



Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges—and Find Themselves

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An engrossing profile of an extraordinary guidance counselor who helps kids get into the right colleges through focusing on self-awareness

Gwyeth Smith, known as Smitty, is a nationally renowned guidance counselor who believes that getting into college should be a kid's first great moment of self-discovery. In *Acceptance*, David L. Marcus, Pulitzer Prize-winning former education writer for *U.S. News & World Report*, spins an absorbing narrative of a year in the lives of Smitty and "his" kids.

At a diverse public school in Long Island, New York, Smitty works his unique magic on students' applications and their lives, helping them find the right college by figuring out who they are, rather than focusing on what their test scores, grades, and finances reflect. Loaded with advice that readers can apply to their own college searches, *Acceptance* is a book that thousands of students and their parents will find indispensable.

Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges—and Find Themselves Details

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Zane says

The book provides a good overview of the college process in the U.S. The main idea that a good fit is what is most important when considering colleges. There are some good tips such as ACT vs SAT and if a female student is considering Columbia they should also consider Bard due to access to classes at Columbia which I did not know. I think one solid point is the idea that the process of considering which colleges to get into as well as what to write for a personal essay is about planning, growing, critical thinking, and maturing for each student in their own way. Do I want a small school or large school? Urban or rural? Which classes are on offer? Do I have the freedom to choose? I liked to hear that some students found the process cathartic and meaningful. I think it is important to present this very stressful time in a way that students understand it's importance and relevance. I also appreciated the fact that teacher's were talking about the kids and taking time to mentor them to go deeper than just the surface to resolve personal issues, learn from them, and to help others. The other factor is money. It's great that a student gets into a wonderful school, but now, how is the student going to foot the bill? The average student debt in the US in 2015 is 35,000USD(see here: <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/0...>). This is also about critical thinking and understanding that the burden of debt can also be restrictive to the freedom and opportunity to find a vocation that is also a good fit. Lastly, helping students understand that washing clothes, cleaning up, using a credit card, shopping and cooking are also part of the University experience and helping students to understand this aspect before they move away is helpful.

Angela Boord says

Read this one compulsively straight through, staying up late to do it. It was on display at the library and caught my eye.

As a homeschooling parent, I found the description of the work of a guidance counselor invaluable... and also somewhat daunting, as I will never be able to call up my friends in the admission departments of major colleges and tell them I have a kid I'm sending their way. Also, you begin to wonder if anyone has ever gotten into a top college who led a normal middle class life and did not have a tragedy in his or her life to write his or her essay about But the book is a good narrative of the whole senior year process, and it does illustrate lessons a homeschooling parent of a college-bound teen can take and use. Since it's told in story form, it's also a lot more enjoyable to read than a guidebook!

Sue says

This book had some interesting insights on how to write essays and I enjoyed following the kids through senior year ups and downs.

Carey says

This was okay. It was easy to read. It didn't provide as many insights about how a guidance counselor helps students as I had hoped, so it wasn't useful as a "how to" guide, and it didn't make strong emotional connections to the kids who were profiled, so it didn't stand alone as a character drama. Mostly, the students who were profiled had things going on in their lives that the counselor helped to draw out, whether it was activities that they were involved with or family tragedies to work through in their admissions essays. I would have liked to hear what the counselor did with a student who didn't seem to be engaged in anything. (In fact, the one student like this who was discussed in the book, the counselor admitted was overlooked by faculty.)

At the beginning of the book, the author and the counselor both seem to denigrate the approach of private college admissions consultant Elizabeth Wissner-Gross, whose book "What High Schools Don't Tell You" I really like. For example, the counselor says he is glad to see kids in his essay class had not spent a programmed summer and were allowed to be kids. But in the end, the counselor had the same philosophy as Wissner-Gross - to help kids find themselves and be less focused on college in and of itself. When it came time to complete applications, kids from average backgrounds without family tragedies needed to be able to draw on extracurriculars, so hopefully they did something with their summers or their time.

Overall, it was okay, but I don't think I learned anything that I didn't already know, and I wasn't invested in the kids, since the story is really more about the counselor. It was a little disconcerting when the counselor would speak with the admissions director of a well-known college about a particular applicant, and from the admission director's wink, wink, nudge, nudge, would decide the kid was never getting in and try to focus the kid on a different school. I wonder how much more candid the book could have been and if it would have been more revealing.

JoAnn/QuAppelle says

Last night I finished **Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges-And Find Themselves** by David Marcus

This book was very quick reading because, to me, this is a fascinating subject. As I said before, in a previous life I think I was a high school college counselor! The main character in this book had had a long career in the business of getting kids into colleges, but he did even more....he tried to get them to find themselves and find the right college for them. He conducted a full semester essay-writing class where the students polished and re-wrote their essays. Very interesting.

After the applications were all done in January, he brought in a banker to explain credit cards and checking accounts to them, taught them basics of cooking, and also about laundry. He had heard too many stories over the years (from grads) to assume that the kids knew these skills.

