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All Loves Excelling

Josiah Bunting III
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Amanda Bahringer, the unsure seventeen-year-old main character of Bunting's novel, is perhaps too easily summed up by her boarding school hallmaster as a "Triple burden. Parent ambition. Parent protection. Wanted another one." Her affluent Long Island parents have shipped her off to the highly revered St. Matthew's for a postgraduate year because her high school grades and test scores weren't high enough for acceptance into Dartmouth College.

Bunting's persuasive satire manifests in the grueling regiment of tough advanced placement courses, exhausting cross-country track races, uninspiring piano practices and extra SAT preparation classes—all in the name of a perfect college application—which causes many of St. Matthew's students to become "systemic departures." Save the elder headmaster, Dr. Passmore, who nurtures her poetic sensibilities, Amanda meets few friends and takes too seriously her self-centered mother's admonition, "Don't let us down."

In this Ivy League-worshipping world ruled by numbers, Amanda obsesses over a 1600 SAT, a 4.0 GPA and a five-mile run in under eighteen minutes. As the novel progresses, this shy young woman sinks deeper and deeper into a quicksand of expectations and disappointment. In an effort to shave thirty seconds from her race time, the 112-pound Amanda starves herself and develops an eating disorder. She also begins to abuse her prescription medications, dosing out on Halcion, Inderal and other drugs to perk up or calm down as needed. The latter half of the story is told in part through journal entries that aptly portray Amanda's deterioration and breakdown.

As a former boarding school headmaster, college president, and current superintendent of Virginia Military Institute, Bunting understands all too well the skewed values and consuming pressures of education. Author of two novels, The Lionheads and The Advent of Frederick Giles, and the nonfiction, An Education for Our Time, Bunting's able prose could have better buried his lesson. His sincere and empathetic rendering, however, stands out as a poignant read for parents and their college-bound sons and daughters.
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