

## Achievement Addiction Book Extracts

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### Extract 1: Worshipping success

535 words

You probably have a dysfunctional relationship with achievement. How could you not? We live in a world that worships hard-won success.

Take Australia's fixation with winning gold medals at the Olympics – and the greater the odds the athlete has overcome to get themselves to that point, the sweeter the victory. Or who can resist the lure of a good Before-and-After shot: photographic proof of someone's discipline, commitment and, as a result, triumphant victory over the flab.

Or ask journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, who wrote an exposé on the way positive thinking gets pushed as an unofficial cure for cancer – which subtly implies that someone's failure to go into remission is *their* fault. In a similar vein, see also Rhonda Byrne's self-help sensation *The Secret*, which advised vision boards to attract health, wealth, husband, and house into your life. If you want these badly enough, the thinking goes, use the power of attraction to manifest them into existence.

Or consider competitive reality-TV shows, and the way that contestants are forced to plead their case before judges to avoid elimination. Regardless of whether this is *Masterchef/Project Runway/The Biggest Loser*, contestants all say some version of the same thing: 'I want this so badly. I'll work so hard. I've got so much more to show you.' In other words, they'll prove through their hard work and effort that they deserve to remain in the competition where, apparently, the one who tries hardest wins.

And what about performance management tools like the 9-Box Grid? One friend tells me that at work she gets 'talent-mapped' on an x-y scale, where x measures performance and y measures potential. The most coveted spot is in the high-performing/high-potential box labelled 'star', which puts the employee on track for promotions and pay rises. But if the employee is judged low performing/low potential, they risk being 'managed out' of the company. Yes, this is *The Hunger Games* of the corporate world, where everyone is striving to be Katniss Everdeen – but someone has to end up in the position of dead meat (ok, just fired).

Even the way we mark significant life milestones seems achievement obsessed, reports *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Trading in one's spouse for a trophy wife being such a Boomer thing to do, Gen-X mid-life crises apparently just settle for the trophy instead: through running a marathon, or trekking to Everest Base Camp. Pursuing any activity, really, that emphasises high performance, self-mastery, and the ability to transform our bodies.

Consider, also, the charged rhetoric of former Australian Treasurer Joe Hockey upon handing down the federal budget in 2014. 'We are a nation of lifters, not leaners,' Hockey declared. 'By everyone making a contribution now, we will build a bigger, better Australia.' Hence, among other measures, the budget's proposed long wait times for unemployment benefits and Work for the Dole schemes to wean young people off the government teat.

In praising self-reliant 'lifters' as ideal Australian citizens, Hockey chided those who relied on the public purse. It was a message that conveyed, contra that feel-good golden oldie: *try not to lean on me when you're not strong. I'll resent being your friend. I'll grudgingly help you carry on.* Not quite as catchy as the original.

## **Extract 2: The elephant – or tiger mother and her dragon child – in the room**

556 words

Work ethic-wise, I peaked at 18. To prepare for my final high-school exams, I spent weekends writing essays under exam conditions. Afterwards, my hand would be a claw, the jagged shapes of letters evidence of the physical strain – and maybe my fraying mental state. But I'd feel less haunted than before I picked up the pen. Even, strangely, high.

I can barely remember what I wrote about, but I can't shake what all that practice taught me: the need – nay, the compulsion – to work, work, work: to prove myself, to justify my existence. All in the hope that one day, all that strenuous effort would pay off.

But reading about the study habits of high achievers today, it hits me: *I got off light.*

Take 15-year-old Tina Huang, who told novelist Alice Pung that she sat a three-hour scholarship preparation test every week at her coaching college. Maths, English, and two essays were routinely covered, though 'for an extra \$25 you could also do an abstract-reasoning test,' Huang said. 'They run the tests through a machine and *tah-dah*, you have your results and self-worth all summed up in a pretty blue graph.'

Exam prep and excoriating self-examination. Asians do love a bargain!

Then there's a certain hall at Sydney's Olympic Park where, these days, academic striving has superseded athletic ambition. In summer, when teens might otherwise be, you know, enjoying themselves, a thousand studious adolescents find themselves sitting portions of a practice selective school exam. You can imagine their heads bent diligently over their desks, a balmy breeze wafting in every so often from the outside.

This scene, written up in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, is rather coy about the ethnic make-up of the majority of test-takers. But given that the story is fundamentally about tuition, a sector with at least 75% Asian clientele, take a guess what background might heavily feature in the crowd?

These opening illustrations aren't meant to (further) stigmatise the Asian, overachieving student – often a figure of pity, if you're feeling indulgent, or irritation, if they're topping English as well as Maths. I'm telling you about Tina Huang and the academic strivers at Olympic Park because, as a Chinese high achiever myself talking about achievement addiction, I'm tapping into one of the most controversial issues in education in this country: the dominance of Asian students in public selective schools. So we may as well deal with that elephant – or tiger mother and her dragon child – in the room.

Yes, I might be leveraging unhelpful stereotypes here – of the Asian straight-A student – that I personally have felt the pressure of and want to challenge. Yes, I'm taking the risk of perpetuating the myth of the 'model minority' that assumes that all Asians are studious, self-reliant and hard-working, when Asians are just as diverse as any other group. And yes, thank God I'm Chinese, or I'd be crazy to rush in where the white woke fear to tread.

Yes, yes, and yes.

But I must also confess that I can't help but marvel at Asian high achievers. They – we – are people of grit who work extremely hard to reach their goals. As such, they merit our attention because they – and their highly motivated parents – are the ideal citizens of the meritocracy, or the equal opportunity system where the hardest workers rise to the top.

### **Extract 3: It's not about everyone getting a trophy**

314 words

What we've really been tracking is the dissolution of common bonds with each other. It's hard to remember that we're all part of the same human team when some players (so to speak) get a louder roar from the crowd than others. Currently, our achievement-obsessed culture tends to single out the clever and the credentialled for praise and high pay, which makes it harder for those of us with different abilities and experience to be recognised.

Which, by the way, is not a sentimental argument for everyone to get a trophy, or to deny people proper recognition for their achievements. It makes sense to reward talent and effort, and to seek the best, most qualified candidates to fulfil the most demanding roles. But when one measure of human value is so prevalent, it's easy to forget that there is no single scale of human worth. For instance, Ravenclaw may emphasise intelligence, but Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin highlight, respectively, bravery, loyalty, and, er, megalomaniacal ambition as significant human traits.

And as I've also explored through moaning about *The West Wing*, smart people might also be particularly prone to being smug people. Or unwise people. Or unkind people. It's ironic that the cleverest people among us can still be blindsided by their own prejudices. Especially since they also happen to be the kind of people who pride themselves on their ability to see the bigger picture.

Michael Young, meritocracy's original critic, feared that the world of equal opportunity would merely swap one class system for another. That aristocracy, or rule by the rich, would be replaced by meritocracy that would establish its own privileged caste of the clever.

If we aren't to be smug or resentful with each other on the basis of our achievements – or on our lack of them – then we need to find a better way that we can belong with each other.

