



ALL POINTS BOOKS

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**CONTACT:** Leah Johanson, Publicity Manager  
(646) 307-5557 | [Leah.Johanson@stmartins.com](mailto:Leah.Johanson@stmartins.com)

“Provocative...this passionate plea to reconsider ‘what it means to be a worthwhile person’ gives policymakers and educators much to think about.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

# THE CULT OF SMART

*How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice*

**By Fredrik deBoer**

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Everyone agrees that education is the key to creating a more just and equal world, and that our schools are broken and failing. Proposed reforms variously target incompetent teachers, corrupt union practices, or outdated curricula, but no one acknowledges a scientifically-proven fact that we all understand intuitively: academic potential varies between individuals, and cannot be dramatically improved. In **THE CULT OF SMART: *How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice***, educator and outspoken leftist **Fredrik deBoer** exposes this omission as the central flaw of our entire society, which has created and perpetuated an unjust class structure based on intellectual ability.

In **THE CULT OF SMART**, deBoer decries the societally-accepted view that academic value is the only value and that intelligence is the only true measure of human worth. If being smart is the only thing that matters, then you must be a failed human being if you aren't. If you have lost out in the great American race up the ladder, failing to make it to some elite college and therefore to the financial and social capital that such an education brings, you must have been too lazy. But hundreds of studies conducted over decades support the idea that not everyone is born with the same academic gifts. It is a scientifically-proven fact that we all understand intuitively: academic potential varies between individuals, and cannot be dramatically improved.

Since cognitive talent varies from person to person, our education system can never create equal opportunity for all. Instead, it teaches our children that hierarchy and competition are natural, and that human value should be based on intelligence. These ideas are counter to everything that the left believes, but until they acknowledge the existence of individual cognitive differences, progressives remain complicit in keeping the status quo in place.

This passionate, voice-driven manifesto demands that we embrace a new goal for education: equality of outcomes. We must create a world that has a place for everyone, not just the academically talented. But we'll never achieve this dream until the Cult of Smart is destroyed.

### **About the Author**

**FREDRIK DEBOER** is a writer and academic with a PhD from Purdue University. His writing has appeared in such places as The New York Times, Harper's, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Politico, Playboy, New Republic, Foreign Policy, n+1, and Jacobin. He is one of the most original and prolific voices in essays today, and his anti-tribal style has earned him admiration from political thinkers of all quadrants.

### **About the Book**

**THE CULT OF SMART: *How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice***  
By Fredrik deBoer

**Hardcover | 9781250200372 | \$28.99**

**eBook | 9781250200389 | \$14.99**

### **Advance Praise for THE CULT OF SMART**

“There’s a mystery at the heart of American life: Why has education—the great liberal equalizer—failed to deliver equality? In deBoer’s searing indictment of our modern meritocracy, he rightly observes that the usual explanations don’t add up—and that they crucially shift blame from a society that makes lesser intelligence a veritable death sentence onto schools, teachers, and families.”

—**Elizabeth Bruenig, *New York Times* Opinion Writer**

“George Orwell once wrote that among his gifts was ‘a power of facing unpleasant facts.’ Fredrik deBoer also has that power, in spades. The first unpleasant fact he forces us to confront is: We do not all have the same level of academic ability. And the second is: Such differences do not reduce our responsibility to address the profound inequities of our educational system. This is a cogent, beautifully written, and radically challenging book. It has made me profoundly uncomfortable.”

—**Alan Jacobs, author of *Breaking Bread with the Dead***

“In a moment where intellectual ‘independence’ often functions as a personal-branding nostrum or cover for reactionary impieties, Freddie deBoer stands out as the genuine article—deliberate, wide-ranging, lionhearted, and invariably worth reading. This book is not only an important contribution to our educational debates, but an altogether discomfiting look at our fetish for meritocracy.”

—**Gideon Lewis-Kraus, author of *A Sense of Direction***

## Talking Points for Fredrik deBoer's THE CULT OF SMART

- In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the uneducated labor market collapsed and the only high-percentage path to economic security began to run through college
- This coincided with a deepening fixation on education as the most important endeavor in human life (explicitly stated) and on intelligence as the sole criterion of human worth (implicit)
- However only a third of American adults hold a bachelor's degree, with many dropping out/failing out of high school and many more self-selecting out of college admissions
- This is presumed to be a failure of teachers and their unions, leading to a full-throated neoliberal embrace of bad ideas like charter schools and private school vouchers
- But those things can't fix what's wrong because they do not address the biggest part of academic ability, which is intrinsic/genetic predisposition
- The described predisposition is about parentage, not race, describing why two individuals have unequal academic outcomes, not racial achievement gaps
- The existence and power of genetic dispositions in academic ability have been demonstrated by literally hundreds of high-quality studies that replicate each other and that find again and again that genetic influence can explain .5 - .8 of the variation in educational metrics within the population
- Intrinsic ability goes undiscussed because it is fallaciously associated with racist ideas about group differences in academic ability, and because it challenges the neoliberal paradigm for society – go to school and you too can be part of the professional managerial class
- If intrinsic ability is real and powerful it means our current system cannot serve a majority of those within it; half of everyone will always be below average on educational metrics
- What's more, intrinsic ability undermines the very case for meritocracy itself: if we cannot determine our own position on the academic ladder, the moral argument that you get what you deserve falls away; no one can choose their genetic makeup
- Instead of attempting to achieve equality of outcomes with bad school reform ideas, we should recognize that differences in intrinsic human abilities, of all kinds, makes the notion of just deserts in a capitalist economy absurd
- We should thus replace the capitalist system, either through reform or revolution, with one that fights to ensure equality of outcomes through cash transfer and the distribution of power to the people