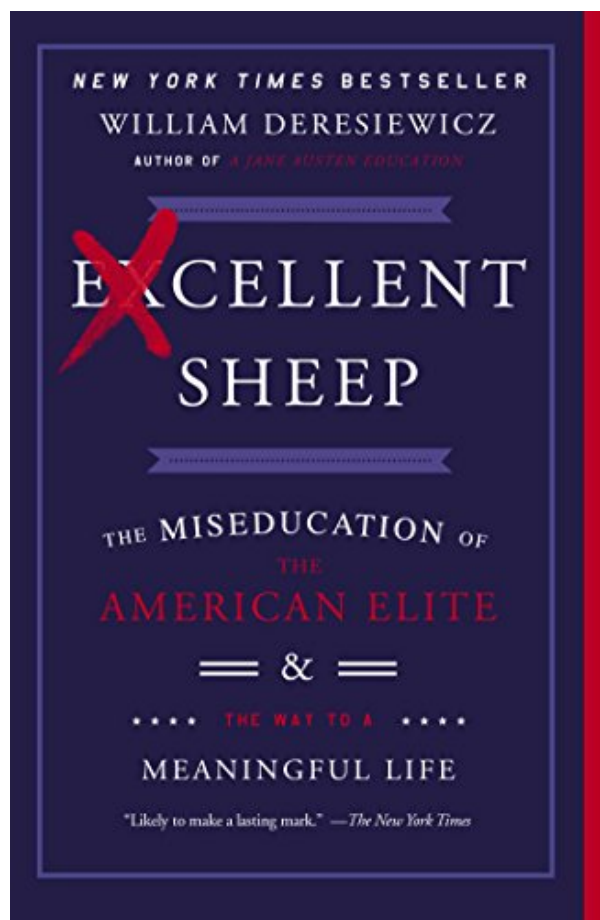
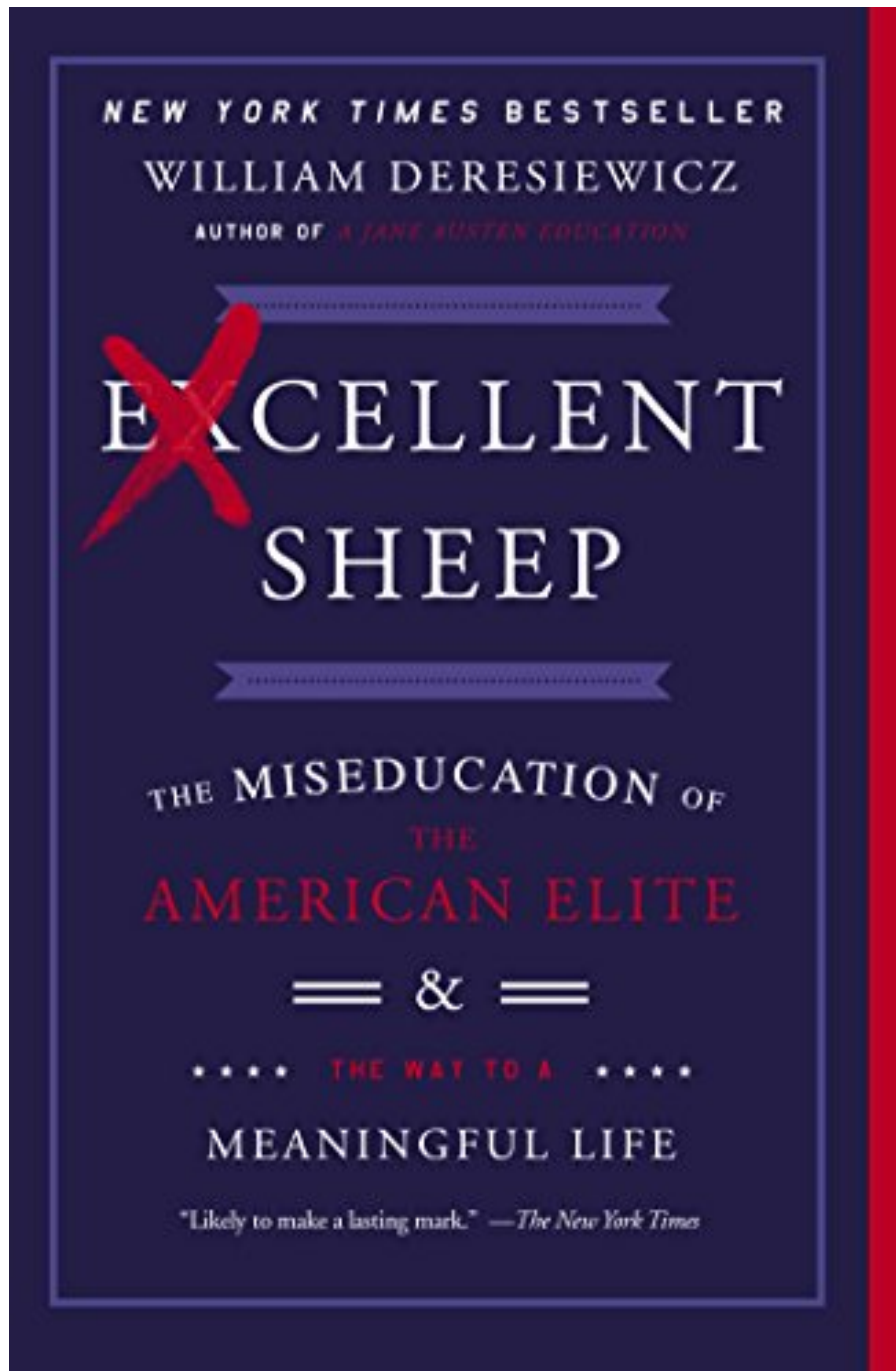


