



Should I Go to Grad School?: 41 Answers to An Impossible Question

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The decision to attend graduate school is easy for future doctors and lawyers: they must have a professional degree to get started. But for young creative workers, aspiring artists, and intellectuals, grad school is an existential fork in the road. An M.F.A. or a humanities Ph.D. can give you time to invest in studying something you love among like-minded intellectuals and qualify you to teach a new generation of students; but it can also uproot you geographically, expose you to backstabbing competitors, and saddle you with debt. Given the current job market, is grad school really worth it—financially, professionally, and emotionally?

In *Should I Go to Grad School?*, a wide range of people who lead intellectually and creatively interesting lives—sculptors and philosophers, activists and poets, a cocktail designer and a movie star—tell their own stories about choosing to go to grad school—or steering clear—and what that decision has meant in their lives. They give us an inside look at what grad school today is really like, and share the wisdom they wish they could have had going in. They reflect on their divergent paths to success, and muse about the path not taken.

With contributors including David Orr, James Franco, Simon Critchley, Terry Castle, Sheila Heti, and many more, *Should I Go to Grad School?* is a must read for anyone seriously considering that titular question.

Should I Go to Grad School?: 41 Answers to An Impossible Question Details

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From Reader Review Should I Go to Grad School?: 41 Answers to An Impossible Question for online ebook

Chelsea says

The original reason I ILL-ed this book was because I wanted it to help me struggle less with my decision about whether to pursue my master's of library science. Despite the ambivalent coaxing of some professors as my class finished our senior projects in undergrad college, I was pretty sure an MFA was not right for me, definitely not then, maybe not ever.

This book hardly addressed my first struggle, because its real focus is on strictly creative degrees whose credentials are necessary only for joining academia (no matter how important the experience becomes). Library science degrees are much more in the group which these essays neatly dodge: it belongs with law and mathematics and the hard sciences, despite seeming like a softer alternative. It is research and profession-based, and my credentials from the program would open up many worlds beyond academia, so the essays here really aren't as helpful. There's a more solid reason to attend for library science than for writing.

That said, I'm so so so glad I read the book. The essays were utterly engaging, amusing, depressing, and intelligent. For one thing, it allowed me to realize that I really could see myself pursuing an MFA later in life (should money and circumstances provide for me to do so more comfortably) because the workshop and focused time aspects really appeal to me, and could be a breakthrough that I need to undergo later.

For another, the utterly depressing descriptive landscape of academic jobs presented here made me feel better about the landscape for putting an MLIS to work (since there are three other spheres with major positions for such graduates), and served as a cautionary tale for me should I still choose to work my way into an academic library at the college level. Many of those librarians are professors, which would suggest that more time would be spent in the endlessly specialized research and faculty politics region than on the library work that I want to do.

All around an engaging group of essays, though with the definite caveat that this book will be flat out unhelpful for some readers considering graduate school. Several essays which expound on the future of graduate students within academia note that the experience of minor adjunct professors in the creative fields likely overlaps with that of science grads caught in the lowest echelons of labs, that sort of thing. But there are many students who may be unsure about continuing down the grad school path in one field or another, and unless they also share a love of English, they likely won't get their answers here.

Kelly Lynn Thomas says

A more apt title for this book would be "Should I Go to Grad School for the Humanities?" because that's all it covers. And that's fine, it's okay for what it is, but I found the tone to be rather dismissive toward non-humanities fields. "It's easy to go to grad school for lawyers and doctors!" But is it? Since the recession, almost every field has become bloated with talent and short on jobs. You could drop \$400k on a law degree and never make partner in a firm because no one wants to retire, because their savings took a mega hit in 2008.

So, if you're thinking about getting an MFA or a PhD in English lit, read this book. But if you're thinking

about a science degree or a degree in social work, etc., look elsewhere.

Zach says

This was actually a pretty enjoyable book to read, with tons of good, general advice and a lot of honesty and humor. The voices were sufficiently diverse, and the opinions offered really ranged the whole scale from "you should do it!" to "take the money and run." (The latter being the suggestion of Nikil Saval.) The book reminded me a lot of some of the things n+1 has published recently (e.g. *MFA vs. NYC* and *No Regrets: Three Discussions*), and I realized halfway through that a number of the names involved in this book were indeed people involved there as well. No surprise.

