

Book Reviews

Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us

by Mike Rose

Published by The New Press (New York, 2009)

Reviewed by K.C. Nat Turner

In his latest book, *Why School?*, Mike Rose offers a timely reminder of why school matters. Using personal experience, family memories, interviews, and observational data, Rose puts the humanizing element back into the purpose of schooling as he tackles the major issues of schooling, education, and reform in the age of Obama. Rose reorients the national public debate about education through this courageous book as he stands up and argues for the need to include curiosity, reflectiveness, imagination, intellect, aesthetics, joy, civility, and understanding as central elements of our collective definition of achievement.

Rose's project is refreshing at this historic moment when the technology of large-scale assessment and record state budget deficits continue to define achievement and in turn limit what gets taught in schools. To this point, Rose challenges us to "not simply accept our public institutions as they are but be vigilantly engaged with them" (p. 156). Through numerous detailed stories of students from many diverse backgrounds, Rose illustrates how he personally has maintained this level of engagement with educational institutions from kindergarten, vocational education in high schools, community colleges, and graduate schools.

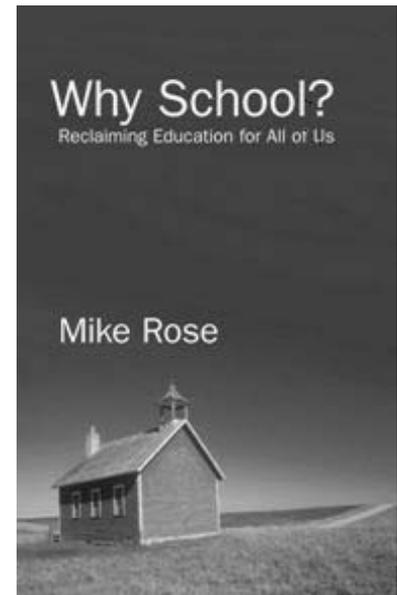
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Rose paints a picture that is less bleak than what typically gets presented in current educational policy research and in the media. He shows how hope can be uncovered even in some of the everyday, unexpected moments of educational practice. In his typically vivid narrative style, Rose writes an extremely accessible book that will be informative to anyone interested in American schooling today. He reflects on what we can learn about the purposes of education from the stories of students and teachers presented in the book, highlighting instances when education goes well. Throughout the text Rose balances the role of the individual in creating opportunity with the constraints of the socioeconomic and historic contexts/he comes from. Rose reminds us that while individuals often

work hard to create opportunity ... a whole sweep of physical and social characteristics (gender and race, the markings of social class, or disability), economic policies, and social programs open up or close down opportunity. (p. 8)

Through his use of rich ethnographic detail Rose brings us in close and shows us exactly how this balancing act unfolds in the everyday lives of the students in the case studies he presents.

One of the first examples of hopeful teaching detailed by Rose is Stephanie Terry, a first-grade teacher in inner-city Baltimore, who engages her students in using the language of science during a les-



son on hermit crabs. Through Terry's artful teaching we see students beginning to feel knowledgeable as they observe closely, record, hypothesize, and report publicly on their thinking. We learn about high school students Willie, Nancy, and Peter. Willie works painstakingly on building computer tables for a district office and explains, "It has to be just right ... or it won't work" (p. 91). Nancy who is working on replacing the brakes on a car explains how precise she is about brakes because they can make a difference in saving someone's life and property. Peter goes above and beyond the call of duty when replacing a faucet on a bathroom sink, asking special permission to replace additional parts to satisfy his sense of workmanship.

These examples of students solving practical problems, redoing or repairing something to make it more appealing or functional are examples of how, when young people are given opportunities to engage in ongoing meaningful activity, they "develop and exhibit behavior and values that have personal and social benefit" (p. 96). Through their stories, skillfully drawn by Rose, he demonstrates how these values of utility, craft, curiosity, knowledge, and workmanship are perhaps as significant as facts learned because they direct students' current and future behavior.

Kevin and Anthony are students who both take advantage of special programs designed to create alternative pathways to educational achievement. Kevin is a student who came to college as a struggling writer through a special admissions program after spending most of his 16th year in a juvenile camp. Instead of the traditional remedial writing programs that focus intensely on grammar and usage through workbook exercises, Rose details a distinctive 20-week program he helped develop using a sequence of writing assignments that moved from lesser to greater difficulty. Based on current research in language and cognition that suggests students like Kevin need not go back to "linguistic square one," Rose's program took a pedagogical turn to include engagement with sophisticated intellectual material (i.e., discussions, in-class writing, and consistent feedback) which enabled Kevin to write competent papers explicating poems and comparing autobiographies. Through this example Rose illustrates how a

successful remedial program doesn't have to carve up language into little bits and build skills slowly but can set high standards, focus on inquiry, and use a variety of creative pedagogical strategies to achieve its goal.

