

'Trick Mirror' connects class through commiseration

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Photos Courtesy of Henryk Kessel '25.

At the end of July, Vassar's incoming class of first-year students was busy preparing for college. This included shopping for dorm necessities, filling out medical forms, pre-registering for classes and continuing a modern Vassar tradition: the required first-year reading.

This year, the selected book was "Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion" by Jia Tolentino. Admittedly, I resented the assignment. Like many other students, it felt like an unnecessary task on my growing to-do list. Despite this, I got my copy from the public library and started reading.

The collection of nine essays explores societal intricacies through a millennial lens, offering a thorough introduction to pop culture, politics and media for anyone who's never had access to the internet. Loosely connected by the concept of "self-delusion", each essay blends a personal anecdote with social commentary and pop culture references, making for a sometimes frustratingly sophisticated analysis of familiar ideas.

Tolentino explores standards set by the female archetype in her essay "Pure Heroines," the mystifying intersection between drugs and religion in "Ecstasy" and the societal pressure of perfection placed on women in "Always Be Optimizing." The essays are dense with a combination of academic and millennial voice. Vocabulary like "ostensible," "prophylaxis" and "nascent" is next to "girlboss" and "queef".

Whether Tolentino's essays warranted the dozens of rave reviews printed in the first few pages is disputed between the Class of 2025. I will say, finding students who *enjoyed* the book was a much more laborious task than finding students who didn't like it, or who didn't read it at all.

"I was very gung-ho about it at first. I read about half of the book, and then I just...stopped," said a first-year who wished to remain anonymous.

Speaking to other members of the class, this sentiment was not at all uncommon. The student realized this too, adding, “Most of the conversations surrounding it that I have engaged in were: ‘did you even do the reading?’ or ‘I didn’t read it at all’ or ‘I read it and I didn’t do the questions.’”

Carissa Kolcun ’25 added that the material itself was difficult to relate to. “While probably not intended, Tolentino’s audience is the millennial, white passing, heterosexual, middle class woman. I am none of these things,” they explained.

The tradition of a common reading goes back as far as 2006. The assignment’s page on Moodle states that the goal is to “bring the incoming class together in a common experience.” The anonymous first-year loved this idea, admitting that she was excited about reading a book the class could connect with and discuss.

I had the opportunity to speak with the Dean of First Year Students, Jen Herrera, to discuss the common reading, the assignment’s history, and its relevance for the Class of 2025.

Before discussing “Trick Mirror”, Dean Herrera, who oversees the book’s selection process, turned her computer screen to show me a Facebook post from the Class of 2021’s first year. Light shone through colorful discs, adorning the windows on the Bridge for Laboratory Sciences. “So this is what we did for the common reading that year,” she explained, waving the cursor over the image. Every student had spat into a petri dish after reading “The Wildlife of Our Bodies” by Rob Dunn. The unified biome of the Class of 2021 gleamed as a collaborative art installation.

Such an activity is unimaginable given the pandemic, but it represents the creativity and passion of the people behind the common reading. Dean Herrera explained how both the first-year class and the Poughkeepsie community are unified through the literature.

“Roxane Gay filled the entire chapel,” she said of the author for the Class of 2022’s common read with what must have been a wide smile behind her mask. During the interview, Dean Herrera showed clear passion for the common read’s unifying power.

In practice, however, it seems the class didn’t connect in the intended way. Instead of unifying us through the content of Tolentino’s societal examination, the common read brought the Class of 2025 together through something we’re used to: commiseration. Dean Herrera laughed at this idea, but pleasantly responded, “Hey, whatever connects you!”

When I asked Kolcun whether the assignment had succeeded in connecting the class, they answered, “In some ways I think it was a good way to connect the class as it often came up in initial conversations I had with people.” They added, “Art and writing serves as a good way to start discussion, but I feel that something less time consuming might have led more people to actually complete the assignment.”

As Kolcun started to touch on, some students were dissuaded from reading the book because of the complexity and length of Tolentino’s essays. The anonymous first-year explained, “Overall it felt like the substance couldn’t keep my attention. I would read before going to bed and just fall asleep, then not remember half of the chapter the next morning.” As for the discussion portion of the assignment, many had the same reason for skipping it.

Professor Dara Greenwood, who wrote one of the discussion forums, said, “I approached them as I would approach a discussion in a course at Vassar, and tried to highlight major themes that cropped up throughout the text.”

While some of my peers were dissuaded by the complexity of the prompts, Professor Greenwood said this was not the intention. “I was impressed with the quality and quantity of the responses we received; the students who posted clearly took time to elaborate on their own thoughts and respond carefully and supportively to each other,” she noted.

Much like Dean Herrera, Professor Greenwood was enthusiastic about “Trick Mirror.” Echoing themes present in the book, she explained, “I think all of us, and students in particular, are constantly navigating how to lead meaningful, healthy, and joyful lives in the swirl of media content that has increasingly moved to the center of our social and emotional spaces.”

Despite the mixed reviews from students, “Trick Mirror” claims contemporary relevance, earning a spot on *The New York Times* Bestseller List for five weeks after its debut. Whether we were responding to the discussion posts online or complaining about summer work, “Trick Mirror” was able to make an impact on the Class of 2025.

Given the mixed response by students, Dean Herrera stated that she was more than happy to accept suggestions for improving the assignment for the future. She hopes to build a website dedicated to the common read and its history later this year.

By the end of my discussion with Dean Herrera, my conceptions about the common read had shifted. What began as a seemingly arbitrary interruption to my summer became an opportunity to discover the values of community, collaboration and curiosity that the Vassar student body and faculty share.

Parts of the Class of 2025 may have been unified against “extra work,” but at least we’re starting somewhere.

Before leaving, Dean Herrera handed me a copy of “Trick Mirror” from her shelf. In anticipation of Jia Tolentino’s campus visit in October, she recommended giving Tolentino one more chance, and to read the book again. I think I’ll give it another go.