

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 19, Issue 1

2019

Article 6

RECKONING WITH APPETITE

Educated: A Memoir

Lydia Maunz-Breese*

*University of Iowa, lydia-maunz@uiowa.edu

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Educated: A Memoir

Lydia Maunz-Breese

***Educated: A Memoir.* Westover, Tara. Random House, February 2018. 335 pp. \$28.00 Hardcover.**

The starkness of the single word title of Tara Westover's 2018 memoir, *Educated*, launches multiple possibilities of interpretation. Educated by whom? For what? To what purpose? It is all of these stories. Her educational endeavors form the narrative's three-part division: childhood and, against all odds, attendance at Brigham Young University and then Cambridge University. Following a loosely chronological form, her narrative is structured around essay-like chapters that begin when Westover was seven. Her memoir tracks her isolated, rural upbringing as one of seven children in a family of Mormon fundamentalists and extremist survivalists in mountainous Idaho. Her father, Gene, supported the family through his junkyard and construction business until suffering severe burns in a junking accident. Her mother, Faye, an herbalist and midwife, began what has since become a hugely successful essential oil company. Westover's reader accompanies her to "a new self" through a harrowing, sometimes heartbreakingly painful journey as she distances herself from a family life of diabolical complexity, stifling regulation, determinism, and unquestioning belief (329). Her narrative chronicles her struggle to understand and define herself as her own individual rather than as "a foot soldier in a conflict I did not understand," concluding with her completion of her doctorate at Cambridge University (181).

Part one begins with her childhood “education.” The scare quotes are justified here for there was nothing systematized or formal about it. Through a series of horrendous accidents and mishaps scrapping in her father’s junkyard, Westover learned about the laws of applied physics. She was lucky to survive. Classroom schooling? There was none. Westover’s parents did not send any of their seven children to public school: homeschooling would shield them from the government’s reach and “brainwashing” influence. But any pretense of homeschooling was obliterated by her father’s frantic efforts both to put food on the table and to prepare for the “Days of Abomination,” the end of time he was convinced was at hand. Lacking institutional certifications like birth, medical, and school records, her world was bounded by her family’s survivalist beliefs and their selective rejection of modern culture and society.

At the age of 17, after teaching herself enough to pass the ACT, Westover steps into a classroom for the first time at Brigham Young University and part two begins. She details her increasingly dismal efforts to find a place at BYU. Struggling in her classes and to fit into a social world she had almost no experience of, Westover writes with pathos and poignancy of the chasm that divides her from everything outside of her survivalist family. This physical and psychological dislocation was severe; she describes learning about the Holocaust and the civil rights movement for the first time, learning that Europe is a continent and not a country. Her cultural and intellectual voids were exacerbated by the shock and offense taken by those encountering her ignorance. Her growing awareness that her “normal” doesn’t match up with anyone else’s “normal” coincides with the realization that she lacks the means to communicate with others who operate under different ideas, ideals, goals, and values than those held by her family. Westover explains, “I’d never learned how to talk to people who weren’t like us—people who went to school and visited the doctor. Who weren’t preparing, every day, for the End of the World” (85-86). Her childhood had given her little of the shared unconscious language of commonly held ideals and collective knowledge.

The final part of her narrative is defined by winning a Gates Cambridge scholarship to attend Cambridge University where this child of the mountains, this child of survivalists whose primary goal is to live “off the grid” safe from the clutches of the federal government, the “medical establishment,” the Illuminati, and other institutions of “socialism” and unrighteousness—this child goes on to earn her masters in philosophy and then her PhD in history. But Westover’s narrative is never a triumphal progression from strength to strength. She chronicles the psychological and physical breakdowns and disintegrations that occurred coeval with her growing access to knowledge and education. Renounced by her family as foresworn and possessed by demonic influences, Westover continues to be estranged from her parents and other members of her family.

