Cross-X: The Amazing True Story of How the Most Unlikely Team from the Most Unlikely of Places Overcame Staggering Obstacles at Home and at School to Challenge the Debate Community on Race, Power, and Education

By Joe Miller

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, $26; 480 pages.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

A genre of books and movies emerged in the past generation that portrays an inspired teacher who miraculously transforms a group of hard-luck students into champions. Outsiders say it can’t be done, but this great teacher does it. One thinks of Jaime Escalante, who taught calculus to poor Hispanic kids at Garfield High School in Los Angeles and was celebrated in a book by Jay Mathews and in a movie called Stand and Deliver. Or the movie about and books by Erin Gruwell, a writing teacher in Long Beach, California (see cultured, page 87), or the books by Rafe Esquith, who teaches Shakespeare to 5th graders in central Los Angeles.

The story has a familiar line: No one thinks much of these students; their life prospects are limited. Once they enter the classroom of the inspired teacher, however, something wonderful happens. Despite initial obstacles, the students amaze everyone with their achievements. The music reaches a crescendo, the story ends.

Cross-X is not that story, although the reader is led to believe that it will be. An assortment of students, all poor and black, join the debate team at Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri. Most of them speak the argot of the ‘hood, not standard English. The coach, Jane Rinehart, who is white, is set up to be the miracle worker. We learn about the impoverished lives of the students and the struggles of their families. We expect that from this unpromising material, Coach Rinehart will fashion a championship debating team.

But the conventional story line never happens. The first inkling of the counternarrative occurs when the coach tells her recruits that the greatest joy of debate is to make the other team cry. Early on, it becomes clear that the book is implicitly (and often explicitly) a narrative about racism, oppression, segregation, and poverty. The reader picks up the theme early on, when Coach Rinehart tells the debaters to discard their infantile notions that the purpose of education is “to give you a chance to be what you want to be” or “to make money.” No, says the coach, the purpose of schooling is to perpetuate the status quo. She tells them that “one hundred families control 80 percent of the wealth,” and none of them went to Central High. She is not one to encourage belief in the American dream of opportunity.

Later in the book, the author, journalist Joe Miller, decides to stop observing and reporting on the story and to become part of it; he grows so intrigued with the game of debate and so deeply involved in the lives of the students that he becomes an actor in the story, watching as they engage in risky personal behavior, then joining up as a debate coach.

Miller describes the many debates that the team from Central High participates in, often in mind-numbing detail. Sometimes they win, sometimes they lose, but Miller leads the reader to believe that racism is behind many, if not most, of their losses to teams from prestigious suburban public schools and elite private schools. Large portions of the book consist of the students’ conversations, which are usually so studded with expletives and sloppy language that it is hard to imagine how these students were able to succeed on the debate circuit against better-educated kids. To read this book, one must have a high tolerance for four-letter words and various forms of misbehavior, some of it involving illicit drugs. The reader also needs a great deal of patience, as the book is twice as long as it needs to be.

Just when the reader thinks it is impossible to endure another detailed description of yet another debate, Miller has an epiphany. He discovers Paulo Freire and The Pedagogy of the Oppressed and shares it with his young charges. The light goes on in his head and in theirs, too. The students suddenly realize that debate is a form of institutionalized racism, and they change their presentation at debates to raps about racism and
Some opposing teams are insulted, but the kids from Central win a few competitions with their new format.

In the background of the story looms Central High, a depressing institution with low achievement, low aspirations, gangs, fights, and a prisonlike atmosphere. Miller briefly relates the tale of the $2 billion court-ordered desegregation plan in the mid-1980s for Kansas City, in which teachers’ salaries were raised, class sizes slashed, and beautiful facilities created. A new Central was built at a cost of $32 million, with special programs in computer technology and classical Greek studies. The federal court hoped that the low-performing, segregated district would have such splendid facilities and programs that suburban whites would enroll and that test scores would rise along with integration. Although Central attracted some white students, it remained a predominantly black school. And at Central High School and in the Kansas City district, achievement remained low, despite the substantial additional spending by the state of Missouri.

Certainly, much more should be written about what went wrong in Kansas City. But Joe Miller’s book is not the place for that sort of in-depth analysis. Miller is outraged by the poverty and terrible circumstances of the young men (they are all young men) that he befriends. He frequently contrasts the dismal material circumstances of their lives with those of affluent white students who live elsewhere. He rages against racism, poverty, and inequality, which he believes (like Coach Rinehart, Paulo Freire, and another hero, Jonathan Kozol) is designed into the American social system.

At the end of the book, after the debaters begin presenting their arguments about racism in rap format, he happily reports that the debate circuit has begun to take notice. Somehow, Coach Joe Miller has become the center of the story, not Coach Rinehart. He sees hope that a revolution will occur, as Jonathan Kozol predicted in a visit to Central, after the affluent white oppressors in privileged schools are enlightened by their encounters with the rapping Kansas City debate team.

One wonders: Will those privileged white students lead the revolution that Miller, Freire, and Kozol long for? Or would the students at Central be better off believing in the American dream, the one that says that hard work, clean living, and a good education is the key to rising out of poverty?

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