

Book Review / Compte rendu

Ryan Thomas, Ed. (2013), *The Doctoral Journey: Perseverance*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing. Pages: 174. Price: CDN\$31.91 (paper). ISBN 978-1-612-29226-7

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The Doctoral Journey: Perseverance shares the stories of Canadian doctoral graduates. An array of contributors outline the myriad of experiences that shaped their own doctoral journeys en route to professional careers as faculty members, teachers, and educational administrators. Editor Thomas Ryan states that the book arose as a response to a question he is asked by many students, “Do you think I should do my doctorate?” Those who are going through or have been down the PhD pathway will most certainly relate to the tales shared by the authors, which fluctuate from humorous, humble anecdotes to stories of horrific struggle - all relayed in candid prose. These narratives also stand as motivational creeds for those considering doing a doctorate that speak to the level of fortitude required to overcome numerous setbacks and seemingly insurmountable challenges on the road to academic success.

The chapters do only tell one side of the story, however: that of the *successful* students who completed a doctoral program. Thus, the voices of the many more students who did not complete the degree, despite their perseverance, remain silent. A further limitation of this work—one which the editor acknowledges in the first chapter—is that a majority of the authors are experienced educators, many of whom had considerable teaching experience or held university appointments or educational administration positions at the time they decided to embark on the doctoral journey. The book does not address pre-professionals and those who completed doctoral degrees in fields of study outside of the discipline of education. It could be argued that these limitations inhibit a thorough treatment of the topic being explored.

Editor Thomas Ryan opens the book with a critical examination of the “doctoral landscape” from a historical perspective. He briefly traces the evolution of doctoral education in Canada from its steady expansion to its enrolment growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He situates this growth in a global context by comparing Canada’s

“microscopic” increase in doctoral production between 1991 and 2004 to the substantial rise reported by other countries over the same period. Ryan notes several recent trends in doctoral education, including shifting demographics, more equal gender representation, lengthy completion times, and attrition rates that now characterize graduate programs. He highlights what has become a “bottomless investigation of doctoral education,” citing a number of studies on the doctoral student experience, and concludes the chapter by situating the present volume in the current research on doctoral education.

Ryan states that because all contributors were able to secure relevant employment post graduation, the book serves as a “counterbalance” to Desjardins and King’s (2011) study, which found that the skill set of Canadian doctorate graduates is not being fully utilized. What was a tad bothersome to this reader is that no mention is made of what methodology was employed to prepare the text, nor is it disclosed from where or how the content for the book was gathered. It is thus unclear to the reader what role the contributors played and whether or not they were part of a larger study on the doctoral student experience?

The body of the book consists of the memoirs of graduates’ journeys through various doctoral programs at a broad range of both Canadian universities and institutions in other countries. Some contributors include excerpts from personal journal entries, research notes, and travel diaries, which give the book a real-world feel. The stories are vividly recounted in the graduates’ own words, which results in reflection pieces that are very moving and give voice—quite literally—to a population that is increasingly studied and written about but rarely involved in that process. What readers may find particularly useful is the advice these graduates offer to current and potential doctoral students on how best to traverse a road that they describe as winding and defined by rough and bumpy terrain. In the words of one contributor, “Navigating the PhD journey was mentally invigorating and enlightening for the most part but there were stretches where it seemed downright treacherous.”

An exception to the preceding chapters—and a refreshing one at that—is Chapter 13, which details the experiences of an individual who pursued a doctorate outside of the field of education and who ended up working outside of an educational institution. While presenting an honest, sobering account of the realities facing doctoral graduates in a tight academic job market, the author offers helpful advice to current students and those considering enrolling.

In the final chapter, “Meaning and Intention in Higher Education,” Ryan discusses a number of concerning issues that face Canadian higher education in general and graduate education specifically. Noting that success cannot be judged solely from a business perspective and that educational outputs are often incalculable, Ryan asks, “What is a satisfactory level or degree of success and how can this be calculated?” Acknowledging that the doctoral degree is ever evolving and that technology now enables students to learn online and from a distance, Ryan notes that maintaining the quality of our programs is of paramount importance. While his analysis is limited by a focus on one province, Ontario, his recognition of the need for both quantitative and qualitative data on educational outcomes at the doctoral level remains valid. Interestingly, Ryan cites research that states the doctoral degree today will likely lead to employment outside of the academy, yet each of the thirteen contributors to the book work either as faculty or in research positions in institutions of—or organizations committed to—higher education. This lends itself to the criticism that the compilation provides a somewhat biased account.

The book concludes with a listing of agencies that are charged with post-secondary education quality assurance. An important point the compilation raises is that the lack of a formal, national system of accreditation for post-secondary institutions makes it difficult to determine how quality is assured at the institutional and program levels. Stylistic inconsistencies occasionally inhibit the flow of writing as each chapter differs in presentation. While some chapters read as first-person narratives or journal entries, others follow the format of an interview transcript, with specific questions posed and responses seemingly directed at an interviewer. It is, nonetheless, a valuable contribution to the sparse Canadian literature on graduate education. This book is a useful resource for those considering enrolling in graduate school, both current and former doctoral students (and their loved ones!), and university and graduate program administrators.

The Doctoral Journey: Perseverance is a much-needed addition to higher education inquiries, and, as a collected work, effectively complements existing research on the doctoral student experience. It can be viewed as a guidebook or roadmap to graduate school that pays tribute to its survivors and inspires tomorrow's scholars to follow steadfast in their footsteps. The authors are to be commended for sharing their own personal journeys and the editor for compiling their stories into an enjoyable text.✦

Reference

Desjardins, L. and King, D. (2011). *Profile and labour market outcomes of doctoral graduates from Ontario universities*. Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Ottawa, ON: Ministry of Industry.