Anthony is an adult with some degree of brain damage who is enrolled in a special program at an urban community college dubbed "the people's college." Anthony had been in prison and worked as a janitor but had gone back to school to better guide his daughter and to jumpstart a second chance for himself. Although Anthony could barely read and write, he had used different forms of media available to him to educate himself and become an articulate and knowledgeable person. Anthony's story sheds light on a number of different topics that Rose addresses in the book, including the purpose of education, the many faces of intelligence, and the importance of creating new pathways to opportunity through public institutions.

What links these intergenerational examples are the diversity of the students and their motivations for studying, which range from pleasure and fear to outrage, frustration, and fun. As learners' interests and motivations are incorporated into their education, they improve their ability to collaborate, communicate, discover, and learn from information as they express themselves through multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis 2006). Rose calls on educators to work with younger and older people to create these types of educational pathways that prepare students for the adaptability and problem solving necessary for participation in future academic, civic, and social contexts.

Throughout his book Rose reiterates that he is not naïve to the fact that one major goal of American education is to prepare the young to make a living. However, Rose refuses to concede the goals of creative, artistic, and political expression. Rose goes to great lengths to demonstrate how, in addition to economic competitiveness, education in the progressive tradition of John Dewey and Horace Mann has been seen as the means to achieve greater intellectual, civic, and moral development. Rose states that there is an economic discussion of schooling to be had, but argues that current attempts to address school failure miss the mark because they are decontextualized

and should instead be located within the context of “joblessness, health-care and housing security, a diminished tax base, economic policy and the social safety net” (p. 27).

As President Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” version of No Child Left Behind takes off, Rose’s voice is a clear warning that standardized tests alone will not be able to measure the most important ideals and goals we as a society hold for our children and our schools. As Paulo Freire (1995) reminded us about the importance of hope in the struggle to improve the world, Rose reminds us that we must not lose hope even during these trying times and he provides examples of what a truly transformative pedagogy and curriculum should include.

References

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Field Notes on Democracy, Listening to Grasshoppers

by Arundhati Roy

Published by Haymarket Books (Chicago, 2009)

Reviewed by Alan Singer

In 1997, Arundhati Roy received the prestigious Booker Prize (now the Man Booker Prize) for her first, and as yet only, published novel, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo). The award gave Roy a measure of international celebrity and an audience for her leftist political views. Since that time she has concentrated her efforts on activism and political commentary.

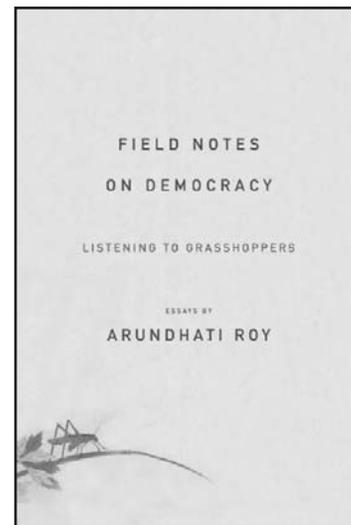
With this book Arundhati Roy enters a discussion on the nature of democracy begun by Enlightenment thinkers in 17th century Europe. Is democracy in the modern sense simply a process, voting for representatives to make decisions for the rest of us, or should it also involve a deeply held communal commitment to liberal values (liberty) and the rights of both individuals and groups? To further complicate the matter, if democracy must include a commitment to

rights, which rights should be paramount: the property rights of the wealthy or the right of the mass of humanity to live in peace, dignity, safety, and with the possibility of a better future for their children?

Common themes in the twelve essays included in this collection are Roy’s critique of globalization as fundamentally unjust and her challenge to the western liberal representative free market model of democracy, especially as it is applied in India. The essays specifically address critical moments in India during the last decade, but underlying issues, such as treatment of minorities, manipulation of electorates, alliances with the devil (George Bush and U.S. capital), and the dismissal of opponents as terrorists, concern us all. India’s Prevention of Terrorism Act passed in 2002 is a lot like the U.S. Patriot Act but even more draconian and subject to misinterpretation and abuse. Hundreds of people are assumed to be guilty and imprisoned without bail. They wait for trials in special courts that are not subject to public review or media scrutiny.