# EXCELLENT SHEEP: THE MISEDUCATION OF THE AMERICAN ELITE AND THE WAY TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ



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From Booklist

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Review

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democracy, and he has an uncommon gift for wisdom without platitudes. *Excellent Sheep* is a withering analysis of the transactional spirit that rules American education and American life, and an inspiring example of a better ideal. A true teacher speaks here. He has my admiration and my gratitude.” (Leon Wieseltier)

“William Deresiewicz’s book is in and of itself a higher education, and to read it is to learn what’s a college for. The author is an inspired teacher, and his lesson is of a truth sorely needing to be told.” (Lewis Lapham)

“William Deresiewicz’s *Excellent Sheep* is a searing and important critique of our morally bankrupt educational system. He argues, correctly, that colleges and universities, awash in corporate money and intent on churning out corporate managers and conformists rather than scholars, have betrayed not only their mission, but the students they purport to teach and by extension the wider society. Independent thought is subversive, uncomfortable and lonely. It requires us, as Deresiewicz points out, to challenge and question reigning assumptions rather than kneel before them. Deresiewicz’s book is not so much a call for reform as for revolt.” (Chris Hedges, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, with Joe Sacco, of *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*)

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A groundbreaking manifesto about what our nation's top schools should be—but aren't—providing: “The ex-Yale professor effectively skewers elite colleges, their brainy but soulless students (those ‘sheep’), pushy parents, and admissions mayhem” (People).

As a professor at Yale, William Deresiewicz saw something that troubled him deeply. His students, some of the nation's brightest minds, were adrift when it came to the big questions: how to think critically and creatively and how to find a sense of purpose. Now he argues that elite colleges are turning out conformists without a compass.

Excellent Sheep takes a sharp look at the high-pressure conveyor belt that begins with parents and counselors who demand perfect grades and culminates in the skewed applications Deresiewicz saw firsthand as a member of Yale's admissions committee. As schools shift focus from the humanities to “practical” subjects like economics, students are losing the ability to think independently. It is essential, says Deresiewicz, that college be a time for self-discovery, when students can establish their own values and measures of success in order to forge their own paths. He features quotes from real students and graduates he has corresponded with over the years, candidly exposing where the system is broken and offering clear solutions on how to fix it.

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- Free Press

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Most helpful customer reviews

275 of 290 people found the following review helpful.

Super People, Excellent Sheeple?

By Alan F. Sewell

This book piqued my interest because my son just graduated high school and is entering college. His classmates range from the "Super People" (author William Deresiewicz's phrase for the highest achievers) who are on their way to elite universities, to the more typical students who are starting their higher educations at community colleges.

In each book review I try to include a few well-written sentences that concisely illustrate an author's point of view. This book is so well written that I could have chosen just about every sentence. Here are some of the best:

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The compulsive overachievement of today's elite college students-- the sense that they need to keep running as fast as they can-- is not the only thing that keeps them from forming the deeper relationships that might relieve their anguish.

