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STYLE

Kids will be kids, but will they ever be adults?

Book explores 'Postponed Generation'

By Hunter Drohojowska

If you have a 24-year-old son with a college degree, still living at home, waiting tables on those evenings when he isn't practicing in his band, there is a book for you. If you are concerned that your daughter with the 3.9 grade point average is home from Vassar and spending her time watching soap operas and working on a tan, this book offers some insight. And if you are in your 20s and trying to cope with the depression and disillusionment that accompanied your graduation, this book offers assurance that you are not alone.

The book is "The Postponed Generation" or "Why America's Grown-up Kids Are Growing Up Later" by Susan Littwin.

Littwin, 47, is a free-lance journalist for local and national magazines with a reputation as a wry observer of political and social systems. An attractive brunette with frank brown eyes, Littwin has a disconcerting manner of going straight to the core of any discussion.

In the late 1970s, Littwin began noticing that friends were worried about the prolonged adolescence of children in their 20s, and that the colleges didn't know what to do about the latest crop of students. Young people were graduating from college later and entering the hard world of reality with extreme reluctance or not at all.

"These young people do grow up, but about 10 years later than their parents did," Littwin says.

"In my generation, we were sort of shoved into adulthood, we grew up with the understanding that you had to be useful," she says. "Our parents had seen the Depression and World War II. They instilled the idea that life was tough out there. Shortly after college, you had a real job, you decided whether you were a Democrat or a Republican, and you were thinking about having a family.

"We stopped doing that with our kids. We made a conscious effort not to pass on that legacy. The nasty part is that they almost need it. They need those warnings about rejection."

The author and her husband, Larry Littwin, a political science

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Susan Littwin has written a book about why so many young Americans seem stuck in a perpetual adolescence.

Littwin

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professor at Cal State Northridge, had a somewhat unusual start in that they traveled in South America and lived in Chile before settling in L.A. in 1968. "But," the author says, "in those days, you traveled under an aegis of some life plan. My husband was getting a Ph.D. to be a college professor."

Littwin has laced her book with profiles of young people, speaking candidly because their true identities are concealed, who are lost on the path in search of themselves. Some are rendered nearly dysfunctional by the harsh lessons of life. There are women with strong credentials for graduate school who wind up as secretaries, men who leave jobs in their father's offices to give massages and polarity treatments in sleepy California villages.

"Some parents put a good face on it — the daughter who graduated and went skiing in Europe, who now wants to act and needs financial help — and other parents are openly concerned that they have raised a race of kids unable to live life, who are in a continual adolescence."

Littwin does not lay the blame solely on the young people. "They are representative of the difference between the '60s and the '80s. The guys from (a small college town), for instance, were the sort who would have been engaged in the '60s. But there was nothing in the outside world to give that experience . . . now, to encourage commitment. The thinking about social commitment is summed up by the one young man who says he worries about not worrying about the bomb. They are inchoate concerns and have nothing to do with him."

The profiles Littwin gathered from around the country are of kids graduating in the late '70s and early '80s, in the worst economic times since the Depression.

"These kids were caught in a vise," she says. Parents sheltered their children and encouraged them to believe they were special. As a result, young people from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds are burdened with a sense of "narcissistic entitlement" that conflicts with the fact of actual work, or worse, the absence of any job offers.

"They emerged from the shell of college into a terrible job market, and a lot of them were truly shocked," says Littwin. This mostly applies to liberal arts and some business majors. According to Michigan State University's Placement Services figures, a 1984 graduate with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering could expect to start work at a salary of $26,643. A liberal arts major could hope for $14,179. In addition, 83.8 percent of math majors, 81.2 percent of engineering majors and 77.4 percent of accounting majors were in college-level jobs three years after graduation. By contrast, only 48.4 percent of English majors, 43.9 percent of social science majors and 38 percent of communications majors were doing work that required their college education.

During the inflation and recession of the late '70s and early '80s, corporations wanted to be lean and eliminated jobs in public relations, community affairs and middle management; the taxpayer revolt and cuts in government funding brought an end to cushy jobs in universities and in social programs. These careers of the '60s, in the fat economy of the Great Society, are not realistic options in the '80s.

Littwin discovered that the only sure bets were in the fields of high technology. Yet, she points out, liberal arts students' feeling of being special, or even superior to their employed peers, is expressed by a satirical quote from a campus magazine: "All engineers tend to be smug about their employment prospects. Remember: You'll be employed eventually. He'll be dull forever."

But that fear of being "dull" — or, in another word, practical — blocks their ability to confront reality. "In the '60s and '70s, there were ways that we absorbed our bright young people taking their first steps, in academia for example," says Littwin. "They could get their feet wet and learn about the real world. Those choices have been taken away from them. They expected life to be more welcoming and their egos were blown when it wasn't."

Yet Littwin also finds these young people to be unwilling to make commitments or take on responsibility. Coddled by well-meaning parents for their entire lives, they cannot easily give up such comforts. When life gets tough, they move back home or ask for loans.

Littwin explained her own ambivalence: "In ways, I feel like a parent who gets a call from school when the child is misbehaving. I feel angry at the child and angry at the school for not handling it better. I'm angry at the young people for not taking the trouble to learn what their future would be like, for being so privileged. At the same time, I was angry at the job market for being so mean-spirited. At times, I am worried that we are becoming an economy and not a society."

Littwin's experience as a high school teacher in the early '60s and her own two teen-age sons influenced her interest in "the mystery of how people grow up and what forms us. But once I got into doing the research, a lot of my notions went out the window," she says.

"I believed the media reports of social conservatism, that young people were getting married and having babies. In my research, I found that was not true. I looked at the figures and found there was no change in the marriage rate and no increase in birth rate.

"Another notion was that the young people were lazy and didn't want to work. That wasn't true. They were willing to get jobs, but not willing to get jobs that involved a commitment. They'd rather be waitresses or office boys to pay the rent and keep their fantasy life. They would rather fantasize the future than take a first step in terms of a career."

This was especially true of children from L.A., New York or Chicago, "where you have affluence and sophistication." She points out that about 40 percent of college graduates are working in non-college level employment.

"One of the comments from nearly everyone I interviewed was, 'I can't work a 9 to 5 job.' But their parents worked 9 to 5 jobs. It's a way of separating themselves because they are 'special.' Perhaps they are angry that their parents had the discipline to work, to earn the money to take care of them, maybe they are angry at their own dependency."

Littwin adds, "To some extent it is a rejection of their parents' materialism, the parents who gave them everything except the ability to be independent."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly for Style.