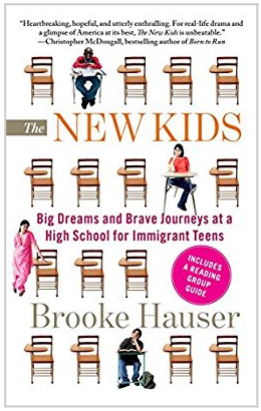

The New Kids: Big Dreams and Brave Journeys at a High School for Immigrant Teens

By Brooke Hauser

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“A refreshing reminder of the hurdles newcomers to this country still face and how many defy the odds to overcome them,” writes *The New York Times*, this inspiring work of narrative journalism recounts a year in the life at the International High School at Prospect Heights.

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These are “the new kids”: new to America and all the routines and rituals of an American high school, from lonely first days to prom. They attend Brooklyn’s International High School at Prospect Heights, where all the students are recent immigrants learning English. Together, they come from more than forty-five countries and speak more than twenty-eight languages.

An inspiring work of narrative journalism, *The New Kids* chronicles a year in the lives of teenage newcomers who are at once ordinary and extraordinary in their paths to the American Dream. Hauser’s unforgettable portraits include Jessica, kicked out of her father’s home just days after arriving from China; Ngawang, who spent twenty-four hours folded up in a suitcase to escape Tibet; Mohamed, a diamond miner’s son from Sierra Leone whose past is shrouded in mystery; and Chit Su, a Burmese refugee who is the only person to speak her language in the entire school.

The students deal with enormous obstacles: traumas and wars in their native countries that haunt them, and pressures from their cultures to marry or to drop out and go to work. They aren’t just jostling for their places in the high school pecking order—they are carving out new lives for themselves in America.

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Editorial Review

Review
A *People* Magazine "Great Read"

"The stories of these kids are simply astonishing." -- Talk of the Nation, NPR

"A refreshing reminder of the hurdles newcomers to this country still face and how many defy the odds to overcome them." --*The New York Times*

"Brooke Hauser, who spent a year following members of the senior class, delivers a rich, extraordinarily moving account of the challenges they met--and the many ways in which kids are the same the world over." --*Parade* Magazine

About the Author
Brooke Hauser has written for *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Allure*, among other publications. She lives in western Massachusetts.

The New Kids

Chit Su’s First Day

Everybody has The Outfit—the outfit they bought for America. The students who have lived in the country for longer have learned how to blend in better, disappearing in brand-name sneakers and low-riding jeans. But each September on the first day of school, the new kids are easy to spot.

Some arrive in their native dress, like the Bangladeshi girls in colorful shalwar kameez, or the African boy who walked the halls in goatskin sandals lined with bristly hair. Others try to fit in and fail, like the boy who came from a country that no one had heard of. He wanted American blue jeans but settled for a pair hand-sewn by his uncle instead. Then there are the kids who dress the part of model student, a few in starched shirts and slacks still wrinkled from the plane, as if they were headed to an immigration interview instead of first period. One Yemeni boy showed up in a business suit, and a Haitian freshman carried a backpack filled with books that weren’t on any syllabus, his notebook thin from all the used pages torn out. Still, he was better off than the refugees who seem to arrive with nothing at all. Everyone remembers the Burmese sisters who wore flip-flops through the first winter snow.

Sitting behind a cluttered desk in her office on the fourth day of school, Dariana Castro examines the new girl from behind cat’s-eye glasses. Somehow, Student No. 219870508 got it almost right. Today is her first day at the International High School at Prospect Heights, a Brooklyn public school that teaches English to new immigrants, but at least by appearances she could be any girl entering the ninth grade at any high school in any city or small town across America. She has silky brown hair, which is half up, and small eyes, which are cast down at the floor. Her lips are glossed and her nails polished, but that doesn’t stop her from nibbling on them. She wears brand-new blue jeans (factory made), a black-and-red Mead backpack, and a T-shirt the fluorescent-green color of Nickelodeon slime. Her clothes fit too well to be hand-me-downs, and they leave

no trace of a foreign country. It's as if someone undressed a mannequin in the back-to-school display in the tween department of Target, and re-created the ensemble on her.