Isolated from their peers, these kids are also cut off from themselves. The endless hoop-jumping... that got them into an elite college in the first place--the clubs, bands, projects, teams, APs, SATs, evenings, weekends, summers, coaches, tutors, leadership, service -- left them no time to figure out what they want out of life.

Too many students, perhaps after a year or two spent using college as a treadmill to nowhere, wake up in crisis, not knowing why they have worked so hard.

"I hate all my activities, I hate all my classes, I hated everything I did in high school, expect to hate my job, and this is just how it's going to be for the rest of my life."

The result is what we might refer to as credentialism. The purpose of life becomes the accumulation of gold stars. Hence the relentless extracurricular busyness, the neglect of learning as an end in itself, the inability to imagine doing something that you can't put on your resume...the constant sense of competition....to be played out within the same narrow conception of what constitutes a valid life: affluence, credentials, and prestige.

If those of us who went to college in the 1970s and '80s no longer recognize the admissions process, if today's elite students appear to be an alien species --Super People, perhaps, or a race of bionic hamsters

=====

That's a pretty dreadful assessment, but Deresiewicz is a former Professor of English at Yale and member of its admissions committee, so he must have seen plenty of it first-hand.

He is surely right about those of us who went to college in the 1970s no longer recognizing the admissions process. I graduated Georgia Tech in 1979. He praises students of our era as "passionate weirdos." That certainly fit my class, although I'd prefer to call us "competent eccentrics." We were engineering nerds. I was recruited because my ACT/SAT put me in the top 2%. I had zero extracurricular activities.

Fast forward 40 years and it seems that colleges cater to "credentialed conformists." Applicants have to show that they are not only academic stars, but social butterflies involved in numerous group activities. Even the "party schools" require students to write an essay explaining why they want to be admitted. The only requirement to be admitted to the party schools of the 1970s was that you had to have tuition money and a

pulse.

What caused this change from universities prizing "passionate weirdos" to "credentialed conformists?" Perhaps it has to do with these factors:

1. We have become more litigation-conscious. Companies can't afford to hire "loose cannons" who create potential legal liabilities. Nowadays people are easily offended by many words and deeds that were ignored in the past, and they are quick to hire lawyers who will seek to recover damages on their behalf. So companies value conformists who follow the book more than they used to.
2. Flattening of management. A company that had 20 branch managers 40 years ago, now has only 1 regional manager, thanks to advances in computers and Internet communication. So, if 95% of the management jobs are gone, then companies have to find discrimination-neutral ways to winnow down the pool of candidates applying for that one job. Inflating the job requirements with credentials, no matter how bogus, is one way to do it without running the risk of discrimination lawsuits.
3. Maturing of industries. A century or so ago people were allowed to practice Law even if they had no formal education. It used to be that way in fields like auto repair and computer systems development. Now that these industries have matured and there is no longer a shortage of applicants, credentialization is the most efficient way to cull the herd.

The important question is whether all this credentialing and hoop-jumping is counterproductive to success in college and in life. I don't think it necessarily is. Corporations operate on these principles. So it is not unreasonable that colleges should give the highest priority in admissions to those who are likely to perform well in corporate employment.

Credentialing and hoop-jumping only becomes counterproductive when it is forced upon people whose natures are NOT motivated by peer-group competition. This may include most nonconformist, creative-minded people who prefer to blaze their own trail through life rather than walk on someone else's.

And we must remember that credentials are not the primary currency of success. Most of the worthwhile things we obtain in life come from our souls. We prosper mostly from the goodwill we create by doing things for others without thinking "how am I going to get paid."

Layering credentials on top of that principle strengthens your credibility and amplifies your reach. But if you have a defective character then credentials will only lengthen the height from which you fall. A lot of hotshots on Wall Street who were long on credentials and short on integrity are costing their companies tens of billions of dollars in fines for defrauding the public. Those who exchanged their souls for tickets to a rat race will die neither wealthy or respected.

I recommend that students and parents should read this book as an "alarm bell" to warn themselves when they may be pushing the hoops-and-credentials envelope a bit too far. William Deresiewicz makes fundamental points that are too often perceived only at the end of life's journey:

Keep your priorities straight. Perfect your own soul first, then jump through the hoops if you feel you have to. But, really, your objective should be to induce life to jump through the hoops YOU build. Never be afraid to take the risks that success requires. Never be afraid of failure. And always do what is right. If your soul is deep and rich, your life will be deep and rich. But if you seek to cover a shallow soul with credentials, then your life won't be worth the paper those credentials are printed on.

