

Review: Tara Westover, Educated: A Memoir, New York, 2018.  
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In the context of America's current immersion in extremism, disinformation, rabid conspiracies, uncontrolled social media [plus Fox News], and the cult of Trump, this should be a must read book. While this is a work about what really amounts to an aggressive form of radicalization in a fundamentalist Mormon family cult, the principles it exposes apply at all social levels!

Most impressive in Educated is the depth of the paralysis of self that this work reveals in Tara, even once she is geographically free of her core family and fully involved and successful in the outside world of responsible intellectual pursuits. Tara pulses continually through bouts of self doubt and self worth even through her PhD., some of these bouts being severe in nature.

### Why is Tara So Bound?

A number of factors contribute to the strength of this family cult's hold on Tara:

- 1) At the center is the father's role, which is consistently powerful and extreme through the entire childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of his seven children. Until Tara is a teenager, he corrals and overwhelms all of the compensating forces that are present [more on this in the next section].
- 2) The surrounding Mormon culture supports the major social values espoused in the father's hyper version of patriarchy.
- 3) While the father is an extreme fundamentalist, the surrounding Mormon religion supports the father's version of the events anticipated in the projected End of the World.
- 4) This extreme commitment to the End of the World being imminent is at the center of the father's denial of all government activities as unGodly and his subsequent insistence on his family's commitment to home schooling and a severe survivalist lifestyle – preparing to endure the Apocalypse.
- 5) Tara's core family live remotely in rural Idaho. Their geographical isolation protects them from exposure outside their extended family, which is aware of the father's extremism and may protest it internally but does not reveal its abusive aspects to the larger community.
- 6) Tara and her siblings are vulnerable, impressionable, and mostly isolated children, and Tara is a girl in a culture where men hold all power and women are expected to be highly restrained in appearance and behavior, procreate, raise children, take care of the home, and obey their fathers and husbands.
- 7) The father displays many of the most negative symptoms of bipolar disease – depression expressed in lengthy periods of total withdrawal to seclusion in the dark, paranoia, and mania expressed in hyper activity, repressive tirades, and

the disregard for the safety of his own children, etc. In the above rural Mormon context, the father's mental disease is excused as merely aberrant.

8) The father rants and "lectures" daily [to a family expected to be passive] – often for hours, pounding his views into his children. If his children depart from his "teachings," they are subject to long accusatory rants for their failing to meet the expectations of God. In this regard, the father contends that as the equivalent of a prophet, his pronouncements constitute direct revelations from God and that he is more devout in the true faith than the ordained Mormon ministry. In a sense, in this family the father is much like an all powerful God.

9) The Mother is a co-dependent, supporting her husband's excessive behavior in spite of having been raised in a much more moderate Mormon family. Only very occasionally, when her husband is absent, does the Mother offer any alternative views to support her beleaguered children.

10) As Tara comes into adolescence, she is repeatedly accused of being a "whore" by her father and one of her older brothers for experimenting with the most minor adjustments in her appearance and for exploring a few of the edges of the "outside" world. This constant verbal barrage is amplified by her older brother's extreme physical abuse as he demands that Tara accept his designation of her as a whore. The brother's attacks are that much more impactful because Tara's parents are made aware of his behavior with both Tara and her older sister and yet do nothing about it. The result: Tara's development of a secure sense of herself as a woman is impaired beyond early adulthood.

#### What Accounts for Tara's "Escape?"

- 1) While Tara is "bound," her basic personality includes being quite curious.
- 2) Tara is aware early-on that there is an alternative, more moderate, worldview.
- 3) Two grandmothers are present – with the father's mother living "Down the Hill" who challenges his extreme views all the time and on virtually every issue. The non-chaotic homes and more supportive lifestyles of these grandmothers indicates there is a positive alternative – even within the extended family.
- 4) Two of Tara's older brothers escape the family confines, and this suggests that there is a way to "get out" to "something" else. Unfortunately, in this culture, males have much greater access to this option than females.
- 5) Tara is encouraged from the time she is an early adolescent by her older "escaped" brother, Tyler, to "get away from the family" and that opportunities within formal education can provide that avenue.
- 6) Tara's musical talent and various work experiences as an adolescent in a nearby town take her outside her family and suggest that a more positive lifestyle and worldview option does exist.
- 7) The mother's home schooling at least instills basic reading and math skills that Tara and two of her brothers pursue by reading a range of books to which they have limited access.

