

SUMMARY

Educated

Tara Westover



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Summary of «Educated: A Memoir» By Tara Westover

Written by Lea Schullery

The captivating memoir of a woman who grew up isolated from society, abused by her family, and despite zero childhood education, she broke the restraints of her father's twisted worldly views and earned her Ph.D. at Cambridge and Harvard University.

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Introduction

Living on a rural farm in Idaho, Tara Westover recalls taking in her surroundings at a young age, breathing in the crisp air and running through the valleys and hills. She learned a lot from living on that farm despite growing up without a birth certificate, medical records, or a traditional education. Growing up with a paranoid father who was consistently preparing for the end of the world, and believed the government brainwashed its citizens, Tara had far from a typical childhood.

In addition to being homeschooled, her mother immersed herself in herbal medicine so they would never need a hospital or doctor. Completely self-sufficient, Tara and her family isolated themselves from reality which led to their own twisted view of the world. Struggling to work against a family that believes education and the government are corrupt, Tara worked hard to succeed. Going against her family's wishes, she consistently struggled with pursuing education and appeasing her family, but in the end, she chose her education.

An Unusual Childhood

Childhood looks different for everyone. For some, it's a time of happiness and innocence as you play the days away. For others, it's a bit more complicated. From a young age, Tara Westover knew that her life was different. She was the youngest of seven children and her parents intended to raise their family steeped in the Mormon religion. She also grew up on a rural farm in Idaho and the children were expected to help on the farm whenever necessary. Many people grow up this way, and Tara enjoyed the carefree freedom of playing in nature and running through the hills of the nearby mountains.

However, there was a reason the family lived on a rural farm, Tara's father, Gene, had a paranoia beyond the norm, believing the government was out to brainwash society and stray them away from God. The paranoia her father experienced was so extreme that he believed his family should always be prepared, even making the children carry supplies with them at all times. If the Feds ever came for them, they were instructed to take off into the hills and be able to survive until the Feds left the area. So, Tara carried supplies like herbal medicine, water purifiers, guns, knives, and Military MREs, or Meals Ready-to-Eat, on a regular basis.

Wanting more for Tara, her grandmother once encouraged Tara to run away with her to Arizona. Coming from a strict Mormon background, Gene was adamant about teaching her a woman's place was in the home and rearing children. Tara thought about the opportunity briefly, but when the time came, Tara couldn't do it and she stayed with her family in Idaho.

Gene surprisingly allowed Tara's mother, Faye, to work as a midwife. With minimal medical experience, Faye took a holistic approach to medicine and became a skilled herbalist and the only midwife for a hundred miles. Gene supported his wife's role since he believed hospitals and doctors were a government ploy for brainwashing and corruption. In fact, because Tara was born at home, she didn't have a birth certificate at all. To the state of

Idaho, Tara didn't exist until the age of 9. Not only did she not have a birth certificate, but she had also never set foot in a school.

Lack of Education

Schooling is an important part of growing up, but for Tara and her siblings, school hardly existed. Believing that the public school system was just “a ploy by the government to lead children away from God,” Gene forced his children to become homeschooled; however, the term is used loosely. While Tara’s brother taught her to read at the age of four, by the time she turned eight, there was very little schooling in the home, leaving the children to their own devices to learn.

Once Tara’s grandmother scolded her for not washing her hands after using the toilet, and when she confronted Gene about what he is teaching his children, he simply told her “I teach them not to piss on their hands.” As you can see, their education wasn’t incredibly rigorous as her parents failed to teach her basic hygiene skills. At least every once in awhile Faye would drop the kids off at the public library to spend the day reading, but when it came to subjects like Math, History, and Science, Tara found herself learning by skimming the pages of a few textbooks without much guidance.

When Tara was 10-years-old, her brother Tyler turned 18 and announced his plans to go to college. He took his studying seriously and he was ready to pursue higher education. Of course, this upset their father since he needed him to help work on the farm. Gene expressed that schooling was just corruption, reading and writing would never give him the real skills he needed to support a wife and a family.

However, Tyler’s announcement of college sparked a curiosity in Tara that higher education was a possibility and she began to study by herself more rigorously. Focusing mainly on religion and reading The Book of Mormon and The New Testament, she began to immerse herself in education.

Lack of Medical Attention and Care

Imagine driving home from a long trip, it's late at night and you're tired. All of a sudden the car drifts off the highway, jumps a ditch and smashes through two wooden utility poles before crashing into a tractor and coming to an abrupt stop. Miraculously, you survive, so what's the first thing you do? Nowadays, you would call the ambulance from your cell phone right? Maybe before the times of cell phones, you could flag down a passing car or try to find a nearby house to use the landline.

