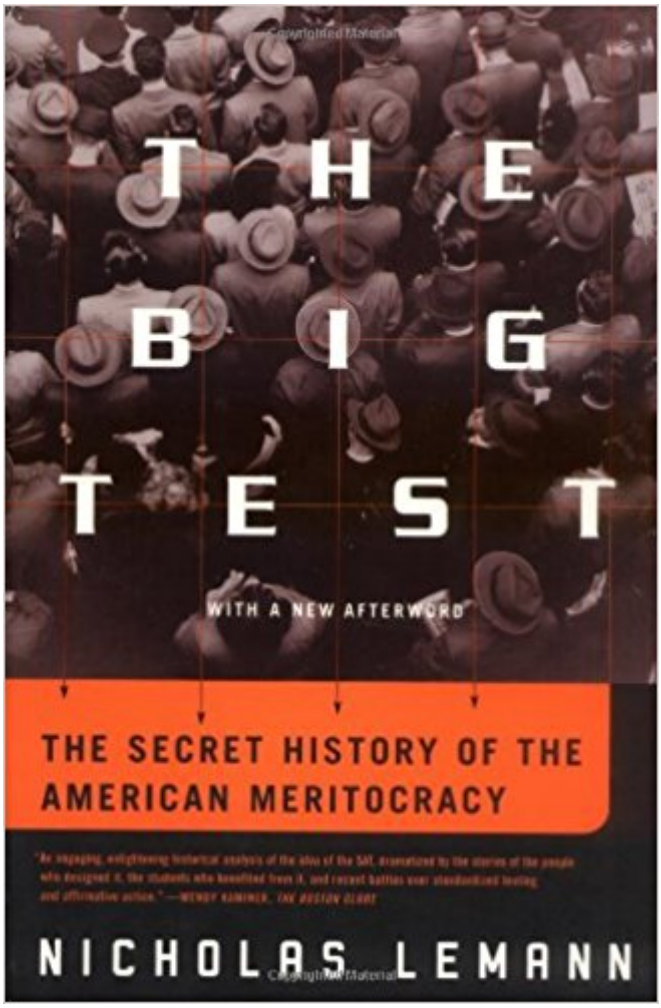
The Big Test: The Secret History Of The American Meritocracy



Synopsis

The widely acclaimed study of what's gone wrong in American higher education.What do we know about the history, origin, design, and purpose of the SAT? Who invented it, and why? How did it acquire such a prominent and lasting position in American education? The Big Test reveals the ideas, people, and politics behind a fifty-year-old utopian social experiment that changed this country. Combining vibrant storytelling, vivid portraiture, and thematic analysis, Lemann shows why this experiment did not turn out as planned. It did create a new elite, but it also generated conflict and tensionÃ¢â ¬â ¢and America's best educated, most privileged people are now leaders without followers. Drawing on unprecedented access to the Educational Testing Service's archives, Lemann maintains that America's meritocracy is neither natural nor inevitable, and that it does not apportion opportunity equally or fairly. His important study not only asks profound moral and political questions about the past and future of our society but also carries implications for current social and educational policy. As Brent Staples noted in his New York Times editorial column: "Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts announced that prospective students would no longer be required to submit SAT scores with their applications. . . . Holyoke's president, Joanne Creighton, was personally convinced by reading Nicholas Lemann's book, The Big Test, which documents how the SAT became a tool for class segregation." All students of education, sociology, and recent U.S. historyÃ¢â ¬â ¢especially those focused on testing, theories of learning, social stratification, or policymakingÃ¢â ¬â ¢will find this book fascinating and alarming.