"What's your name?" Dariana asks.

"Chit Su," the girl says, twisting a flower-shaped ruby ring on her finger.

"Cheet Sue," Dariana repeats carefully.

Cradling a phone receiver to her ear, she motions for the girl to take a seat. Especially during the first week of school, it's rare that an extra chair is available. Throughout the day, a steady tide of visitors flows into this air-conditioned room, located in the back of the student-government office on the fourth floor, keeping Dariana in a perpetual state of distraction.

Officially she is known as the Coordinator of Special Programs, but a better job title would be The Fixer. Every immigrant community has one, and the International High School at Prospect Heights has Dariana, a twenty-five-year-old Dominican with pale skin, curly red-tinted hair that will change colors and styles many times in the coming months, and a solution for everything. Teachers go to her for glue sticks, information about scholarships, or a squirt of hand sanitizer from the giant container on her desk.

To students, Dariana is like Craigslist and a big sister rolled into one, offering everything from job opportunities and relationship advice to home remedies for any number of ailments. For instance, how to get rid of a hickey. Step 1: Address the problem, as she had to do with a Parisian junior who came to school with a blotchy purple stain above his collarbone. What's on your neck? That's disgusting! Step 2: Rub the inflicted area with a penny to disperse the blood. It works with black and blues, too. Step 3: Cover what's left of the love bite with concealer, dismissing any protests that the student in question, in this case a boy, might make about not wanting to wear make-up. Well, why'd you let her do that? Step 4: Send the student back to class.

As soon as the new girl walked into her office to pick up her class schedule, it was obvious to Dariana that Chit Su was suffering from a bad case of nerves. But that's just about the only thing about Chit Su that is obvious. Other than the ID number assigned to her by the New York City Department of Education, very little is known about Student No. 219870508. No one is exactly sure where she came from, or how she got here this morning, up three flights of stairs and past security. To Dariana, she looks like an ordinary American girl. But she is from Burma. Or Thailand. Her answer changes depending on who asks. Either way, she is the only person in the entire school who speaks her language, now that the flip-flop-wearing Burmese sisters have relocated to Texas. She is seventeen years old, and her English is very limited. That much is clear.

"Are you happy to be here?" Dariana asks, leaning forward. "Are you nervous?"

Silence. Shifting her weight in the chair, the girl smiles, her teeth crowded on top of each other like subway riders at rush hour.

"You're not nervous?" Dariana asks again, this time speaking more slowly. More silence.

Dariana stands up and walks over to the corner of the room, where a large plastic bag is filled with snacks and small cartons of juice.

“Here,” she says, handing Chit Su a package of peanut-butter crackers, along with her class schedule. “Eat these every time you feel nervous. It will make you feel better.” Rubbing her stomach, Dariana pretends to chew. “Mmmm. That’s what I do.”

* * *

The International High School is located in north-central Brooklyn on the third and fourth floors of a massive, sandy brick building, formerly known as Prospect Heights High School. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, amid gang warfare, it was considered among the most violent schools in the city. But since then, the Prospect Heights High School closed, and in its place are four small schools: the Brooklyn Academy for Science and the Environment, the Brooklyn School for Music & Theatre, the High School for Global Citizenship, and the International High School at Prospect Heights.

Every morning on the way to first period, students have to pass through a metal detector. Located on the southern side of the school building, the security area is better known as “scanning,” and was set up as part of a citywide effort to reduce violence and weapon possession in schools. The rules are pretty simple: In addition to guns, knives, and glass bottles, no headgear, belts, or electronics are allowed. Nevertheless, day after day, a battle of wills plays out on the patch of sidewalk where boys and girls form double lines under the watch of various administrators and blue-uniformed school-safety officers who guard the entrance to the cafeteria. Despite countless PA announcements throughout the year about dress code, students show up in bandannas and bandies (bandannas tied around the chest like a bra), do-rags and chains, country flags festooning from their pockets, and dingy boxers ballooning from their low-riding jeans like puffs of smog.