Unfortunately, this scenario became a reality for Tara and her family when her 17-year-old brother, Tyler, fell asleep at the wheel on a long road trip. Even though no one was wearing their seatbelt, they all miraculously survived. Faye, however, suffered serious brain injury and needed medical attention right away. Gene toyed with the idea of taking her to the hospital, but ultimately decided she would be okay resting in the basement. After Faye recovered, she was never the same and experienced memory loss and persistent headaches. Still, she didn't need medical attention according to Gene.

The accident didn't become the only accident where the family failed to seek medical attention. In 2000, Gene took the family to visit his mother in Arizona and insisted on leaving despite an impending snowstorm. Of course, on their way home, their car slid off the road and crashed into a field. Again, no one was wearing their seatbelts and they, again, miraculously survived. Tara lost consciousness during that accident and doesn't remember how she got home, but she does know, she never went to the hospital.

Even when her brother Luke was helping Gene at the scrapyard by impaling cars with skewers to drain them quickly of gasoline to prevent an explosion, Luke didn't realize that gasoline had drenched his jeans. So when Luke went to prepare the torch, his pants burst into flames. Since Faye was gone, Tara was the only one at the house that could take care of Luke's third-

degree burns, so she wrapped his leg in black plastic and dunked his leg into a garbage bin filled with ice and water. When Faye returned home, she had to quickly cut away the dead flesh and dressed his leg in her own herbal remedy. While he eventually recovered, he never received professional medical care and Gene tended to the fire in the bushes before tending to his burning son.

Tara Begins to Learn Independence

Since Tara's older siblings had left home as soon as they had enough money, Gene's farming business began to crumble and he was forced to focus on his scrapyard business. Needing help from the remaining children, Tara found herself working in the junkyard, separating various materials to sell. She hated it. So, she decided to post fliers to promote herself as a babysitter.

In no time, Tara was working 8 am to noon as a babysitter and she felt more liberated than ever. While she wasn't making a lot of money, she was gaining independence and her job as a babysitter led her to more opportunities around the community. One of the moms she sat for asked Tara if she wanted to attend dance class. She quickly asked her parents if she could go, and surprisingly they agreed despite Gene's views of the "immodest" leotards. During the Christmas recital, however, Tara's outfit still didn't appease Gene and Tara was not allowed to continue dancing.

While Tara was crushed that she could no longer dance, she and her mother decided to sign Tara up for something that Gene couldn't refuse, voice lessons. Gene was so captivated by Tara's singing that he encouraged her to pursue her passion, eventually allowing Tara to audition for the town theater production of Annie. Tara was gaining independence and she was finally learning about life outside of her father's paranoid delusions.

However, during this time her father's delusions were exacerbated by the impending end of the world. It was 1999, and Gene was certain that Y2K would lead to the Days of Abomination and he began to spend all of his time preparing and stockpiling for the inevitable apocalypse. Warning everyone that electricity and telephone lines would cease to function, Gene even bought a cable TV subscription just to witness it all crumble as soon as January 1st hit.

Of course, nothing happened. Tara recalls “the disappointment in his features was so childlike, for a moment I wondered how God could deny him this. He, a faithful servant, who suffered willingly just as Noah had willingly suffered to build the ark.”

Tara Realizes she Needs to Leave Home

If you can dig deep back into the recesses of your memory, you might be able to remember what it was like to attend high school. Hormones raging, only focusing on impressing your crush, experimenting with new looks to see what suits you. It's both an exciting and frightening time in a person's life. It was during this time that Tara developed her first crush, Charles.

Tara remembers it was shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 when she began experimenting with make-up to impress Charles. Immodest clothing was out of the question, remember the leotard fiasco? Anyway, Charles' attention wasn't on Tara, he instead set his sights on Sadie. You see, Sadie was dating Shawn, Tara's brother, and eventually, Shawn broke things off with Sadie allowing Charles to swoop in and ask Sadie to dinner. It all sounds so innocent, and it is, but when Shawn learned of the recent developments, he took his anger out on Tara. He became enraged and accused her of being a "slut" and a "lying whore," and began to physically abuse her. Faye watched the entire altercation and refused to intervene, and it wasn't until Tyler unexpectedly walked in that Shawn was finally forced to stop.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the first time Shawn took his anger out on Tara. Remember the car accident when Tara fell unconscious? Afterward, Tara experienced neck paralysis that Shawn "fixed" by swiftly jerking her neck. She eventually continued to experience more abuse, but with a family that refused to do anything, she began to accept her fate and deal with it.

After witnessing the altercation between Shawn and Tara, Tyler encouraged Tara to enroll in high school and escape both her father's constricted world view and Shawn's continuous abuse. He told her that to get accepted into the Mormon school of Brigham Young University she would only need a decent score on the ACT and BYU had a long history of accepting homeschooled students.

