



October 1998

Books & Authors

Sally Baker
Colby College

Kevin Cool

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

Recommended Citation

Baker, Sally and Cool, Kevin (1998) "Books & Authors," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 87 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol87/iss3/11>

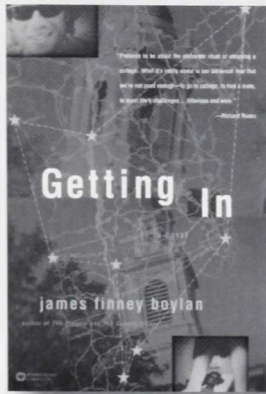
This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



The Search for Acceptance

James Boylan's new book explores the angst of *Getting In*

By Sally Baker



Getting In

Warner Books
352 pages

Dylan Floyd's reality is like someone's recurring nightmare. The teenager, trapped in a Winnebago with five members of his dysfunctional family and one snooty friend, embarks on a tour of elite New England colleges. But Dylan has a miserable secret. He somehow skipped an answer blank on his SAT's and, as a result, received scores that would shame a gerbil. He's certain that none of the colleges he looks at will be looking back at him.

Getting In (Warner Books 1998) is Prof. of English James Finney Boylan's take on the lengths to which students and their families will go to secure admission to prestigious schools. But it is a great deal more than that. As novelist and former Colby faculty member Richard Russo says in a promotional blurb, the book "pretends to be about the elaborate ritual of choosing a college. What it's really about is our universal fear that we're not good enough—

to go to college, to find a mate, to meet life's challenges."

Boylan, whose characters always seem to exist in a blurry but believable version of real life, presents in *Getting In* a group of people who all, in one way or another, wish they could go back and retake a critical test. Their scores are as low as Dylan's. And, most of them think, the results of this trip will shape every moment to come until they die. "What happens if they don't let me in?" one character thinks while regarding his drunken self in a mirror. "Who am I then? . . . I disappear, he thought. I vanish from the face of the earth and turn into somebody else. Who do I become if I don't become the person I imagine?"

Dylan's father, Ben, lost his wife to suicide and his business to a ruthless corporate board.

Ben's brother Lefty, the man at the Winnebago's wheel, delights in Ben's failure and in offering the beaten man a sales job on the family car lot. What Lefty doesn't know is that his wife, Chloë, not only hates him and rues the day she married him, she's trying to kill him with fatty food and lots of athletic sex. Chloë, 50 years old and without options for a better life, wishes she'd never settled for a man so inferior to her first husband. Her daughter Allison hates Lefty, too, but is more focused on whether she should sleep with the snooty boyfriend, Polo, who plans to ooze his way into Harvard and, probably, forget about her. And Lefty's son Juddy, a fencing champion being pursued—to Polo's eternal horror—by Harvard's fencing coach, has retreated into a "hey, dude"

persona in order to cope with a secret he carries about Ben's mother and Lefty.

In Boylan's hands, this rich material sings. From the beginning you know you are in for a treat: describing Dylan's reaction the owner of a Southern accent, Boylan writes, "Dylan looked at the man with curiosity. It was the first time he'd ever seen a man wearing a string tie who was not on the front of a bucket of chicken."

Nuggets like that—seemingly effortless lines that fix a character in your mind—abound, and so do pieces of wisdom arising from the mind of a mature, seasoned writer. Dylan comes to the conclusion that "girls and college were a lot alike" and thinks, "The only difference was that with college you took SAT's whereas with girls there were all these other secret tests you took and failed without even knowing it. It would be nice, actually, to know what your scores were in life. That way you wouldn't keep trying to ask out Stanford when in all probability you'd wind up married to somebody like the University of Las Vegas."

As the novel progresses, from Yale to Harvard to Colby, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Middlebury, Amherst, Williams, Wesleyan, each character finds some truth or comfort to live with. Secrets are revealed, people are hurt and grow stronger in the wounded places. And throughout, Boylan displays the mastery of humor for which he is noted among the very best American novelists. ♦



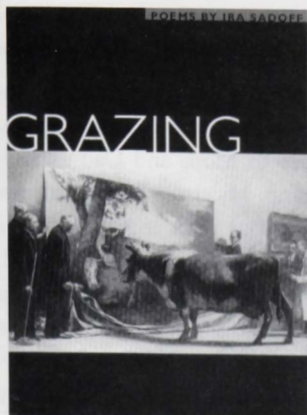
Boylan: Life is an entrance exam.

