



## Conning Harvard: Adam Wheeler, the Con Artist Who Faked His Way into the Ivy League

*Julie Zauzmer, Xi Yu (Additional reporting)*

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The story of Adam Wheeler's lie-filled path into Harvard, his compulsive conning of grant and scholarship boards after enrolling, and the eventual discovery of his fraudulent past.

## Conning Harvard: Adam Wheeler, the Con Artist Who Faked His Way into the Ivy League Details

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## **From Reader Review Conning Harvard: Adam Wheeler, the Con Artist Who Faked His Way into the Ivy League for online ebook**

### **Allison says**

It's written by a reporter for The Harvard Crimson, and to be frank, you can tell. Not that the reporting isn't thorough, but a) you can tell she disapproves of the whole scandal (while I was actually interested more in how he did it than in hearing "how bad it is to cheat"), and b) it is VERY dry. I gave it about 30 pages before quitting.

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### **Theresa says**

A quick read. This book suffers from the author having been denied the opportunity to interview the subject: Adam Wheeler. Despite this, it was fascinating to read about his outright lies, deceptions and plagiarisms, the effort of which far exceeded what might have been necessary for him to write his own papers, achieve legitimate grades, or establish a reputation worthy of honest letters of recommendation. This is also an amusing story about the blindness of elite academia in America, a subject about which I'm passionate, having turned away from its groves years ago. This book is a worthwhile throw-away read, if only to give substance to one's own biases against elite education.

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### **David says**

quick read about serial, compulsive plagiarist who BSed his way into Harvard as a transfer student, faked effusive recommendations for himself, invented credentials on his cv, won scholarships and writing prizes with other people's work, and so on and so on until getting tripped up when applying for a Rhodes scholarship using an essay written by a friend and colleague of one of the interviewers. Oops.

Author was on the story for the college newspaper at the time, which means she has lots of insight into the details of what made his Kirkland house suite so suitable for big parties, but also is predictably correlated with a youthful, inexperienced writing style.

Other major gap in this very interesting story is that she never got cooperation from the perp or even his family. So the technical details of his cheating are all here, including the somewhat ridiculous lengths to which he took it (e.g., cribbing from the acknowledgements of someone's dissertation in English lit), but any further intel on his life, how this all started, whether he was nervous about getting caught, etc. -- all lacking.

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### **Tucker says**

Makes college applications into an interesting topic. An impressive piece of work from an undergraduate author (who is the real thing). Even though the subject of the book is not interviewed directly, the reader gets the sense that we know quite enough about him already, thank you very much. (Quite possibly he is a "nice guy" in many respects, but the scale of his plagiarism, into which he sinks all his energy and which he lets

define his life, is off-putting to say the least.) I posted a longer review/synopsis of this story to Disruptive Dissertation.

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### **Gabrielle S says**

I found the premise to be fascinating. I have often wondered how hard it would be to do this sort of thing just as a scientific experiment. I would say that it was amazing that he wasn't caught sooner but with the volume of applications Harvard and other schools receive then people are not going to read thoroughly.

I can't help thinking that if he had been a little bit less of a pretentious ass about the whole thing he probably would have gotten away with it and graduated without being caught.

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### **Kathryn says**

I was fascinated by this well-written and exhaustively detailed book about a young man who faked his background, transcripts, test scores, and personal recommendations to get into several universities, notably as a transfer student to Harvard and winner of several high-profile literary prizes. I was also surprised that his way-beyond exceptional applications never gave any of the admissions committees' people a moment of pause. He displayed himself as so unique and beyond the norm that I would have questioned a lot of things. I was disappointed, however, by the author's inability to interview Adam Weaver for this book and to get into his head. There is no discussion of his motives, why he lied so outrageously when a lot less would have sufficed, and why he was such a risk-taker as a fraud. We also learn very little about his family and its role in Wheeler's story. Overall, a good read about how top-tier universities work -- and don't always work too well. Also a message to colleges to look more askance at college applicants.

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### **Mandy says**

An interesting re-telling of real life Adam Wheeler, who conned his way into Harvard, as well as the broader social implications that contribute to cheating.