I'm considering graduate school in the humanities, so this book was absolutely written with me in mind. Some of the main takeaways were:

- Go back to school with a clear intention, and hold fast to it (Josh Boldt)
- "[B]e sure of the questions that you are willing to pursue forever, and to determine the best ways and institutions that will allow you to do so." (Eben Klemm)
- Don't go unless they pay for it (pretty much everyone)
- Remember that you're a laborer (Saval, again)
- Think of what you're willing to give up to do this (Amy O'Leary)

Though there are the necessary voices telling about how "we're in the endgame" (Terry Castle), which I can totally believe, I was also heartened by the number of people saying that for a certain type of person, not going is worse than going. And that so long as you go in with eyes wide open, with contingency plans and low expectations of what precisely your future will look like, and a clear exit route if needed, you have one of the best opportunities in your life to simply apply your heart and mind to some enduring questions that interest you. This is a gift, and if you can accept it graciously and without selling your soul, it may just be worth taking.

A final note — I just... don't get the James Franco chapter. I would love for someone to tell me why it's there. (Is it a joke? I don't understand.)

Thanks to the editors for putting this collection together!

Kristen says

In theory, a good topic to explore. A few of the stories resonated with my own questions on if grad school is the right course for me or not. However, these were personal testaments less than answers - not to say they were not enjoyable, simply that they opened up more 'what if's. There was also a bias towards fine art writers and poets, and I related less to the anthology as a result.

Rachel G. says

I still don't know if I want to go to grad school, but this book made me want to go less.

Melody says

This is a really great collection of stories and ultimately an invaluable book. Whenever I Googled 'Reasons To Go To Grad School' or, alternatively, 'Reasons NOT To Go To Grad School' I was looking for sentiments and personal essays like these. It is an impossible question, but the people writing about their experiences for this book answer it eloquently and in a variety of ways that make the decision seem a little less impossible.

Some of the stories are eye-roll inducing mini-memoirs of privilege and youthful ignorance. I didn't make it all the way through the really pretentious ones that you could just tell were written by people with money or upper class backgrounds (or parents!) to support them. However for every somewhat pretentious chapter written by an annoying person, there are two chapters written by people who actually have important and meaningful things to say about this. Even James Franco's very matter-of-fact style chapter ended on an interesting and inspirational note.

The varied life experiences from normal folks are what makes this book worth reading. You get a little bit of everything. Some went to grad school and are glad they did, some went and regret it, some didn't go and are glad they didn't, some went and are still palpably unsure if it was the right choice, some went and didn't finish and have a lot to say about why, some never even applied and give very compelling reasons why you shouldn't either.

I love the wide range of personal stories (and how a surprisingly large number of them include some element of journalism or a chance encounter with a journalist). Some acknowledge and attribute their success to luck and not their own inherent greatness. Some are so self-aware that they're able to see the myriad of personal problems that led them to making regrettable decisions. Almost everyone is interesting and gives many reasons why they did grad school or ignored it completely. Mental health, debt, disappointment, doubt and more are all discussed in great detail in numerous chapters. It's fascinating and not just because I've been grappling with the question myself. No two people took the same path into or out of the grad school trap. It both confirms and opposes my biggest fears, questions, and concerns.

I recommend this though because after reading these stories, I came away with a better idea of what I wanted to do. I think that's why the book was written.

Linda says

<http://treviansbookit.blogspot.com/20...>

James Payne says

This was great, I got a lot out of it. The selected writers were current and relevant - bounced into a few of them just being in New York for a few days, and many others have been on my periphery in the last year. Didn't know, but somehow always knew, that Simon Critchley was a punk.

Meagan says

I picked this up in Boulder while in town for a programming conference.

I am still applying to one program, I think.

Maybe.

Audrey says

More interesting than I had expected. Truthful reality of higher ed, and what I would call, a bonus chapter from James Franco.

Nicholas Aune says

A collection of individual stories on whether or not someone attended grad school and how their decision affected their career and whether or not it was a good idea. Most stories also contain advice on what to look for in a grad school.

Phil Kwon says

I received this through a giveaway program by Goodreads. This is a collection of sincere stories from those who are involved in the field of "art," or rather creative studies. I found this quite encouraging and would recommend. I have to say that I am not involved in that field of study thou.

Aliosha Bielenberg says

3.5

Very quick, flowing, and eminently readable -- it was a good choice to procrastinate with during finals. I really appreciated that there were no simple answers. As other reviewers have noted, the authors all reflected on various parts of their life and how grad school did or did not affect it. Overall, an excellent book to think with.

Rebecca says

Graduate studies in the arts and humanities – who'd be fool enough to ever undertake such a thing? (Me, for one.) This book is an appropriately balanced blend of cautionary tales and love stories; everyone from sixth-

grade dropout Dale Stephens to actor James Franco has two cents to throw in. Although I didn't find it compelling enough to read from cover to cover, it was an entertaining one to skim, with a few particularly valuable essays.

