

Educating Children with Autism

There are two sides to every story, and yet there can still be few answers to discern the truth. Many of us have read *Educated*, a memoir by Tara Westover, published by Random House. As of February 2020, it's been on the New York Times best-seller list for two years and has been translated into 45 languages. It's labeled as a memoir, a story of childhood abuse and the author's remarkable rise in education, eventually earning her PhD despite a lack of formal education in her home growing up.

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UPDATE: Comments are turned off on this post. My intent is not to trash on Tara's family. This is a book review. Over time, comments have simply rehashed certain opinions. If anything, the family could use prayers—all of them. Those are my thoughts and feelings—January 2023.

As you might imagine, from a parental and sibling perspective, Tara's family is upset with the book being printed, with the story being told. In fact, they dispute much of what's been written about them. Mother LaRee Westover has recently authored her memoir, *Educating*, to "tell the story of my life as I really lived it and not in the dramatically fictionalized way others, based on my daughter's book, are telling it for me."

Is *Educated* Based on a True Story?

Is it all true? That's what I really wanted to know when I agreed to read LaRee's memoir. Like many of you, I read Tara's memoir, *Educated*, a couple of years ago and re-read it right after reading LaRee's book "in preparation for this review.

To give you some perspective of the setting where both books take place and why I'm very much interested in them, you need to know that the Westovers are from Clifton, Idaho (population 301 in 2018). I grew up in the nearby community of Preston, Idaho (population 5,501 in 2018). The distance is about 12.5 miles, a 16-minute drive in southeastern Idaho.

Surprisingly, we don't know each other and have never met. As you might anticipate, however, the Westovers and I know some of the same people, several of whom have reached out to me since Tara first published her book. These mutual friends have expressed concern that the memoir isn't fully truthful and have asked me to take a look at both sides of the story.

When *Educated* first published I found reference to it online and read the tag about it being a true story of a Mormon from Idaho. Mormon is the nickname of my religion: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You might imagine I quickly clicked the book link and ordered my copy as my interest was definitely piqued. I knew nothing more about the book.

As soon as it arrived, I started to read and kept noticing similarities to my

own hometown and wondered where everything was taking place. Tara's book doesn't clearly identify the setting as Clifton. Imagine my surprise, when at about two o'clock in the morning (yes, I couldn't put the book down), I read "Worm Creek Opera House" on page 85. No town has a theatre with that awful name except Preston, Idaho!

Suddenly, I knew the book was about my community and possibly involved people I knew; the book became more personal and I wondered, Was the abuse I was reading about possible in such a tight-knit community? Why would a family from my religion do such things? I had so many questions. I was dumbfounded, perplexed, sad, and shocked. And yet I believed Tara must be telling the truth—at least to some degree. Some of what she shares is fact and can be proven. She also references her journal writings. Other content, however, is he-said, she-said and is noted with asterisks and tiny print or is admittedly retold from conversations with relatives later in life.

Is Educating Based on a True Story?

In her self-published memoir, LaRee and her husband, Val, make a point of telling us they are different, and they're not afraid to be different. It says so in huge font on the back cover and is a pronounced theme throughout the book. They're also proud that they don't travel "the middle of the road," doing things as many others do. Why do they emphasize these points? Because they often did and still do their own thing.

They homeschooled, which wasn't a popular choice when they were raising children. They used homeopathic treatments for many of their ailments, even for serious injuries when most people would have immediately sought hospital care or a physician's visit. LaRee practiced midwifery, without any kind of license or formal schooling, for years when it was legal in the state of Idaho and other states where she worked. (Practicing midwifery became illegal in Idaho in 2009.) She was the only midwife for miles around once her mentor and trainer moved. By their own admission, she and Val had different ideas—and stuck to them.

Trouble with Extended Family and Neighbors

Several chapters in the book admit the Westovers often didn't get along with extended family and others in their community. Val was and is insistent that his beliefs and ideas are right. LaRee supports him. Much of her book

repeatedly tells us what a wonderful, righteous man Val is: "One of the reasons I fell in love with Val all those years ago was his desire for righteousness." One example, on page 100, explains his mindset and convictions: "Val discerns truth from sophistry better than any other man I know. He doesn't abandon his ideals and opinions easily, as he worked too hard to arrive at them through study, pondering, and prayer."

