Dedicated, Decorated, and Disappointing
Rafe Esquith’s latest is a manual for parents, not policymakers

Lighting Their Fires: Raising Extraordinary Children in a Mixed-up, Muddled-up, Shook-up World
By Rafe Esquith
Viking Adult, 2009, $24.95; 208 pages.

As reviewed by Liam Julian

It’s likely that Rafe Esquith is the nation’s best-known teacher. He has pocketed an impressive number of awards and honors, including, even, membership in the vaunted Order of the British Empire, a nifty designation he picked up by way of directing the Hobart Shakespeareans—a troupe of young actors plucked from his 5th-grade class at Los Angeles’s Hobart Elementary School—who travel the world performing the Bard’s works. Esquith has also appeared on Oprah and been praised by the Dalai Lama. And he has written widely—op-eds, articles, and books. Esquith’s first volume on education, There Are No Shortcuts (2003), is somewhat self-explanatory; his second, Teach Like Your Hair’s on Fire (2007), is less so. The eccentric title refers to an incident when Esquith, deeply enmeshed in a science lesson, did not realize, until his students began screaming, that he had set his hair alight with an alcohol burner. A cooler-headed Esquith later explained the book’s theme on National Public Radio: “If I could care so much I didn’t even know my hair was on fire, I was moving in the right direction as a teacher—when I realized that you have to ignore all the crap, and the children are the only thing that matters.”

Perhaps because Teach Like Your Hair’s on Fire ended up a New York Times best seller, Esquith has stuck with the ignescent symbolism for his latest book, Lighting Their Fires. It’s a guide of sorts, the main point of which is that good children are made and not born. The author recounts a trip he took with five students to watch a baseball game at Dodger Stadium. They arrived early to take a tour, after which their guide breathlessly confided to Esquith that the pupils were “so confident but so sweet,” and “so beautiful” that they “glow.” Then “she paused, searching for the right adjective. ‘They’re extraordinary,’ she said in almost whispered respect.”

Esquith counters, “But here’s the secret. These students weren’t born extraordinary—they became that way.” And Lighting Their Fires tells us how they did it.

They did it, unsurprisingly, by being taught by one of the country’s most dedicated and obsessive teachers, a man who believes that low-income 5th graders for most of whom English is a second language can learn to love Shakespeare. He also believes that hard work, far more than talent or innate propensities, produces success. Before taking the kids to see the Dodgers, Esquith taught them to score games while they all watched the World Series on television, encouraged them to play baseball daily on the playground, and required them to view Ken Burns’s 18½-hour-long documentary, Baseball, over spring break. When they attended a major-league game, they would enjoy it because they worked at enjoying it.

But there’s a difference between being a great teacher and a great author, and the examples and lessons put forth in Lighting Their Fires are soggy tinder when it comes to lighting a reader’s interest. Esquith trots out a lot of commonsense stuff. That children should learn the importance of being on time, or that they shouldn’t spend hours immobilized by television or computers, aren’t observations that will have any reasonable person shouting eureka. Policy hounds won’t find anything of substance in the book, either, and are bound to be disappointed.

Most readers of Lighting Their Fires will be disappointed, in fact. Allegedly an explanation of how to form “thoughtful and honorable people,” the book is really part self-help manual for parents and, notwithstanding its preaching about the virtue of humility, part self-aggrandizing memoir. Hobart Shakespearean that he is, Esquith skillfully plays the role of the modest, righteous, self-filled, patient, and wise educator who—though surely he could work in other more-prestigious and remunerative professions—nobly remains in the classroom, quietly going about his saintly business. This is not exaggeration. Examples of Esquith’s self-absorbed, self-imposed martyrdom...
are ubiquitous. Consider the book’s first sentences:

It was 5:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon in May at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles, and most of the dedicated teachers and administrators had long since left campus. I wished I could have escaped with them. I was exceedingly tired. It had been a particularly long week. In fact, it had been a long year.

Nice touch, adding that bit about “dedicated teachers and administrators”; they’re committed, of course, just not that committed. A similarly sly autolatrous tactic, plentifully deployed, is Esquith’s portrayal of just about everyone he meets as well meaning but misguided, whether it’s the Dodger Stadium tour guide who mistakenly believes that his angelic preteen coterie is “extraordinary,” or the TSA employee who can’t comprehend that his wholesome pupils would choose not to tote Game Boys onto an airplane, or the flight attendant who can’t grasp that his cherubic students won’t need DVD players for their traveling duration—that, as Esquith tells her, “they’re going to read.” (The kids are going to...read? Someone canonize this man!)

I could go on—for instance, Earnest Esquith gets himself cursed out at the baseball game by two different spectators whose obnoxious manner he publicly corrects, and he somehow validates his own actions by quoting the injunction of Anne Frank’s father to confront evil in the world—but to do so would be like electrocuting fish in a barrel. Suffice it to say that Esquith has, in Lighting Their Fires, ostensibly written a book for adults. He shouldn’t speak to them as if they were children.

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