Degree inflation means that whereas, only a few decades ago, an undergraduate degree might have seemed remarkable, now it can feel like a master's or even a PhD can be the only way to stand out from the job-hunting crowd. When Maggie Nelson graduated from college in 1994, graduate school never occurred to her; she believes she's of the last generation for whom that was the case. Now, by contrast, a higher degree is almost *de rigueur* in some circles. But is grad school just a means of stalling, delaying the inevitable onslaught of adulthood? Is it merely a last resort for those who have run out of other ideas?

An interview with Terry Castle, who has taught literature at Stanford for over 30 years, is especially dispiriting. She goes so far as to pronounce that graduate study in literature is now "unwise," unless one has private income. (Indeed, several authors echo that perhaps you should only go if it's free, or if you are in fact being paid to study.) There are plenty of other warnings here, though none quite so frank. Sara Marcus advises readers to take time out after college, and only return for graduate school bearing a very strong idea or a question that must be answered. Stephen Burt says graduate students must prepare themselves for teaching, or for writing very specialized textbooks. While many people go to graduate school to give their lives structure, Sheila Heti counters that a book project can fill the same function.

Some of the pieces only touch on grad school peripherally, and read more like mini-memoirs, such as opera composer Jake Heggie's story of admitting to his wife that he was gay. My two favorites were Ecuadorian writer Meehan Crist's account of researching traumatic brain injuries, a field she might never have entered without the prompting of her nonfiction MA program; and Ben Nugent's likening of his Iowa MFA experience to the work of the Russian masters – a retreat into monomania and nineteenth-century rural penury.

Of the rest, the best essays are the ones with an inventive structure: Burt's is a "choose-your-own-adventure"-style flowchart in text form; Namwali Serpell's is a point-by-point treatise (1, 1.1, 1.11, etc.), and Lucy Ives's is a lecture addressed to fellow writers.

As a longtime fan, ever since the first episode of *Freaks and Geeks*, I was eager to read what James Franco had to say in his article. Alas, as I've found with any of his published writing I've tried so far (e.g. Palo Alto), it was something of a disappointment. He has dabbled in many fields of graduate study, completing six separate years at six different institutions, and has taught film studies at UCLA and elsewhere. "I wanted to treat my other interests with as much seriousness as I did my acting," he writes. But he doesn't offer any advice that will be useful to anyone other than self-funded dilettantes.

I wish this book had been around a decade ago when I was figuring out what to do after college. I could have saved myself a lot of debt and disillusionment if I hadn't continued on to an MA program that has proved useless in terms of my future career development. I enjoyed studying Victorian literature in Leeds for a year, but it was a trying time in other respects and didn't provide me with any skills or experience that I've been able to apply since then. Yet, as John Quijada cautions, "One should not try to second-guess the past." There's no telling who I would be now if I hadn't spent that year at graduate school.

Kressel Housman says

As some of you may realize, the flavor of my mid-life crisis is academic. Other women may try to relive their youth by dressing like teenagers again, but all I want is a chance to redo college. I messed it up pretty badly the first time around, and I know I could do better now. I've even got an idea for a thesis. (See my review of *Daniel Deronda*.) But I don't see how I could possibly quit my job, and even if the ultimate aim is to switch to a career in academia, even before I read this book, I'd heard nightmarish stories about perpetual adjuncting with no job security or health insurance. Could I really be better off in my unintellectual office job? What about my untapped potential? I bought this book to find out if there's any possible way to turn my grad school dreams into a practical reality.

Unfortunately, the answer seems to be "probably not." Of the 41 contributors to this book, the majority said grad school is overpriced and that there are plenty of ways to live "the life of the mind" without it. Even the ones who touted the plus sides of grad school - mostly making valuable connections, personally and professionally - had a caveat to their "yes" answer: "Don't go into debt for it." That means if I'm ever going to make a go of this, I have lots of research to do to find some kind of teaching fellowship or other grant. It sure ain't happening tomorrow.

The target audience of this book are recent college grads who aren't sure what to do with their lives, not middle-aged moms like me. Because of that, much of the advice didn't apply, but some of it was spot-on. One person said, "If you've got one book in you (I'm looking at you, memoirists), don't go to grad school." Another person, himself a grad school drop-out, said you don't need grad school to live the life of the mind because, "There's this thing called reading." Thanks to Goodreads, there's a thing called sharing what you read, too, and it isn't with classmates who view you as a competitor.

My favorite essay, though, was from a man who loved linguistics but landed a secure civil service job, so he never went to grad school. He studied and wrote about linguistics as a hobby. When he published some of his work online, he was invited to participate in an academic conference in Europe. He said it was a taste of the life he did not choose, and he had no regrets. So sometimes, it really is possible to remain in "the real world" and still fulfill your creative dreams. May it be so for all of us.

If you're considering grad school in the humanities, this is a must-read. It cost me only \$5, and it may have been the wisest purchase I ever made. It may just have saved me tens of thousands of dollars in debt.
