

Streib, J. (2023) *The Accidental Equalizer: How Luck Determines Pay after College.* University of Chicago Press.

Review by Allison L. Hurst

This is Jessi Streib's third book, all published in the last eight years. As with *The Power of the Past* and *Privilege Lost*, it is a snappily written, crisply presented monograph based on interviews with a select group of persons experiencing some interesting aspect of class dynamics in contemporary America. In this case, the group of persons are college seniors looking for jobs and mostly finding them. Streib employs this group to tell a story of the role of luck *rather than class* in finding well-paying work after college. *The Accidental Equalizer* thus operates as a counter-narrative to that which is mostly related by researchers publishing in this journal. Instead of a story of class mobility blocked by preexisting class advantages, Streib describes a field that is so random and undetermined that class advantages (e.g., what and who one knows, how much money and education parents have) are largely powerless to make a difference in outcomes. In her account, working-class students are equally as likely to find a well-paying job after college as their middle-class peers.

To say this finding flies in the face of a lot of pre-existing research would be an understatement. Is Streib convincing? To some extent, yes. A finding that, in certain circumstances, class background matters less than luck is actually quite a consequential and even, perhaps, revolutionary finding. But those "in certain circumstances" are important to keep in mind.

Let's begin with where Streib shines. She is a facile storyteller and is able to convey difficult information succinctly. There is a lot of "economics" discourse throughout the book, but a casual reader would hardly notice as it is wrapped up well in colorful description and compelling examples. As always, her title attracts and surprises, and throughout she writes passages that could easily stand as "soundbites" on a podcast or in the pages of the *New York Times*. Actually, I expect to find it there soon!. Unlike many academics who get tripped up on their own discourse, Streib always seems to know how to reach her audience. This is a fun book to read. It is compelling and persuasive, and full of stories of actual people struggling to make sense of their circumstances.

Throughout she uses a simple analogy of *Let's Make a Deal* as a running theme in support of her theory. You may recall the famous game show in which contestants were shown three doors and asked to randomly select one in the hope of acquiring a valuable prize. Actually, the game was a bit more complicated than this, but let's keep it simple, as Streib does. Class doesn't help any contestant in this game. It is wholly random, and the contestants have no idea where the prize is located or even what the prize is. As Streib explains, they can't call their parents for help as their parents don't have any useful information either. Streib argues that the employment market for some college graduates works similarly. It doesn't matter if your parents were college professors,

corporate CEOs, or pinsetters at the local bowling alley. How much money graduates earn out of college is subject to luck.

Now the caveats. Streib uses a particular sample of college seniors and graduates here – those majoring in business at a mid-tier public university who are on the market for mid-tier business jobs open to recent college graduates. Students, all with college degrees from the same institution, compete blindly for entry-level “business” jobs advertised in such places as Monster.com. These jobs can be anything from cold-calling customers to “marketing” jobs that entail rote data entry to project management. The advertisements are often comically ambiguous and almost never state a salary figure, unless it is to call it “competitive.” A student can pursue a job through multiple interviews thinking that this is a well-paying position at a major company doing important business-related work only to find out at the very end that they will make no more than \$35,000 doing largely grunt work like making copies. Or that they will be earning twice that and be on a fast track to promotion into management. The point is, *who knows?* The conditions of employment, including salary, are largely hidden away, like those valuable prizes in *Let’s Make a Deal*. Most of the students/graduates Streib interviews also appear to “settle” for the first job they actually land, largely because there is so much uncertainty and anxiety about employment. Thus, wealthier students who have their parent’s support if they need to keep looking are also taking the low-paying option when offered.

I am concerned with the book’s generalizability. On the one hand, Streib is careful to clearly state the circumstances under which class does not matter. First, information has to be lacking. Job seekers simply don’t know enough about this market to pull strings or take shortcuts. Salaries are hidden, job descriptions are vague, job titles are uninformative, and promotional structures are not disclosed. Secondly, employers use “class-neutral criteria.” It appears (almost) random what criteria are used by hiring committees. Streib talked to people making these decisions, and they are all over the map. Some might like the fact that a candidate went to a private high school and others might be turned off by it. Some might give more weight to prior unpaid internships while others think this is an unfair advantage and prefer candidates who’ve worked real jobs. Many hirers tell Streib they don’t like entitled candidates, seemingly *dis-advantaging* middle- and upper-class job seekers.

On the other hand, Streib suggests that these circumstances (poor information plus class-neutral hiring criteria) are fairly widespread. I think she has raised a really interesting question here – where and when do we find these circumstances? But I am much less optimistic than she is about the answer to that question. One of the reasons class-neutral criteria operate in the mid-tier business hiring market she studied was that the bar was set relatively low for candidates. There are a lot of these jobs and anyone with a college degree who majored in business and who knows how to present themselves during an interview (something the college program teaches them, as Streib shows) is desirable. In that case, it really is luck who ends up with what employer. Everyone who wants a job gets one. It’s only after the hiring that pay differences are noted. But how many markets are really like that? We know from Laurison and Friedman’s *The Class Ceiling* that some professions pay a lot more attention than others to class criteria. Furthermore, having a college degree is itself a non-class-neutral criterion, as Streib herself knows. Despite what many highly educated people think, the great majority of young adults are still not earning college degrees. The fact that working-class graduates were not further disadvantaged once they earned a degree from

a mid-level public university is something, but certainly not the whole or even main story about American mobility that her title suggests.

Streib's final chapter suggests we have a choice between class-based meritocracies and luckocracies, her coined phrase for the random hiring practices she uncovered. She spends some time discussing the pros and cons of each. I think this is something of a wasted opportunity for a book that is welcomely succinct. I would much rather have seen her be more thoughtful about those specific circumstances and what we can really learn about the ways class affects opportunities for all. I fear the upcoming *New York Times* piece that tells everyone class doesn't matter anymore. It's just luck.

Reviewer Bio

Allison L. Hurst is a Professor of Sociology at Oregon State University. She is the author of *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades, and Double Agents* (2010), *College and the Working Class* (2012), *Amplified Advantage: Going to a "Good" School in an Era of Inequality* (2019), and the co-editor of *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016).