Roy goes into great detail on what will be obscure events for an American audience. But the beauty of her landscape is in the panoramic vista of contemporary India, not the details. Besides, Roy and her publisher provide readers with a very useful glossary.

Arundhati Roy does not back down from controversy in this book or, as far as I know, anywhere else. She documents the connections between rightwing “free market” forces and Hindu nationalists who have attacked the country’s Muslim minority. A recurring theme is India’s total acquiescence to capital-



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ist development projects at the expense of all other values. Roy fears that, in the name of progress, India will be transformed into a police state governed by politicians with close ties to international corporations whose interests they serve: a finance minister had previously been a lawyer for Enron, a judge who ruled on ecological issues left to go to work for Coca-Cola. This collection also includes a speech Roy gave in Turkey chastising that country's refusal to acknowledge the Armenian genocide.

Arundhati Roy is not arguing countries should no longer aspire to democracy. Rather she is concerned about what happens in a country like India where form replaces substance. She asks, "What happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning?" (p. 3). Electoral democracy, like capitalism, is short-sighted. The process provides no long-term vision and lacks the ability to address long-term problems. Roy fears that achieving electoral democracy might mark the end, rather than the furthering, of civilization. She decries the faux democracy in India and elsewhere where elections have become television-friendly spectator sporting events with little real policy difference between the major political parties. While proudly proclaiming itself a democracy, India, always a caste-based society, has devolved into an apartheid state. The 70% of the population that lives in rural areas is overwhelmingly impoverished and completely marginalized. Meanwhile, in the urban areas a small elite lives in walled-off isolation and shares in the obscene riches of globalized capitalism.

Arundhati Roy's critique of electoral democracy has an element of the problem of "false consciousness" that has plagued left wing social movements since the start of the industrial revolution. Members of oppressed groups that the left believes should be in the vanguard of struggles for social change, act individually rather than collectively, accept the validity of the societies that oppress them, and aspire for mobility within those societies. This book would have been stronger if Roy addressed this problem directly.

Arundhati Roy's arguments, delivered with an artistic flourish, are quite sophisticated. She challenges the building of dams to support irrigation projects because they promote a shift to cash crops that denude the soil, make farmers heavily dependent on

polluting fertilizers and pesticides that they cannot afford, and change the ecological balance of the sub-continent. Roy sees free market capitalist development creating a new caste system in India of haves and have-nots, but in her variation of the Marxist dialectic, she also sees it producing the social unrest that can mean its downfall.

Unfortunately, Roy's passion and rhetorical skills can lead to exaggeration, which is always dangerous if your goal is to convince people; when they learn that you exaggerated in one area, they become suspicious of other things you have to say. The massacre of 2,000 Muslims and the gang rape of women in Gujarat in 2002, especially when it is tolerated by the police and the ruling political party, are horrific, but in a country with over 150 million Muslims, it does not rise to the level of genocide. Describing ethnic hatred in India as reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the 1930s is also too much hyperbole. In Germany, Jews made up less than 1% of the population and were much easier to scapegoat and exterminate than India's Muslim population. Roy does grapple with the perception that she is using the term "fascism" to describe India too loosely, but decides that it is an appropriate description of what is taking place.

There is also an element of conspiracy theory in the book that I find very disturbing. Roy suggests that the "incompetent" handling of the prosecution of the men accused of a 2001 attack on the Indian parliament was actually designed to mask government complicity in the attack — the mysterious second gunman on the bridge in Dallas. Roy believes this was done to justify repressive measures and to stir up anti-Islamic sentiment. Because she has no actual evidence of the conspiracy, she poses a series of leading questions that are little more than what-if statements. If Roy knows something she should have said it. But her approach in this book is just wrong. The book jacket has glowing praise from Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, and John Berger. I would feel better about the state of the left if one of them had also addressed this problem.

Arundhati Roy dedicated this book to those who have learned to divorce hope from reason. I wish that I could. I find it difficult to be hopeful when reason suggests that humanity is headed towards economic and environmental disasters on a biblical scale. I am

not convinced, although I wish I were, that the dialectal tension she counts on to bring about progressive social change — and that she argues is producing revolutionary upheaval in the Indian countryside — will actually bear fruit. The forces of global capital will be very difficult to topple. Meanwhile, I hope we have enough resources stored away from the seven fat years to survive, but as Roy knows full well, most of the world's people missed out on the benefits of those fat years.