256 of 274 people found the following review helpful.

Correct Diagnosis -- Incorrect Prescription

By Zachary Slayback

When I saw William Deresiewicz's New Republic piece, "Don't Send Your Kids to the Ivy League," I jumped at the opportunity to read it. As a partial Ivy League apostate myself, the thought of somebody -- a former Ivy League professor at that! -- calling out the cultural problems within these institutions excited me. The piece made waves, with students and professors alike responding, and getting people excited for Deresiewicz's book, *Excellent Sheep*. It worked. I bought his book and worked my way through it, hoping for an intricate analysis of a serious cultural issue and a nuanced solution.

While at an Ivy League university -- the University of Pennsylvania, in my case -- I see many of the issues that Deresiewicz identifies in his New Republic piece and in interviews on the book. Students who came to school wanting to change the world and make it their own place, to be in the driver's seat of their lives, quickly fell into an assembly-line-like mold. They may have entered school wanting to start a business and offer a new service, or to write a book, or to become a professional speaker, but by their second or third years, many had their eyes set on the crown jewels of the Ivy League experience -- On Campus Recruiting (OCR). They designed their resumes and schedules around exactly what recruiters from Goldman Sachs or Morgan Stanley would want and slowly extirpated the things they had passions for coming in to school. They became barely identifiable with their starry-eyed freshman selves. It wasn't infuriating as much as it was sad.

The problem is not necessarily that students want to go work on Wall Street after their time at school -- if that is truly your dream and what you believe will make you come alive, then by all means, please go pursue that! The problem is something at these schools is driving young people to settle and choose careers they don't find fulfilling. I was hoping Deresiewicz would identify what that something is.

In short, I was disappointed. Deresiewicz correctly diagnoses the disease that is this cultural issue, but his diagnosis is shallow, lacks detail (he relies almost entirely on anecdote and quoting English literature), and misses the deeper issue of pre-college schooling almost altogether. Even worse, his prescription for the problem -- accessible liberal arts education at schools like public honors colleges (outlined in Part III of the book) -- stems from his romanticized view of the academy, an unrealistic view of how public honors colleges operate, and an economically illiterate view of admissions reform (please see Steven Pinker's review, "The Trouble with Harvard." Pinker points out that the issues that students face at elite schools -- anxiety, depression, unfulfilled potential -- are suffered at higher rates by students at public universities, and that Deresiewicz's admissions reform recommendations would fail to address the perverse meritocracy he attacks, among other things).

*Excellent Sheep* has sections that are worth reading, and can be an enjoyable book at times, but the reasoning and argumentation behind it is flimsy and frustrating. Once one digs through the literary fluff that makes up a good half of the book, one walks away dissatisfied.

If a reader is interested in something on each of Deresiewicz's main goals -- the unfulfilled lives of young people, finding one's passions, and higher education reform -- there are better books out there. Consider Peter Gray's *Free to Learn*, Roman Krznaric's *How to Find Fulfilling Work*, and Bryan Caplan's forthcoming *The Case Against Education*.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

It's Okay...

By Dr. S. Brook Henderson

*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life* – A Book Review

By Dr. S. Brook Henderson

This book, written by William Deresiewicz and first copyrighted in 2014, is a hardbound book that covers the value of higher education. Although the book doesn't have any special features such as cartoons or illustrations, it is written in medium type with relatively short paragraphs, which makes it easy to read. The ISBN is 978-1-4767-0271-1 for the hardbound book and 978-1-4767-0173-5 for the ebook. Free Press is the publisher and it is available at my local library, so probably at yours as well.

Dr. Deresiewicz used to be a professor at Yale and he writes this book about the system of elite education and what it does to kids. This book is written in a personal, conversational style that seems to have the author speaking directly to the reader. Clearly, it is a powerful critique of our present educational system, beginning with the way students are shepherded into elite schools and spanning some critical questions about college. The book is intended for anyone who is interested in education in general and our current college system.

