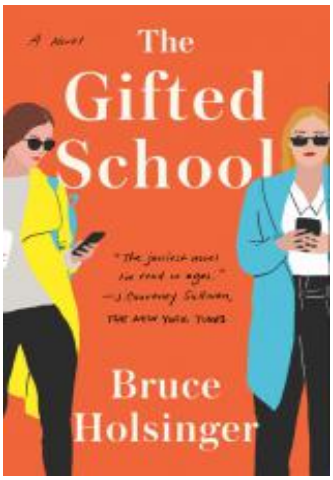
The Gifted School

by Bruce Holsinger



About the Book

Smart and juicy, THE GIFTED SCHOOL is a compulsively readable novel about a previously happy group of friends and parents that is nearly destroyed by their own competitiveness when an exclusive school for gifted children opens in the community.

This deliciously sharp novel captures the relentless ambitions and fears that animate parents and their children in modern America, exploring the conflicts between achievement and potential, talent and privilege.

Set in the fictional town of Crystal, Colorado, THE GIFTED SCHOOL is a keenly entertaining novel that observes the drama within a community of friends and parents as good intentions and high ambitions collide in a pile-up with long-held secrets and lies. Seen through the lens of four families who've been a part of one another's lives since their kids were born over a decade ago, the story reveals not only the lengths that some adults are willing to go to get ahead, but the effect on the group's children, sibling relationships, marriages and careers, as simmering resentments come to a boil and long-buried, explosive secrets surface and detonate. It's a humorous, keenly observed, timely take on ambitious parents, willful kids and the pursuit of prestige, no matter the cost.

Discussion Guide

1. What is your opinion of the families at the center of THE GIFTED SCHOOL? Do you have different opinions about the various sets of parents: Rose and Gareth, Samantha and Kevin, Beck and Azra, Ch?ayña and Silea, and Lauren? If so, with whom do you sympathize most? Who do you relate to? Who is most at fault? Who do you think are the best parents for their children overall?

2. What is your opinion of the children? Discuss the characters of Emma Z, Emma Q, Zander, Tessa, Atik, and twins Aidan and Charlie. What are their responses to the pressures placed on them by their parental figures? In what ways do

their families shape their behavior? Who among them will thrive as an adult?

3. Do you understand the general anxieties of this community of parents? Why do they feel so competitive about this school, given the fact that their children are already doing well in the previously available institutions? If you do consider the parents? motivations and intentions justified, do you also understand the behaviors that follow? What would you have done in a similar situation?

4. How does the novel make you think about intelligence vs. giftedness; talent vs. skill; ambition vs. competition; privilege vs prestige? What role does privilege play in this story? What about ambition? Insecurity? How do the ambitions of some of the characters relate to prestige?

5. Consider the supportive roles that neighboring families can play in the raising of children within a shared community. Consider the good things that these families have contributed to each other. Now consider the secrets that many of the characters kept and the hurtful behaviors of which they were guilty. In the end, what do you think of these friendships? Would they have continued happily, indefinitely, if Crystal Academy hadn?t come along?

6. Tessa?s video blog offers an outlet for the expression of her feelings about her mother, Lauren, as well as Lauren?s group of parent friends. Do you think Tessa is justified in publically sharing their secrets? What is being said about the mother-daughter relationship between Lauren and Tessa?

7. The ALPACA group stages a significant online protest of Crystal Academy and of the idea of a ?gifted school.? What do you think about their arguments? Has there been a similar debate about public versus magnet education in your community? Are any of the children in the book truly gifted? Why or why not?

8. The CogPRO is the standardized test that all students applying for Crystal Academy have to take before they can submit a portfolio. How do you feel about the way the application process is depicted? Do these admission criteria fairly evaluate the candidates?

9. Ch?ayña believes that administrators at the open house exploited Atik?s heritage. But Atik and Silea are happy with how he was celebrated. Do you agree with either position?

10. What do you think about the characters? revelations at the end of the novel? Will Beck succeed in changing his financial situation? Will Rose, Samantha, Azra and Lauren make different parenting decisions going forward? How did Ch?ayña?s views of the gifted school shift by the end of the book?

11. How do gifted-and-talented programs work in your local school district, and what roles do race and class play in these programs? Are some private schools offering the same thing that gifted programs do --- but only for those children whose parents can afford to pay the tuition? Have there been controversies around education in your community?

12. Consider the news about the lines parents have crossed to get their children into college. Do you feel this applies to all levels of education? Have you, your parents or your child ever crossed a line in pursuit of an educational opportunity?

Author Bio

Bruce Holsinger is the author of five novels, including CULPABILITY, THE DISPLACEMENTS and THE GIFTED SCHOOL, as well as many works of nonfiction, most recently ON PARCHMENT: Animals, Archives, and the Making of Culture from Herodotus to the Digital Age.

His books have been recognized with the Colorado Book Award, the John Hurt Fisher Prize, the Philip Brett Award, the John Nicholas Brown Prize, the Modern Language Association's Prize for a First Book, and others. His essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and many other publications, and he has been profiled on NPR's "Weekend Edition," "Here & Now" and "Marketplace."

A Guggenheim Fellow and Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, he teaches in the Department of English at the University of Virginia and serves as editor of the quarterly journal New Literary History. He also teaches craft classes and serves as board chairman for WriterHouse, a nonprofit in Charlottesville.

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