Urban Hero
Wrong role for school teachers
As reviewed by David Steiner

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The movie scene has become familiar—the American high school class close to rioting, the racial tensions boiling, the curses flying across the room—and then, the breakthrough moment. Through an inspired gesture, the teacher connects: he uses an apple, she uses karate, he the doping of a mouse, she a student-drawn cartoon. The connection made, the trajectory is clear. The classroom gradually becomes a haven, a precious space of bonding and learning set against a sea of social violence and family tragedy. The teacher as hero or heroine pays a price—loss of a less heroic lover or spouse, disdain and opposition from colleagues and school administrators (always portrayed as cynical and patronizing), even, in one case, martyrdom for the cause.

Too often formulaic, these are not great movies. In Freedom Writers, the latest product of the genre, Hilary Swank looks continually uncomfortable in the leading role. Based on events in the 1990s at a high school in Long Beach, California, the movie tells how a teacher evokes the Holocaust to connect her students with the universality of human suffering. The result is a life-changing experience in which her Hispanic and African American students and the Jewish Holocaust survivors they encounter bear witness to a common humanity and hope. As educators in a pluralist democracy, we are tempted to forgive the film’s weaknesses and celebrate the heroic teacher as she fights for the souls of her students. Stand and Deliver, Dangerous Minds, 187, and now Freedom Writers continually tap into our need to believe in the narrative of the “great teacher,” capable of saving students in need. (187, alone in the genre in lacking final hope, was a commercial failure.)

The exemplar of the great teacher, past and present, is a staple of Western European culture. Among the many, Socrates remains the seminal figure. In the 12th century, Abelard, known to us today through his tragic love affair with Heloise, became a legendary teacher, gathering students from throughout Europe. A century later, St. Thomas Aquinas, offering lessons at the University of Paris, became recognized as the master teacher of Catholicism. In the 16th century, the Maharal of Prague, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, founded the Talmudic Academy known as the Klausen; he defined Torah and kabbalistic studies for generations. Centuries later, as rector of the Nuremberg Gymnasium, Hegel would begin his epochal rethinking of the history of philosophy, a project Heidegger would continue in Freiburg, achieving, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “the kingship among teachers.”

In the much briefer history of the United States, the teacher as a great cultural or philosophical voice is largely absent. Leo Strauss, whose influence is now hotly debated by analysts of American foreign policy, was European-born. John Dewey is a rare example of an educator whose thinking about pedagogy and engagement with broader political issues achieved national status, but he was not a great teacher. Writing about France, my father could cite the high school teacher Émile-Auguste Chartier, commonly known simply as “Alain,” as “a commanding presence in European moral and intellectual history” from 1906 to the late 1940s; there are no American equivalents.

Moreover, American literature has little place for the great teacher: in Washington Irving and J.D. Salinger, the schoolteacher is largely weak and useless. Whereas in Europe, great teaching is grounded in the power of their ideas, in America it is a matter of ideals: the lone warrior who overcomes the odds, who triumphs over the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of the urban public school. The heroes depicted—Jaime Escalante (Stand and Deliver), LouAnne Johnson (Dangerous Minds), and Erin Gruwell (Freedom Writers)—shine against backcloths of deprivation and despair. This is an ironic form of heroism, dependent as it is on conditions for which we all bear continuing responsibility. Heroism is surely a virtue. To depend on public school teachers to display it is not.

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