

ly wet weather in my soul” — “a grouch,” in the words of his kindergartner, who one day changed her father’s life by urging him to stop grumbling. “I was a whiner,” his daughter told him, holding herself up as an example, but “on my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn’t going to whine anymore.” For Seligman, it was the epiphany that launched the now four-year-old movement he calls Positive Psychology and infused his career and life with new meaning.

As the inspirational nugget about his wise child suggests, inside Seligman the downbeat realist has plainly lurked a romantic apostle eager to get out. And as the rest of his book reveals, Seligman the scientist does not always demand the greatest stringency of laboratory work, or dwell on its inevitable limitations. The many studies he cites (and the tests he invites readers to take) on such topics as optimism, gratitude, forgiveness, and “satisfaction with the past” do not generate quite the definitive data he would have you think. As he himself says, “how you feel about your life at any moment is a slippery matter,” far from easy to measure. “Perhaps neither response will seem to fit,” he prefaces his optimism assessment; “go ahead anyway and circle either A or B.”

Yet to say that the Positive Psychology project is driven perhaps as much by motivational fervor as by methodological rigor is not to suggest that it’s for softies. Seligman’s appeal is to those who pride themselves more on having heads on their shoulders than on getting in touch with their feelings. He has cobbled together interesting research done over the past 30 years, since the cognitive revolution in psychology and the advent of behavioral genetics. The research challenges both the fatalistic and the facile assumptions promoted in a Freudian era that found victims everywhere in need of cathartic release from anger and guilt repressed since childhood. Seligman’s “new”



Head (2001), by Mary Atkinson

psychology sounds decidedly more old-fashioned.

We are prisoners of our childhoods, he argues, only in the sense that “bubbliness (called positive affectivity)” is a “highly heritable trait.” Otherwise, our fate is in our hands—or rather in our heads and our characters. By learning to argue rationally and accurately against the “negative” emotions with which evolution has amply armed us, and even

better, by building on the “strengths and virtues” we recognize in ourselves (cross-cultural research has inspired a list of 24 to choose from), we can become more buoyant and resilient. Not least, we can discover true gratification, which brings a sense of selfless fulfillment.

A grouch might complain that when Seligman turns to apply his principles to work, love, and parenting in his closing chapters, he suddenly changes his mind about the secondary importance of childhood events. He joins countless experts in saying that a “securely attached” start in life—and lots of empathetic communication ever after—helps create more purposeful workers, loyal spouses, and competent, confident, committed children. Then again, if Seligman had prescribed a flashy, original formula for the age-old pursuit of the good life, wouldn’t you be skeptical?

—ANN HULBERT

THE GATEKEEPERS:
*Inside the Admissions Process of
a Premier College.*

By Jacques Steinberg. Viking. 292 pp.
\$25.95

For bewildered high schoolers seeking admission to the cluster of highly selective colleges essayist Joseph Epstein jokingly labels “Yarvton,” the mysteries are legion. Does having invented an innovative medical device as a sophomore outweigh lackluster grades and a

dearth of advanced-placement classes? Does coming from a top prep school help or hurt? How does Harvard University manage to reject a quarter of its applicants with perfect SAT scores? Doesn't every school need a talented oboist? Just what strange deals, back-of-the-envelope calculations, and personal crusades shape the next generation's elite?

A writer for *The New York Times*, Steinberg was given extraordinary access to Wesleyan University's admissions office and to the applications—and lives—of a half-dozen aspirants to the Connecticut school. College admissions, he finds, is “messy work,” filled with subjective judgments. Wesleyan's process tries to predict whether a student will “add” to the community, handle the rigor of the curriculum, and succeed after college. It seeks what admissions officers term the “angular” rather than the “well-rounded,” the student with, as Wesleyan's dean of admissions said in 1964, “the best chance of accomplishing something in his lifetime, as opposed to the dabbler.”

Admissions officers have seen it all: the fresh cookies, the daily postcards, the recommendations from senators and celebrities, the essays crafted to pull at the heartstrings. But sheer chance may make a more decisive difference.

One applicant devoted his essay to comic books; the Wesleyan officer who read the application, as it happened, “loved the X-Men.”

The officials strategize, too. Some colleges reject the most highly qualified applicants, “not wishing to waste an acceptance” on anyone who probably won't attend. (*The U.S. News & World Report* rankings, which matter to those good schools without centuries of prestige and tradition, rely in part on the percentage of accepted students who enroll.) And the schools hunt down, with free airfare and professor one-on-ones, the most desirable candidates.

This book has a less epic quality than, say, Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (1998), but it depicts the admissions process with clarity and sympathy. Some readers may be troubled that admissions officers act not just as talent scouts but as social engineers, and that luck plays such a prominent role. Yet the officers' decisions, as they choose among far too many highly qualified applicants, are not arbitrary. Steinberg shows that they consider teacher recommendations as much as ethnicity, accomplishments as much as geography, and diligence as much as creativity.

—CHRISTOPHER MOORE

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC.

By Mark Allan Powell. Hendrickson Publishers. 1,088 pp. \$29.95

Although *Rolling Stone* describes the world of contemporary Christian music as a “parallel universe,” there can be little doubt that, with annual sales approaching \$1 billion and such artists as Amy Grant and Jars of Clay regularly crossing over onto secular charts, the Christian music scene is thriving. By 1998, according to *Billboard*, contemporary Christian music accounted for a larger share of recording industry revenue than jazz, New Age, classical, and soundtracks combined.

Now, contemporary Christian music has its own encyclopedia. The massive and mind-numbing tome, with well over a thousand double-columned pages, provides more than

any sane person should care to know about everyone from rockers Larry Norman and Whiteheart to pop artists Michael W. Smith and Sandi Patty, as well as Bob Dylan, who for a time told concert audiences that “Jesus is the way of salvation.” The entries provide biography, discography, and a description of the musical styles of each artist or group, and the introduction offers a brief history of contemporary Christian music.

Scholars are now engaged in a lively debate about the origins of contemporary Christian music. Some trace its roots back to 19th-century shape-note singing in the South, although Powell insists that its history goes back no farther than the Jesus movement of the late 1960s. Today, contemporary Christian music embraces styles ranging from heavy metal to ska, and an equally lively debate is taking place over