

up so much of his time and I rarely got a chance to be alone with him and talk about poetry.

While I was still at Deerfield I had started reading Auden and was dazzled by his poetry. I was particularly drawn to his *mélange* of different, clashing styles—spoken conversation, popular songs, greeting cards, newspaper headlines, and on the other hand Old and Middle English. Auden gave a couple of readings at Harvard and I met him. I also ran into him on the street in Harvard Square one day when I was writing my thesis on him and he gave me some ideas on how to write it. After I moved to New York I got to know him better.

*Some Trees* was my submission to Yale University Press for the Younger Poets Prize in 1956. I could have submitted it directly to Auden, who was the judge, but they returned it not having forwarded it to him, and Frank had the same experience. Then it turned out Auden was not satisfied with the other manuscripts they had sent to him—he was on Ischia at that time, where he had a summer home. Chester Kallman wrote Auden to tell him that O'Hara and I had had ours returned, and Auden asked to see them. We sent them to him in Ischia, and he chose mine, which was my triumph over Yale University Press. I recently discovered, reading the letters of James Schuyler, that Auden hadn't really liked either of our manuscripts, but he needed money and wouldn't get paid unless he chose something. Anyway, I graciously accepted.

## The Red Badge of Dishonor

Being a legacy admission is the dark secret of many an undergraduate. But is the reputation of being undeserving itself undeserved?

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

AT HARVARD, EVERYONE knows the legacy kid. He's the prep in the crest-embellished blazer and rep tie, sipping a pre-prandial G-and-T in his room before sauntering off to the Porcellian for a champagne-soaked dinner — while the plebes burrow into the library to grind out their pathetic A's. A **DUBYA**, in other words, transplanted to the Yard.

The only problem is, such a character, or even a distant approximation of such a character, is hard actually to find on a campus so rife with overachievers. It's a bit like hunting Bigfoot: Everyone has heard of him, but no one has actually seen him. Partly it's because legacies lay low, knowing they're a highly charged subject. The *Crimson* regularly

fulminates against legacies; the public gives a thumbs-down in opinion polls; and Sen. **EDWARD KENNEDY**—himself a legacy who'd enlisted a classmate to take his Spanish exam—has filed federal legislation to help end such favoritism.

So legacies know better than to out themselves. "Certain people boast about partying all the time," says **JESSICA MANNERS**, a senior whose father was a Harvard grad. "But legacies? That's a secret. Nobody boasts about that." Adds fellow senior **SPENCER BERMAN LAZAR**, whose father, two of his father's sisters, and grandfather all went to Harvard, "I like the anonymity of people not knowing." Plus, as a believer in "distributive justice," he

finds it hard to defend. "It's like something in my history I am not proud of."

Thus most undergraduates have no clue who is one, and, truth to tell, don't particularly care. Even legacies themselves have faulty radars for those Winston T. Z. Throttlebottoms of lore, although many of them *think* they have seen such a specimen, or at least hints of one. One sophomore legacy who preferred to remain anonymous described the process by which he detected one in a class during his freshman year. "He was less articulate than everybody else, and had not done the reading." But was he a legacy? He hesitated. "Actually, I'm not sure." Then he brightened. "But he was wearing a polo shirt."

The truth is, legacy students aren't much different from everybody else on campus. They're as likely to be public-school graduates as they are to be preppies, and they come from all over the country. Yes, they are whiter, and richer, than non-legacies, but that simply reflects the socio-economic mix of Harvard's admissions policy of their parents' eras; as Harvard students become more diverse, so will their offspring. And yes, of course they had an advantage in getting in, or this would not be an issue, but the advantage is slight.

**DANIEL GOLDEN**, in his book *The Price of Admission*, which assails discriminatory admissions policies of elite colleges like Harvard, nailed other varieties of unfairness, showing how parental fame,

parental money, and a student's athleticism can win not-so-bright applicants a thick envelope in April. The case against legacies isn't nearly so strong. In 2002, Harvard admitted 40 percent of legacies compared to 11 percent of other applicants — which certainly sounds unfair. But Harvard parents' children are likely to be better students than the average, and the SAT shortfall of legacies is scant (just a 50-point difference, or about 3 percent, out of the possible 1600), which may be explained by the fact that legacies, confident of their admission advantage, don't go nuts trying to push up their scores.

Rather than slack off at Harvard, most legacies seem to have an extra incentive to do well: They want to prove their detractors wrong. Spencer Berman Lazar, for example, felt a need "to prove to myself and to my family that I belonged." An economics concentrator and straight-A student, he was an extracurricular whirlwind, active in the Model U.N., WHRB radio, the Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, the pan-collegiate *Current* magazine (founded by 02138's own editors **BOM KIM** and **DANIEL LOSS**), and an Internet consulting company. "I put in a lot of 16-hour days," he says.

Freshman **JULIA HORNIG** freely grants that she caught a break. She was a fabled "Z-lister"—a well-connected admittee with a subpar academic record required to take a year off before coming to Harvard. At Dalton, she so rarely attended class



“degenerates,” the ones with no college ambitions. Her grades were unexceptional, and her SATs merely adequate. The legacy saved her. Now that she is at Harvard, she has vowed to make it up to the better students she displaced. “I owe it to them to take advantage of the opportunity,” she says. “It’s kind of a guilt thing.” So she cracks the books as never before, never skips class, does service work in Mission Hill, and, this year, was in charge of putting on the Hasty Pudding’s Woman of the Year parade featuring Scarlett Johansson.