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### **Gina says**

DNF. I'm not sure what I wanted when I began this book, but I didn't get it. There are some interesting tidbits about the college application process at top tier schools along with some general criticism of that process along with plagiarism and cheating among high school and college students. I was curious about Adam Wheeler and his specific cons (although I think calling him a con artist is going a bit far), but that took a backseat to the author's own agenda/viewpoint. Interesting topic but poorly executed. I just couldn't get into it.

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## **Mark Ehlers says**

This was a very interesting and well-written book that I found hard to put down. Julie Zauzmer did an excellent job of weaving the story of how a pathological fraudster faked his way into Harvard (and Bowdoin) and, amazingly, how he was not caught until he came very close to winning Harvard's endorsement for a Rhodes scholarship. Particularly impressive is the fact that the author of this book was a senior in college at the time she wrote and published what is an incredibly compelling story. The book had only two shortcomings: First, there was insufficient information about Adam Wheeler and his family. This may have been due to a lack of access to them, but more insight into his background and upbringing, and his personal perspective and motivations would have helped round out the story. Second, Ms. Zauzmer was pretty easy on Harvard's complete and utter negligence in not catching Wheeler sooner. The claims he made on his application, and the nature of many of his "essays" and writings, were virtually unbelievable and should have resulted in some added due diligence.

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## **Tim says**

The story itself was interesting and the book appears to be thoroughly researched. However, the author spends large chunks of the book editorializing about the college admissions process. This breaks up the flow of the book, is unnecessary, and gets to be pretty repetitive. The author's writing style is also very much like a journalist. The prose is pretty dry and unvaried. It feels like you are reading a series of newspaper articles to a degree. The book would have been much better if it was crafted more as a story with better character development and better descriptions of events.

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## **Azabu says**

This con artist was astonishing. Not only did he plagiarize his way into Harvard as a TRANSFER student (less than 1% success rate), he aced the interview. A twisted genius with a compulsion to lie and cheat yet the smarts to make it through 2 yrs at Harvard, get a girlfriend or 2, make friends etc I couldn't put it down and felt bad about the ending (no spoiler).

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## **Nora says**

For me, this kind of book is a guilty pleasure. I love stories about frauds and con artists. Usually I root for them, but it was hard to like the fraudster in this book because he lied and plagiarized not just to get into Harvard, Bowdoin, and Stanford, but also to be a straight A student and win top prizes. At first I was not very impressed by the writing style of this book, but once I realized that the author is a college kid herself I had a lot of respect.

The story of what the con artist did is quite interesting, and I won't spoil it here, except to say that he was following the school of thought that says the bigger and more ridiculous your lies are, the more likely it is that you'll get away with it. The author is too respectful of the Harvard admission's department and administration to delve deeply into why it took them so long to catch on. A smarter, more moderate cheater would never be caught. If all he'd wanted was to collect a Harvard diploma, no one would ever have caught

Adam Wheeler, but then he set his sights on a Fulbright.

I like that the author has an insider's view because she is a Harvard student herself, but I think it also made her blind to questions that would occur to an outsider. Like, what is so great about Harvard that people will do anything to get in; what is the spell that people are under? That is so bizarre it should be a chapter in itself. But I got the sense that the author feels that way too, like naturally the highest dream of any student would be to go to Harvard, so no explanation needed. And my biggest questions went unanswered. What motivated this guy? Why did he keep on doing the same things even after he got caught? No one knows the answers to these questions, probably, but I would be curious to hear what the people who knew him thought. Also, what was his childhood like? Any interesting backstory on this guy? What was wrong with him, anyway?

At times the fraudster must have spent much more time copying and editing little snippets of plagiarized material than he would have just writing a few sentences. The few pieces of his own writing in the book are almost complete gibberish. Did he do any of his college course work? Would he read the assigned books in his classes? I thought it was interesting that the person who finally caught him was not more cynical or suspicious than the other people who'd read Adam Wheeler's amazing transcripts, recommendations, and resumes. He was just more caring, worried that this student was taking on too many responsibilities at a young age. Oh, and he'd read the essay that the fraudster lifted. Anyway, the whole book brought back my college days in the humanities, where it didn't matter if my papers made sense or were on-topic, as long as they had a certain tone and lots of three-dollar words.