One thing I enjoy about her writing is its conversational quality; you always feel as if she is talking directly with you, albeit with great enthusiasm, but not as if she is lecturing. However, while her writing motivates the already convinced, I am not convinced that her arguments change the minds of non-believers.

I know this is probably inappropriate in closing a book review, but Arundhati Roy is one of the few global intellectuals I would like to meet and talk with. The next time she is in New York and has a couple of hours, I would love to take her out for a cup of coffee or tea and a chat.

Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling

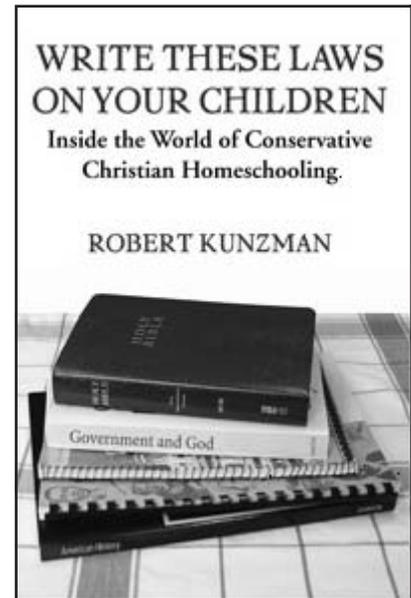
by Robert Kunzman

Published by Beacon Press (Boston, 2009)

Reviewed by J. Gary Knowles

As a doctoral student researching and residing in Utah in the early 1980s, I was denied the opportunity to research homeschooling because learned professors on my supervisory committee assessed the practice as “not having sufficient importance, relevance, or merit for doctoral research.” I was enrolled in a school of schools — a university college of education — largely devoted to research about and practice in public schools. I was forced to research the phenomenon of home education independently while I completed a “more acceptable” study. How circumstances have changed regarding the place of home education in America!

I went on to explore, through parents' life histories, experiences of coming to and “doing” homeschooling. In that work, and in later research activities, I met many conservative-minded, religiously motivated parents and their families. The portraits of families that comprise most of *Write These Laws* ring true to me. I know families that have similar perspectives and views of and on the world. But I also suspect that the stories told about the activities and perspectives of the six families in this book likely represent the public face of practices



and activities that go on behind the curtain of safety and privacy of the homes Kunzman visited. (For example, what happened when he was not present? There are, after all, limits to the degree researchers can intrude upon the goodwill of families.) On the other hand, I have met few home-educating parents who were not willing to have their stories retold, even by sympathetic listeners. Kunzman appears to be a sympathetic scholar; although peppered throughout the accounts of the families are expressions of respectful, perhaps gentle, challenges to their theories, practices, creeds, and goals. This is perhaps one of the strengths of the book, although I have some reservations.

Twenty-five years after my university experience I estimate that there are well over two million school-

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age children being educated in the United States under parents' close guidance; this estimate, which is beyond what Robert Kunzman provides, is hardly insignificant or irrelevant. The exact number is unimportant, given uneven reporting policies across states and schoolboards and the continued practice of some parents to float beneath the radar. It is likely though, that parents who homeschool daily provide an exclusive venue, a stepping off point in knowledge development and growth, and a basis for citizenship and civic engagement for a sizable group of children in America. For this reason alone Kunzman's research is illuminating. He shines a light behind the curtain into the shadows of conservative, Christian home education practices and perspectives because, as he says, the majority of home-educating families in the United States (as opposed to other nations) appear to consist of this same demographic.

This, however, was not always the case over the last 70 years or so. Home education was once more situated in matters of school accessibility (or lack thereof) and progressive pedagogies and curricula. The present homeschool phenomenon rests in a set of historical events, contexts, and circumstances that I wish Kunzman had taken more time to explore and articulate for readers. It is the backdrop to the curtain.

This history has the potential to put Kunzman's stories of families in greater perspective. It would frame their actions and make stronger links to the origin of the controlling mandates of central contemporary players in this unfolding, conservative, Christian, home education drama: for example, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), numerous storefront Christian schools, small and large curricular developers and learning materials publishers to which many of these families turn for paid assistance, support, and collegiality in their educating endeavors. For instance, the conflict that began in the early 1980s between Raymond Moore, a prominent, relative early center-right/moderate home education advocate, and the then fledgling HSLDA and its leader was, perhaps, an ominous foreshadow of events and perspectives that now appear on the conservative homeschooling stage. This fact receives a passing glance in the early pages of the book and

brief mention later on. It is instructive because of the insight it affords into the present "work" of HSLDA.

