacy status, race and athletic ability pretty much equally as important as one's academic profile.

The book was not very exciting and quite repetitive, but in retrospect very enlightening. It's one of those works that unveil an institution heavily shrouded in prestige so that you can see how things really work. It probably could have been done in half the length though.

SallyStenger says

I have just started it and am about 50 pages into it. My initial reaction is that I'm not sure it was a good decision to read this. It is very ponderous reading. The author keep talking about elite people who are chosen based on things other than merit and yet is very vague about what he means by that - doesn't describe exactly what he means by lack of merit and give specific examples. However as I get into it more perhaps it will improve. He has now begun examining education at Princeton, Harvard, and Yale (which he says will be the focus of his book) beginning about 1900. He has some interesting comments about the educational philosophies of the various college presidents and apparently is going to provide comment and critique on how they work out so I hope the book will improve.
July 28 - this is a long, long book. I have been reading it for over a month and am now at about page 400. The book goes over the colleges' use of quotas for Jews and quotes some anti-Semitic remarks on the part of college presidents and others. It continued through the period when women were admitted and is now going over the Bakke case. It has some interesting comments but is rather hard to get through.
August 7 - finally finished reading it - now I have to decide whether I want to read the 100 pages of footnotes.
-I started reading the footnotes but was unable to finish before the book was due. I renewed it twice and that's the limit. The footnotes were pretty interesting.

Mark Foskey says

Sometimes the right kind of view of a small part of something can illuminate the rest. This magisterial history of admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton is also a history of class in America, the concept and implementation of meritocracy, ethnic divisions, educational thought, and probably more things I haven't thought of. It's especially appealing for Big Three alumni, but it's worth reading if you are interested in any

of those things. I try to give 5 stars sparingly, but this book deserves them.

MacK says

In *The Chosen* Jerome Karabel has compiled a comprehensive and riveting account of the hidden causes for American education as we know it today. Why do we have to write essays? Why is the SAT so important? Why do you always feel like a poodle on display throughout interviews in musty admissions offices? Because Harvard, Yale and Princeton did it...that's why.

Questions about access to education, the value of education and the quest to retain the power of those who had already received their education come through in page after page of well woven history. The characters are dynamic engaging figures and the events can be, at times, shocking.

Unfortunately, there's a lot of events, and a lot of characters. And if you're reading this book in addition to several hundred other pages of literary theory throughout your graduate school career you're really not going to pick up the book with real enthusiasm at the end of the night. It had to go back to the library, and sad as I was to not finish it, I feel that it is worth reading, no matter how much you read of it.

Heather says

A 560-page history (not including several hundred pages of footnotes) of the admissions process of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, starting with the early 20th century. It is really a study of sociology in the US, and how views have changed regarding race, religion, gender, and other differentiators. It also explains how we ended up with the existing admissions process of those schools, and subsequently all American colleges and universities in general. This book covers anti-Semitism, sexism, the shortcomings of the GI Bill post-WW II, the Civil Rights movement and affirmative action, the decline of the east coast private schools and the traditional WASP upper class, how immigration demographics changed the make-up of the entering classes, etc. However, the crux of the book doesn't come until the end...that regardless of how people are categorized, the ones that are increasingly less represented at these schools are poor people. In other words, although the schools may admit a percentage of minorities, there is substantial evidence that the most underrepresented group are those that are socioeconomically deprived. The schools completely lack any kind of class diversity. Another major point is whether the schools should admit those that are representative of the existing leaders in society (by race, wealth, etc) or to strategize who are the future leaders. The book also shows that over the hundred+ years highlighted, there is still overwhelming preference for legacies (ie, keep the alumni happy so that they continue to give money to the school), athletes, and defined minorities. If you do not fall into at least one of those three categories, you will have a much more difficult time getting into college. Also, there is still strong preference for the "paying customers" (students not needing financial aid).

As a point of reference, I looked up the schools of a few Ivy alumni to get a feel for how these schools were when they were there. Here's a few that I found on Wikipedia (the Cheny ref was in the book)...