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Customer Reviews

Nicholas Lemann’s The Big Test starts off as a look at how the SAT became an integral part of the college application process by telling the stories of men like Henry Chauncey and James Bryant Conant of Harvard University, who sought in the 1930s and ’40s to expand their student base beyond the offspring of Brahmin alumni. When they went into the public schools of the Midwest to recruit, standardized testing gave them the means to select which lucky students would be deemed most suitable for an Ivy League education. But about a third of the way through the book, Lemann shifts gears and writes about several college students from the late ’60s and early ’70s. The reasons for the change-up only become clear in the final third, when those same college students, now in their 40s, lead the fight against California’s Proposition 209, a 1996 ballot initiative aimed at eliminating affirmative action programs. Do these two stories really belong together? For all his storytelling abilities--and they are prodigious--Lemann is not entirely persuasive on this point, especially when he identifies the crucial moment in the civil rights era when "affirmative action evolved as a low-cost patch solution to the enormous problem of improving the lot of American Negroes, who had an ongoing, long-standing tradition of deeply inferior education; at the same time American society was changing so as to make educational performance the basis for individual advancement." Lemann’s muddled transition is somewhat obscured by frequent digressions (every new character gets a lengthy background introduction), but a crucial point gets lost in the shuffle, only to reappear fleetingly at the conclusion: "The right fight to be in was the fight to make sure that everybody got a good education," Lemann writes, not to continue to prop up a system that creates one set of standards for privileged students and another set for the less privileged. If The Big Test had focused on that issue, where equal opportunity is genuinely at stake, instead of on the roots of standardized testing, where opportunity was explicitly intended only for a chosen few, it would be a substantially different book--one with a story that almost assuredly could be told as engrossingly as the story Lemann chose to tell, but perhaps with a sharper focus. --Ron Hogan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In a country obsessed with educational opportunity, the principal institution for overseeing the distribution of access to higher education, the Educational Testing Service, was founded in "an atmosphere of intrigue, corruption, competition, and disorder." So contends Lemann (The Promised Land) in this enthralling, detailed story of how the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) became enshrined in U.S. culture. Although the idealistic, patrician pioneers of testing may have wished to displace the entitlements of birth and wealth for what they saw as the more democratic entitlements of scholastic

aptitude, at the end of the 20th century "their creation looks very much like what it was intended to replace." This story is compelling in itself, but Lemann's exploration of how the politics of American meritocracy turn on the issue of race makes his history absolutely indispensable to current affirmative action and education debates. Lemann's treatment of the 1996 battle over California's anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 convincingly shows how what is nominally a democratic process actually works. The current crises in American education have deep roots: "America had channeled all the opportunity through the educational system and then had failed to create schools and colleges that would work for everybody, because that was very expensive and voters didn't want to pay for it." The real costs of this situation are now clear; anyone concerned about it should heed this book. Agent, Amanda Urban, ICM. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Although this book is a bit too long and deviates into individual histories that are interesting, but not completely relevant to the main issue, the main ideas of Leman's book are tremendously important for any thinking American. Not really a history of the SAT, the book is more a history of post-war attitudes towards what we think of when we think of an "elite" or an "aristocracy of intellect," etc. The book is an important one to read, especially now when our society is becoming much more similar to Mexico and the Philippines in its disparity of wealth and class than it is to the image of itself in the years, 1945-80. With one per cent of the population controlling forty per cent of the wealth, we really need to ask some basic questions about where we are headed as a nation. This book begins that discussion. I am amazed that Leeman wrote it a decade ago.Leman's "Afterword to the Paperback Edition" (343-51) is of critical importance to the message of this book. If you have no time to read any other part of the book, read these pages. Here is where his whole history of American efforts to define or create a "meritocracy" hits home: "The chief aim of school should be not to sort people, but to teach as many people as possible as well as possible, equipping them for both work and citizenship...The purpose of schools should be to expand opportunity, not to determine results" (348). He turns the idea of the SAT to a critically political interpretation: "The culture of frenzy surrounding admissions is destructive and anti-democratic; it warps the sensibilities and distorts the education of the millions of people whose lives it touches" (351). This is brilliant thinking and clear thinking. Leman has linked the (now distorted)goals of higher education in this country to the perverse societal structure that it continues to produce. One does not have to be a leftist or progressive to understand the danger of such a direction for our country. One need only be a patriot.

