

## Review Essay

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### **Why Teachers Matter**

*Peter Gibbon*

#### ***In the Deep Heart's Core***

Michael Johnston  
Grove Press, 2003.

#### ***There Are No Shortcuts***

Rafe Esquith  
Pantheon, 2003.

#### ***Wonderland: A Year in the Life of an American High School***

Michael Bamberger  
Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004.

There are over four million teachers in America, yet we rarely hear their voices in books, magazines, or newspapers. Many are outstanding but shine unseen, remembered only in their communities and by grateful students. Nor are teachers major players in the standards and testing movement. Change comes from Washington, state departments of education, and local school boards.

Perhaps teachers are too busy. Perhaps they have heard too many clichés. Or maybe they know that when the classroom door shuts, they have influence far exceeding that of professors, pundits, and policy makers. For whatever reason, teachers rarely speak up, and that is sad. We should therefore be grateful for any glimpse into

classrooms, any insight or inspiration from the people who actually instruct our children.

After graduating from Yale, Michael Johnston enrolled in Teach for America, spent a summer taking education courses, then headed south to teach English at Greenville High School, a school in the Mississippi Delta, where 95% of the students come from poor families and all of the students are African-American. *In the Deep Heart's Core* is Johnston's poignant account of his two years there.

Conditions in the school are discouraging. Johnston teaches in 100-minute blocks without a curriculum or mentor. Classrooms are drab, desks and books in short supply. Colleagues are demoralized and cafeteria patrol is painful. To Johnston's classroom come a "host of children who showed no interest in education, discipline, or respect." They are not inspired on the first day of class copying into their notebooks uplifting words by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nor do they respond to the illustrated lesson on the Harlem Renaissance Johnston carefully prepared while in training for Teach for America. They rip up books, tear down posters, deface desks, gamble in the hall, and give him the finger. He does not worry about grade inflation, as fewer than 5% qualify for the honor roll. Johnston makes liberal use of referral forms, security guards, and the assistant principal. More ominously, some students threaten teachers and attack classmates.

Johnston quickly discovers that a dismal school reflects a disadvantaged community, in which dysfunctional families, dead-end jobs, drug use, and random violence are common. Three students are killed outside school in gang-related incidents during the two years Johnston teaches at Greenville. One, Gina Dickens, a "confident, gracious, and charismatic girl," was hit by a stray bullet while picking up food at Floree's Lounge. In school, a student splits open his classmate's skull with a wooden stool in a dispute over watches and rings. Johnston hardens as he confronts a world "where death came easily."

But just as the book starts to read like *Blackboard Jungle* and Johnston veers toward despair, he begins to have some success with

troubled students. He lends out his books, becomes involved in his students' lives, and starts coaching track. Supervising detention, he plays chess with Larry, a taciturn, angry boy whose father beats him. Johnston tries to make Larry understand that in life, as in chess, we have to have a plan, to make smart choices, and to "play with dignity and principle."

Tutoring English, Johnston meets Dianca, improves her essays, and comes to understand what it is like to be a teenage mother. He records Dianca's reaction as she grasps a difficult concept:

There was something deeply triumphant about her laugh, and yet it was laced with a distant note of despair. Her laugh proclaimed: "Who would have thought Dianca would ever know the difference between an independent and a subordinate clause?"

To motivate Mario into making the honor roll, Johnston promises lunch at any restaurant in Greenville and entices him into reading the *Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*. "It was the first time I had ever seen a student truly lost in learning in my room," Johnston reports. After reading the *Autobiography*, Mario starts asking hopeful questions about his own future. Johnston writes:

... there have been few times in my life that I have felt more integral to the project of life on this planet, more a part of that mysterious human quest for meaning, than I did in that room with Mario that day. I think it is the power of these rare moments of meaning that draw so many teachers back each fall.