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### **Hal says**

A rather interesting book that at times gets bogged down in the recitation and review of the length Adam Wheeler went in perpetrating his fraud on several institutions of higher education, most notably Harvard. I would have preferred more about Adam the man, but his reclusive tendencies probably did not offer much more to look at.

Yes his conduct was certainly criminal in the fraud and deceit and he was eventually punished with equal measure, but I could not escape the presence of the giant elephant looming in the background, Harvard University. It is true they have many thousands of applications to review each year to enter their hallowed academic environs. Yet this great institution of most learned scholars at the very pinnacle were entirely duped, caught up in their own hubris and romance of seeming brilliance and accomplishment. And their outrage at being duped and financially taken advantage of for around \$40k or so was somewhat amusing. The court ordered restitution. The richest educational institution that controls and endowment of around \$30 billion, that's billion with a B. How dare they be embarrassed this way, caught with their pants down for all the world to see.

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### **James says**

I think that I was predisposed against the author/the book itself because as a graduate of a small midwestern liberal arts college, I am programmed to dislike all things Harvard. But in truth, it was solidly written and once it got going, I was effectively hooked. (Although the story almost wrote itself) I wish the author had delved more deeply into and had been more critical about the systemic flaws that allowed for this to happen.

Wheeler built his entire scheme on a presumption that his parents, admissions officers and faculty members were clueless drones that could be fooled by esoteric language and impressive credentials. Zauzmer could have probed more deeply in that area which would have resulted in a more meaningful narrative.

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## William says

This book is both fascinating and irritating. First the upside. Zauzmer has done meticulous research and the story provides a lot of detail on how Harvard's admission process works (which is interesting to me as a former dean of admissions and current independent college counselor). The details of Wheeler's cons and forgeries is almost always fascinating. The story does not really work well, however, because Wheeler is only seen from the outside. His voice is sorely needed. He did crazy stuff with a 100% chance of being caught. While Zauzmer's perspective is that he is just enormously dishonest, he sounds to me pathological.

Zauzmer has really "drunk the KoolAid" concerning Harvard, and ends the book saying that the effectiveness of a \$30-billion corporation in vindictively punishing a student who made a fool of it is a stand for truth which benefits all of us. Get real! Adam Wheeler is in no way a symbol of dishonesty among college applicants in general. The case is clearly an outlier, not a symbol of anything. Was John Wayne Gacy a symbol of anything about modern society?

There is an underlying arrogance which disturbs me. Zauzmer is in general patronizing about Bowdoin, where Wheeler started his college career. She says at one point that it's hard to understand how a student with Wheeler's (forged) credentials would have chosen a school this lacking in prestige (though Bowdoin is consistently ranked among the top few institutions of higher education in the US). She says more than once that Brunswick, ME (where Bowdoin is located) possesses an uncomfortably arctic climate, though its average annual temperature of 45 degrees is only six degrees lower than Cambridge, MA.

And what especially troubles me is that it took so very long for Harvard to question Wheeler's absurdly lofty credentials. His achievements were so extensive that it is hard to believe that they were not questioned, and indeed Wheeler was denied admission at several schools, though that is not mentioned in the book aside from a reference to Yale. It takes a kind of arrogance for admissions readers to see an admissions candidate whose prose is so abstruse as to be a burlesque of normal writing as a match for the education their institution offers.

I am also struck by a student who was more or less an "above average" student at a fairly average public high school was able to get mostly B-B+ grades at Harvard before he started cheating in his coursework. How demanding can the education be if a student whose credentials are well below the threshold for, say, thirty or forty of the most selective colleges and universities in the US can do competent if undistinguished work?

But most of all, there is a human tragedy here to which the author seems immune. There is no evidence Wheeler is a truly bad kid. What made him embark on all this fraud and do it for so long? I feel sad for Wheeler and his parents, and wish he were described more fully as a human being, rather than oversimplified as merely a criminal. This is not the symbolic story the author claims, but the painful tale of the degeneration of an adolescent for reasons which are never explored.

I agree with the other reviewers who see the book as not especially well-written. It also has a "look at me" quality somehow, and the book lacks the objectivity which should characterize good journalism. The "we're good and he's bad" tone becomes offensive, because both sides of that are an over-simplification. Adam has

major and obvious flaws, and Harvard has none. Not very interesting, at least not to me.

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