This was in a public school in Oyster Bay, NY. My experience with public-school HS guidance counselors is that most of their time and effort goes into the kids with problems (or troublemakers), with little time left over for actual "guidance" ---let alone doing what this guy did.

If you have any interest in this topic, or a child getting ready for the college application process, I would

highly recommend this book.

Thomas says

I am deeply intrigued by the idea of college. As I am reviewing this book I am a sophomore, but I stress about college admissions and my GPA and extracurricular activities at least once a day. So there is an obvious reason to why I enjoyed this book so much.

I found the story of each student applying to college endearing and entertaining. The book read like fiction, making it a whole lot more than just college statistics. The only thing is I wonder how many students, teachers, and parents have the time to sit back and read a book like this if they are so busy participating in the mentioned extracurricular activities within the book.

Overall this book satisfied my college information binge and has given me a new perspective on how to approach college applications. 4.5 out of five stars.

aimlesslegs says

Good, but made me feel bad about myself--I don't have any special talents or circumstances like the kids in this book. If the idea was to ALL kids to feel less stressed about college admissions, it failed miserably--although I imagine it worked for many people, especially parents (who unfailingly think their children are special) and those students with excellent extracurriculars and "character" but lackluster grades.

Rebecca says

I really enjoyed this book. My new go-to recommendation for all college kids to read. This book focused on one guidance counselor's job for a year in getting kids into the "right" school. He and an english teacher really focused the kids on their essay's, which I loved. The essay in most books get regulated to the back of the packet, but this book made the reader focus a lot on it and for good reason. It's kind of an important part of the packet that the student has a final chance to tell the college about them self and make them stand out, which the students in this book really did. Anyone and everyone gets good grades and comes from a "typical" family. But it's the essay where you can really make yourself stand out. I think kids need to concentrate more on that. I liked the kids they chose to concentrate on for this book, though I did get kind of confused as some they spent more time on then others and then others were heavily focused on at the beginning, never to be heard from again. That got me really confused. I also liked the counselor a lot, which really made the story. One of the better books I have read in a while.

Beth says

Acceptance is nonfiction that read like fiction - author Marcus chronicles the college rush process through the eyes of a guidance counselor and his advisees. Gweyth Smith, like the protagonist I loved in Admission, is really dedicated to finding a school that is the right fit for each student and provides the best opportunity

and experience for him or her. Every year, Smitty takes on a half dozen or so special cases, working more closely with them to beef up SAT scores, bring grades up, confer with parents, and round out those resumes (or drop things from their overscheduled lives, if necessary). He and his girlfriend, the AP English instructor, also co-teach a popular course on essay-writing for college to help teens find a voice that will stand out and be true and honest, and maybe cope with an issue too.

I honestly totally missed the point that this was nonfiction and was pretty confused by the author's note at the beginning, but then dove right in and figured it would be explained later - that it was just a device to impart a more "realistic" feeling. At times, the narrative got too bogged down with reading the same type of details, like SAT scores. And even though the book focused mostly on Smitty and 7 students, other students and teachers were woven in, so the author used repetitive descriptions to keep reminding us who each student was, which was really unnecessary, because there is a cast of characters at the beginning. The tone had a very sanitized feeling to me, and really suffers from a lack of editing - it's hard for me not to compare it to Boylan's pitch perfect *Getting In* or *Admission*. Acceptance is thorough, but I nearly put it down a half a dozen times. I felt some sympathy, for some of the kids, but not empathy.

Acceptance will have more appeal for parents who want their kids to get into Ivy league schools, than for college-bound students who will be too busy test taking and volunteering and working and playing sports and performing in drama - to actually read this.

Deron says

Another find in the new books section at my library, I picked this up because I find that I'm fascinated by the collegiate admissions process since becoming a college instructor, new father, and because I bungled my own college selection process so badly back in high school. A very entertaining and engaging read, I ripped through this in just a few days. I think the key thing I got from this book is that it's essential that a college choice fits the student and that the student themselves find out what that might be and that it takes a crazy, crazy amount of work and luck for students to be accepted into "top" school these days.

Nichola says

Another journey through the college application process, this time by following a lead guidance counsellor at a particular high school. He selects who he would like to counsel, co-teaches an essay writing class period, and is available to meet with students whenever. The stories were interesting with several different types of students represented not just super polished kids with ambitious parents- one who money is a real issue, one who is bright but completely unfocussed, another who has a sports management talent. It covers their initial apps, their changing views when acceptances come through, their financial aid/scholarships and even some second thoughts years later. I am not sure the message of the book, as our high school offers nothing like this model for counselling and we had to manage this process ourselves, and anyway this counselor retired and now privately counsels (\$\$\$), some of the kids changed schools after a semester, and much was made that some of their essays were included in a book of awesome college essays. So they didn't really find themselves or a good fit. Hmm.

