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# The Smartest Kids In The World: And How They Got That Way

the  
smartest kids  
in the world



amanda ripley



## Synopsis

How do other countries create "smarter" kids? In a handful of nations, virtually all children are learning to make complex arguments and solve problems they've never seen before. They are learning to think, in other words, and to thrive in the modern economy. What is it like to be a child in the world's new education superpowers? In a global quest to find answers for our own children, author and *Time* magazine journalist Amanda Ripley follows three Americans embedded in these countries for one year. Kim, 15, raises \$10,000 so she can move from Oklahoma to Finland; Eric, 18, exchanges a high-achieving Minnesota suburb for a booming city in South Korea; and Tom, 17, leaves a historic Pennsylvania village for Poland. Through these young informants, Ripley meets battle-scarred reformers, sleep-deprived zombie students, and a teacher who earns \$4 million a year. Their stories, along with groundbreaking research into learning in other cultures, reveal a pattern of startling transformation: none of these countries had many "smart" kids a few decades ago. Things had changed. Teaching had become more rigorous; parents had focused on things that mattered; and children had bought into the promise of education. A journalistic tour de force, *The Smartest Kids in the World* is a book about building resilience in a new world-as told by the young Americans who have the most at stake.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hours and 43 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: August 13, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00EI6A6NS

Best Sellers Rank: #34 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Special Education > Gifted Students #109 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Education #115 in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > History

## Customer Reviews

By her own admission, journalist Amanda Ripley used to go out of her way to avoid writing articles about education. She'd rather cover almost anything else. But after she was assigned a story on a

controversial educator, she became intrigued. What types of education helped children become smarter? Did particular skills help them tackle learning challenges better? During her research, Ripley happened to see a chart compiling half a century of student test scores and performance rankings, gathered from a variety of different countries and cultures. She was intrigued - and puzzled. The data in that chart (collected by economists Ludger Woessmann and Eric Hanushek) greatly changed her perspective and upended her assumptions about what children need to reach their learning potential. The research revealed that in a handful of countries scattered across the world, kids seemed to be gaining critical learning skills, outpacing many other countries, including America (especially in math). From their earliest years, the students in these select areas learned effective and innovative ways to tackle reading, science, and math problems. Their skills also helped them master not only familiar but new information more quickly and easily. What accounted for these differences over time? How on earth did Canada go from having a mediocre educational system to one with impressive results- even rivaling Japan? Why did a country without child poverty, Norway, end up with students who still received inadequate schooling? Why did American teenagers (even those attending elite schools) rank 18th in math compared to kids in New Zealand, Belgium, France, and other countries? These questions are part of what Ripley calls "the mystery" and it is at the heart of this book: the reasons why some kids learn so much in some countries and so little in others. As part of her attempt to gain more insight into how a select group of countries excelled at educating their children, Ripley sought the help of three American teenagers - Kim, Eric, and Tom - who were sent to live and learn in "smarter" countries for a year. Much of this book is based on first-hand accounts of the teens' experiences while living and learning in another culture. Without them, Ripley notes, she "never would have glimpsed...the scenes that make it possible to understand why policy works or, more often misses the mark totally." The three American students have very different backgrounds. There is Kim, who left her rural area of Sallisaw, Oklahoma and a relatively mediocre school system to travel to Finland. Eric attended a high school in Minnetonka, Minnesota which was regularly ranked among the top schools in America by Newsweek. He traveled to Busan, South Korea to experience the "Korean pressure cooker" of education there. Tom left behind a high school culture in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, one which was focused on sports and the Future Farmers of America and traveled to Wroclaw, Poland. I was fascinated by reading about these students' lives abroad and the challenges they faced when navigating different school systems and cultural traditions. Many of the descriptions are vivid, from Eric's sense of dread when he realized that Korean students attended school a staggering 12 hours a day to Tom's recollection of his first humiliating attempt at a math problem (in front of the class) in

Poland. But this book is more than a series of personal perspectives from three teens. There is also plenty of hard data interspersed between their anecdotes. This does make for a certain scattered quality to the book at times. A description of Tom's initial struggles with math in his Polish classroom leads into a long section on math education in the United States before coming back round to Tom as he picks up the chalk and attempts to solve a math equation. When Kim struggles to understand a Finnish novel, her teacher brings her a children's book which simplifies the plot details. This section is the jumping off point for contrasting Finnish teacher training with that in the United States before returning to Kim and her discussion with some classmates. In spite of an occasionally bumpy flow, this book was still very engaging. It not only gave me a cross-cultural perspective but new insights into ways to help children become innovative and effective learners.