This book is a forceful indictment of the current college system and what happens to kids who are on the fast track to success. Deresiewicz states that these students have learned how to please their teachers and coaches over the course of their school years and that the process has robbed themselves of introspective abilities that could benefit their stressed, often depressed, state of mind. He speaks forcefully about this, saying at one point, "They've learned to 'be a student,' not to use their minds." He says very few students are passionate about ideas. They are focused on success – getting As – not on the thrill of learning and challenging the status quo.

In discussing the history of elite schools and how circumstances got to be the way they are, Deresiewicz looks to the industrial revolution and the wealth it created as the genesis of the elite school. He discusses the racism that developed as the gap between the wealthy and "the great unwashed" increased and how it impacted college enrollments. He says that the baby boomers appearance on the college scene created another revolution, moving enrollments in elite colleges from aristocracy to meritocracy. He declares that the system that came out of the 1960s is the same one we are living with today.

The book is organized topically, from describing the "sheep" (the students), to self-examination to ask the question, "What is College For?," to Schools and on to Society as a whole. In answering the question of the purpose of college, Deresiewicz says that "return on investment" is the phrase talked about today. It is, in his opinion, all about getting a good job. He maintains that students don't hear about deeper questions such as whether jobs, financial security and national prosperity are the other things that matter. He encourages this type of questioning and posits that the first purpose of college is to teach its students to think – to be skeptical, to reach one's own conclusions and to "find yourself." A little over half of the book is dedicated to describing how students are wronged by college, but then Deresiewicz gives the reader the answer to the School dilemma. And it is (drum roll, please): a four-year liberal arts education. Oh, with very good teachers. A liberal arts education will provide the skill of thinking, along with reading great books, according to Deresiewicz. Finally, he discusses the cost of the system of elite education to our society as a whole. He says that it is bringing back racial and fiscal inequality and cites lots of statistics to support his assertion. At last he attacks our political system as being elitist and calls for us to leave aristocracy and meritocracy behind as we try democracy.

I was with Dr. Deresiewicz right up until his answer to all the elite college system woes culminated in a liberal arts education. Really? Oh, with very good teachers. That should fix everything. While I agreed with many points in the book, I found his prescriptions to be simplistic at best and naïve at worst. He speaks passionately about his beliefs, which I admire, and backs them up with statistics. As a critical thinker, though, I know that statistics can be skewed and looking at a topic through a specific lens can distort that

topic. I wonder if that is what happened to this author. In taking a hard look at elite colleges today, was his lens of “something is terribly wrong” sufficient to give the reader a skewed view of his topic?

I came away with the impression that this is one of those books that is great if you already agree with the author’s basic premises. If you don’t agree, or if you don’t have the same context for the information he presents, it is an easy-to-read rant. The book does challenge some elitist views of race and economic standing and it is true that, in the U.S. today, the rich are getting richer and the middle class is getting poorer (and smaller). Whether a liberal arts education and democratizing colleges will solve those issues, is difficult for me to believe.

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# **EXCELLENT SHEEP: THE MISEDUCATION OF THE AMERICAN ELITE AND THE WAY TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ PDF**

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From Booklist

**\*Starred Review\*** It might surprise the countless students competing for admission to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford that they could be fighting for a dubious prize. But in this probing indictment, a former Yale professor accuses America's top universities of turning young people into tunnel-visioned careerists, adept at padding their résumés and filling their bank accounts but unprepared to confront life's most important questions. Craven conformity, not free-spirited independence, is what Deresiewicz sees students learning in a campus world populated by hyperspecialized professors who pursue arcane research agendas and leave the teaching of undergraduates to adjuncts and TAs. The time has come, Deresiewicz asserts, for college professors and administrators to make students their first priority by giving them a challenging liberal-arts education. Grounded in the humanities, such an education would give students real intellectual and imaginative breadth, not just a professional credential. Besides pressing for this curricular and pedagogical realignment, Deresiewicz calls for radical reform of admissions policies, so reversing the trends that make the university an enforcer of caste hierarchies. Deresiewicz's controversial full agenda indeed means an end to rule by meritocracy and a beginning of fairness for the working class. An urgent summons to a long-overdue debate over what universities do and how they do it. --Bryce Christensen

Review

"In *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz sets out to unnerve the current and future college students of America (and their parents). He succeeds brilliantly, with an indictment of elite education that should launch a thousand conversations. Read this book to remember what learning should be, and then pass it along to the next sheep who should leave the flock behind." (Emily Bazelon, author of *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy*)

