For a certain sort of high-schooler (too cool for Yale, too socially savvy for Harvard), Brown was once the university of choice. But now that sort of student is turning to a little patch of emerald green on the Hudson River; a place that has been quietly attracting students as idiosyncratic as they are well connected for years. Bard alumnus Matt Taibbi ('92) explains why his alma mater is like no other college on earth.

the NEW BROWN?

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDY ANDERSON

The first thing you notice about Bard is its breathtaking natural beauty. When I was a student there 40 years ago, this was, apart from the dark clothes and the parade of existential angst emanating from the student body, the most distinctive thing about the place. The school is a kind of riverbank acre high above the Hudson, in a semi-remote spot two hours north of New York City—just about where the river valley stops being a densely settled echo of the city and starts becoming desolate woods.

Back then, when I wasn’t plunging into deep bouts of sorrow/depression about what I was going to do with my life, I was taking long walks through the campus and this outlying wilderness. I knew by heart all the trails that cross the incredible rambling waterfall behind the alabaster-white Blithewood Mansion, all the winding and muddy paths down to the river (at certain times of year there are spots down there where you will always find deer), all the best trees to sit under while I read the book by Tolstoy and Gogol and Chekhov that were my escape at that time.

Like a lot of Bard students, I had gotten off the path a little on my way to college. Having been both troubled and in trouble in high school, and (also like many Bard students back then) Bard was my second college. I had transferred from NYU after my freshman year; unable to deal with being just one of thousands of faces in a city of millions.

In deciding where to transfer, I instantly chose Bard after I visited and saw its wilderness. To a young, confused loner from the Boston suburbs, Bard looked like paradise. I’d considered a slew of similar schools, including Bates and Vassar, but there was something about Bard’s chaotic, half-overgrown campus that I preferred to those more manicured places (that and the fact that a lot of them rejected me). Very soon after I arrived, I disappeared into a fantasy world built mainly around Russian novels. I would walk in the fields behind the nurse-like Robbins dormitory and imagine Levin’s estate in Anna Karenina or, going toward the woods lining the

LIKE A LOT OF BARD STUDENTS, I HAD GOTTEN OFF THE PATH A LITTLE ON MY WAY TO COLLEGE, HAVING BEEN BOTH TROUBLED AND IN TROUBLE IN HIGH SCHOOL.
The It Girls

Though seniors Kelly Miller, Louise Barker, and Lana Barker hail from different places—Philadelphia, St. Paul, and New York City, respectively—the three bonded over their love of photography.
edge of the embankment, the duel scene in Lemontov's novella "Princess Mary."

I started taking creative writing classes, which felt almost like a core requirement at the school with writers like Mary McCarthy, Mona Simpson, Chinua Achebe, and Ralph Ellison among its current and past faculty. Bard has a repuation as a writers mecca. I eventually found a professor there who took an interest in me, encouraging me despite the cheesy faux-Russianness of every story I tried to write. (All my fiction from back then is ridiculously pretentious and reads as if it's been translated into English.)

A poet who studied at Harvard a generation before I was born, Ben Lefarge thought I could be a writer someday but he dearly worried about me as a person and sent me carefully typewritten letters (the good professor was very old-school in a cool sort of way) even when classes were over, just to stay in touch. I eventually reached a critical moment in my life when I was presented with an opportunity to do an exchange program of sorts in Russia, only it came at a time when I was having what in retrospect was a kind of agoraphobic nervous breakdown. I found myself too afraid to go.

When I told my teacher over the summer that I'd decided against going abroad, he forcefully objected and essentially told me I had to go. So I went, and that trip changed my life. I would end up living in the Soviet Union and postcommunist Russia for 10 years and becoming not a novelist but a journalist, describing a society in total, violent upheaval, a place that couldn't possibly have been more different from the relative serenity and peace of Bard College. But what carried me through that experience was a fascination with the country and its people that began in my Bard days and was nurtured by my teachers there.
WITH WRITERS LIKE MONA SIMPSON AND CHINUA ACHEBE AMONG ITS FACULTY, BARD HAS A REPUTATION AS A WRITERS MECCA.
There's no Greek life at Bard, nor an official football team, but there is the 33-member rugby team, and its players are kings of the school. Captain Andrew Levy (center, in striped socks) has interned at The Colbert Report; and Hanza Haywood (fourth from right) is a certified EMT.
THE SCHOOL TODAY IS CUTTING-EDGE IN EVERY DIRECTION, WITH BRAND NEW FACILITIES EVERYWHERE—APART FROM THE CHARMINING OLD BUILDINGS, WHICH HAVE ALL BEEN RESTORED AND NOW SEEM OLD ONLY FROM A DISTANCE.
THE SCHOOL HAS BECOME A LIBERAL ARTS DESTINATION FOR THE RICH, GIFTED, AND CREATIVE.

