

Classical Me, Classical Thee

SQUANDER NOT
THINE EDUCATION

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If you have gone so far as to open the cover of this little book, then I think that you and I already have a lot in common.

You're a student in a classical Christian school.

Yeah—I did that too.

I went all the way through a classical school, K-12, and I think I have a pretty fair idea of the kind of life you lead. I bet I know what kind of classes you have to take and the sorts of teachers you listen to all day (the good, the bad, and the ugly). I know what kind of books you have to read, and I bet I know what you think of them. I probably have a

pretty good idea of the kind of classmates you have—and the difference between the face they show to you and the face they show to your teachers. I might even understand some of your frustrations, your questions, and your boredom, as well as what intrigues you.

I decided to write this book because I have spent my entire life around students in your position. I went through a classical school and walked in your shoes myself; now my own kids are high school students in a classical school, and they are currently walking in your shoes. I teach classes at a classical high school, so I spend every single day, eyeball to eyeball, with students who are jumping through the same hoops you're having to jump through. I have, in fact, seen the life of the classical high school student from pretty much every angle.

And let's face it. You're probably not at your school because you picked it.

I don't suppose that sometime in your early youth you sat down and read through a series of books discussing educational styles and decided that classical education looked like the best option. It's possible that your parents may have done that with you . . . but realistically, you're at this school because your parents were sold on the vision of classical education, not because you were.

This whole education thing is not something you chose, it's something that's being done to you. And when you were little, you never questioned it. But now that you're old enough to make a lot of your own choices in other areas (I'm assuming your mother doesn't still pick out your outfit every day), it may have occurred to you to wonder what the point of all this is. If you haven't asked the question yourself, I'm pretty sure some of your classmates have. Am I right? It probably went something like this:

One intrepid soul raises his hand in the middle of a gripping lesson on the uses of the Latin subjunctive and says,

“Why do we have to learn this?”

Another kid immediately chimes in,

“Yeah! What good is this going to do us in life?”

A third throws out,

“When will we
EVER USE THIS AGAIN?”

And I'd be willing to bet that whatever answer you heard wasn't terribly compelling. Did they tell you that Latin will help you with your English vocab and that you will be able to intuit the meanings of unusual words much more easily than other people?

(“Yes,” you think, “or I could just ask Siri and have a better answer in two seconds.”)

Or perhaps they told you that if you go to med school you’ll have a breeze of a time learning the names of medical conditions as opposed to all the other the unfortunate souls who never studied Latin?

(“But I want to be a pilot,” you mutter to yourself, “and chatting casually about the names of bacteria will—let us hope—NEVER be a part of my life.”)

Maybe you were told that botanical names will be easier for you to decipher?

(Let’s be real—that hardly seems like an alluring enough reason to have to study the subjunctive.)

Or possibly they mentioned that your math scores on standardized tests will be higher?

(And you sat there thinking that you don’t even care enough about that statement to even formulate an opinion about it at all. Insert eye roll here.)

Or maybe they scolded the entire class for having a bad attitude.

(And maybe you needed that and maybe you didn’t.)

Or did they give you Dorothy Sayers’ essay on “the Lost Tools of Learning” to read?

Yeah, I’m sorry about that. **I’m assuming that you remain unconvinced, settled in skepticism, and counting the days until you can choose what college you**

go to, choose what major you want, and choose what classes you sign up for.

Or maybe you're not that kid. Maybe you're loyal to this whole project, you enjoy your classes, you like your teachers, and it really bugs you when your classmates complain. But wouldn't you—even if you don't have a chip on your shoulder and a fuss in your voice—wouldn't you kind of like to hear the answers to those questions, too? Wouldn't it be helpful to know what the rationale is behind teaching you all this material? Wouldn't it be a bit handy to understand some of the behind-the-scenes decision-making which determined that you would learn this stuff? Because in my experience, even the most enthusiastic and on-board students still only have a very hazy notion of what all this is actually about.

Now, I do think there are some extremely compelling answers for this whole thing—I'm just not sure anyone has taken the time to actually spell them out for you.

Everyone's spending so much time giving you a classical education, it's possible that no one has taken the time to stop and tell you why they're doing it.