"This is a book of great importance to our society. It deserves to transform our understanding of integrity and achievement and success. William Deresiewicz is a genuine humanist with a profound faith in the promise of democracy, and he has an uncommon gift for wisdom without platitudes. *Excellent Sheep* is a withering analysis of the transactional spirit that rules American education and American life, and an inspiring example of a better ideal. A true teacher speaks here. He has my admiration and my gratitude." (Leon Wieseltier)

“William Deresiewicz’s book is in and of itself a higher education, and to read it is to learn what’s a college for. The author is an inspired teacher, and his lesson is of a truth sorely needing to be told.” (Lewis Lapham)

“William Deresiewicz’s *Excellent Sheep* is a searing and important critique of our morally bankrupt educational system. He argues, correctly, that colleges and universities, awash in corporate money and intent on churning out corporate managers and conformists rather than scholars, have betrayed not only their mission, but the students they purport to teach and by extension the wider society. Independent thought is subversive, uncomfortable and lonely. It requires us, as Deresiewicz points out, to challenge and question reigning assumptions rather than kneel before them. Deresiewicz’s book is not so much a call for reform as for revolt.” (Chris Hedges, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, with Joe Sacco, of *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*)

"William Deresiewicz is one of America's best young public intellectuals. He has written a passionate, deeply informed, and searing critique of the way we are educating our young. Whether you agree or disagree - and I found myself doing both - you must read this book. It should spark a great debate on America's campuses and beyond." (Fareed Zakaria, author of *The Post-American World*)

“*Excellent Sheep* is likely to make...a lasting mark...for three reasons. One, Mr. Deresiewicz spent 24 years in the Ivy League, graduating from Columbia and teaching for a decade at Yale....He brings the gory details. Two, the author is a striker, to put it in soccer terms. He’s a vivid writer, a literary critic whose headers tend to land in the back corner of the net. Three, his indictment arrives on wheels: He takes aim at just about the entirety of upper-middle-class life in America.... Mr. Deresiewicz’s book is packed full of what he wants more of in American life: passionate weirdness.” (Dwight Garner *The New York Times*)

"It might surprise the countless students competing for admission to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford that they could be fighting for a dubious prize. But in this probing indictment, a former Yale professor accuses America’s top universities of turning young people into tunnel-visioned careerists, adept at padding their résumés and filling their bank accounts but unprepared to confront life’s most important questions. . . . An urgent summons to a long-overdue debate over what universities do and how they do it." (Bryce Christensen *Booklist* (starred review))

“Welcome to what is sure to be the most polarizing education and parenting book since Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*.” (Town & Country)

“This refreshingly barbed indictment of America’s prestige-education addiction reveals what college students are really getting out of all that work, all that struggle, all that stress – and all those tuition loans.” (MORE Magazine)

"*Excellent Sheep* challenges parents to break from the herd mentality, to question what we really want from our children, who we really want them to be. The book filled me with both hope that there could be a more authentic, creative way to raise a new generation of thinkers--and with the courage to try to find it." (Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*)

“Deresiewicz’s critique of America’s most celebrated schools as temples of mercenary mediocrity is lucid, sharp-edged, and searching ... he poses vital questions about what college teaches—and why.” (Publishers Weekly)

“An unquestionably provocative book that hopefully leads to productive debate.” (Kirkus)



"Not only does Deresiewicz speak with candor about the ins and outs of the educational hierarchy from an insiders point of view, but he prompts some serious questions about the potential for reform and what we as parents can do to encourage our children from a young age to change the way that they're learning, and as a result, what they take from the world in exchange. A much recommended read, especially for those currently with or planning to have children." (Briana Burns High Voltage)

"[A] good case that these colleges are failing in their most essential mission: to help kids "build a self." (Mother Jones)

"Provocative." (The Daily Beast)

"Anyone who cares about American higher education should ponder this book." (The New York Times Book Review)

"Exceptionally enlightening." (Bowling Green Daily News)

#### About the Author

William Deresiewicz was a professor at Yale until 2008. He is the author of the landmark essays "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education" and "Solitude and Leadership" and is a frequent speaker on campuses around the country. A contributing writer for The Nation and a contributing editor for The New Republic and The American Scholar, he is the author of *A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and the Things That Really Matter*. Visit [BillDeresiewicz.com](http://BillDeresiewicz.com).

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