My husband and I have been having lots of conversations about higher education in the United States, so when I read The Book Wheel's review of *The Smartest Kids in the World*, I decided to read the book to get a better understanding of what children are learning prior to entering college. I really enjoyed Ripley's writing style. I felt like I was going on a journey with the author. In my humble opinion, I think a conversational style is perfect for nonfiction books, because they are a journey of discovery for the author and are filled with the author's newly found opinions. Nonfiction books are typically filled with strongly supported hypotheses, so we might as well write them like that. As a science writer myself, I use the verbs to suggest, to indicate, to find a lot. I hate it when I am reading for pleasure and nonfiction writers describe strongly supported theories as fact. I thought this book had a lot of great take away messages for both parents and teachers. In particular, Ripley reports that parents are most helpful when they read to their children when they are young and ask their children how their days were when they are older. Interesting, but not too surprising, children whose parents are very involved in the schools' extracurricular activities tend to perform worse than children whose parents are not involved. Ripley notes that this is only a correlation, so parents might be encouraging their kids to focus more on extracurricular activities more than schoolwork or that parents are getting involved because their kids are doing poorly and want the school to look at their children in a better light. In regards to teachers, Ripley's research indicates that teachers that provide rigor and push their students to do better are doing more for their students than teachers who provide all the answers. As someone who had teachers who gave me the answers and other teachers who made me rewrite a thesis sentence ten million times before I could write the rest of the essay, I can attest that teachers who made me work for my grade had my respect and trust. Unlike some articles that I have read about school systems in other countries, Ripley does a good job

showcasing what Finland, South Korea, and Poland do right and what these countries need to work on. It was refreshing to see that school systems around the world (not just the United States) have their problems. Of course, Ripley rightly shows that the United States' educational system has some serious problems and is ranked accordingly. She does give the United States hope; however, when she shows that countries like Poland have only made recent changes that have greatly improved their national rankings. We have hope as a country! Let's talk about some of my concerns with this book. My major concern was regarding the research in this book. Ripley focuses the book on one international exam, the PISA, and three international exchange students' perspectives. Although she does speak with some other people, Ripley appeared to get most of her book from these three high school students. Granted, I think that their opinions are well thought out and interesting; however, I wish that she had interviewed a broader group of people both within the United States and in other countries. When I first started the book, I thought Ripley had only three exchange students' perspectives, so I was a little worried. Then I discovered that she had done a survey including lots of students, so I felt better. Unfortunately, I then looked at the numbers. Ripley sent a survey out to 242 US students who attended school abroad and 1104 international students who attended school in the United States; however, only 37 American students and 165 international students responded. Ripley states that these data are still good; however, I cannot see how that is true without the needed statistical analyses that she does not provide. Throughout the book, she notes that 8 out of 10 students said "fill in the blank." I do not feel confident in these statements. The sample size is much too small. I may be wrong about this; however, the lack of any statistical explanation in the appendix does not lessen my concern. I think I would not have been so bothered by this, if she had cited more of her sources in the text. Because I did not know where statistics were coming from, I did not know if I could believe them. Ripley does have resources in the back of the book, but they are grouped by chapter, not line by line (at least this is how it was done in my galley copy). Some may argue that having lots of references in the text would be distracting, but Mary Roach does this in her books and they are very readable. So how did I like this book? This is a tough question. I loved the writing style, and I thought the exchange student perspective was a great way of getting at a unique perspective. I thought that Ripley had some interesting theories on some of the problems with the American educational system and possible ways of improving it. At the same time, this book had several flaws. First, I thought a larger variety of people needed to be interviewed for this book. Second, if Ripley wanted to use her student survey, she needed to show more evidence that the results were not skewed. I think I am particularly alarmed by this survey, because she only explains its limitations in the appendix that I doubt many people read. I would

recommend this book to someone who is interested in a jumping off point for learning more about the American educational system and how it differs from other countries' systems with the caveat that the statistical analyses may be misleading. Although I do have problems with the student survey statistics, I am still giving this book 3 out of 5 books for the international student exchange interviews and conversational style writing approach. I received this item for free in exchange for an honest review.

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