But those rigid thoughts and actions often created a chasm with extended family members. "Interactions with family," LaRee admits, "sometimes caused trouble between Val and me and led to our children being exposed to slanderous stories about their father."

Chapter 22 is dedicated solely to explaining family injustices. Val's mother often disagreed with her son. She lived just down the hill from the family and was concerned about her grandchildren's safety, education, and upbringing. "Long before the end of her life," however, "she came to see the damage these tirades were causing and stopped," LaRee writes.

Her parents also had a strained relationship with her because of Val. In fact, though her parents lived in nearby Preston, the Westovers didn't visit often. "There were times when my family's near constant censure triggered discouragement, nastiness, and whining in me." LaRee continues, "I would become unfairly annoyed at Val and more frustrated, sometimes vocally, by his health issues." Extended family spoke out when Val's health prohibited him from working to sustain his wife and children. Other times family criticized when seeming luxuries were purchased: "They saw it as Val's extravagance or his inability to put his family's needs in proper order."

LaRee sees Val in a different light. As a youth, she had experienced a troublesome, manipulative relationship with another young man. The book's first few chapters go into detail about the experience. Her parents were concerned then, and their concern continued when she married Val: "Did Val, as my family claims, drag me against my will out of the middle of the road?" She says they didn't. But LaRee spends a lot of book space telling us about the former dysfunctional relationship, and it's confusing to a reader as to why, especially when her relationship with Val has been troublesome.

And what about relationships with the neighbors? In chapter 26: "People, Politics, and Persecution" LaRee tells us, "Our family had to bear the maltreatment meted out by those who were unwilling to make room for broader ways of thinking." A journal entry from February 20, 2005, records the following: "The events of the past few weeks and

the past day or two, particularly, have brought to my attention that nothing has really changed after all.â€• She continues, â€œThe fact is, there are some neighbors who seem to dislike me for who I am and would likely feel no remorse for any amount of trouble and inconvenience they could cause me and mine, so long as they could do it legally.â€•

Val also remembers the family â€œgoing to church and sitting in an available pew and watching as people near us got up and moved away without speaking a word.â€•

Noted in the chapter are unpopular Westover debates regarding the upgrade of the townâ€™s water system. â€œIt was a rare month,â€• LaRee notes, â€œwhen the city council meetings failed to discuss what Val Westover was up to.â€• Then there was an eviction notice for a trailer they owned; reports of fire hydrants mysteriously being knocked over; zoning ordinances prohibiting home-based businesses, which the Westovers own; and fights for property rights.

Midwifery and Homeopathic Remedies

Five chapters are specifically devoted to these topics, in one form or another. These career choices are an important part of LaReeâ€™s life, and she chooses to discuss them in great detail.

Understandably, she wants to represent the best side of her chosen profession as a midwife. She points out that in some rural areas, midwife deliveries may be the quickest option for healthy births. While that may be true, I can say the hospital in Preston, Idaho, where my youngest brother was born, is where many local deliveries occur. Itâ€™s located about 10 minutes from where we lived at the time and is probably about 20 minutes away from Clifton. I was born in the Logan Regional Hospital, which is about 45 minutes away. Nearby Pocatello, Idaho, has options as well to serve my hometown community.

LaRee mentions several books and courses she has studied to gain her knowledge and expertise in midwifery, homeopathic remedies, foot-zone treatments, and chakra methods. Years of experience and miracles in treating two family members with severe burns using herbal remedies and pressure-point healings provide testimonials for the products she uses and sells through her now multi-million-dollar company Butterfly Expression.

No scientific studies, however, with controlled environments, study groups, and supporting data were cited to prove

successful treatments shared in the book. Therefore, medical opinions expressed in the book are anecdotal.

Medical resources, in LaRee's opinion, are sometimes necessary. "Even though we grew into using herbal remedies almost exclusively, there were certain times when the expertise and counsel of medical personnel blessed our lives," Chapter 16 tells of several instances where medical care was sought for Westover family members. "We do not consider the medical community to be the enemy," she clarifies. There's even a medical disclaimer in the front of the book, but throughout its pages, she tells over and over how her natural practices are better. She gives little credit to the medical community and medical advances.

Homeschooling

LaRee attended Brigham Young University (BYU) for a time. Val also attended university. While at BYU, she began to explore the idea of home schooling while pursuing a degree in early childhood education. When she had children of her own, she first sent them to public school. Kindergarten was about 10 miles away, and it was hard for one of the first children to endure the bus ride.