Barack Obama - Columbia (tranfer) '83, Harvard Law '91
Hillary Clinton - Wellesley '69, Yale Law '73
Bill Clinton - Georgetown '68, Yale Law '73
George Bush (Jr) - Yale '68, Harvard MBA ??? (daddy went to Yale and was a superstar academically, as

well as sports and "leadership")
Cheney - got into Yale via nepotism, kicked out freshman year for poor grades

So, I have a few complaints about what the book doesn't cover. Although there is brief discussion about the increase in the number of students seeking financial aid, there is absolutely no discussion about how that is increasingly less linked to the affluence of the parents (ie, rich families that make their kids pay for their own education). As someone that has done college scholarship interviews, this is increasingly a major issue. There is also little discussion about the increase of tuition over time, and how the cost at these three schools compares to non-Ivy or other Ivy schools. I was also disappointed at the complete lack of discussion of the changing demographics in graduate schools, because what is happening at the undergraduate level is substantially different than at the graduate level.

And, as a woman, I was definitely pissed off about why those schools started admitting women. They literally used women as a recruitment tool. In other words, the initial reason why women got in the door was to prevent men from going to other schools that were co-ed.

This is a remarkable book, and although it took me an unusually long time to read it, I really enjoyed it.

Carl says

One of the best sources of cocktail-party conversation you may ever encounter (assuming that your fellow partygoers are interested in college, social class, history, sociology, racism or anti-Semitism or sexism, or the American ideal of meritocracy), this long, long book is entirely worth the effort.

Some key moments, in a litany of fascinating and often horrifying ones:

Princeton: The Princeton Director of Admissions in 1939 pulled an African-American kid out of the registration line to tell him not to enroll, for his own good (so argued the director, insisting that he was not racist) (239). With that "accidentally admitted" African-American successfully excluded, Princeton continued its lily-white run: not a single African-American enrolled there in the 20th century until 1945...and even into the '50s, there were several Princeton classes with zero African-American students. That's zero.
Yale: All of NY's, Chicago's, and Philadelphia's public schools together sent a total of 13 students to Yale in 1930, while the exclusive private school St. Paul's sent 24 that year...out of a graduating class of 68 (118). The massive and excellent Bronx High School of Science enrolled 7 of its grads at Yale during the era 1950-54...while Andover sent 275 during that same timeframe (211).
Harvard: Under President Lowell in particular, Harvard was so confident in their presumption that it was appropriate to limit the number of Jews that Lowell presented his quota ideas more or less publically. Yale and Princeton were more circumspect, and ended up limiting the number of Jews more successfully, lacking a backlash, but even Lowell was able to cut the percentage of Jews almost in half from 1925 to 1933 (197). Admissions men and administrators tended to use the word "neurotic" or "disgruntled" as code to describe the Jewish student.

It's a story of prejudice, anti-intellectualism, clubbishness, and unacknowledged privilege -- or rather, privilege disguised as divine right instead of perceived properly as the result of systemic bias. And yet Karabel sources so thoroughly (the hundred pages of end-notes are also full of gems) and covers his topics so broadly and with such academic rigor, this never comes off as polemical. Yes, I'm a Harvard grad, and one who believes that legacies (and athletes) receive much more advantage in admissions than they should --

sorry, My Two Children -- and I loved seeing the embarrassing secrets topple out of the secret files.

It's more properly a story about America, and how we as a nation love our self-mythologization even as we become blind to the fictional and hypocritical elements of it. The colleges' tasks were and are hard, and the stakes were and are high in both practical and symbolic ways; it is Karabel's greatest success that we readers don't despise these schools overall, despite their many crimes against equality, liberty, and fraternity...wait, wrong country. Not far off as a concept, though.

Especially rich topics that the sociologist author mines expertly include the development of co-education in the late '60s and early '70s, the conversion of affirmative action from a set of policies that favored legacies and private school boys to those that favored historically-underrepresented minorities over a very brief and tumultuous period, the quest for "yield", and the power of alumni.

