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Searching for Coolness

By MARIA RUSSO

Joe College

By Tom Perrotta.

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St. Martin's Press. \$23.95.

It's easy to see why "Election," Tom Perrotta's zippy, strangely suspenseful 1998 novel about a New Jersey high school student government election, became a cult favorite on college campuses (and was turned into an equally popular movie). "Election" put a human face on the vast system through which American high school students are sorted into more and less prestigious colleges. In the clash between the fiercely ambitious Tracy Flick and Mr. M., the hapless English teacher who recognizes something unsettling in Tracy's onward, upward march, Perrotta captured a drama played out in high schools across the nation: Who will stay behind and end up replicating their parents' lives, and who will get a shot at bigger and better things? The novel's great, moving insight was that the teachers who enable the savviest and most privileged to leave are themselves among those left behind.

"Joe College," Perrotta's fourth book of fiction and his first since "Election," also takes on the social shuffling of the meritocracy and its effect on individual lives. This time, Perrotta explores what happens after a working-class guy arrives at an elite college. It's 1982, and Danny, the Yale junior from New Jersey who narrates the novel, has finally begun to feel as though he belongs in the campus mix. He's no longer astounded by things like Yale's "singing-group subculture." (At first, he'd been "totally unprepared for the centrality of singing groups to campus life, the excitement that surrounded the news that so-and-so had been tapped to be a Spizzwink or an Alley Cat.") He's got a foot in several social circles: the eclectic bunch of Yalies and townies who work with him at the dining hall; his tightly knit group of roommates; and his fellow staffers at Reality, an undergraduate literary magazine devoted to "the whole wide hardscrabble world spread out like a dirty rug at the foot of our ivory tower" -- with no scrimping on paper stock or other production values, naturally, thanks to an anonymous donor.

Yet Danny is both too honest and too self-protectively evasive to escape the difficulties of straddling his two worlds. He dodges increasingly desperate phone messages from Cindy, a girl from home whom he'd spent a bored, lonely summer ambivalently dating while he worked long hours on his father's lunch truck (called "Dante's Roach Coach"). He's trying to make romantic headway with an altogether different sort of girl: Polly, a Reality editor who's the girlfriend of a young assistant professor. ("Sexual harassment hadn't quite come into its own as a concept at the time," Danny notes.) As spring break approaches and his father suddenly needs an operation, Danny confronts the prospect of returning home to pilot the lunch truck by himself, confronting Cindy and the rest of the old life he's steadily moving away from. When Cindy turns out to be pregnant and mobsters try to take over his father's hard-won lunch-truck route, the working-stiff life Danny was poised to escape seems all too real.

Perrotta has a knack for revealing the huge stakes in ordinary events without seeming melodramatic; he understands the consequences that can attend a false step in the transition from one life stage to the next. This is especially true for someone like Danny, who may graduate from Yale but could as easily end up a college

dropout settling for the things his father settled for. "I believed that I was a decent person," Danny says as he mulls over his troubling behavior with Cindy. Yet he sees his life "as a car with no brakes careening down a dangerous mountain road. Get in my way and I'll run you down, or at least leave you in the dust. Not because I want to, but simply because I have to."

Perrotta has a dark streak, but he's not an angst-ridden or moody writer. He tends to hustle his downers offstage as quickly as possible. His prose is cheerful and smooth (some might say too much so), studded with references to pop songs, as if he's trying to give the book a soundtrack. Nonetheless, he's created an absorbing, fleshed-out portrait of an American male edging toward adulthood by crossing seemingly rigid social boundaries. He's attuned to the small acts of emotional bravery -- tasting his Korean roommate's kimchi in a quest to become a more "adventurous eater," or dancing in public for the first time -- that mark Danny's development as surely as do more outwardly obvious turning points. And his gently satirical takes on the lunch-truck business and on a certain kind of college culture, circa 1982, are full of funny, dead-on observations.

It's a virtue of "Joe College" that it makes acting out of pure self-interest seem almost noble under certain circumstances; after all, most of Danny's Yale classmates have been too fortunate to find themselves in the kind of situations he regularly navigates. After eating at an expensive restaurant with the wealthy father of a college friend, for example, Danny looks at his "Dante's Roach Coach" key ring and is struck by a "burning, overpowering rush of shame, though what it was for I couldn't say." Yet ultimately, Danny's two worlds are not necessarily as far apart as he imagines. In Perrotta's generous view, his hero's embrace of Yale represents not so much a rejection of his old life as an act of loyalty to himself and his sense of life's expansiveness.

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