Sam says

This book is about a nationally renowned guidance counselor that helps high school students find and apply to colleges. Although I don't have a child who is currently applying to colleges, not will she in the near future (she's 7 years old), I found this book to be very insightful.

There is so much competition to get into a college these days that one needs more than just good grades. The book focused a lot on writing. A college applicant must have the writing skills to not only catch the attention of college admissions but one must write in a way that will uniquely set them apart from the other hundreds of applicants (so all of you students out there, invest a lot of time on sharpening your writing skills).

Another focus of the book was finding the "right" college. Finding a college that is a good fit for the student. One that will help them grow intellectually and socially. Just because college X has a good reputation and is popular in sports doesn't necessarily mean that the college is the "right" choice.

This book is written like a novel but is a true story of seven high school students finding and applying to colleges with the help of their guidance counselor. This book is a goodread and an easy read and is recommended to anyone with children, no matter their age, on the path to college.

Elise says

If I have to read high school seniors referred to as "youngsters" one more time, I may scream. As my two-star rating suggests, per Goodreads, "it was ok." There are definitely some positive aspects to the overall message of the college choice being more meaningful than buying a brand (or, in some cases, begging for a brand!). But I found that several of the vignettes weren't as meaningful as the author may have supposed. And, while I can appreciate the zeal and expertise of the primary figure, Smitty, he honestly didn't really come across as someone I would enjoy working with. [For the many who are his fans, I'll give you minute to gather up your stones and tomatoes and shoes to throw at me...] He's clearly good at what he does, but the way the author portrays his personality didn't generate in me the response I was probably meant to have. It's like the portrayal is begging for awe, but it's too blatant a request for me. I can't quite tell if a different narrator would have changed my mind or if the person of Smitty just isn't my kind of person. Perhaps a bit of both: the narrator lacks any skepticism (any faults on Smitty's part are depicted as stepping stones for future almost hero-level dedication to "the right!", if that makes sense) and Smitty himself takes actions that I view as overreaching (a couple of examples: adjusting a student's work schedule, challenging a parental decision about family vacation). If you want to get the best part of the book, just read the appendix that offers practical, sound advice about the admissions process.

Bonnie says

I'm the mom of a high school senior so I picked this book up thinking that it might give me some insight into the college admission process and the transition from high school to college. Not so much. Here's why. This is the story of a school that can afford to have a guidance counselor track about 10 kids who are all college bound and with the exceptional wisdom of said guru-counselor (Mr. Smitty), all of these kids not surprisingly get into college. Here's the issue. There is no school that I know of that has a counselor who does this. The counselor at my daughter's school barely knows her and that's just how the ed system is.

Counselors may have some insight and have good recommendations but most kids get this kind of hand-holding or advice. The writing is also atrocious. There is so much in it that should be cut...extraneous material that had no relevance. Still, getting beyond all of this, it was somewhat interesting to see who ended up where and why. Overall, I'd take a hard pass on recommending this book.

David says

"fly on the wall"-style report of the last year of work (of a 30+ year career) in a Long Island public high school by a college admissions guidance counselor who had experienced great success in helping kids get into selective colleges that seem to suit their personalities and interests. There were 109 seniors that year, and the subject ("Smitty" -- as an aside, has there ever been someone with the surname Smith who is not called "Smitty"? -- we owe it to ourselves as a culture to be more creative in nicknaming people) is head of guidance department and theoretically responsible for all of them, but the book helpfully focuses on a half-dozen or so kids in detail as they finalize their application lists, write essays, stalk the wild scholarship offer, cope with rejections, and decide where to go.

It reads quickly, and the subject matter interests me probably more than it would the average reader, as I work at a college and have two kids in college who've been through this process fairly recently. The downside of the book in my opinion is that the author seems to worship his subject and avoids any critical analysis (if you're a Wx Post reader, you could say the tone is about like Jay Mathews' writings about "Stand and Deliver" subject Jaime Escalante of Garfield High calculus teaching fame).

In particular, author swallows whole Smitty's self-promotion as a sort of maverick who sees through the absurdities and unfairnesses of the college admissions system and refuses to play the game, except that.....

--he brings in \$150K/year [I didn't know anybody below superintendent level made that much in public secondary education!] running the guidance office at a small public school

--he teaches (co-teaches with his significant other) a for-credit English class consisting entirely of coaching kids on their admissions essays

--he wields clout on behalf of students at specific colleges by making personal appeals to admissions officers he knows from long career in guidance, from going to conventions of such people and sucking up to them, etc.

--he retires at the end of the book.....to start a business as a \$330/hour admissions consultant working privately for (obviously) well-to-do people who want to give their kids an edge at highly selective colleges.

I don't think any of this means he's a bad guy or should be excoriated by the author -- nobody including me asks for a lower salary or harder teaching load or what have you -- but his self-image as somehow standing outside of a nutty, stressful, zero-sum system does seem a little delusional, and the author misses that side entirely.