Homeschooling the Westover children was met with opposition by the local school board and the state of Idaho. Both sets of grandparents also disapproved, but LaRee persisted with her goal. Initially, her homeschooling was structured much like public schooling but evolved to focus on a more relaxed, learning-together approach. She writes about all the hands-on, personalized lessons she prepared for the children, some of whom have special needs, and frequent trips to the town library.

She also encouraged older children to teach younger children (p. 93-94). With her busy career as a midwife and her own illnesses to tend, she was gone from the family often. This fact should be considered when Tara, the youngest of the children, insists she didn't receive an adequate education growing up.

Unlike Tara's recollections that there were no educational resources at home, LaRee insists they were stocked with a variety of books, an encyclopedia set, magazines, and "one of the first personal computers in our small town."

Tara remembers the computer as having limited software options and no internet access. A photo in LaRee's book shows a satellite-type dish installed on their home in the 1990s for internet services (p. 86). Tara was a junior at BYU in

2007. So the years indicate she would have had technology in the home for her studies if the service was current and paid for.

After a time, some of the Westover children chose to attend public school. Six of the seven children went on to receive more formal education, and three earned PhDs. Today, several of the Westover's 36 grandchildren homeschool or have been homeschooled.

Key Topics from Educated That Are Missing in Educating

Tara's written account has always bothered me from a journalistic point of view in that key discrepancies are admitted with an asterisk and tiny print at the bottom of the page. Yet her account is what's written in the main text. It's important to note that there are holes in her story. Sibling recollections of main events vary. It's a fact noted in the memoir.

But it's also key to note there are important facts that are irrefutable facts. And LaRee either doesn't address them in her book or only mentions them briefly.

Why would you not get a birth certificate for some of your children?

The last four of the Westover's seven children did not receive birth certificates at birth. In the prologue to her book, Tara tells us: "We have no medical records because we were born at home and have never seen a doctor or nurse. We have no school records because we never set foot in a classroom." She notes a few exceptions for medical treatment, but her point is that medical care was not often sought, though it was needed.

Tara was finally issued a Delayed Certificate of Birth when she was nine. Even then, there was a discrepancy on her birth date that had to be corrected. Her brother's birth date was uncertain as well. Except for a tiny mention that you almost miss, LaRee doesn't explain the why behind not getting birth certificates. Tara says it's because her father suddenly decided to end his personal "ten-year policy of not registering with the Government" (p. 19).

Why didn't Tara's dad, Val, cooperate on key legal issues? Why did he isolate the family?

At one point, Val (pseudonym Gene in the book) refused to renew his driver's license and insure their vehicles. He also didn't allow his family to have a phone for years (see p. 29). While there's nothing illegal about not having a phone, he cut off needed communication to the outside world. These are just a few examples of how Val and his family bucked the norm for years; Educated tells of more.

The Westovers may argue these are just minor details in the bigger picture of their story. But they are facts that indicate Val's stubbornness and controlling nature, something Tara repeatedly brings up throughout her entire book. They might also help to explain the bigger picture of why there were and are so many Westover problems in the community.

Some of those problems may be legitimate; the family has an attorney they actively use. Val's refusal to cooperate in these legal matters, which we all have to abide by, seems to be a direct result of what Tara tells us is his paranoia of the government and anything to do with it.

Why did Val insist on emergency preparedness for the "Days of Abomination"?

On page 8, Val is said to use the term Days of Abomination, which is not a term used in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's in Bible scripture, but it's not how the church references The Last Days. Instead, the Savior's Second Coming is something we speak often about at church and at home.

Though many of the events prior to His coming are prophesied in scripture to be frightful, there are also many beautiful things to come. We are taught to look forward, await His arrival with hope, and prepare ourselves spiritually. In physical preparation, church members are encouraged to gain a supply of food storage and necessities for emergencies. Nowhere in official church publications or talks is counsel given for the storage of ammunition and arms or the preparation of self-defense measures. In fact, we are counseled against it.