So here you go—I'm trying to take a shot at that.

Why bother with this? If you don't really have any choice in the matter and you're just going to be stuck in your school until you graduate, why bother reading about it? Why not just hunker down and get through it? Why not just start carving notches in the wall of your prison cell, marking the days until graduation and freedom? To answer that question, bear with me for a sec.

Let's say that you suddenly found out about the opportunity to be an intern on the film set of a major blockbuster movie that is going to be filmed in Italy this summer. You would get to spend your whole summer break on set, shadowing the director and getting a front-row seat watching how all this magic is being made. You would get a behind-the-scenes look at how everything works, from the actors to the special effects guys, the stunt men, the camera crews, the costume designers, and the editors. You could watch and learn from a world-class director as he weaves all that raw material into a gripping story. Let's say that you're interested in pursuing a career in film, and so not only will this whole experience be just plain fun, you also know that it would be of invaluable benefit to you as you get ready to start out on that career path. It could open any number of doors in the future, from what colleges you may attend to further film opportunities of the same kind. You know you would learn tons, and you know that you would come out of this experience with a huge head start over all the other kids who, just like you, are interested in pursuing a career in filmmaking.

Whether or not that particular scenario appeals to you, you can understand how it could appeal to someone. And furthermore, let's say that in order to get into this internship, you have to apply for it, you need to show exceptional talent and be highly qualified, you have to submit an original short film as part of the application process, and then you have to be selected out of thousands of other applicants who are all dying for the same thing. So you do it. You apply. You cross your fingers, you pray like crazy, and then . . . against all the odds, you're selected.

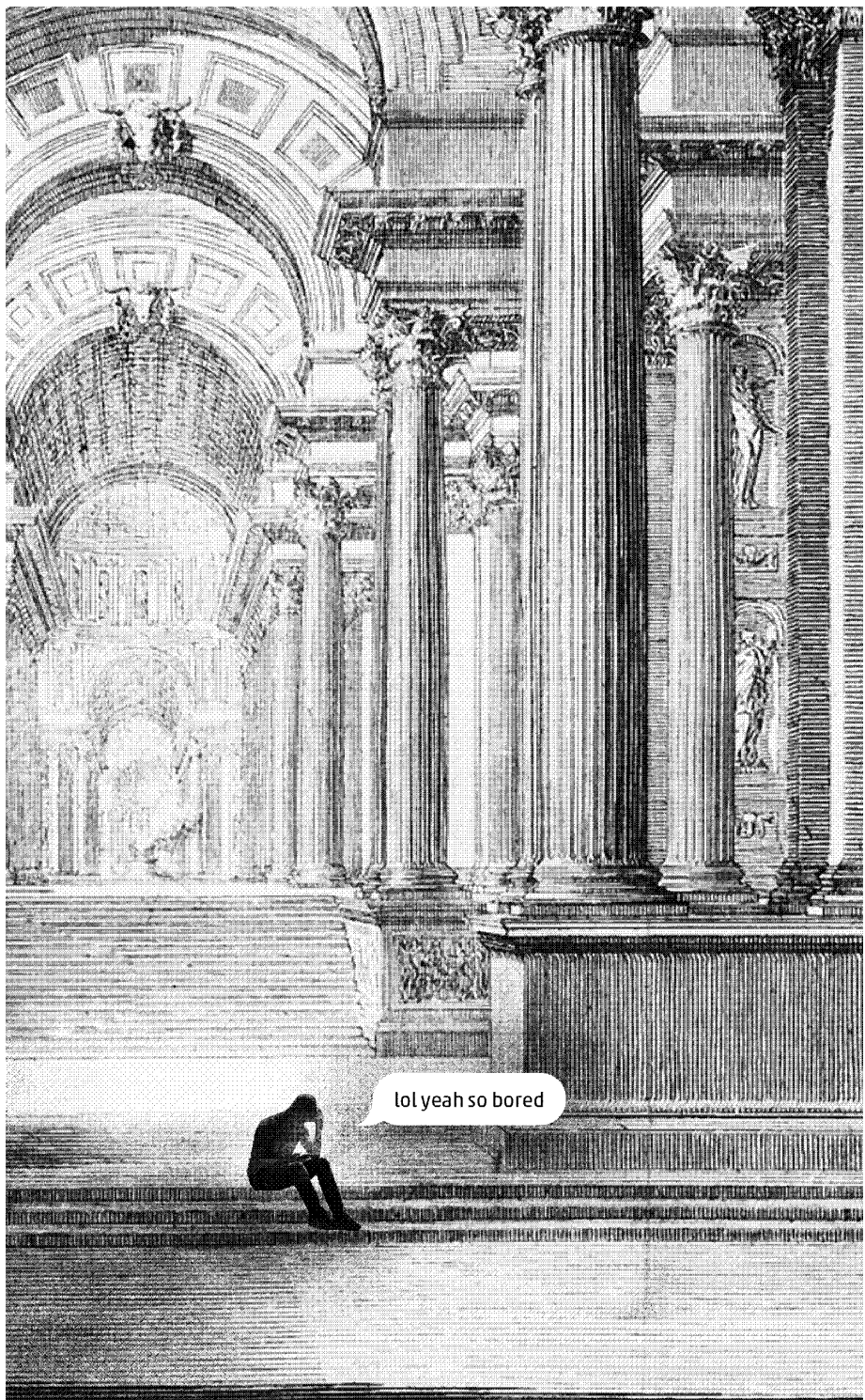
You are actually the one lucky winner out of thousands who gets to go on this crazy ride.

