

Mad Lit

FELICIA SULLIVAN

How many readings of John Cheever's *Bullet Park* does it take to purge WASP envy? The editor of *Small Spiral Notebook* keeps count.

By Ling Ma • Photo by Andrea Thompson



Felicia Sullivan in Boro Park, New York, where she grew up.

Felicia Sullivan has been helping others tell their tales for years. As founder and editor of the recently discontinued lit journal *Small Spiral Notebook*, she set up a forum for some of the most promising younger writers around. Now the writer-editor-blogger is exhuming her own story in the riveting memoir *The Sky Isn't Visible From Here*, which traces her unrooted upbringing with her single mother.

Of all the options, what's a young Jewish girl looking for a stable environment to do? One answer: Cultivate a cold case of WASP envy at an impressionable age. Namely, the sort of upper-middle-class purgatory depicted in John Cheever's *Bullet Park*. We asked Sullivan to cast an eye back at the influential read.

***Bullet Park* is about:** a spiritually bankrupt suburban family whose world is comprised of cocktails and commuting and the madman who's determined to bring them ruin.

I chose this title because: it was an entrée to a new world in my teens; it became a world I coveted in my 20s, and then it became a world from which I'd flee in my 30s.

The first time I read *Bullet Park*, I was: 14 years old.

I've read it: 12 times, although I haven't returned to it in years. Perhaps I've had my fill of self-medicating WASPs who live comfortably uncomfortable lives.

A free-associative personal memory I have of this book is: of a birthday party I attended in Westchester with my then-boyfriend in 2003. My boyfriend, a self-loathing Jew, was drinking the WASP Kool-Aid. Scotch-drinking bankers, Dartmouth men, women donning pearls, and everyone rallying over a game of cricket surrounded me, judging me. Talk about *Bullet Park*. But I dressed the part in a preppy pink cashmere vest and played the part by passing out drunk

and stoned on Valium on the couch.

On the train back into the city, I kept shouting that this was not the life I wanted. "Those people were something out of fucking *Bullet Park*," I cried out. To which my boyfriend at the time shouted back, "What the hell is *Bullet Park*? And what is so wrong with *those* people?"

My favorite part is: the end. It's caustic, honest, hilarious, disturbing, and profoundly sad all at once. A father rescues his depressed son from a fire (an attempted murder). You think that would actually change the family, bring them closer together, give them goddamn *perspective*, but no. Nothing changes. I love *Bullet Park* because it is frighteningly realistic — it's possible that people do not change in the wake of tragedy, that people will continue to be miserable and complacent, living quiet lives of emotional paralysis.

My favorite line is: "Tony went back to school on Monday and Nailles — drugged — went off to work and everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been."

After reading *Bullet Park*, this book caused me to: unravel.

You should read it while listening to: crickets.

You should read it when: you need an anesthetic.



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