Bard is apparently a different place now. When I went back recently for a reunion (characteristically, not my own; many Bard students from my time were on five- or six-year plans, so they seldom graduated with the classes they started with), I ran into a couple of professors I had known. One joked about the new type of Bard student that had begun appearing in the intervening decades—during which the annual tuition has gone from $13,200 to $42,475. The school has apparently become a chic liberal arts destination for the rich, gifted, and creative, in some circles even serving as a plausible alternative to the Ivy League experience. "You meet kids now," he laughed, "who, you know, like their parents." That wasn't the school I knew. The Bard of the late '80s and early '90s was full of kids like me: bright, screwed up, and affectedly miserable. Your typical Bard student back then slept until noon (if he got out of bed at all), wore blacks and browns and dark blues called from thrift stores and army surplus shops, made student films about death and cannibalism that somehow managed to be comedies, and was prone to looking at the world with a kind of half-assed nihilism mixed with a reflexive iconoclasm, which often expressed itself in the devious and elaborate pranks that for years were a signature of the student body. Then Bard was just a pretty little spot in the woods with an old seminary building, a few decaying mansions, and a small group of very smart educational lifers—a raw strip of overgrown natural beauty opportunistically turned into a school where you could send a problem teenager for a while. (Continued on page 145)
# The Other Bards

Town & Country canvassed college counselors at dozens of top private schools across the country about up-and-coming colleges with enough idiosyncratic cachet to lure smart kids away from bigger, name-brand institutions. Here are their picks.

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<th>SCHOOL</th>
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<td>Barnard College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colgate University</td>
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<td>Macalester College</td>
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<td>The New School</td>
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<td>Pomona College</td>
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<td>Reed College</td>
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<td>Vanderbilt University</td>
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to get his head straight. There were no science facilities to speak of, and the school was just a few years removed from having its sports teams practice in a glorified barn. (It's now the campus security office, affectionately known as the "old gym.")

The school's famous alumni were never around (one of its favorite sons, Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, famously wrote a song about how "I'm never going back to My Old School!"). and many of the legends about our famous absence graduates revolved around various angry, weirdly complex, and pointless campus cops. One popular story involved Cherry Chase having once led a cow up to the roof of one of the school buildings as a joke—I have no idea if this story is true (and, in fact, some people say it happened at Haverford)—before realizing too late that cows can go up stairs but not down them. I leave the reader to imagine what ultimately happened to the cow of this legend.

Bard claims many well-known alumni, with conspicuous overrepresentation in the world of literature and the arts—there's actress Blythe Danner, director Christopher Guest, X-Men writer Chris Claremont (the college figures prominently in the X-Men stories), and actor Larry Hagman (two of my classmates like to tell a legendary story involving a hot tub and a road trip to Hagman's home). Characteristically, some of the school's most famous attendees never graduated: Chase, Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, and actor Peter Sarsgaard (the kind of person who I could have guessed, based purely upon his ability to play deviant or slacker characters, had gone to Bard). It's probably also worth noting that for a long time the school's most famous alumni weren't astronauts or senators or captains of industry (though corporate raider Adher Edelman—class of 65—was allegedly the inspiration for Gordon Gekko) but quirky, angry performers with a countercultural bent.

That had to be the result of the proud underdog vibe that was once a staple of Bard life but really isn't anymore. When my friends and I returned to the school for that reunion a little while ago and found ourselves standing in front of Frank Gehry's incredible performing arts center—a giant, hallucinatory, spaceship-like structure that is almost like a scale version of his famed Guggenheim in Bilbao—a few of us shared a moment of collective embarrassment.

This Wonderland-like assortment of monumental landscape art, Austen-esque mansions, ultramodern laboratories, waterfalls, carefully manicured gardens (the gravel walk and statue garden behind the Lithewood building is one of the most beautiful places I've known), and visual and acoustic masterpieces by the likes of Gehry is all for just 1,400 or so people. On a per-student basis, Bard has an embarrassment of riches and resources, and a few of us alumni found ourselves scratching our heads at the fact that back in the day we still found a way to complain about our lives.

The school today is cutting-edge in every direction, with brand new facilities everywhere except for the charming old buildings, which have all been restored and now stand only from a distance. Once a home for academic black sheep, Bard is now rated "most selective" by U.S. News & World Report and apparently even has an international reputation. ("Even the French know of the school," La Farge quips.) It's almost like a piece of performance art, a high end impressionistic take on the whole concept of a liberal arts school. The yawnning teenager you send here can become anything he wants—a composer, a poet, a filmmaker—and on the way he will be fussed over by world-renowned experts in all these fields. And yet, populationwise, the whole deal is smaller than your average public high school.

With these changes come the changes in the student body. The angry vibe is mostly gone and the new Bard student is still bright and different in the way of previous generations of Bardians, but he or she also tends to be a positive, engaged, energetic creature. When I went back to the school a few years ago to give a speech, I was shocked by how put together and grown up all the kids were. I suppose this could be simply attributed to how different American teenagers are these days; they're both more career-oriented and (to use a word that's probably not quite right, although it's close) patriotic than they were two or three decades ago, a development I find both amusing and disturbing.

But in Bard's case, the student body has undergone other, more specific changes. Now that the college is so expensive, the students generally come from far wealthier (and, presumably, at least marginally happier) backgrounds. There is an end—and it is physically hard for me, as a Bard grad steeped in memories of the ironic self-loathing of my student days, to write these words—a kind of school pride there now. Donald Fagen notwithstanding, the school's famous alumni are suddenly more often (Yauch had just been on campus when I last visited) as going to Bard has apparently become cool in the broader cultural universe.

I don't know how I feel about this. Bard was a huge part of my life. Its unique and hauntingly odd atmosphere is still with me all the time, and I know many of my classmates feel the same way—they have an emotional connection to this place, which seemed cut off from the normal world and made just for us not-yet-normal kids. It was a strange little hidden paradise that is now no longer hidden and perhaps also not at all strange anymore. But that might not be such a bad thing after all.

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