Not all Johnston's students are troubled. He meets Marvin, who started reading before kindergarten and whose parents cultivated his curiosity. Marvin "used words like 'plethora' in conversation, wrote avidly on his own, and would challenge teachers to debates over whether Shakespeare was in fact the greatest writer who ever lived." Marvin's friend, Jerry, also has intellectual curiosity. He describes the two boys:

While other boys were watching television or playing video games, or hanging out at the mall harassing girls, Marvin and Jerry were walking, inventing fictions, analyzing the world in the

pieces that pass between stoplights and corner liquor stores and abandoned industrial parks.

Johnston plays chess with Marvin and tutors him for his college entrance exams. Of Marvin, Johnston observes: "He had assumed none of the distaste for life that surrounded him; somehow he managed to develop from his bleak environment a perpetually hopeful and peaceful vision of his own world."

*In the Deep Heart's Core* is filled with affecting portraits of students and Johnston's interactions with them. By his second year, students stop by his class, shake his hand in the hall, talk to him in the cafeteria. He is eager to start up his truck in the morning and experiences "that feeling of redeeming exhaustion that comes when you work so hard for something you believe in."

Though the book wanders, the writing is clear and often eloquent. What is not as clear is how Johnston moves from neophyte to effective teacher. This is an important question because educators want to know if a skilled, motivated teacher can make a significant difference in the lives of disadvantaged African-American adolescents and, if so, how to recruit and train such people.

Was it his new role as head coach? Did he learn from his mistakes? Do students torture first-year teachers and then let up? My guess is that Johnston was a young, energetic, bright, empathetic, charismatic teacher who, after initiation, gained a following, though he is too modest to say this. His love of Greenville, his affection for the students, and his satisfaction in teaching indicate a rare commitment.

The thesis of Johnston's book is that students are good and, despite their bleak environment, hopeful. From reading their journal entries, Johnston discovers that "in their deep heart's core," his students want "meaning and dignity," a middle-class life with money, a house, a stable family. Why do so many not get such a life?

Johnston mentions "the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, the extreme poverty, the enduring chasms of race and class." He also says that students are betrayed by the adults living around them and offers some harrowing descriptions of physical violence

and spousal abuse. He criticizes the chronic rootlessness—families moving from house to house and children from family to family—that makes the teaching of responsibility difficult.

Johnston is reluctant, however, to generalize or to judge the school, community, or culture. He was only twenty-two himself and a child of privilege. And the culture of poverty and creation of a black underclass are subjects not easily understood or quickly remedied. Can schools make up for history, overcome poverty, prop up families? How can we change schools like Greenville: improve the curriculum? reduce class size? offer professional development for teachers? hire a dynamic principal? lengthen the school day and year?

How many of the problems Johnson encountered—drugs, gangs, guns, teenage pregnancies, and a youth culture steeped in materialism and hedonism—lie outside the school, impervious to intervention? What are the societal forces that permitted 1100 poor African-American adolescents to be clustered in one shabby building? Rather than speculate about grand solutions, Johnston prefers doing what he can—the small deed, the kind act.

In his optimistic belief in young people and his stories of occasional breakthrough, Michael Johnston has written a hopeful book. But he would probably concede that he offers as much darkness as light, that individual transformations are not the same as systemic change, and that he has no easy answers.

*In the Deep Heart's Core* ends on an upbeat note. In the Afterword, written three years later, Johnston returns to visit Greenville and finds a renovated high school, with new science labs and spotless hallways. In his absence, Greenville had merged with another high school and split into “smaller autonomous learning communities that focus on particular subjects or career paths.” Johnston brings us up-to-date on the lives of his former students whom he visits, and who, in their resilience, seem to mirror his hope and idealism.

Unlike Michael Johnston, Rafe Esquith is a veteran teacher. Esquith works with disadvantaged fifth graders, rather than high school students. And where Johnston's style is meditative and literary, Esquith's is brash, direct, and colloquial. Where Johnston is modest, Esquith is outspoken. In *There Are No Shortcuts*, Esquith knows the way. Esquith believes that all students can love learning and achieve, despite crumbling schools, incompetent administrators, foolish curriculums, and what he regards as a misguided accountability movement. The answers, according to Esquith, are smart teachers, classic literature, a longer school day, and unremitting effort. The enemies are basal readers, dumbed down tests, rigid unions, professional development classes, unimaginative administrators, and incompetent colleagues. Not to confine his indictment to schools, he adds as villains a degenerate popular culture and the "tyranny of the ordinary."