So, she began to study for the ACT and continuously received lectures from her father, outwardly rejecting her plans to go to college. He began to instill fear into Tara by announcing “The Lord has called me to testify. He is displeased. You have cast aside His blessings to where after man’s knowledge. His wrath is stirred against you. It will not be long in the coming.” However, she continued her studies, and after two attempts, she received a 28, a score high enough to be admitted into BYU.

At just sixteen years old, Tara moved to Utah to attend BYU with the support and help of her mother.

Tara's Culture Shock

If you've ever moved into a college dorm room, you remember the excitement of finally living on your own. The independence, the freedom. However, with Tara's strict, sheltered upbringing, she had a hard time coping with the differences of her roommates. For instance, upon meeting Shannon, she was immediately greeted by a girl wearing tight pink pants and a white spaghetti strap tank top, completely baring her shoulders. Even worse, Shannon turned around to reveal "Juicy" written on the rear of her pants. Utterly shocked and appalled, Tara retreated to the privacy of her room.

She enjoyed her second roommate Mary but became appalled when she came home one Sunday with a week's worth of groceries. Mary had rejected the Lord's Commandment by shopping on the Sabbath, and once again, Tara found herself retreating to her room. Of course, culture shock became the least of Tara's worries once she realized the difficulty of her classes. Having enrolled in English, American History, Music, Religion, and Western Civilization, she quickly realized how unprepared she was for college courses.

With the bombardment of new terms, she felt herself sinking. How could she possibly catch up? She felt so far behind, but one day she finally mustered up the courage to ask her professor the meaning of a word she had never heard before. Silence filled the room and the stares from her classmates quickly embarrassed her. The word she asked her professor to clarify? Holocaust.

While her grades were far from decent, she realized she could not afford to attend school and living expenses without a scholarship, so she set out to improve her grades. After a classmate helps her by telling her that she was supposed to read the textbook, and not just look at the images, her grades begin to improve. Finishing the semester with all As except in Western Civilization, she is able to obtain a scholarship for half of her tuition.

Adapting to Life Outside Her Father's Worldview

While a break between semesters might mean freedom for many young students, for Tara, it meant working to earn money to continue funding her education. Taking a job at a local grocery store, she is eventually forced to quit after her father threatens to kick her out if she doesn't help with the junkyard.

Throughout the break, Tara begins a relationship with Charles; however, she carefully refuses to let Charles inside her life at home. Recently, Gene and Shawn gang up on teasing Tara for becoming "uppity" since studying away at college and Shawn relentlessly taunts her in front of Charles. But, she stays firm in her beliefs and begins to experiment out of the confines of her father's worldview.

At the start of the new semester, for the first time in her life, Charles convinces her to take some Ibuprofen for an earache after her mother's usual remedies fail to relieve the pain. Surprisingly, she feels relief after just twenty minutes. Tara then begins to seek counseling from her local bishop, where she eventually opens up about her troubled upbringing. She confides in him that she is suffering from severe jaw pain due to a rotted tooth but can't afford to see a dentist. Encouraging her to seek government aid, Tara refuses, believing that receiving help would be equivalent to mind control. However, she eventually follows the advice of her bishop and receives \$4,000, more than enough to cover the \$1,400 dental operation.

Now that Tara has experienced medical care and government help, she finds a new outlook on life and begins to devote more time to her studies. During her Psychology 101 class, she became obsessed with learning about bipolar disorder. As soon as she saw the symptoms written on the whiteboard - depression, mania, paranoia, euphoria, delusions of grandeur and persecution - she knew the disorder fit her father's symptoms almost exactly. Tara had an epiphany. She recalled the moments leading up to and

following Y2K in which he experienced immense happiness and euphoria, followed by extreme depression. She thought about the extreme paranoia her father experienced about the government trying to control and brainwash them.

Coming to this realization, Tara became angry at her father for subjecting her and her siblings to his fantastical paranoia and sheltering them from the world. However, before she could confront her father about her feelings, he experienced a terrible accident.

New Opportunities

Suffering from a terrible workplace accident, Gene's face and hands were covered in severe burns and his condition looked grim. Risking his life, Gene stated he would rather die than go to the hospital, so Faye treated him with her homemade burn remedies. Throughout the night they prepared to say goodbye, but miraculously, Gene survived, and six months later he finally regained his ability to talk.

Despite this harrowing time, Tara continued to focus on her studies and began to develop an interest in history, politics, and world affairs. Noticing her motivation, her professor encouraged Tara to apply for a study abroad program at the prestigious school of Cambridge, a school she had never even heard of before. But, she got accepted and thus began her new life abroad.