In LaRee's writings, Val is portrayed as very religious and spiritual, but on this important issue, he does not follow church counsel. On page 9 we learn that the Westovers had a bunch of supplies ready in their "head for the hills" bags: ready-to-eat meals, herbal medicines, water purifiers, and more. These items can be good emergency essentials. But then Val comes home "with more than a dozen military-surplus rifles, mostly SKSs." Tara then tells us the weapons and supplies were buried on their property for use when needed.

According to Tara, her father often frightens the family with accounts of someone named Randy Weaver and his family, who are purportedly being harassed by the government. A quick online search of the name and you learn that the Ruby Ridge standoff in Idaho is what's being referenced. Some Weaver family members died in the 11-day siege with US Marshals. Val is convinced his own family will suffer similar fates, though the Ruby Ridge incident happened 618 miles away, if they don't prepare for a government standoff.

Why was big brother Shawn (real name Travis) allowed to be such a bully to Tara?

In much of Tara's book, she writes about physical harm he repeatedly inflicts upon her. She claims her mother saw it and her sister experienced abuse as well, though this sister later retracts her story. Tara also spots serious signs of abuse in Travis's spouse and reports it to the family, causing another, huge family dispute.

The reader is confused, however, when Tara continues to spend time with Travis "alone. Yet, that is often typical behavior from a victim of abuse. They remember the good and love the person. So they go back.

LaRee admits, very briefly on one page, that "no one who knows Travis "not even Travis himself" will tell you that he doesn't have a temper." Even before experiencing a serious head injury, he had a temper.

"At times, Travis can be belligerent and obnoxious and intimidating" (p. 291). And then she goes on to praise him, referring to him as unselfish and deeply loyal. "Society has rightly taught us the value of watching for the warning signs of abuse," LaRee states. "Even when looking specifically for it, I saw nothing that caused me concern."

Mom's light treatment of this matter is confusing and leaves the reader to suspect abuse did happen and is being ignored. Tara's account is detailed enough to indicate there was a problem.

Why is the family junkyard business buried in Mom's book?

LaRee occasionally references their previous family businesses, which Val operated for many years. She briefly mentions their "salvage yard business." In contrast, Tara calls it a junkyard and tells us in great detail, and throughout much of her book, about her hard, often dangerous work there.

In fact, several serious injuries occur to all the siblings when machines malfunction or metal punctures a limb. As a reader, you become very concerned about what happens there. But LaRee avoids the topic for the most part and focuses almost exclusively on her midwife and homeopathic careers and on their current company Butterfly Expressions.

Letter I received to review LaRee's memoir. Note the signature.

The family experienced two major car accidents, resulting in serious injuries. Val battles additional injuries and health concerns. Why was medical care not sought during these critical times?

According to Tara's account, both car accidents occurred while returning home from Arizona visits to Grandma. At Val's insistence, they leave late in the day, causing drowsiness while driving. In the first incident, Val was at the wheel. The second time, one of his sons was at the wheel.

In one of the crashes, LaRee hit her head against the windshield, resulting in "raccoon eyes" that Tara later realized are an indication of traumatic brain injury. LaRee reportedly suffered from severe migraines for years and retreated for hours and days at a time to the dark basement, seeking relief from additional pain experienced in daylight hours. Treatments included homeopathic remedies but no hospital visits.

Val and one of his sons experienced severe burns. Again, they were treated with herbal salves but no hospital care or western medicines for the pain. Miraculously, they both survived. Homeopathic remedies can be used in conjunction with other medical care, but the Westovers often chose not to pursue these options during their various illnesses and extensive injuries.

Religion

Both books address religion. Tara's author note says, in part, "This story is not about Mormonism. Neither is it about any other form of religious belief." As was noted earlier, the correct name of the religion is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The terms Mormons or Mormonism are nicknames and are not used as correct names by practicing church members. The longer name is correct and focuses on worship of Jesus Christ.

Tara herself is no longer an "active member," which is a term used to denote someone who is no longer practicing

the faith. However, one can be a "less-active member" or "nonmember" and still be considered a good Christian and a good person.

LaRee, Val, and family are reportedly active members of the faith. Throughout *Educating*, LaRee tells of spiritual promptings, priesthood blessings, temple attendance, answers to prayer, heavenly visitations, and faithful church attendance and gospel study.