For the most part, the upperclassmen are wise to the campuswide restrictions from 8:40 AM to 3:10 PM A few bury their cell phones in Prospect Park until school is out, while others grudgingly deposit their Sidekicks and iPods into numbered brown paper bags, which, for a small fee, cashiers at any number of nearby delis will stow behind the counter, along with the scratch-off cards, Wet N’ Wild condoms, and E-Z Wider rolling papers. The Yemeni clerk on Franklin Avenue is known to have the best deal on the block, one reason why his store is always packed with International students in the minutes before class. Occasionally kids manage to stash their phones in their shoes and get through the metal detector without incident, but it is hard to sneak much past the flat stares of the guards.

One person who always manages to slip by is Alex Harty, a twelfth-grade math teacher. Tall, lanky, pierced, and tattooed—a multicolored portrait of “the gunslinger” from Stephen King’s series The Dark Tower covers his right arm—Alex lopes through the halls of the International like a walking DO NOT DISTURB sign, when he isn’t rolling through on his skateboard. On most days, he comes to work wearing a Toronto Blue Jays cap and baggy cargo shorts, publicly flouting the schoolwide ban of hats and disregarding the administration’s distaste for low-riding pants. He did wear a suit on his job interview: his prom suit. Despite the no-iPod rule, Alex is rarely seen without his headphones. Not just any headphones. These are Shure SCL2 sound-isolating earbuds in black, which, according to the product description, are “great for use in noisy environments such as bus stations, airports, or live stages.”

Or high schools. In the past, everything from the metal band Tool to the bluegrass fusion of Bela Fleck has helped Alex keep his sanity, but not this year, not during the first week of school. Over the summer he lost his iPod, and when he walks into the halls of the fourth floor, there is no buffer, no noise rock or soothing Flecktones to drown out the sound of his students crying out, “Mr. Haaaaaarrrrrttttttyyyyyyyyyy!”—and more than four hundred other voices shrieking simultaneously in foreign tongues.

“Aiiiiiiiii, Te ves muy morena!”

“Salaam Aleikum!”

“What’s crackin’, yo? What’s poppin’?”

“Kire ki obostha!”

“Jarama!”

“Hey, Plátano,” a French junior calls out to a curly-haired Dominican girl, her brown skin oozing like fresh taffy out of too-tight jeans.

“Hey, Frenchie,” she says, smiling over her shoulder before folding herself into the arms of her boyfriend.

Three years ago, when Alex first began teaching at International, it all sounded the same to his ears: “‘JABBA-JABBA-JABBA.’ When the hallway would come into the room, it was insanity,” he says. “It felt like the Tower of Babel.”

In some ways, Babel is an apt metaphor for the International High School at Prospect Heights, which is part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization formed in 2004 that serves recent immigrants and new English-language learners from around the world. (In addition to twelve schools in New York City, the Network has opened schools in Oakland and San Francisco.) At the school in Prospect Heights, students come from more than forty-five different countries and speak more than twenty-eight different languages. At any given moment hundreds of tongues are flapping in Arabic, Bengali, Creole, French, Fula, Hindi, Krio, Mandarin, Mina, Nepali, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tajik, Tibetan, Urdu, and Uzbek.

Despite his efforts to tune out the cacophony, Alex has picked up a few things over the years. At first, he was boggled by the fact that some of the Tibetan and Bangladeshi students seemed to understand one another; then he learned that they share the common language of Hindi, which the Tibetans learned in Dharamsala, India, home to the largest Tibetan exile community as well as their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. Their native “Tashi delek” means “hello” or “good luck.” The Haitians speak Creole, not to be confused with Krio, the broken English dialect of the Sierra Leoneans, who greet each other with the somatic salutation, “Ow di bodi?” (How’s the body?) Typically, the answer is, “Di bodi fine!”

Everyone who walks through the halls of International on a daily basis has a different way of dealing with the noise. (Aspirin helps.) The effect can be overwhelming, like audio spam. Imagine being trapped in a small, windowless room and tuning into dozens of AM radio stations at once. Some frequencies are low, such as the soft chatter of the Pakistani girls who gather in black hijabs, moving like shadows against the rows of rusting blue lockers; or the Bangladeshi girls, who giggle behind their palms and form a colorful garden with their streaming silk scarves in marigold, bluebell, rose, and lime.