Esquith's story is inspiring. He started teaching middle class students in Southern California, but felt that they had too much and he had it too easy. He decided to move to Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles to work in poor neighborhoods with students who knew little English. He has taught at Hobart for eighteen years and has become a legend. His fifth-grade students read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Crucible*. They play Vivaldi, perform *King Lear*, and outperform other students on standardized tests. They travel to the Hollywood Bowl, Yosemite National Park, and Washington, D.C. Ian McClellan visits his class. Hal Holbrook is a patron. Prominent businessmen fund some of his trips, and the Walt Disney Corporation has recognized him as the outstanding Teacher of the Year.

Of course an inspiring story must have roadblocks. Esquith confronts envious colleagues and rigid administrators. He works extra jobs to raise money for his trips, plays, and instruments. He stops sleeping and gets sick. Not all students are grateful and kind, and Esquith admits mistakes—snapping at colleagues and favoring intellectual promise over character formation.

I am not sure Esquith's saga is replicable or that his stringent program would work for all teachers, but his critique of the educational

establishment, though severe and sometimes simplistic, is unusual and worth our consideration. Esquith insists that teachers must be smart and well read, a statement rare in educational literature and worth our attention, since the American public generally does not think of pre-college teachers as people of intellectual distinction. Teaching, argues Esquith, is a “holy mission” that demands maximum effort and offers the ultimate reward: transformed lives. Remember, Esquith says, “lives hang in the balance.”

Esquith would like to be outstanding *and* recognized. This attitude is rare in an egalitarian profession uncomfortable with talk of ambition, reluctant to consider performance pay, short of entrepreneurs. To be outstanding and transform lives, you don’t use prepackaged curricula or worry about state tests, according to Esquith. Basal readers and worksheets bore students. Instead, teach what you love, teach great works of literature, teach Shakespeare and Mark Twain and watch students rise to the challenge. Esquith’s vigorous defense of high culture is rare in a profession more worried about diversity than excellence, and a valuable antidote for students inculcated with the values of an entertainment/celebrity culture.

Esquith may be charismatic, but he is a careful planner. “I don’t have a desk in the classroom. I’m on my feet, like Henry V exhorting his soldiers to fight on St. Crispin’s Day. I’ve spent hours planning what chapter we will read. . . . Nothing is left to chance.”

Among the important insights in the book is the section on how a teacher changes and grows. This section challenges those who complain that teaching is a static profession, that one year is like another, and that there is no way to ascend except to become an administrator. Teaching, Esquith insists, is an evolving career. You experiment, make mistakes, and self-correct. Countering the experience of Michael Johnston and indirectly criticizing *Teach for America*, he writes, “It takes years of experience to develop the wisdom that can lead to being a first-rate teacher.”

Esquith has little use for the goal of self-esteem, insisting that skills come first. He believes in “multicultural sensitivity,” but argues that this goal has eclipsed educational excellence. One night he took

his students to the Hollywood Bowl to hear Lynn Harrell play Dvorak's Cello Concerto. Afterwards the students went back stage to meet the cellist and one asked shyly, "Mr. Harrell, how can you make music that sounds that beautiful?" Harrell responded: "Well, there are no shortcuts."

It would be fair to call Esquith an elitist—an admittedly unusual description of a fifth-grade teacher. He repeatedly rails against "a society that embraces mediocrity" in schools and culture. When his students go to watch the Los Angeles Dodgers, he instructs them in the history of baseball. When they attend a concert, he insists on good manners.

But Esquith is no ordinary elitist: he teaches Malcolm X as well as Mark Twain. He internalizes the books he loves and learns lessons from his favorite characters. From Huck Finn, he learns to be a social critic. After reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he aspires to be kind. And he is instructed by his students as well as by books. From a ten-year-old student whom he carelessly rebukes, he learns that he can be mean. From a trio of academic superstars who turn hostile, he discovers that he has overemphasized intellectual accomplishment. "Discipline, hard work, perseverance, and generosity of spirit are, in the final analysis, far more important."