Upon arriving at King's College, she is immediately awed by the immaculate campus architecture and sophistication. Tara feels insecure and overwhelmed, but she manages to gain the attention of Professor Jonathan Steinberg, a renowned Holocaust expert who helped Tara throughout her time at Cambridge. Examining every word of her papers, Steinberg had a keen eye for mistakes and encouraged perfection. Amazingly, when Tara turned in her final essay, Steinberg was impressed by her work and persuaded her to attend graduate school. Not only would Steinberg help her secure admission, but he would also help secure funding, either at Cambridge or Harvard.

With Steinberg's help, Tara secured admission at Cambridge's Trinity College and became the third student from BYU to ever win the Gates Cambridge Scholarship. Such praise resulted in many local papers and TV outlets running stories on Tara, who was now a local celebrity in Idaho.

Balancing Grad School and Home Life

Now attending Trinity College among elite British students, Tara feels more out of place than ever, but she begins to immerse herself in her studies. She eventually develops a small circle of friends and takes the opportunity to travel to Rome to learn about the vast history. Initially overwhelmed, Tara recognizes the opportunity to learn in the city, but her trip was derailed when her sister Audrey sent her a disturbing email.

Audrey relayed to Tara that she had been suffering abuse from Shawn and she didn't want Shawn's wife to become a victim as well. She planned to confront their father about his behavior, but she needed the help of Tara and her mother. During their conversation, Faye eventually apologized to Tara for failing to protect her from her brother's abuse. Now, Tara realized the pain of hiding her past and began to open up about her experiences with her friends and teachers.

Meanwhile, Tara notices the family business is booming. Her parents are now rich thanks to her mother's herbal remedies that helped cure her ailing husband. Of course, her father declined a \$3 million deal and the success of his wife led to resentment. Gene is forced to come to terms that the roles of husband and wife are straying from his traditional beliefs, and arguments ensue.

As her family life becomes increasingly unstable, Tara continues to flourish in her studies, eventually winning a place to study for a Ph.D. at Cambridge. She begins to open herself up to new ideas that were once forbidden and hidden from her, like feminism, where she learns that her father's traditional ideas of a woman's role were archaic and oppressive. While she is thriving at school, she is becoming increasingly distant from her family. Still, she decides to return home for Christmas where violence ensues.

Coming to Terms

While at home on Christmas break, Tara and Audrey confronted their father about Shawn's abuse, but he refused to believe them, consistently asking for proof. Tara turns to her mother for support, but like always, she stays quiet. To make matters worse, Shawn places a bloody knife in Tara's hands, indicating a threat that seemed pretty clear. While they come to peace briefly, Tara knows the pain isn't over and realizes that Gene and Faye will help their sons over protecting their daughters every time.

Tara is forced to come to this realization upon returning to Cambridge when Shawn's threats to harm Tara become relentless. She continues to confront Gene about Shawn's behavior, but she is simply told to shrug it off and that she was becoming a dangerous influence on the family.

During this time, Tara accepts a fellowship at Harvard University where her parents come to visit her. She quickly realizes her parent's ulterior motives as Gene tells her that she needs to accept their way of life or be seen as a danger to the family. Gene believes that the Lord visited him and told him that Tara had been taken by Lucifer and needed a special blessing to absolve her of her sins. She found out that both Audrey and Shawn had accepted this blessing, so Tara is now the final member of the family that needed to be saved.

Refusing to accept her father's twisted view of reality, her parents leave abruptly. Throughout the years that follow, Tara focuses on her Ph.D. The topic? The Family and Morality including the topic of Mormonism as an intellectual movement. She earns her Ph.D., moves to London and begins a new life with her boyfriend, Drew.

In the years following her move, Tara struggled to come to terms with the status of her family. Removing contact from her parents, she also recognizes a rift between her siblings. Herself, Richard, and Tyler moved on and had their own careers while Audrey, Shawn, Luke, and Tony continued

to depend on their parents, and the two groups failed to get along whenever they were together. While she remains close to Richard, Tyler, and Tony, Tara has come to terms with her relationship with her family. She has accepted that she is “not the child her father raised, but he is the father who raised her” and her new self emerged the night Shawn physically assaulted her when she was just sixteen-years-old. Her upbringing became an education.

Final Summary

Despite Tara's simple and non-traditional upbringing, she defied the odds and earned a Ph.D. even though she had a childhood that consisted of a non-existent education. Throughout her time earning her degree, Tara opened her eyes to new experiences and new perspectives. She realized her father suffered from bipolar disorder, and that his paranoia about the government prevented her and her siblings from experiencing a normal childhood. She excelled at school, but unfortunately, her pursuit in higher education meant cutting ties from her parents and created a rift between her siblings. But Tara believes the sacrifice was necessary for her independence and freedom and uses her experiences to educate others.



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