Robert L. Hampel, *Fast and Curious: A History of Shortcuts in American Education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. 192 pp.

Here's a truism: Americans love a get-rich-quick scheme. Here's another: in the US, education has historically been the path to the good life. But schooling, by most accounts, is a slog. What's to be done?

Robert Hampel offers some answers in this book, the first history of the get-educated-quick scheme. In a series of case studies that skip around the twentieth century, Hampel introduces us to reformers, cranks, and grifters, all hustling some version of the idea that learning can be done on the quick and (sometimes) on the cheap. Generations of Americans bought what they were selling, from mail-order courses on typewriting to brain-boosting pills peddled in spam email.

In keeping with the theme, *Fast and Curious* is a quick book, just 168 pages, including notes and a lovely bibliographical essay. Hampel divides it into a pair of two-chapter parts. The first, "Faster and Easier," is primarily concerned with forms of education that can be done at home, like correspondence courses and prepackaged "Great Books" collections. The second, "Faster and Harder," deals with innovations that promise long-term shortcuts in exchange for a short-term burst of effort, including accelerated degree programs and novelties like shorthand writing.

More specifically, Hampel's first three chapters deal respectively with shortcuts to human capital, cultural capital, and credentials. In each case, a lot of the solutions on offer are nothing more than educational snake oil, hawked by salespeople making "extravagant and deceptive claims for their products and the dramatic results that would ensue" (p. 3). And yet, other for-profit ventures seem more reputable, not least for their surprising associations with luminaries. Hampel provides vivid case studies of two affiliated mail-order programs designed to train artists and writers, counting Norman Rockwell and Rod Serling among their "guiding faculty" (p. 30). No less an educational titan than Charles Eliot spent his later years endorsing the Harvard Classics—published not by the university press, but by Colliers. And many more elite universities turn out to have been in the thick of the hustle, from Columbia's correspondence division in the 1920s to Cornell's short-lived combined BA/PhD program in the 1960s.

Celebrity isn't the whole story, however. Hampel offers a great short history of CliffsNotes, relying on personal interviews that show how a study-aid company started in a Nebraska basement quickly grew into a cultural phenomenon. Those little black-and-

yellow pamphlets were sold in campus bookstores, of course, but they were also advertised in *Playboy*. Another case study examines Simon's Rock, a quirky college in Massachusetts that admits teenagers right out of the tenth grade. The fact that it has been underenrolled for most of the half-century since its founding—and the fact that it has no imitators—indicates that the appeal of the educational fast track has its limits.

Indeed, while this book is not a polemic, Hampel is pretty clear about his opinion that most of these shortcuts are bunk. Even casting aside the more egregious scams, he disagrees with the fundamental premise at hand: that "learning is linear. A student should make step-by-step progress, doing the assignments in the exact order and the precise manner stipulated by the correspondence school. … [These schools] rarely considered the possibility that the developing mind zigzags, with leaps of insight as well as bouts of confusion, rather than moves straight ahead" (p. 11). And, he suggests, the necessity of that zigzagging has kept the hustlers at bay for well over a century. While some had short-term successes (detailed multiple times in an odd focus on the stock prices of their holding companies), none of the programs and schemes has had a lasting presence in the educational sphere, or even a significant impact thereon.

Hampel takes a number of liberties in compiling his cases. He devotes a couple of pages to paint-by-numbers—can we count that as education? Does the fact that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. never earned a PhD constitute a shortcut, or was that just a career choice at a time when professors didn't need one? And the biggest liberties of all come in the fourth and final chapter, which examines innovations like simplified spelling and shorthand. These speak much more to the efficiency craze of the early twentieth century than to educational matters. Hampel is on firmer ground when discussing speed-reading, which promised to quicken learning in a way that seems both miraculous (read fifteen hundred words a minute!) and profoundly stupid.

There are omissions, too, as there must be in a book of this length. These include, other than brief mentions, the innumerable shortcuts that rely on the internet. But this is a work of history, and though we are in our third decade of widespread internet access, that may be a topic for an entirely different book. More glaring is the omission of politics. The loudest voices for educational shortcuts have often come out of a brand of conservatism rooted in both anti-intellectualism and reverence for the free market. Those ideologies combine to form disdain for the academy and cheerleading for anything that might circumvent it. And if there's a buck to be made along the way, even better. Given that educational hucksters have captured national politics—Hampel does reference Trump University and Betsy DeVos's heavy

investments in the snake oil Neurocore clinics, but only in passing—this angle deserves a lot more examination.

Providing this would have given *Fast and Curious* an argument; as written, it doesn't have one. And that's OK. Hampel hasn't written this book as a major historical intervention. What it is, is good plain fun. Those of us who spend our time thinking about education, especially its history, will find ourselves chuckling and shaking our heads throughout. Who knew that the YMCA was running ten law schools in the 1920s? Did Columbia University really once peddle mail-order classes on interior decorating? And one can't help but be tickled by how the condensed book series Classics Illustrated paraphrased Hamlet's soliloquy: "Life is sad. If death is like sleep, it might be better to die" (p. 54–55).

So, in that spirit, here's the CliffsNotes version of this review: Learning is hard. Some people will tell you otherwise, but they are either lying or delusional. Reading this book, however, is a pleasure. You should do so.

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*doi: 10.1017/heq.2018.39*

Adam Laats. *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 360 pp.

Finally, we have a comprehensive history of some of the most significant—and significantly understudied—"dissenting" types of higher educational institutions: fundamentalist and evangelical colleges and universities. And Adam Laats is exactly the right person to have written it. As a sympathetic outsider to the institutions he studies, Laats pairs depth of research and analysis with a commitment to rigorous fairness to his subjects. In *Fundamentalist U*, Laats does not merely explain the internal logic of an interesting, but isolated, group of colleges and universities; he also raises critical questions about the nature of broader American higher education and culture in the twentieth century. As Laats notes, "Our culture wars are not between educated people on one side and uneducated people on the other. … Rather, our culture wars are usually fiercest between two groups of people who have been educated in very different ways" (p. 4).