To those who have not had such experiences or feelings, her testimony or beliefs may appear to be awkward and confusing. To those who have witnessed similar feelings and experiences, her accounts may still feel awkward and confusing. "The Spirit whispered reassurances and peace," she says in one instance of true alarm while attending to serious burns at home (p. 246). She also notes that Val may have "pushed safety protocols somewhat as he is used to heaven's protection" (p. 243). These are but a few of the many, many religious experiences LaRee shares in her book.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints do experience blessings and miracles. So do people of other faiths and individuals who don't practice religion. God loves us that much. He blesses us and we are counseled to share deeply spiritual experiences on a limited basis. Sacred experiences or received blessings are not to be used to establish credibility or enforce a point of conflict to prove that one's differing thoughts or decisions are right.

Mental Illness

As an adult, while on her own, Tara seeks therapy and medication for mental illness. She is open about the fact that she struggles with it and has experienced panic attacks and has been known to sleep walk.

In response to her daughter's therapy sessions, LaRee feels there's a "high likelihood the therapist was manipulating her memories" (p. 290).

Tara and LaRee have both studied and learned about mental illness and the symptoms thereof. Tara believes her father struggles with bipolar disorder. LaRee makes no mention of this but does say she has "seen depression up close and over extended periods of time, as well as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and very real cases of dissociative identity disorder" (p. 290). She says "opioid addictions, thyroid issues, and many other things contribute to or

mask themselves as mental health disorders.â€•

Any careful reader of both books will see that mental illness appears to be a strong factor and should not be dismissed as a problem for the family.

According to my online research, LaRee founded her homeopathic company 22 years ago (also known as Butterfly Express) with her daughter Valaree. Per their website, â€œButterfly Express, LLC manufactures, markets and sells essential oil and other products.â€•

They have received a warning letter from the FDA that their products are not to be advertised and sold as cures for Covid. The FTC has also issued a warning letter. Perhaps in response to these letters, their website now notes, â€œButterfly Express does not make any claims about the use or effectiveness of our products.â€• The company reportedly has 25-30 employees (the number fluctuates according to online sources), many of whom are family.

According to The Preston Citizen, our local newspaper, the company is now owned by Val Westover (also see image above). â€œIt enjoyed 30-50% growth annually until Educated was published.â€•

My Opinion

Until this point I have tried to remain objective. That is my job. But a book review, which I was asked by a family representative to do, requires an opinion.

No one, based on reading these two books, will be able to discern the absolute truth about what really happened to Tara growing up. Itâ€™s a he-said, she-said finger-pointing blame game. And itâ€™s sad.

I do feel strongly that Val Westover has temper, control issues and untreated mental health issues. He now owns the business his wife and daughter started. The first thing you see in his wifeâ€™s memoir is his prologue. The letter I received (image above) is signed by him, not even a mutual signature.

Tara tells us in her book that she doesnâ€™t want to see her father again. She needs to sever those ties to go on with her lifeâ€œwithout his control. She has a right to refuse to see him. Itâ€™s sad that LaRee wonâ€™t see her own

daughter without her husband.

LaRee has done her best to live in duress with a husband who has much more going on than the digestion health issues she keeps mentioning. Those are the least of his problems, from what I can see. Unfortunately, in her unfailing love and loyalty to her partner, I believe she has enabled him to continue on an unhealthy path that has caused their entire family to suffer extensively. She's so loyal that she sticks with him even when he's wrong.

Homeopathy

I do think some of her homeopathic remedies could be helpful. I personally enjoy using aromatherapy and find some essential oils to be helpful. I think they should only be used as a supplement when treating serious illnesses or injuries.

Midwifery

As to the career of midwifery, I don't have personal experience. When we lived in the Boise, Idaho, area some of our neighbors were involved in midwifery that ended in tragic results. In 2010, midwifery in Idaho became legal, requiring proper licensure. My own two deliveries ended up being long and complicated. I believe we would have lost my second son had we not delivered at a hospital and needed their NICU. There are pros and cons to using a midwife. It's not on my personal radar, so I don't research it.

Educating is the other side of the Educated story. LaRee's desire is to go on educating, teaching about natural remedies and other things she deems important for her family and community. To me, both books together provide an opportunity for us to look at both sides of a story. In today's world, where we are quick to jump to rash conclusions based on what we see on social media or in the news, we'd do well to remember that factual reports are open to interpretation. Consider the source. Be informed. Educate yourself.

Special thanks to Sue Larson who read both books, my review, and offered editorial insight and medical information I needed to know to better understand Educating.

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