Westover's parents, especially her father goaded by possible bipolar disorder to increasing degrees of "paranoia and fundamentalism," were uneasy with uncertainty or shades of grey and enforced a black and white worldview delineated by good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, believers and nonbelievers (30). Their fundamentalism stripped away uncertainty and ambiguity. As she describes it, "my father had taught me that there are not two reasonable opinions to be had on any subject: there is Truth and there are Lies" (132). Her father taught her that books were to be either adored or exiled. Books that were of God—books written by the Mormon prophets or the Founding Fathers—were not to be studied so much as cherished, like a thing perfect in itself.... I read them to learn what to think, not how to think for myself. Books that were not of God were banished; they were a danger, powerful and irresistible in their cunning. (240)

Westover explores the rigidity of such reductive thinking that forces the world and all its complexity into unnuanced, unshaded, single stories with their assurances of universal truth. Readers familiar with Chimamanda Adichie might recognize the danger of a single story—the danger of diminishing complexity into wieldy but inaccurate oversimplifications and reductive stereotypes. Westover reminds us that "We are all of us more complicated than the roles we are assigned in the stories other people tell" (334). Through the luminous clarity of her prose, she illustrates the damage done when the totality of an individual is reduced to someone else's single story. For her, that single story often revolved around her femininity. As a woman, her identity was limited by family, belief, tradition, religion to expectations that she fill the role of subservient daughter and future subservient wife and mother. Because of this narrative, her sense of a "worth that was inherent and unshakable" is recast as an awareness of her "maturing body, of its evils and of my desire to do evil with it" (119). This leaves her feeling her own worth as "conditional, like it could be taken or squandered. It was not inherent; it was bestowed. What was of worth was not *me*, but the veneer of constraints and observances that obscured me" (119). Stories, used to strip us of our senses of identity, personhood, and individuality, lead to feelings of dependence, isolation, and incompleteness.

Westover's narrative takes on unexpected usefulness and urgency by encouraging the questioning of certainty in belief, opinion, and the conviction that our own stories adequately encapsulate the totality of experience and existence. She describes the inherent difficulty that "To admit uncertainty is to admit to weakness, to powerlessness, and to believe in yourself despite both" (197). She goes on to say, "It is a frailty, but in this frailty there is a strength: the conviction to live in your own mind, and not in someone else's" (197). Westover's memoir finds hope in the following: cultivate an ability to dwell in uncertainty; cultivate the capacity to differentiate the absence of knowledge as a willful lack or disregard; embrace a willing acknowledgement of the limitations of the known. And all these can be found through education. Less about facts,

knowledge, and institutions of higher learning, Westover's definition of education is a "path of awareness," (180) to "a new self" (329). However, that path of awareness conceals her reliance on institutions of higher learning, one of the blind spots in an otherwise powerful narrative.

But there are moments of beautiful illumination and grace. For Westover, her introduction to chorale music is a transformative experience. Such moments involve the construction of "mental language[s]" developed through the diverse vocabularies of mathematics, music, art, books, history, and philosophy. These languages create a lingua franca for creative exchange, storytelling, and meaning-making vital for societal engagement and reform, social justice, and civil discourse (206). This is the value of education and also what defines a valuable education. It allows us to access other parts of ourselves—the beautiful, painful necessity of the shaping and developing of individuality.

The power of this kind of education is twofold: it provides the means of connecting and engaging with the complexity and diversity around us, while also fostering ways to develop a capacious sense of self constructed on the capacity for a multiplicity of narratives with which to make sense of a complex self and multi-storied worldview. Westover sums it up neatly saying,

Everything I had worked for, all my years of study, had been to purchase for myself this one privilege: to see and experience more truths than those given to me by my father; and to use those truths to construct my own mind. I had come to believe that the ability to evaluate many ideas, many histories, many points of view, was at the heart of what it means to self-create. If I yielded now, I would lose more than an argument. I would lose custody of my own mind.... What my father wanted to cast from me wasn't a demon: it was me. (304)

This is the glory and the power of Westover's memoir, as well as the pain—that it shows us the potential of such an education, as well as the strangling, rigidity that festers in its absence.