8) Ideational and financial support from key educators and Mormon bishops is very significant in encouraging and sustaining Tara's exploration of the alternative world as she approaches and once she escapes to the outside.

9) Tara is able to apply her training from her family experience to be industrious and to take on any challenge, and these abilities support her effort to be successful in the "outside" world.

10) Tara locates the academic tools she needs, largely teaches herself early on, and seeks advice from a range of outside sources. She is remarkably self sufficient and persistent once she sets a goal – in spite of her self doubts.

### General Comments

Tara's conflict over her sense of self is deep and persistent, and it often threatens her "escape." She is perpetually returning home trying to resolve her desire to maintain her relationship with her core family with her commitment to the very different self she is developing in the world beyond family. In behalf of family, the best she can do by the time she is writing this memoir is to collect two of her emancipated brothers and their families and a few other "normal" relatives and make that her family. The overall picture of Tara's core family presented in this work is so devastating that she must realize that the impact of her book being offered to the general public will most likely enforce her further exclusion.

Tara has had two or three "boyfriends," but she never alludes to any romantic component in these relationships. Indeed, as a late teenager, merely hands touching evokes an instantaneous withdrawal response in her. Into her twenties Tara's self conflict remains so powerful that she can binge on TV serials for months or alternatively suffer night terrors of being trapped by her father that end with her in her pajamas sleep-running and shouting in the streets. As her memoir ends, Tara has no marriage or family of her own. Hopefully, since the book's appearance in 2018, Tara has been able to commit to a loving marriage and to foster a "normal" family for herself! She certainly deserves it!

As a professional historian, Tara emerges from her conflicted sense of self with the realization that history never escapes the influence of the author's point of view. It never contains the truth. Indeed, objectivity is a worthy goal, but it is never achieved. And worldview and the limitations of our awareness of the nature of reality inevitably impact our products. As scientists, the objective should be to remain open-minded, consider all the relevant facts known at the time as well as all of the past and present views of these facts by responsible parties, then offer whatever contribution we can. And, our modern culture should instill a solid but open worldview that denies all sources of radicalization!

### Additional Specific Comments

Physical and psychological abuse of children in most families usually promotes the abused to get out as soon as they can and look back only to declare that the kind of behavior that they have suffered will never occur in the families they create. Of course there are repeaters in this situation – especially physical abuse from men, but the originating family itself typically has little hold on the escapees. The strength of the hold Tara's core family has on her in spite of her very successful escape is the result of a different kind of binding force – extreme indoctrination/radicalization. In Educated we see the strangle hold on self identity and family orientation such a strong family cult can generate. How this kind of hyper indoctrination can be sustainable in the context of a surrounding culture that is committed to very different values is at first puzzling. But after all, culture in general is designed to instill a worldview that is not to be challenged. And if you can isolate your children from that surrounding culture and inculcate a very negative view of that culture through the impressionable years of your children's childhood, it is remarkable how binding the result can be! The parallel is radicalization.

As a researcher whose work has focused on deep life history interviewing and the social, cultural, and psychological analysis of the results, I wish Tara had discussed the sources – other than long term memory – for her detailed descriptions of specific events in her narrative. At a few points, Tara mentions her journals, but we get no specifics on their range of coverage, the degree of specificity in these records or how she has utilized them. Without this information and considering how ambivalent, difficult, confusing and long term Tara describes her response being in her "escape" from her family, it is "reasonable" for some readers – and those wanting to reject her accounts – to question how reliable her memoir is and suggest significant "embellishment." I am aware that such challenges have in fact occurred in Tara's core family's responses to Educated. Reliance on Tara's two brothers' review and input is significant, but presumably it is her journals that are the primary source of her detailed account of events in the past. Tara could have avoided a lot of questions about the validity of her memoir, if she had included at least a paragraph or two describing her journals and how she used them in constructing Educated. As a professional historian, Tara knows that validity in science has a lot to do with the integrity of process. If Educated is reprinted or offered in subsequent editions, including information on her journals and their use would be highly recommended.