With me so far? Now then. Once on the set in Italy, how are you going to feel about all the stuff the director is telling you about the whole process of film making? You're standing in Rome outside the Colosseum in the late afternoon, helping set up the cameras, listening to the director explain how he wants to frame the shot and what he wants to capture as the actress runs across the street to catch a bus. He's talking about the light and why he's going to wait until the sun comes out from behind that cloud, and he's most insistent that the sunlight will profoundly affect the dramatic impact of the scene he's trying to create.

Let me ask you . . . Are you groaning and rolling your eyes the whole time? Drumming your pencil on your notebook and dying a little bit inside? Asking yourself, or him, what is the point of it all? Wondering when this will possibly ever benefit you? Yawning ostentatiously, muttering “sheesh” under your breath at periodic intervals, and looking at your watch every two minutes?

Of course not. And the reason you wouldn't be doing that, is that you already value what it is that you're receiving. You know what a privilege it is. You know how crazy hard you had to work and how highly you had to achieve to be here. You see what an enormous opportunity it is. You see how great this is going to look on college applications. You know how this increases your chances of getting onto other sets in the future. Clearly you're not going to waste this moment by fussing, spacing off, or making the director wonder if he shouldn't just send you home. Obviously you're going to be giving this whole thing 110 percent of your effort and attention—and that's because when you value something, you treat it differently than you would if you thought it was worthless.

Now let me introduce you to another person along on this trip. Let's call him Logan. He's the nephew of one of the film crew, and he's stuck hanging out on the set in Italy with you all summer—which really bums him out because he wants to be skateboarding with his friends back home in Milwaukee, but he can't because his parents are forcing him to be on this stupid trip and it's totally lame



lol yeah so bored

and uncool. So he slumps around in the background with a tortured look on his face and spends the entire time staring at his phone. The two of you are receiving all the same opportunities, but you're getting two very different things out of it. Now, let's suppose that Logan finishes the summer, goes home to Milwaukee to pursue his dream of becoming a professional skateboarder, but things don't really go his way because it turns out that he's just not that good. So he enrolls in college and, after switching majors three or four times, he finally pulls himself together and fixes his attitude and realizes what it is he really wants to do . . . pursue a career in filmmaking. And let's say this time around it really takes. Logan has figured out his passion—and it turns out that he's actually kinda talented at it.

Regardless of your thoughts on the internship, how do you think Logan feels when he looks back on that summer? Does he have any regrets? Might he wish that he had paid better attention? Would he wish that he could go back in time and change one or two or all of the details?

Many students from classical schools have wandered off into the sunset after graduation, and several years down the road have suddenly noticed how very useful their education is proving to be. **They value it now, but in retrospect—when it's quite a ways back in the rearview mirror.** Suddenly they look back at what they were given in high school, and they realize that they were handed something that very, very few people