Others are head-splittingly strong, like the Dominican girls who do running jumps into each other’s arms, or the Haitian fashionistas who clog the halls, screaming at the top of their lungs, their hugs more like body slams in a cage match.

Chaos and confusion always reign during the first week, but the administrators and school-safety officers who police the third and fourth floors still try to impose order. For the rest of the year the classrooms will never be as clean as they are in September. By June every year, barnacles of dried gum encrust the undersides of tables and chairs, and every August they are scraped away. The restrooms are stocked to the

hilt with toilet paper, the bowls pristinely awaiting an answer to a communal plea that has been laminated and taped to the girls' bathroom door: FLUSH, it says, IF YOU LOVE YOUR SCHOOL. At least for a little while, the hallways smell of disinfectant and not body odor—or, worse, stink bombs. The mottled blue floors are practically spit-shined, like linoleum lagoons, dimly reflecting Nikes and Pumas on their surfaces, as students pounce on each other, their shrieks rocketing off the walls.

Leaning against a row of lockers and sporting a pair of Nike Airs in red, white, and blue, a sinewy African boy named Freeman Degboe lives up to his reputation as the class flirt, stroking his goatee and chatting up girls in various tongues.

"Did you miss me?"

"Where are you from?"

"Hola, flaca!"

"Bonjour!"

"Hey, it's my wife!" he greets a cute Chinese junior with short-cropped hair and broad shoulders. "Ni hao!"

Over the summer, Freeman traded in his round John Lennon specs and the acoustic guitar he always carried around in the halls—both more for effect than actual use—for those white Nikes, a gold Jesus head pendant, and the nickname Pollo Frito, which his Dominican rapper friends call him in honor of his appetite for Spanish-style chicken and rice. Wind Liu, a whippet-thin Chinese girl with a penchant for patent-leather stilettos, rechristened herself Dinice, even though she still heads her homework with her birth name, Dong Er. Owen Zhu, a geeky senior with a few sparse chin hairs and a flash drive on a cord around his neck, came back with fresh skills, which he hopes will impress Wind/Dinice/ Dong Er.

"I got really into Rubik's Cube over the summer," he tells her. "I like it to make my fingers smoother and my thinking smarter." Oblivious to the cloud of boredom misting over Dinice's milky-blue contact lenses, he fishes out the puzzle cube from his backpack and works it with thick, sweaty hands. "I learned how to do this on YouTube," he explains, when each side is a single wall of color. "My best time is one fifty-seven."

Most of the faces that pass through the halls are familiar. But every year approximately 110 freshmen are accepted into the school, many arriving in the country just months, weeks, or even hours before the first day. Tiny and burdened by huge backpacks, the new kids grip their class schedules and wander the halls lost and confused, watching as teachers pull over other kids like traffic cops stop speeding, swerving cars for Breathalyzer tests. Do you know where you're going? Who's your advisor? Who, who, who? She's waiting for you!

On the first day of school, every student is directed to an "advisory," a group of about a dozen kids who meet with each other and their advisor, usually a teacher in their grade, for sixty-five minutes twice a week. A few advisors have already led their freshmen charges through the halls, pointing out important landmarks, like the cafeteria in the basement and various classrooms, including 444, which is the room number for Chit Su's first-period class, global studies.

Because Chit Su came late, she is on her own until she meets her advisor, who also happens to be her first-period teacher. Outside Dariana's office, Chit Su passes through a harsh, seemingly lawless world on the way to Room 444. Gripping her class schedule in one hand and half-eaten peanut-butter crackers in the other,

she walks with her head down through the halls, her backpack molded to her like a turtle shell, her sneakers squeaking against the bluish-gray linoleum. On her right is a mural left by the Class of 2008. The entire wall is covered with a colorful patchwork of squares painted in different shades, representing the skin tones of the inaugural class: peach, parchment, ebony, cocoa, and umber. On her left, locker doors open to reveal stick-on mirrors and photos of teen idols like Zac Efron and Selena Gomez, before banging closed.

