

It's Midterms in America

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JOE COLLEGE, by Tom Perrotta. St. Martin's, 306 pp., \$23.95.

TOM PERROTTA GETS it right. His new novel, "Joe College," is one of the few convincing portrayals of college life I've ever come across. I may be slightly prejudiced here. I went to college in the same years (1979-83) as Perrotta's protagonist, Danny (and the author himself). What feels so dead-on about "Joe College" isn't just that Perrotta ("Election," "The Wishbones") gets the small details -like the albums that people played again and again and again during those years - or the things that must be common to every college student- the inability to get work done in the airless, flourescent-lit chambers that are college libraries (who designs those monstrosities?). Perrotta nails down the particular strangeness of experiencing the zenith of the Reagan years from inside the cocoon of higher education, particularly for working- and middle-class kids.

Danny, who's in the second semester of his junior year, is a working-class Jersey boy attending Yale on a scholarship. Even with the financial aid, school is a stretch for his parents. His dad, in a burst of middle-aged restlessness, has ditched his grocery store job for a lunch-truck route, and it's partly out of a feeling of responsibility that Danny spends vacations working in the truck, hustling from one construction site and office parking lot to another. It's on his regular run that he meets up with Cindy, a girl he never paid attention to in school. Cindy and Danny have next to nothing in common, but out of boredom and horniness (his), the two embark on a summer fling. Only it's more than that for Cindy, as Danny finds out from the letters and (unreturned) calls he receives when he goes back to Yale.

The pleasure of "Joe College" isn't just that Perrotta writes smooth, readable prose, invents engaging characters and tells a good story (though that's more than you get from a lot of novels). It's also in the way he links Danny's shame about-and protectiveness toward-his working-class background to the larger drama being played out in the Reagan years. Like a lot of white, working-class people, Danny's parents fall for Reagan's white-picket-fence vision of an America that never was without grasping that they are the very people Reagan's economic and social policies shafted. Danny, like almost all his classmates, even the rich ones, despises this doddering fool of a leader, and yet he can't escape the guilty feeling that he has bought into some part of Reagan's philosophy.

Maybe you have to have been the first one in your family to attend college to understand Danny's mixture of pride and shame, the suspicion that he is betraying his roots by wanting to do better than his parents did, and his inability to feel comfortable in either world. He can't quite feel at home with the workers on his lunch route who rib him about being a college man and ask whether he's scored with Jodie Foster yet, or with the rich kids he encounters at Yale,

like the girl who plunges her hand into a punch bowl to extract her Rolex and announces, "My Daddy would've killed me if I'd lost it." Perrotta captures that tension in an indelible scene in which Danny and his roommates are treated to dinner by the rich father of one of them. It would have been easy for Perrotta to make the rich man a blowhard or a boob. Instead, he's a pleasant guy who's genuinely interested in listening to their problems, who even laughs good-naturedly when they all confess to detesting Reagan. Danny has spent the dinner slowly easing himself into enjoying the unaccustomed luxury of the evening when his host, patient and friendly, says, "Ronald Reagan's been a great president for people like us." Coming back to his dorm room later that night, Perrotta has Danny explain, "The strangest feeling came over me, a burning, overpowering rush of shame, though what it was for I couldn't say. The intensity of it buckled my knees...then I forced myself to stand up." As he makes it inside, all he can do is say to himself, "I didn't do anything wrong."

And this time Danny is right. He didn't. But Perrotta complicates things with the character of Cindy, the girl still wearing feathered Farrah hair in 1982, who Danny's ashamed to let his new college friends meet. Perrotta's riskiest move was to make Danny's cavalier treatment of Cindy the snobbiest thing in the book, the essence of the behavior he's afraid he's showing his parents, and a reflection of the Reagan era's relentless sorting out of who belonged and who didn't.

"Joe College" is a deceptively modest novel. Perrotta manages to do a remarkable amount in it. It's a comic novel so enjoyable you find yourself turning the last page in no time, and yet it's got staying power. You find yourself going over the scenes in your head. It's also a personal (and perhaps autobiographical) book that's never self-absorbed, never fails to link its protagonist to the larger world, giving us a main character who behaves terribly at times but without sinking into self-loathing. Perrotta has gained a reputation for turning out pop entertainments, and he's certainly done so here. But "Joe College" is more than that. Even if it doesn't come together and reach the summation it should, it's a serious, substantial use of the novel as social history. To paraphrase something the critic Robin Wood once wrote about filmmaker Howard Hawks, we shouldn't underrate Perrotta because we enjoy him. "Joe College" doesn't engage in the kind of exquisitely crafted navel-gazing that still holds sway in so much contemporary fiction. It's worth noting that Perrotta teaches writing at Harvard. For the sake of our future pleasure as readers, let's hope his students are paying attention.

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