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Review of *This Is Not the Ivy League: A Memoir* by Mary Clearman Blew

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BOOK REVIEWS


Mary Clearman Blew reports that her “gorge still rises” recalling “the dearth of expectations” held out for her during her remote Montana childhood. In passages reminiscent of Alice Munro’s Lives of Girls and Women, we see a smart girl who, to realize her potential, must bring her own volition ruthlessly to bear.

Of course, she is not forgiven for overstepping her bounds. Most critical of her are her husband’s parents. When, after marrying at
age eighteen, she becomes pregnant within the year, her mother-in-law is triumphant: "I guess this is finally the end of college for you!" Instead, Blew continues putting her education first, even causing her husband to follow her when she enrolls in a PhD program at the University of Missouri.

Despite her determination to succeed, Blew couldn’t help but internalize her culture’s ideas. Her view of the past vacillates between assertive pride in her career-mindedness—did she put her children at the center of her life? “God no!”—to wondering if she should have been less self-advancing. Did her education make her “unfit for marriage” and motherhood? This ambivalence energizes the memoir and makes Blew’s return to Montana for the first job of her career at a remote “no exit” college/vocational school a psychically dangerous decision.

She must fashion her own idiosyncratic, unguided version of new womanhood as she’s followed around town by the prying eyes of gossips and her first, then her second, husband’s jealous suspicions. As a consequence, she suspects that she appeared “icily unapproachable, as though she feared that someone else’s smile or greeting might shatter her surface.”

Beneath that impenetrable surface, wars raged, and, like mountains rising from the Plain, loss piled up beside success. In a gripping, disturbing, and memorable account of her son, Blew writes reluctantly, lest she awaken pain, which she compares to a “gargoyle” that could “open her eroded eyes and flap into the light.” Nursed, read to, loved, encouraged, then gone, Jack has refused to speak to her now for over twenty-five years.

She has met other women whose sons wander the world without them. Are those children among the unacknowledged externalities, the price paid as husbands and wives sought, and most often failed to find, a new equilibrium in those times? Blew returns as often to this theme of the prices paid as she does to the freedoms won. Readers will thank her for this honesty, which gives this memoir its magic and its power. When she cracks open the doors on these questions, our own gargoyles rustle their wings.

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