DAVID WILKINSON

Plenty to Chew On

Ira Sadoff rages at the indignities of American life in *Grazing*

By Kevin Cool



Grazing

University of Illinois Press

72 pages

Judging from the title of Ira Sadoff's new book, *Grazing*, one might reasonably anticipate a collection of poems evoking a pastoral, Whitmanesque America. But, as the author writes in a line from "At the Grand Canyon,"

*... I suppose we can be done
with it,
the whole business of matching
trees with moral lessons . . .*

The redemptive qualities of nature are all worn out, according to Sadoff, and so is America.

Visceral and provocative, *Grazing* is an often bleak, occasionally hopeful statement about America at the end of the century. In an interview, Sadoff said it is poetry that, "looks suffering in the eye, and tries to make sense of it—to make it matter."

Each of the book's three groupings of poems plucks a different nerve. Part 1 is introspective and emotionally raw, Part 2 blazes with indignant fury, Part 3 soothes. Sadoff says he wanted to construct a "spiritual journey" that moves from the harsh realities of private lives to a public accounting of cultural conflicts

and finally to a metaphysical "transcendence." "The transcendence is in this life, through the body, in this world," Sadoff said.

The early poems are intimate and painfully revealing. "My Mother's Funeral" mourns a son's estrangement from his damaged, emotionally distant mother. The dark and disquieting "Solitude Etude" and "Before and After" typify Sadoff's ability to take personal events and fuse them with historical and social moments. In "Solitude Etude" subjects range from mass murder at McDonald's ("... Now they retrieve/the carcass of a child, his ninety-nine cent meal/pressed to his chest . . .") to the despair of a middle-aged man at a dreary truck stop in Wyoming ("dry-mouthed and needle-pocked, half-hypnotized, / teary-eyed, swooning with a moan, he sang / Oh mama, please don't bring me down."). Uniquely American places are laid bare to reveal the damaged goods within. It is not a pretty sight.

In Part 2, the poems practically quiver with rage and contempt. They shriek at the inelegance of popular culture, the sensationalism of events, the wearing down of decency. Sadoff is scathing in his assessment of suburbia, in particular. "Quake" and "Vivaldi" are blis-

tering indictments of the vacuity, isolation and self-absorption of American life. The title piece, a frenetic barrage of disjointed associative images, imitates the noisiness of our media-driven society. Our attention spans, writes Sadoff, are "worn fingernail thin." *Grazing*—at the mall, in front of the television and in our relationships—is our new pastime, he says. The results are lives reduced to muddled sequences of unconnected events lacking commitment, permanence or meaning.

Sadoff is angrier in *Grazing* than in his previous works, which he characterizes as "modest and humble." The rage is connected to issues of social injustice, he says. "It's a rage at how little we matter as individuals; at how large the injustices are. And at the same time how all of our experiences are corrupted by the ways in which the culture uses icons—the Kennedy assassination, the death of Marilyn Monroe—to intensify emotion. Real emotion is cheapened."

"I wanted to investigate the gulf between the individual and the culture, which now is wider than ever," Sadoff said. "Our culture doesn't value art, doesn't value empathy or compassion. People are pushed aside for commerce, so

we feel powerless and often resigned to our fates. I see poetry as a protest against resignation."

"At the Grand Canyon" (see excerpt below) hints at the ambivalence of what it means to be an American, at once awed by the nation's grandeur and demeaned by its excesses.

In Part 3, Sadoff softens. The poems are more pastoral, often drawing on the Maine landscape for both setting and spirit. "I didn't want the book to be irretrievably dark," said Sadoff, whose "I Like Waking Up" will touch anyone who has awoken to a crisp, quiet country morning in Maine.

"In Maine we live in exile from the rest of the country," Sadoff said. "People here are decent to each other. The severity of the landscape encourages people to look out for one another."

Part 3 also continues Sadoff's exploration of passion and eros through the physical world. Sadoff says he wants readers to fully feel both the agony and ecstasy in his poems. "The hope is that we can inhabit our experiences fully, immerse ourselves in them," he said. "I'm saying you can't have it both ways. You have to take the pain with the ecstasy. The repression of one leads to the diminishment of the other." ♦

At the Grand Canyon

an excerpt

*... You could not call it shame, what called to us
back there, growling in the voice of a grizzly, huddling by a juniper,
burnished and silver, at the crest of the butte. You could see
a blur of light from Vegas, or if you listened closely*

*you might hear money changing hands, or further back
a few Apache feathers glazed on a necklace. There we were,
caught between two countries: one barbaric and beautiful,
the other spoiled and civilized. As if that were the end of it.*



Ira Sadoff