Although the background of the SAT is only part of this book (not the whole thing, as the title would lead you to believe), the history of the SAT that is presented is fascinating, and probably the best part of the book. The book shows how colleges and universities, which were originally intended to promote scholarship and educate professors, had their focus changed by standardized testing (in the author's opinion) and eventually became seen as the gateway to well-paying careers for those people who were not born into wealth and privilege. The author also portrays the class differences and the struggle for public funds between different types of colleges - private vs. public, and community college with the more advanced institutions of higher learning.The SAT was intended to provide an impartial system of separating the best and the brightest students from others. I am sure that by now the vast majority of Americans who have taken the SAT and other standardized tests - in some cases over and over - are well aware of their limitations and the fact that some otherwise smart people just do not do well on such tests. Nevertheless, this book makes a compelling case that with the advent of the SAT and the ensuing competition between colleges for the students with the best scores, many socioeconomically or educationally disadvantaged people (perhaps disproportionately African-American) are being excluded, not just from a supposedly better education, but also from the better job opportunities that a highly ranked school brings, based on their inability to score well on standardized tests.It's unclear just who (if anyone) is the "villain" in this story. One gets the impression that the author meant to write a condemnation of the standardized testing industry. However, the history of the test shows that it did serve to open the doors of higher education for some immigrant and minority groups, such as Jews and Asians. Also, the schools themselves, as well as the people who regard doing well on a standardized test and getting into a "good" school to be the be-all and end-all of success, come off as being pretty screwed up. As other reviewers have noted, the author insinuates that not doing well on the SAT, and consequently not getting into a top school, is a big handicap in life; perhaps this is what he was taught by his own family or culture. The reality is that some people manage to do well in life without scoring highly on tests or going to an "elite" school and the importance of both aspects is likely overemphasized by the author, just as it is overemphasized by some segments of society.Midway through, the book shifts gears and devotes the last section to highly personalized descriptions of a legislative struggle over public school tax funding and affirmative action. While those who are interested in the state legislative process might enjoy the insights, I thought this section went on way too long and in the end did not portray any of the schools or people involved, much less affirmative action programs, in a positive light. Nor did I think that the problems and issues involved were that related to SAT

scores as the author would like you to believe. I think this should have been an entirely different book, and the story of the SAT might have been better just told on its own and left for the reader to think about, rather than grafting on what seems to be an obvious agenda on the part of the author.

Educational

When my daughters were just beginning the college admissions process a mere three years ago, I had no idea how things had changed or why--and the degree to which my own experience of the process had become irrelevant. This book does much to make that all clear, in prose which smacks of Tom Wolfe and is peopled with fascinating vignettes of characters, known and unknown: from Presidents James Bryant Conant, Clark Kerr, and Kingman Brewster to Henry Chauncy, "Inky" Clark, and Molly Munger, just to name a few. Lemann’s thesis is essentially one of good intentions gone painfully awry. The Ivy League and other highly selective colleges have been debrided of old families and old money, only to be replaced by the narrowly proficient and unduly ambitious. It’s not a pretty picture and one wants to believe it less important than Lemann and many applicants and their parents think. Much of the book appeared in a series of articles in the New Yorker and, unfortunately, is not much better than the sum of its parts. But I still heartily recommend this book. It puts our elite in focus and gives perspective to one of the most debated issues of our time--affirmative action.

If you read this book, please also read Thomas Sowell’s recent Quest for Cosmic Justice. Lemann spends this whole book trying to figure out how some undefined "we" (by which he means people of his own academic and cultural background) can arrange life and society so that money, power, prestige, etc. are distributed and redistributed "fairly" without ever defining what that is.This is a foolishe, authoritarian and doomed quest -- ultimately it leads to the Pol Pots of the world. Sowell’s book explains the fatal flaw in this kind of arrogant reasoning.By the way, I went to law school with one of the principal characters in the book. She wasn’t nearly as interesting, then or now, as the author tries to make her.

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