

Eli's Children

Gerard G. Nahum

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Eli's Children provides an interesting look at a privileged world that, though coveted, also has its dangers.

Gerard G. Nahum's *Eli's Children* is a quiet novel about one young man's coming-of-age journey, related through the lens of his four years of college. Centered on themes of arrogance, ego, intelligence, and growth, the novel serves as a mini-portrait of the journey many college-goers take as they move from initial acceptance to final graduation.

When Joshua Clafston receives his acceptance to the fictional Ivy League school Laurelton University, his life is changed forever. Acceptance into this elite institution immediately confers a responsibility and weight upon Joshua that he had never before experienced, and he must navigate the boundaries between arrogance and adulthood as he struggles to reconfigure his identity upon entrance into school. "In a matter of hours," Joshua says early on, "I was transformed from someone quite ordinary into a blossoming prodigy who had slipped through childhood humbly unnoticed." Most importantly, Joshua learns from the eccentric, diverse group of students around him, who are also struggling to find a place for themselves in this unique and charged world.

The humor in the novel is found mainly in Joshua's wry observations about his entry into this new, "elite" life. A simple letter and a fortuitous decision change not only the direction of his life but others' perception of him in strange and sometimes unforeseeable ways. Joshua struggles with this change, both wondering if it is deserved and if he can live up to the new expectations it presents. At the same time, he sometimes falls prey to the glamor of the prestige of his new life without understanding its substance.

Nahum is able to use Joshua's battles here to shed light on the fundamental difficulties of adulthood. He gently mocks the pomp and prestige of the trappings surrounding the world of elite education while not devaluing the importance such places can hold, primarily for the people encountered there. The work veers on parody, and at times it can be difficult to tell whether Nahum is trying to evoke sympathy for Joshua or to mock his limited worldview, as when he meets someone in the surrounding town on his way into Laurelton who indicates his life is in danger off-campus in those parts.

The story in *Eli's Children* moves slowly, spending a fair amount of time setting the scene with background information about characters, locations, and histories. This gives the novel a thoughtful, dynamic feel, and much of the meaning in the book develops in these quieter, introspective passages. At times, the narrative can feel a bit stilted because of this, with heavy buildup and slower forward action, designed to give a full account of Joshua's time at Laurelton rather than any one specific experience or storyline. Overall, the work is less a fast-paced drama than a commentary on elite education and one young man's formative development and culminating realizations from this education. The novel's intrigue lies in part in Joshua's blissful lack of self-awareness, which dawns only slowly over the course of the novel as Joshua continues on his "irrevocable road to manhood."

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STEPHANIE BUCKLIN (June 3, 2016)

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