Some of the little moments dinged around in my head for a long time: did you know that the SAT was in use for decades before students were ever allowed to see their own scores, which didn't happen until 1958? (266) That all three of these schools seemed to have a pathological disinclination for valedictorians -- although many were admitted, too -- with bigshots calling them "greasy grinds" who often cared about grades only and "lacked passion" while also being "afraid of life"? (284).

Perhaps most prominent among Karabel's theses is the surprising one that "merit", that term so blithely bandied about nowadays by conservative critics of affirmative action, was initially instituted as the non-academic "diversity criteria" that favored legacies who had private school pedigrees. Diversity *was* what legacies contributed! Knock me over with a feather. Well, that sure explains why as late as 1946, 82% of alumni sons were admitted to Princeton while during that home's GI Bill wave, admission was offered to only 38% of veterans who had academic abilities that met the school's criteria (239). Harvard and Yale had similar admission percentages. Membership has its privileges.

Because I can't keep myself from saying this, I have to add my two negative/skeptical comments to what is an otherwise unreserved rave for Karabel's book:
1) Style-wise, he falls into the very common expository rut of overusing periodic sentences -- often, he constructs a paragraph that lacks variety, with four or five consecutive compound-complex sentences, each beginning with a participial phrase. Ugh. At least his writing is clear.
2) I was very curious that Karabel did *not* mention the University of California system and Ward Connerly in his rich discussion of the history of conflict over affirmative action. Karabel is a professor at Cal-Berkeley.

A third thing, which I can gloss over more easily, was the amount of repetition. Many statistics, quotations, and other references were repeated several times -- almost as if it were a hedge against the likelihood that readers would dive into only one segment of the book, and leave the rest untouched. It can be overwhelming, true. But there's a bigger structural issue here as well: in his persistence to shuttle among all three of the Big Three, the author successfully cross-links as necessary...and then repeats when he gets to the section dedicated to the linkee. As I say, I can gloss this because I like the persistence in giving all Three their fair share of attention, but it did get irritating at times.

Any quibble I have with Karabel's style or structure or editing is dwarfed by the irritation engendered by the practices revealed in this mesmerizing history. And yet, it is clear that his non-polemical, thoroughly academic approach recognizes when they mean well and yet are overwhelmed by realpolitik. If we laypeople look at college admissions today and smirk, "If only they listened to me, this could be easily fixed," we're being wildly naive. The task is both crucial and excruciatingly difficult, in ways that Karabel's readers will much, much more thoroughly appreciate.

Ryan says

The Chosen looks at the 'Big Three' (Harvard, Yale, and Princeton) and the admissions process for the respective institutions. The most interesting aspect of the book is how each of the universities have adapted and changed due to the social expectations of the general US populous. Beginning as institutions for White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants (WASPs) with priority given almost exclusively to private preparatory boarding schools, the social changes begin to take off while looking at the various leaders of the colleges as the primary focus for change. It was very eye opening to learn about the extremely anti-Semitic guidelines of admissions in the 1920s up through World War II. Also covered is the racism towards all minorities, prejudice towards women, the battle over Affirmative Action, and the adoption of need, sex, and race-blind admissions policies. The major flaw that I found was the constant use of various names of individuals from various institutions that were randomly and briefly covered. It became very difficult to keep track of who was at which university and what their particular view points and contributions were. Overall, this book was a very dense, but interesting read.

Tara Brabazon says

This is a remarkable book. Karabel investigates how and why Harvard, Yale and Princeton "have always been heavily overrepresented in the American elite." The word 'access' - particularly in the context of debates about 'widening access' - is controversal and complex. Karabel gives a history to these debates, probing the nature of 'merit' through university selection processes. He probes the many definitions of merit since 1900, with particular attention to the distinctions between merit and meritocracy.

This is an outstanding book that shows how - even with good intentions - the structures of inequality are pepetuated through university admission processes.

Daeny Pineda says

I've learned so much about the college process from this book. It's an extremely comprehensive text on the development of the admissions process as we know it, complete with reflections on how "meritocracy" functions.
Also, it gave someone an inferiority complex about his level of intellectual curiosity, so I'm living.