Harvard defends the legacy privilege on the grounds that it offers graduates added incentive to shell out when the development office comes calling. It also deepens the institutional memory of a college, allowing Harvard parents to solidify their bonds to their old school. And oddly enough, legacies may take some of the pressure off a school that is otherwise packed with overachievers. “It’s a relaxer,” Hornig says. “It means I’m, like, normal,

and we don’t all have to be geniuses. We can talk about sports.”

And that St. Grottlesex slacker? He’s largely a figure of yesteryear. One legacy kid had heard about such a fellow from his father. Raccoon coat, old-Boston lockjaw accent. After arriving late to section one afternoon, he explained what had delayed him: “I totaled the Jag.”

The most reliable recent sighting occurred in the Yard five years ago, when a St. Paul’s grad who must remain nameless did indeed, with a posse of his prep-school classmates, start mixing gin-and-tonics at 5 p.m., and then repaired en masse to the Fly Club, where they remained until well past midnight, getting nicely potted. Such ongoing antics presumed his transition from Harvard into the world would be as smooth as from St. Paul’s into Harvard. Well, not quite. “He’s now doing some shit job in Kansas City,” said an informant with a chuckle. “And I bet he’s thinking, ‘This is not how I planned it.’”

## Best Job Ever!

Forget medicine, law, politics, and business. This pair of dissidents has forged a new career of on-camera mouthing off.

BY MICHAEL COLTON & JOHN ABOUD

AS THIS MAGAZINE tirelessly reminds us with its snazzy red underlines, Harvard University has produced Nobel Prize winners,

financial titans, medical geniuses, literary giants, even MICHAEL DUKAKIS. But as accomplished as these graduates may be, none of them strug-



gles with the formidable challenge that we two proud sons of Harvard face every week: coming up with fresh jokes about Paris Hilton.

Though our day job is writing groundbreaking screenplays and television pilots that never see the light of day, we also have a steady gig as pop-culture commentators on the cable network VH1—home of shows such as *Best Week Ever*, *I Love the 70s*, *I Love the 80s*, *I Love the 90s*, even *I Love Toys*. (Though, truth be told, we are only lukewarm about toys.) We once branched out to Country Music Television, sticking our heads inside a giant foam Yule log to deconstruct Christmas-themed videos. In retrospect, that was a poor choice.

After seeing us mock Britney and Lindsay on TV, people often ask us, “Don’t you think you’re wasting your Harvard degree? You could be a doctor, a lawyer, something important.” To which we usually reply, “Enough, Dad! I get it!”

We certainly do not view our VH1 work as undignified, not even the segments about *The Bachelor*. In fact, our studies at Harvard perfectly prepared us for a career in the snarky arts. You can see the roots in our senior theses: “The Upskirt:

Continuity and Change in Celebrity Genital Photography, 1904-1963” (Michael, VES); “Oh No, You Didn’t!: Bitches, Sluts, and Catfights in the Novels of Jane Austen” (John, History and Literature).

Indeed, snarkiness is as rich a Harvard tradition as grade inflation. Who can forget Supreme Court Justice HARRY BLACKMUN telling STEPHEN BREYER that ANTONIN SCALIA had gained so much weight, “he makes ANTHONY KENNEDY look like RUTH BADER GINSBURG!” Hilarious.

We believe that our appearances on VH1 serve a valuable cultural function—as vital as whatever it is that hippie DR. WEIL does. A stable society depends upon common experiences and shared points of reference, especially stupid ones. We may never get a national consensus on tax policy, but we can all agree that Rosie O’Donnell is grating. Or that Tara Reid’s drunken mishaps are delightfully grotesque. Or that it’s now acceptable to listen to Justin Timberlake. By cracking wise about such matters of state, we provide the moronic glue that holds our fragile, dumb democracy together. Mocking the latest plot turns on *Grey’s Anatomy*

is completely in keeping with the Harvard call to service. It’s not as selfless as, say, running a hedge fund, but then, what is?

Another reason we take pride in our work is because it denies airtime to old Eli. To our horror, the *Yale Daily News* recently reported that many Yale alumni are appearing on Comedy Central, which could reflect “a shift in the dynamics of television comedy away from Harvard’s traditional dominance.” This raises an important question: Why were we reading the *Yale Daily News*?

Now that we have blazed a basic-cable trail, we encourage other graduates to follow in our footsteps. “Ironic punditry” may not be a priority for the Office of Career Services, but you should know that our job has its perks: VH1 pays us literally *hundreds* of dollars a week. And consider this: Lawyers don’t get recognized on the street by teenage girls. Well, maybe Dershowitz.

Our advice to the talking heads of tomorrow is as simple as Jessica Simpson. The pop-culture commentary track has the same demands as a career in politics, finance, or science: hard work, determination, and the ability to tell the Olsen twins apart. With any luck, one day you, too, will use the critical thinking skills that Harvard taught you to dissect the latest celebrity sex tape.

MICHAEL COLTON AND JOHN ABOUD ARE AMONG THE WRITERS OF THE UPCOMING FILM *THE COMEBACKS*. THEY ARE ALSO FEATURED ON THE DVD OF *BEVERLY HILLS 90210*, SEASON 2, BUT YOU PROBABLY ALREADY KNEW THAT.