Esquith may teach traditional texts, but he is not above using progressive insights. When studying *Treasure Island*, students dress up as pirates. On Friday his students sit in a "Magic Circle" and share their feelings. He concedes that a good teacher must be a social worker and psychologist as well as a scholar. Esquith is successful because he combines the best of traditional and progressive pedagogy. He champions mental toughness, unreserved effort, high expectations, high culture, and good character. Simultaneously, he cultivates personal relations with his students, insists that learning be relevant, and believes in group projects.

*There Are No Shortcuts* is not perfect. The writing is choppy and Esquith is thin-skinned. Working hard and avoiding mediocrity are not unusual remedies. But teachers should read this book, for

Esquith insists that what makes the difference is not curriculum, tests, principals, not education courses or professional development, not families, race or social class, but the idealistic teacher in love with a subject and devoted to students. Esquith offers a new and heroic model for the teacher: missionary, entrepreneur, rebel, social critic, crusader for the disadvantaged *and* high culture.

Teachers regularly complain that they are marginal, powerless, unappreciated, forced to be social workers and disciplinarians instead of instructors. Professors urge them to be facilitators, not sages. Sociologists lament that teaching is a lonely profession without enough adult interaction. Policy makers complain about the low test scores of teachers. Michael Johnston and Rafe Esquith rebuke the whiners. In their books, teachers come across as powerful and compassionate. By bearing witness, they demonstrate that the work of teachers is interesting, challenging, and significant.

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Michael Bamberger's recent book, *Wonderland: A Year in the Life of an American High School*, focuses on students rather than teachers, and on the middle class rather than the disadvantaged. In *There Are No Shortcuts* and *In the Deep Heart's Core*, teachers are heroic figures who make a difference. In *Wonderland*, teachers are employees operating in a bureaucracy, pals instead of authority figures, coaches not scholars.

A writer for *Sports Illustrated*, Bamberger decided to spend a year at Pennsbury High School in Levittown, Pennsylvania, just north of Philadelphia, after seeing a news clip about Pennsbury's old-fashioned prom. He hangs out with students, interviews parents and the principal, and offers us an intimate look at life in one high school, the journalistic equivalent of *Boston Public* or a reality-based TV show. To students who ask him about the purpose of his book, Bamberger answers, "Real names, true-life, real everything."

The book is organized around the senior prom, a five-day extravaganza that students and administrators take very seriously, that

unifies the community, and that serves as a rite of passage, Bamberger tells us, to help Pennsbury's students become adults. We also follow the lives of selected students as they progress through the year: the homecoming queen, the co-chair of the prom, the junior class president, a couple who have a baby, a boy who drinks too much and is hit by a car.

Bamberger was given access to e-mails and instant messages, to family discussions, to student conversations. Recreating events and dialogue, he weaves all this information into a fast-paced, vivid narrative. To know so much about so many characters and give structure and interest to what otherwise might be a mundane year required creativity, imagination, a lot of research, and careful editing. Bamberger excels at the mini-portrait: a janitor taking a cigarette break, a football star nursing his handicapped brother, the mother who learns that her son has been hit by a car.

What does Bamberger tell us about Pennsbury students? "The kids at Pennsbury wanted cars, stereos, DVDs, dinner out." To satisfy these desires, more than half work after school. They drink, dress provocatively, have sex early. They love their parents but are generally not deferential. Although white, they embrace black culture and, raised on David Letterman, are comfortable with irony. They have little interest in church or Boy Scouts and no use for politicians. In the cafeteria, they cluster in cliques. They have an athletic elite and a "social ruling class."

Bamberger profiles the high school quarterback and the field hockey star, both of whom pursue athletic scholarships. "Winter Sundays," says Bamberger, "were sacred in the lives of many Pennsbury kids. . . . On Sundays in winter, the Eagles played [football]." Bamberger describes the junior class president's goal for getting the most out of his high school experience: "He vowed to live a life out of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, out of *Risky Business*, out of the *American Pie* movies."