Room 440, 441. Chit Su squeezes by a knot of Dominican boys wearing sunglasses and long chains of colored rubber bands—their rap group's very own discount bling. "718! All day!" someone screams in honor of the posse's name and Brooklyn's area code. Nearby, a Haitian girl wearing a single, black lace Michael Jackson glove teases her hair with a purple pick.

Room 442, 443. More classroom doors swing open, and students spill out, shrieking, laughing, hugging, high-fiving, and talking—so much talking. Even their T-shirts talk, getting louder and bolder over the year: "Sexy Baby," "Sexy Bitch," "Mean Girls Finish First," "I'm Looking for a Rich Man." A stringy African girl in a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Hi, Hater" sprints down the hall, leaving Chit Su to stare blankly at the blocky lettering on her back: "Bye, Hater."

At Room 444, Chit Su comes to a squeaking halt and peers through a rectangular glass window in the door. The room is bright and filled with students, their faces turned toward a thin woman standing in front of a huge map. Her name is Suzannah Taylor, and she teaches global studies. Two days ago she made the students step up to the map, point out their countries, and then say one thing they liked about where they were from and one thing they liked about New York City. Everyone agreed that the best thing about America was TV. A boy from Mauritania said he liked his country because it's large. One girl couldn't find Haiti on the map and was surprised to see how small it looked when Suzannah pointed out a speck of green amid so much blue. When Suzannah asked a Puerto Rican girl what she missed most about her country, her eyes welled up with tears. "Todo," she said. Everything.

Suzannah told the class that she missed her home, too, but it was hard to tell where she was from. Fair-skinned with fine brown hair, glasses, and a tiny silver nose stud, she looked like she got dressed in an African market that day. She wore a grass-green skirt in a bold flowered print, big black hoop earrings made of wood, and ivory bangle bracelets that clanged together when she pointed to a gigantic mass of land on the map. "Texas," she said. "The capital of Texas is Austin. It's not the biggest city, but it's where the government is. My country's capital is Washington, D.C. That's where the president lives. One thing I like about my country is that there are so many different kinds of people. My second country is Mali because I lived in Africa for a year."

"Where are you from?" Suzannah asks Chit Su, when she walks into her classroom on the fourth day of school.

"Thailand," Chit Su says, looking around the room. The peach walls are covered with posters of laminated world currencies and flags. If she had been in class on the second day of school, she would have drawn her country's flag in crayon on a four-by-six-inch index card along with the other students. But because Chit Su is late, Suzannah gives her a worksheet to fill out. It is divided into three columns: "Words I don't know," "Words I kind of know," "Words I know."

From her backpack, Chit Su pulls out a pencil bag and selects a sparkly silver-and-blue pen, poising it over the page but never touching the nib to the paper. From the corner of her eye, she watches Suzannah show the class pictures of maps on a projector.

“Who can tell me what a continent is?” Suzannah asks.

Several hands shoot up.

“It’s like an island, but bigger!”

“A group of countries!”

“Something you find on a map!”

Biting the tip of her pen, Chit Su stares at the assignment. As the other students get to work, she stares at the walls, and at her classmates. Like in the mural in the hall, their faces range from ivory white to cake-batter brown to dusky black. Only, up close, they are in high definition. There are a surprising number of mustaches and lots of acne, some of it covered up with patchy foundation or hidden behind heavy bangs. A couple of the girls wear dark veils wrapped around their heads and shoulders.

“We’re going to talk about maps today. Pretend I’m from a different planet,” Suzannah says, cocking her head to the side. “What’s a ‘map’?” More hands shoot up, and she shows the class a map of Central Park. “Is that Costa Rica?” a Haitian girl asks.

At moments, the outside world seeps in, breaking up the chorus of voices. Through the open window comes the whoosh of braking trucks and distant cries of ambulance sirens. In a nearby classroom, the English teacher Minerva Moya claps her hands for attention, her voice ringing down the hall. “Students! STUDENTS!”

When the clock hands hit 9:45 at the end of the period, the effect is already Pavlovian. Students zip their backpacks closed and shove out of their seats, grinding metal chair legs against the floor. Chit Su is still clutching her sparkly silver-and-blue pen, but her page is blank.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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