Pride and Prejudice

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the Cohen novel, the central character is Anne Elliot, whose own family and in a Florida retirement community, is outrageously funny.) How better to investigate and satirize contemporary mores than through the eyes of a high-
school guidance counselor who is juggling the demands of status-hungry parents and their anxious children?

In the Austen novel, the central character is Anne Elliot, the daughter of Sir Walter Elliot, a widower who has spent his family into near poverty; Anne is a spinster who years earlier had been persuaded by her snobbish family to abandon her true love because he was not up to their elevated social standards. In the Cohen novel, the central character is Anne Ehrlich, whose own family and personal history reflect the story of Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot.

The big difference between the two novels, of course, is that Anne Ehrlich has a day job, which puts her in charge of college admissions at Fenimore High School. This is the process that stands at the very nexus of parental strivings and ambitions. To her office troop hordes of angry parents, insisting that

she raise their child’s grade-point average by a fraction of a point or that she classify their daughter as learning disabled so she can have extra time on the SATs or that she push their son to apply to the father’s alma mater even though the boy lacks the grades to get in.

The Secret: Push and Package

Anyone who has any awareness of the pressure on high-school students to get into Ivy League colleges will enjoy this novel. I laughed out loud frequently as I read her fictional description of life in the guidance office at Fenimore High. Cohen has hit a bull’s-eye in describing the lengths to which parents (and sometimes students) will go to gain entry to the best colleges, where applicants often have only a 10 percent chance of being admitted as freshmen.

Parents at Fenimore listen raptly as Curtis Fink of Fink Educational Consultants advises them on how to get their son or daughter into a top school. The secret, he says, is “push and package.” Push them to study and do their work, but that’s not enough. The real trick is packaging. Like the boy who was a couch potato who got into Haverford; the consultant said, I “gave him a political spin and turned him into the Westchester Gandhi.” It is not good enough, he warns parents, for your child to be a music genius. If he makes all-state orchestra, that’s still not good enough. He has to “cluster his assets” by joining a regional wind ensemble or a rock band that opens for Bruce Springsteen or tutoring underprivileged children in music or writing a music column for Slate. What about the child who has never won an honor or an award, asks a parent? Easy, says the consultant: get on the Internet and find contests in small literary magazines that no one reads. “Dig up the kid’s old papers and submit them. If nothing else, you’ll get a certificate of recognition that you can put down on the application. Admissions officers don’t read these things too closely. If you’re lucky, they’ll think the kid won.”

Anne Ehrlich has to contend with ambitious parents who want their children to get into top colleges regardless of the students own ability or interest. She keeps rocking chairs in her office, hoping that they will calm emotional supplicants. Some wealthy professionals try to bully her into writing letters that will help their children’s chances at colleges they are unlikely to be admitted to. Others threaten litigation. This is a constant fear, since the previous head guidance counselor lost his job after he miscalculated a student’s grade-point average and the parents sued and extracted a six-figure settlement from the school district.

The school principal is a decent man, but he too feels the pressure from parents and knows that his tenure depends on their good will. He is not above asking Anne to write a recommendation to Georgetown for a student whose parents are important in the local community, even though a more highly qualified student also wants to go to Georgetown but has “no parental muscle behind her.” Both the guidance counselor and the principal know that Georgetown “has a habit of taking only one a year from Fenimore,” and Anne absolutely refuses to undercut the deserving student.

As the book unfolds, we learn about “helicopter moms,” who “hovered above [their] progeny ready to make a rapid, vertical landing at the slightest provocation,” and “ripple kids,” the ones whom
third-tier colleges eagerly seek out because their “coolness” and their aura as trendsetters will attract other students. The guidance counselor’s office is stuffed with identical gorgeous brochures, all pitching “a unique educational experience.” The community is brimming with franchise offices of Princeton Review, Stanley Kaplan, SAT tutors, and other purveyors of special courses to prepare students to beat the SATs. Students learn principles, strategies, and commandments. “The key to SAT taking is to skim,” says one successful tutor, who has a line of Mercedes-Benzes and Lexuses outside his door. “If you start to concentrate on what the questions really mean, you’ll realize how stupid they are and never get anywhere.”

When Anne is not dealing with parents who want their child labeled as ADD (attention deficit disorder) to get extra privileges or with a student who is thinking of transferring to a nearby high school to improve her class ranking, she is coping with the shock of once again meeting her lost love, who has enrolled his nephew in Fenimore High School. As in a Jane Austen novel, all things work out for the best for the deserving, and Anne

Ehrlich eventually gets the man she had lost 13 years earlier. And we, gentle readers, get many opportunities not only to enjoy a good story, but to laugh at the absurdities of the college admissions process and to ponder the wreckage of academic values.

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