Readers of *Write These Laws* are taken on a research journey as Kunzman expands his understanding of homeschooling and travels across the country interviewing parents, families, and heads of organizations committed to conservative Christian home education. In the process Kunzman derives compelling, even disturbing, insights into the movement. He interviews leaders of the Home School Legal Defense Association and its offshoot, Generation Joshua, "service providers" to home schooling, and the six families. The research accounts of these interviews and observations are laid out for readers in an immensely readable form befitting a researcher who appears genuinely interested in understanding the nuances of the educative practice. There is a natural flow to this work that parallels Kunzman's unfolding understandings. I take it, also, that the main audience for this work is home educators and the public at large although, no doubt, it will be of interest to education and sociology scholars and public school educators as well.

The audience of scholars of all stripes may find elements of this research lacking. For instance, Kunzman does not articulate his research orientation and associated methods, including information gathering, analysis, interpretation, and representation (which could have been included in an appendix so as not to disrupt the flow of the text). Although I am most interested in knowing about the arrangements and conditions under which Kunzman visited the families and gathered accounts, he is also silent about the ethical dimensions of the work, especially to what extent families may have reviewed interview transcripts and the way family participants were represented. There is also no discussion of the ethical dimensions of selecting service provider organizations and their directors for interviews and analyses, and the representations of those individuals; and, some reluctance to substantially critique practices and organizations or come to more definitive conclusions (a point about which I feel some ambiguity).

Even as I want to know more about where Kunzman stands, I know full well that, in order to continue to research in the larger home-educating community, he has to err on the side of caution, re-

straint, and fairness. After all, researchers have ethical responsibilities that are beyond those upheld by reputable journalists and they have a responsibility not to, as it were, raid and flee with the spoils. I wonder, also, what the families and the small-time service providers that were singled out think of the work. A broader discussion about these kinds of organizations may have served the purposes of the study well. To be fair, I may be a little hard on Kunzman because his writing is respectful enough so that his observations and ideas — indeed his questionings — may be considered and reconsidered, I suspect, by more thoughtful, conservative Christian homeschooling readers. Further, I sense he works hard at allowing readers to come to their own conclusions.

The goals of the study and the research questions which guided it are announced early in the opening chapter. Kunzman wants to describe what it is like to practice homeschooling from a conservative Christian viewpoint. He intends to provide a window into the worlds of educating families and four central questions guide his study. The first has to do with teaching and learning: “What kind of teaching and learning goes on at the kitchen table” (p. 9)? He wants to get a sense of the nuances of the various activities and contexts that intend to promote learning. The second is about the extent to which these parents both think for themselves and reflect their own values and beliefs while concurrently allowing (or not) their children to also think for themselves. The third has to do with Christian citizenship. He posed the questions: “How do these ... parents understand the rights and responsibilities of religiously informed citizenship?” and “How do they communicate these convictions to their children” (p. 10)? In this regard Generation Joshua’s mandate “to take back America for God,” is a rather frightening perspective, given the pluralistic and multi-racial/cultural/religious society of the new millennium. The fourth element centers on home school regulation: “[S]hould the state regulate home-schooling, and if so, to what extent” (p. 11)? These and related questions form the script of Kunzman’s quest. They are sound and timely questions about an increasingly present educative endeavor.

I found some of the best insights of the book located in “Chapter 5: Generation Joshua and the HSLDA.” Here Kunzman discusses (through recounting interviews with key people, including the founders of HSLDA Michael Farris and Mike Smith and directors of GenJ) some of the organization’s goals, practices, and public perspectives. He wonders about the implications of adversarial political and civic educational opportunities offered young people through GenJ, an organization that has mobilized hundreds of young students for conservative political purposes, to “reclaim [the country] for God.” These are the children whose families have memberships with HSLDA. He wonders about the proliferation of battleground terminology expressed through the various activities and communication channels of the organization. He wonders about the misuse and manipulation of research evidence by HSLDA and possible conflicts of interests in this regard. He wonders about the “legitimacy” of HSLDA taking up issues, such as the rights of the unborn child and gay- and same-sex marriage. He wonders about the long-term political ambitions of the leadership. He wonders about the oppressive controls by Farris on those members who challenge his authority or ideas, (such as the large number of faculty who resigned at Patrick Henry College (an arm of HSLDA where Farris is also the President) over disruptions to academic freedom. He wonders about proclamations that homeschooling is largely religious in nature. He wonders about the general adversarial framing of public school–home school debates. To be sure, the fundamental work of HSLDA (and Smith and Farris, together, as attorneys prior to the formation of the Association) was instrumental in calming the swell of sometimes frivolous litigation against parents that began in the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s. In that role, the Association’s legitimacy and integrity is not questioned.

