

Tara Westover and the Contradictions Which Allowed Her to Write a NYT Bestseller

Human beings love a good rags-to-riches story. As proof of this, consider the enduring popularity of the fairy tale 'Cinderella.'

In recent years, Americans have put their own unique twist on this genre: the memoirs of people who achieved success after escaping the white working class. Famous examples include *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls and *Hillbilly Elegy* by J.D. Vance.

A dubious addition to this canon is 2018's [*Educated*](#) by Tara Westover which hit #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Months later, it is still holding on at #2 behind *Becoming* by Michelle Obama.

Westover tells the story of her upbringing in a strict Mormon, survivalist family in Idaho. She did not grow up in physical poverty of the kind Jeanette Walls describes in *The Glass Castle*. Rather, Westover believes she was raised in intellectual poverty, claiming she received next-to-no education. However, as a teenager she studied on her own, was accepted to college, and later earned a Ph.D. at Cambridge University and completed a fellowship at Harvard.

Westover seems to have carefully selected the elements of her upbringing that will make her family appear backwards. By the time she wrote *Educated*, she had already spent years moving in elite liberal circles. She clearly figured out exactly which buttons to push:

- Her family doesn't go to normal doctors.
- They don't believe in formal schooling.

- They own guns. Lots of them.
- They worry the government will come after them.

Her family is the embodiment of Barack Obama's infamous 2008 comments about people who are "bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them...." Given this, perhaps it is not surprising that Obama himself publicly [praised](#) *Educated* as a "remarkable memoir."

Westover dwells on embarrassing details like the fact that she wasn't taught to wash her hands after using the bathroom. She speculates that her father has undiagnosed bipolar disorder. (Despite all her degrees, she hasn't learned that most people believe their parents are insane.)

She is honest about being raised Mormon but frames her upbringing as more broadly Christian. She makes a lot of vague references to reading the Bible and attending church. She describes how her family is always stockpiling supplies for when the world ends, but she doesn't explain that this is a significant tenet of Mormon theology. She writes about attending counseling sessions with the "Bishop" of her church. That's a job title that's used in many denominations and can mean vastly different things. But Westover does not elucidate what role a "Bishop" plays in Mormonism.

Westover's downplaying of the explicitly Mormon elements of her family's religious beliefs seems like another attempt to score points with her liberal readership. This way they can associate the backwards Westover family with their crazy Baptist cousins or their eccentric Catholic uncle.

Educated is also full of contradictions. Her mother was – gasp! – an unlicensed midwife. Westover says her family believed drugs provided by hospitals were "an abomination to God." Yet she also writes that once – when a delivery her mother was attending started to go wrong – her mother personally drove the woman in labor to the hospital.

The biggest contradiction of all is Westover's constant bemoaning of the fact that she never attended school as a child. Her subsequent academic success proves that either her education at home was far more substantial than she admits or that grade school education is unnecessary.

Westover writes, "I'd learned to read and write by reading only the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and speeches by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young." That sounds like a pretty good education. Millions of students across America are basically [illiterate](#), yet she was reading the most influential book in human history, the Bible, and also working her way through heavy 19th century texts.

Westover has six older siblings, and two of them earned Ph.D.s just like she did. That does not square with her depiction of a family that despises book learning.

She recounts how she confessed to an eminent professor at Cambridge University that she never attended school. His response was, "How marvelous. It's as if I've stepped into Shaw's 'Pygmalion.'" If he isn't bothered, why should she be?

Westover's parents could have dumped her in the sausage grinder of their local public school. She seems to believe that is exactly what they should have done. She refuses to admit that if they had taken the conventional path, she would not be where she is today: an academic with impressive credentials and the author of a #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

Perhaps a little gratitude to her parents is in order. Sadly, it does not seem to be forthcoming.

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