What does *Wonderland* tell us about the teachers? The principal, once a basketball star at Pennsbury, is hardworking and compassionate, though he seems to put only male teachers in the important

positions. "From the principal on down, Pennsbury was dominated by men. It had always been that way." The forensic coach could be found at Eagles games, selling programs to make a little extra money. Though sporting a long ponytail and tattoos, the art teacher knows how to draw the line when students are too familiar. But most of what we know about Pennsbury teachers comes through the eyes of veteran history teacher Jim Cunningham, who has been faculty advisor to the prom for twenty-three years. Says Bamberger of Cunningham: "For years, he had been one of those teachers found at almost every school, the teacher who shapes lives, the teacher whom former students talk about at their twenty-fifth reunion."

Cunningham seems disillusioned by a new world in which standards have declined, basic skills are ignored, teacher-student debate is muzzled by political correctness, and bureaucratic minutiae diminish independence.

He felt the modern teacher had been turned into a self-esteem counselor, that the modern teacher's role was to make the student feel good about himself. If the student couldn't spell or use proper grammar, that really didn't matter.

Unlike Michael Johnston, however, Cunningham neither quotes Yeats nor argues for social justice. And unlike Rafe Esquith, Cunningham does not call for uplifting novels, unreserved effort, or trips to symphony. Johnston and Esquith are crusaders and idealists. Of Cunningham, Bamberger notes, "his greatest memories of his thirty-three teaching years were from the prom."

The theme of this year's prom is "Hollywood Nights." Bamberger describes the students' transformation of the school:

The red-carpet entrance, the giant popcorn boxes, the gold-painted Oscar, the way every square foot of drab Pennsbury wall had been covered in original artwork. . . . There were student drawings of James Dean, Judy Garland, the Three Stooges, Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe. One hallway had been converted into Beverly Hills's Rodeo Drive, with storefronts for Armani and Tiffany and Chanel. Another hallway was a replica of the Hollywood Walk of Fame, in which each senior had a star.

The title of *Wonderland* comes from a poem by Lewis Carroll that Bamberger quotes to suggest that high school is a magical time of dreams, escape, and illusions. It also comes from a pop song by John Mayer. Bamberger tells us the song could be heard “while the volleyball team was practicing, in the student parking lot, and in the faculty rooms” with its refrain: “Your body is a wonderland.” The book includes references to Tony Soprano, Patti Labelle, Eminem, Justin Timberlake, Charlie’s Angels, Matt Damon, Britney Spears. Except for Lewis Carroll, no person from art, literature, or science makes it into Bamberger’s narrative. Popular culture has triumphed in *Wonderland*.

In *Wonderland* there is little mention of academics, except to note that on Friday textbooks are thrown in the back seats of cars and “would not see daylight until school resumed.” To be fair, Bamberger did not set out to examine the curriculum at Pennsbury High School and his purpose inherently meant less time in the classroom. Still, the implied message of *Wonderland* is that intellect is not important at Pennsbury. Unwittingly, this book raises serious questions about the purpose of a high school education and the role of teachers.

Jim Cunningham comments that in many ways Pennsbury had not changed: “High school had always been about the search for love, for sex, for various highs, for independence, for acceptance.” It is revealing that he does not mention knowledge, civic duty, or character as things one searches for in high school.

High schools should, of course, sponsor clubs and sports and encourage social adjustment, but they should also open new worlds and offer students an alternative universe to peer and popular culture. Ideally, teachers expose their students to the wonder of science, the fascination of history and literature, the beauty of mathematics.

*Wonderland* offers a fascinating look at students in one American high school. They seem nice, hardworking, devoted to their parents. By the end of the book, Bamberger convinces the reader that proms are important. But in their devotion to cars and sports, their pursuit of material goods, their preoccupation with sex and celebrity, the students reflect American values at their most shallow. One leaves

- 4. *Wonderland* thinking that Richard Hofstadter is correct in his belief that anti-intellectualism is a predominant feature of American schools. One leaves nostalgic for Michael Johnson and Rafe Esquith and their belief that schools should do more than mimic a commercial culture. ∞

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