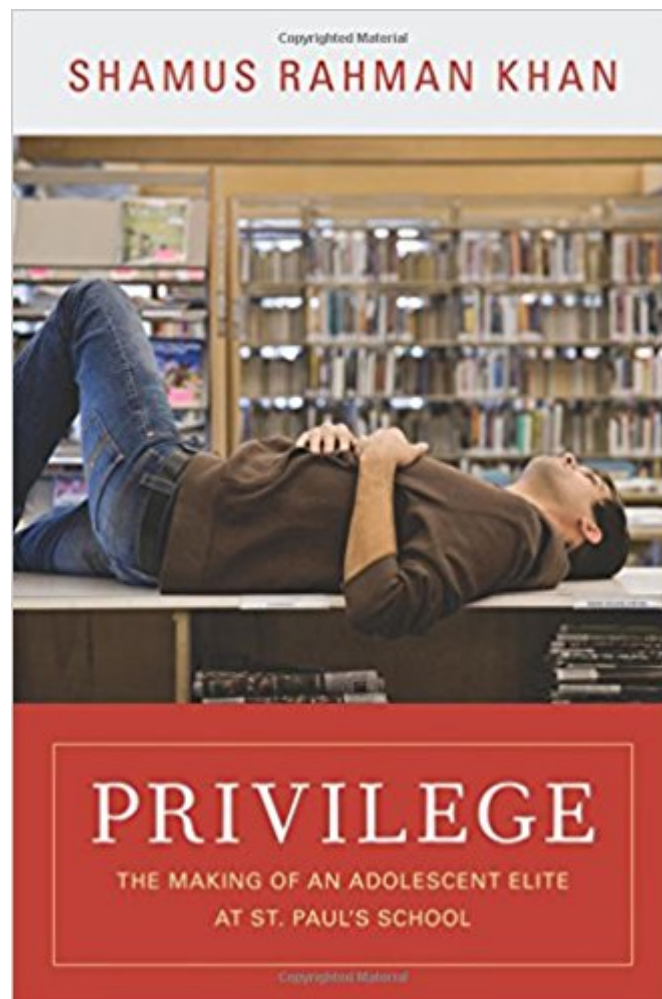


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# Privilege: The Making Of An Adolescent Elite At St. Paul's School (Princeton Studies In Cultural Sociology)



## Synopsis

As one of the most prestigious high schools in the nation, St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, has long been the exclusive domain of America's wealthiest sons. But times have changed. Today, a new elite of boys and girls is being molded at St. Paul's, one that reflects the hope of openness but also the persistence of inequality. In *Privilege*, Shamus Khan returns to his alma mater to provide an inside look at an institution that has been the private realm of the elite for the past 150 years. He shows that St. Paul's students continue to learn what they always have--how to embody privilege. Yet, while students once leveraged the trappings of upper-class entitlement, family connections, and high culture, current St. Paul's students learn to succeed in a more diverse environment. To be the future leaders of a more democratic world, they must be at ease with everything from highbrow art to everyday life--from *Beowulf* to *Jaws*--and view hierarchies as ladders to scale. Through deft portrayals of the relationships among students, faculty, and staff, Khan shows how members of the new elite face the opening of society while still preserving the advantages that allow them to rule.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I love reading books that take us behind the scenes where we're normally barred from entry. And I've often envied people who got the boarding school experience. So... what's life really like at an elite school? One of the most elite, of course, is St. Paul's Academy. Author Khan attended as a

student, then returned as a faculty member and ultimately a participant-observer in an ethnographic study. The result is a book that's enjoyable - especially specific scenes - but less enlightening that one would hope. Mostly I would have liked to see a clearer organization, either chronologically with the school year or thematically. I also didn't get a clear sense of the author's premise. He seems to demonstrate that the "elite" learn how to behave or are reinforced in appropriate behavior, by both students and faculty. In particular, the school emphasizes norms of appearing "at ease" and confident. My frustration with this book is that it's somewhere between sociology and memoir. I can't help comparing it to P.F. Kluge's book about returning to Kenyon College as a professor, over 20 years after his own graduation. Kluge shared the experiences of being at Kenyon; one of the most memorable is his chat with a colleague, a single woman who was headed home to a lonely dinner. Khan tries to draw insights from observations. One good example involves a dialogue between a "Mrs. Brown" dorm leader and a student "Evan" who was showing off his knowledge about St Paul's just a few hours after arriving. Khan observes that the adult (presumably a faculty member) cleverly put down the young man. We get less sense of what actually happens in classes, art studios and athletic fields. I'd have liked to get a sense of a typical day in the life of a student.

I was attracted to this book as a result of it having been mentioned in news stories about the Owen Labrie case, an interest informed by the fact that my maternal grandfather and his brother attended St. Paul's a century ago. Unfortunately, this well intentioned book barely scratches the surface of its subject and is disappointing even if viewed on the level of memoir, consisting of a series of anecdotes strung together along the lanyard of the author's shibboleth or pet theory that the central feature of what makes an elite prevail in the present era is their sense of "ease", their nonchalant attitude and smooth adeptness in social interactions that obscures the realities of social class privilege that undergird their station in life. But Mr. Khan harps on this observation so incessantly to the point that he only succeeds in thickening the fog around this issue. While it is worth noting that the "Chase Abbott" (think Thurston Howell III) style has been mostly abandoned by the WASP elite in recent decades, it is an entirely unremarkable outcome given the changes that have occurred in society as a whole during that time. Mr. Kahn speaks to this broader history in the early chapters of the book, but later becomes completely absorbed with opining about the implications of his anecdotes about St. Paul's without clarifying that this is a broader trend. Wealthier Americans no longer seek to identify themselves as a patrician caste and have thus adopted a more plebeian style consistent with mass culture. Workmen no longer imitate "bourgeois culture" by wearing shirts and ties as they did as late as the 1930s, rather bourgeois youth now wear jeans and baseball caps.

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