

On the contrary

 By [Bronwyn Williams](#)

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“ There are quite a lot of people who think my aspirations are not possible. That's a good thing. We don't need to really worry about these people very much, because since they don't think it's possible, they won't take us very seriously and they will not actually try to stop us until it's too late. ~ Peter Thiel ”

Know your subject

I recently read - and was appalled by - Max Chafkin's *The Contrarian*, a biography of the controversial billionaire investor, Peter Thiel.

“ Trying to read this & I'm honestly appalled.

The author comes across as a perverted teacher who joins in the taunting of a bullied child, leaving the reader with the impression bullying is fine, mockery of sexual preference is fine, as long as the victim is smarter than you.

pic.twitter.com/vJMyWSCVbk— Bronwyn Williams (@bronwynwilliams) [November 20, 2021](#) ”

For a start, the author only appears to have actually met Thiel couple of times, and briefly at that. Nor does he appear to have interviewed his subject's husband or family. In spite of this, the author feels confident in making some *very* personal claims about the quality of his subject's relationships - this despite the fact that Thiel, as far as any outsider can tell, has been happily married to his long-term partner since 2017, with whom he has a daughter.

However, the quality, originality, and blatantly biased character-assassination-by-association, what *really* bothered me was the tone.

Weakness is not a virtue; strength is not a vice

Regardless of your views about Peter Thiel's politics or business (rest assured, Chafkin leaves no doubt as to *his* opinions

thereof), and whether you believe the man is a hero or an antihero, it is hard to side with an author who joins in mocking his subject alongside his self-confessed high-school and college bullies. It's worth noting that the Chafkin *did* manage to track down and interview the bullies, who furnished him with all sorts of stories about how they made (or at least tried to) make the young, socially awkward Thiel's teenage years miserable. This pattern of snide glee at the expense of someone else's privacy and comfort extended to the copious paragraphs that rehashing the many gossip column inches dedicated to discussing and demeaning Thiel's sexuality over the years.

The message the reader is left with is that it's perfectly fine to mock the looks, personality and even the sexuality of people who are smarter and richer than you are (*even if they were not, in fact, more successful than you at the time of the insult - this handy excuse can apparently be post-dated*). In fact, the impression is that the smart and successful somehow *deserve* to be put in their place by their less successful counterparts.

I find this a particularly abhorrent insinuation, the idea that somehow weakness and relative failure are somehow correlated with virtue, while success is some sort of a character flaw.

The mediocracy mentality

Far from being an original thought, I see this dynamic playing out all too often in boardrooms, where mediocre managers and envious colleagues instead of supporting and promoting the most talented and successful employees decide instead to cut them down to size, to draw the exceptional down to the average.

This sort of *mediocracy mentality* can cripple organisational culture. Talent and hard work is not something to be flattened down to the lowest common denominator, it is something to be nurtured and cultivated.

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