Conservative Christian homeschooling is big business (contrary to the perspectives of Kunzman’s families), and HSLDA is major evidence of this fact. Parents purchase voluminous piles of redundant textbooks and public school cast-offs — not to mention all manner of media symbolic of bygone, nostalgic times when God was ever present in picture-perfect, spiritually robust, honest, hard-working, ho-

mogenous, Republican, small town America. This hearkening to a glorified, imagined past, and the desire to unify church and state through God-fearing, Christian leadership in local, state and federal levels of governance, is reflected in all manner of curriculum, testing, and related services and products and organizational affiliations such as GenJ. It is a sobering reality and a wake-up call for those taking more moderate positions about the place of home education in American society.

There is much that I could criticize about the substance of this book: the findings and discussions, the stories of encounters. But Kunzman has at least cracked open the scripts of HSLDA's disinterested support for parents and their children, the actions of its subsidiaries, its leadership, and questionable educational practices. The focal points of this study allude to many of these criticisms. Of course, the directions of public education — an ideal that is yet to live up to promises — over the last 60 or so years have contributed to a flood of parental dissatisfaction with schools intended to serve all. Intimate learning environments, local curriculum, community-sensitive teachers, collegial and friendly relationships, manageable community-school relations, and the like, are just some of the qualities of public schools lost with the call to achieve economies of scale, and enforce economic rationalism, for example. These are some of the qualities home educators proclaim as not being present in contemporary schools (of course they have a litany of complaints). In parents' minds the ongoing amalgamation of school services, expansion of individual school populations, bussing, attention to "equal" distribution of resources and course offerings have contributed to the loss of quality education (and they are correct in a sense).

Robert Kunzman's account winds up with a chapter entitled "Becoming Public" and it is here that I really get a sense of what he thinks. Without arrogance he discusses the stories of engagement with parents and others in light of the research questions he posed. The first paragraph reminds readers that, for many conservative parents, "homeschooling was a spiritual battle for the soul...." His conclusions are highly compatible with those I have come to hold as a result of more than 30 years of involvement with home educators. He acknowledges the great variety

of perspectives and practices, noting that some of the very best educational contexts he has witnessed were in home or parent-directed contexts. He also notes the reverse — and rightly so. While he acknowledges the conformity evident in these settings, he recognizes that different kinds and expressions of conformity are found in public schools and the teachers and students. To be of liberal persuasion is to often disdain those who are more conservative — especially if they are Christian. Unlike the parents he does not engage in a home school versus public school debate. Like me he is also a teacher of teachers and recognizes the incredible strengths and agonizing (disheartening) weaknesses of public schools, qualities that abound in literature and debates about schools and school systems. Some, perhaps many, of these parents have come to see public schools as the emblematic enemy of their religious freedoms and assert their rights, as upheld in the highest courts of law, to guide their children's learning, believing that there is no distinction between the notion of formal schooling and that associated with attaining an education as a lifelong endeavor.

By the time I reached the end of the *Write These Laws*, I was convinced that the manner in which Kunzman engaged with the families and the community members within the conservative, Christian homeschooling movement was balanced and fair. This is a sound piece of scholarship and one to be praised for its accessibility and the windows into the families' worlds it provides. Other scholars will take these stories, and ones like them, and mold them into alternative discussions of this and other dimensions of American homeschooling. And homeschooling parents will no doubt be prompted in different ways by the reflections of families like theirs.

Why School? will be embraced by parents and teachers alike, and readers everywhere will be captivated by Rose's eloquent call for a bountiful democratic vision of the purpose of schooling.Â What is intelligence? How should we think about intelligence, education, and opportunity in an open society? Why is a commitment to the public sphere central to the way we answer these questions? Drawing on forty years of teaching and research, from primary school to adult education and workplace training, award-winning author Mike Rose reflects on these and other questions related to public schooling in America.