Caroline says

If this book had been 50% shorter with all the same content, then I probably would have given it 4 stars. The idea is really interesting, but the presentation unnecessarily long and convoluted. There would be 3 or more chapters covering the same time period from different perspectives, usually at least one for each school, and there was huge overlap that was not really remarked upon other than to repeat the same contextual occurrences over and over again. Even when the schools actions were heavily intertwined, for example with

Yale and Princeton deciding to go coed, they were presented individually and thus the facts were basically repeated twice. Maybe I am being mean to give it two stars but the structure not only made the book way longer than it needed to be, but was also confusing.

Petra Eggs says

"It is no exaggeration to say that the current regime in elite college admissions has been far more successful in democratizing anxiety than opportunity."

It's hardest to get in to these universities if you are a totally brilliant middle class white kid unless you are a really rich WASP (of course) as they have diversity quotas to fill. Race being the great American obsession (and often confused with religion) being Jewish can be a minus point as they are over-represented according to some recruiters, this also is beginning to apply to Asians especially those whose family hailed from the Indian subcontinent. It's easier if you are from a really poor and so can be the recipient of a major scholarship, ethnic and disabled, or are a top notch athlete as all these groups contribute to the 'scores' of the universities in being good, all-round representative places. Even if they aren't really. It's easier still if you are Native American or are of other under-represented ethnic minorities even if you don't meet the academic standard. The is positive action. Maybe it will work, or maybe given the rigorous academic standards of the Ivy League schools, they will just fail to keep up. The universities do not have to publicise figures of drop-outs and the areas of society they came from.

If you happen to be at least part Carib Indian, brought up in the islands, a pretty damn good athlete and have American nationality by accident of birth, and even dyslexic (adds points!) you will be considered an absolute prize to the Ivy Leagues seeking to show their diversity. So my Scottish friend's daughter has her pick of the big three when when she graduates from school. But she wants to go to Aberystwyth, in Wales, because her girlfriend is there. Will head win over heart? I doubt it, whose does at 18?

No system is free of bias and without doubt these schools deliberately select for rich white kids, especially the children or relatives of alumni, politicians and notables and the very wealthy who might endow, donate or leave money in a will to them.

A customer of mine is the granddaughter of one of the richest women in the world (she lives locally). She left school at 15 to pursue a career in riding, but that failed and now at 18 she wants to be a vet. She says her problem is that she wouldn't ever be able to do the exams but is ok at assignments and essays. I asked her how she would get into a university and she waved her hand at me vaguely, oh grandma would fix things, maybe give a library or something she joked, being quite self-aware. I hear she started in Glasgow university a couple of weeks ago.

But at least they have sizeable minorities of kids from normal backgrounds these days. Maybe one day selection will be done by computers on grades and various other attributes like social contributions, athleticism, talents and ambitions and have nothing whatsoever to do with the parents' background whether ethnic, religious or economic. One can but hope. After all, who knows where the next great genius or inventor or person that inspires us all will come from? Everyone deserves a chance.

Read 1/1/2005

Tressie Mcphd says

Meticulous historical account of how exclusive Universities developed discretionary admissions policies to, first, restrict the merit-based entry of ethnic Jews. They discovered that this discretionary power suited the needs of the administrators. Unlike merit based admissions exams for which "undesirables" can theoretically study, discretion allows universities to change the admissions criteria and, most importantly, to obscure how they make admissions decisions. These elite Unis use that power to protect their role in the reproduction of power. They concede marginally, as in the case of admitting black students, only when the political and social pressure to do so demands it. Even then those changes are marginal, controlled and constantly renegotiated. If you want to figure out how it is that almost every President of the United States as gone to these three schools, this is a good place to understand the importance of privileged institutions to the social structure. Be warned, it's a history book. It's dense and long but well-researched and worth it.

Jackie says

My spouse finally finished reading aloud this epic examination of the admissions policies and practices of the top three Ivies during the past century. A fascinating (and appalling) examination of how the anti-semitism of the administrations of each college shaped many of the admissions policies we take for granted today (too many smart Jewish boys were applying in the early decades of the century; to keep their numbers down, the colleges started adding interviews, SAT scores, extracurricular activities, and recommendation letters to the admissions mix). Heartening, though, to read about the movements in the 60s and 70s to protest racial exclusions (esp. at our alma mater, Yale). Although disheartening to see how pushback from alumni in the 80s and 90s undercut many of the more radical changes of mid-century. The final chapter was particularly interesting; I didn't know that the man who coined the term "meritocracy" thought of it as a dystopian rather than a liberating construct, in large part because those at the top of the privilege heap get to define what "merit" is. Merit currently includes not only academic achievement, but being a child of an alum; having athletic abilities that have little to do with academic potential; and, after a long and difficult struggle, being a member of an American racial minority. As the author notes, working class kids are the ones who are currently the least likely to benefit from the current admissions system.

Far too many statistics make this book about 2/3 longer than it needs to be. But anyone interested about race, class, and "merit" play into the admissions game should find this worth the slog (or should check out the recent New Yorker article that summarizes many of Karabel's findings).

Will says

This book should be required reading for anyone in the college admission field, whether a college admission officer or a college counselor on the high school side. (I think college presidents should read it, too.) It's an eye-opener in every way, turning over the rocks of the Big Three's admission practices to discover the maggots and worms beneath. Karabel's history is meticulous and well-presented. Anyone who thinks there was once a golden age of college admission where "merit" was the only defining factor should read this book.

Reading some of the letters where those in charge of admission discuss "grinds" and "undesirables" or even wish that Armenian genocide had been more effective is enough to give you chills. And of course, like any

good history, it gives you some perspective on the way today's college admission system operates.

I've been thinking about this book since the recent controversies over buildings and schools at these institutions named for Woodrow Wilson, Calhoun, and others who were racists--perhaps, given the racist pasts of the institutions themselves, they should change their own names. (Not gonna happen, I know, but no one is pure.)

A terrific book I keep close at hand.

Nathaniel says

This is a very, very, very long history of the admission policies of the "Big Three" Ivy League schools. Karabel did a respectable amount of digging into the archives of these schools and certainly deserves credit for his research. Much of the correspondence he unearthed had never been looked at by anyone from the outside world before, and his reproductions of parts of those works here deserves praise. The overall theme of so much of our country's public policy having been shaped by institutions that at their core are mainly country clubs to provide networking opportunities for rich peoples' children is also trenchant, and probably the most interesting of Karabel's many threads - especially when he's talking about the relationship between the top Ivies and very public, historically important families such as the Roosevelts.

However, this book is still not as interesting as it should be, mostly because Karabel is a much better researcher than he is a writer. His tone is just pedantic enough to be soporific if read for long periods of time, and though the book is very long each paragraph by itself conveys very little information. On top of this, Karabel also frequently gets off-topic explaining contextual US history of the time in excruciating detail, and using way more examples than are necessary or prudent (do we really need several pages of primary sources quoted in detail to establish that America in the 1920's hated Jews, when half that amount gets the point across?). He also seems to feel the need to explain for pages the entire background of every person who bore even a trivial bit of responsibility for setting admissions policy at these institutions, which makes it easy for the reader to get buried in names. The presentation of facts can be disorienting, and often jumps around in history several times in the same chapter, e.g. by saying "Charles Eliot would be opposing Lowell past the age of ninety" in one place, "Charles Eliot died at age 92" in another, and "Charles Eliot opposed Lowell at the age of ninety" in a third. Karabel also assumes familiarity with important personages that even a well-educated reader outside of a particular discipline may not be familiar with (e.g. Felix Frankfurter), and often repeats major points from chapter to chapter without reference to having made them before. For all these reasons and more, his writing can only be described as very inefficient, which makes getting the pertinent facts out of this book much more tedious than it needed to be.

It's a shame, because the level of research here is first-rate, and could've made a really good read with a better writer (because it's both unfair and unrealistic to ask a modern editor to fix a work of this length). Unfortunately, there's so much unnecessary air in Karabel's writing that this book really could've been 40% shorter and still conveyed the same information more effectively. For that reason, it's not really something I can recommend unless you're really, really, REALLY interested in the subject matter and patient enough to extract the pertinent details from the incredibly vast but very shallow sea of information presented here.
