

One Hundred Miles and a World Apart

Two teachers reflect on their work in vastly different schools

**The Battle for Room 314:
My Year of Hope and Despair
in a New York City High School**
by Ed Boland

*Grand Central Publishing, 2016, \$26;
256 pages.*

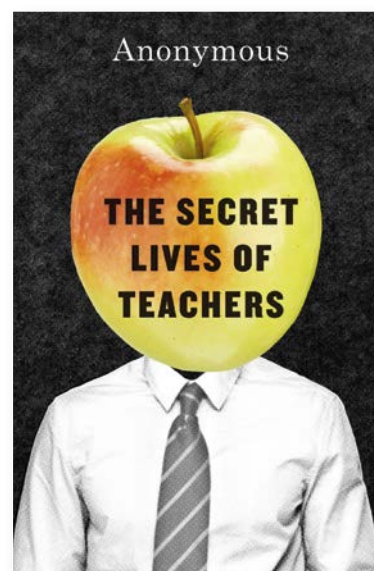
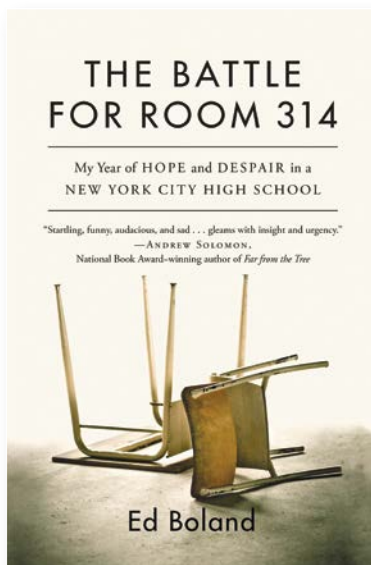
The Secret Lives of Teachers
by Anonymous

*University of Chicago Press, 2015, \$25;
272 pages.*

As reviewed by David Steiner

In these new books, two authors reflect on their experiences as teachers in New York State. One is Ed Boland, a career changer from the world of nonprofits. Boland takes his social conscience and his teacher-training courses at a New York City education school and plunges into the world of a city public school. The other, who remains “Anonymous,” reflects on many years of teaching social studies in an elite private school in upstate New York. The reviewer approaches the task in a Platonic mode: Are there universals underlying the job of teaching that transcend school contexts? Is there an essential core to teaching children that remains timeless?

The title of Boland’s *The Battle for Room 314* says it all: the author experienced his classroom as if it were a war zone. The heavy fog of despair never lifts: successes are ephemeral, well-intentioned efforts splinter on the rocks of urban reality, and failure is both personal (for the teacher) and systemic (for the students, their school, and their world). Unsurprisingly, the



school portrayed in the book was placed on the list of the weakest 5 percent of the state’s public schools. Only 2 of the 32 teachers who began the academic year with the author stayed beyond three years. At least a portion of the graduating class—comprising half of the students who started their senior year—were onstage only because their teachers bent the rules governing graduation standards.

What’s most disappointing about this book is that, for all its honesty and moments of humor, realism, and despair, it isn’t especially insightful. Lacking either pedagogic perception or original social commentary, it ends with a predictable laundry list of suggested education reforms: more funding, more research, better teacher training, more innovation. In the end, the book is a dreary diary penned by a poorly prepared, rather tortured teacher, who largely fails at his craft in a mindlessly mismanaged school.

Yes, there are episodes so ghastly

that the reader’s voyeuristic instincts are temporarily engaged. The author’s failures in his classroom are at times memorable, and we are torn between empathy and regret that he lacks more-effective strategies. The portraits of wasted student talent poignantly speak for themselves. And there is blame enough to go around, from the failure of the school’s administration and that of Boland’s teacher preparation (less than an hour on classroom management), to the surrounding socioeconomic reality of which the classroom is a tragic microcosm.

Of course, those who make a genuine effort to teach in such difficult circumstances deserve our respect, and the reader will start this book rightly sympathetic to the “best intentions” of the author. First-year teachers in New York City public schools often experience genuine hell, even as they give their all, as Boland apparently did. But then we read: “The cops don’t care. The union doesn’t care. The rich

neighbors don't care. The parents don't care," followed by the observation that "I began to loathe my students." What does one make of a story that portrays a teacher swearing at his students and ends with bathetic phrases of lukewarm self-congratulation ("Any role I played in a young person's life ... is a worthy one")? Well, not much.

Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's instructions on the art and science of hermeneutics—essentially, how to read with respect for the text before you—call on us to take stock of our prejudices and then bracket them if we hope to learn something when we read. I confess that I approached *The Secret Lives of Teachers* with plenty of prejudice, partly because of the jacket blurb's promise that "scandalous" revelations awaited (they did not), and partly because of the apparent subject matter (a teacher in an elite private school tells all). Was I really going to have to review an exposé of how the sons and daughters of privilege play their way through a coddled adolescence marked by illicit drugs, erotic fumbings, and petty cruelties? In fact, although there is an episode involving pot brownies, the temperature stays tepid: the pace of the storytelling is leisurely, and neither the dramas nor (with one exception) the language would bring a blush to Jane Austen's cheek.

So, here again, we have a teacher describing his year of work. This time, however, we trade inner-city New York for upstate pastures. Think Mr. Chips teaching in the Hudson Valley. Our narrator, "Anonymous," is a high-school social studies teacher, and his musings meander from classroom to common room to field trip, returning to the school to celebrate (in a rare moment of sentimentality) the hope that is ever reborn at graduation: "I pause to savor the cadence."

Anonymous's temperament and tastes are well-suited to his chosen pedagogical world (a rare trip to a New York City charter school evokes fear and

alienation—he describes the intersection at 2nd Avenue and 125th Street as "wide and empty"). His teaching style is traditional, but he listens to and learns from his students. These capacities, combined with a quick mind and a willingness to constantly hone his craft, suggest a strong teacher: Anonymous tosses a planned lesson on *Huck Finn* when the students press into uncharted

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interpretive territory. Deftly guiding the discussion, he opens the way for some deep thinking. Through a series of vignettes, we are entertained by throwaway remarks that run the gamut from the drearily familiar ("The academic dimension of schooling is really a relatively small part of a student's life") to something that Scott Fitzgerald might have written: "Rich people can afford to be nice. That's why it's always a little surprising when they unreservedly are."

One pulls for the author: perhaps amid the punctilious style, the understatement, the two-dimensional portraits of students and colleagues, a deeper wisdom will emerge?

Certainly, there are moments that offer the opportunity for wisdom. A student makes a remark that inadvertently causes pain to a wheelchair-bound peer; another student is stunned to learn that a teacher believes she is "phoning it in"; a colleague is fired on dubious grounds. Each instance tests

the author's teaching and intellectual skills, but such moments come and go without deeper observation or analysis.

Here is Anonymous summing up his life's calling, surely a moment for original insight:

My goal is to give them [my students] a sense of contingency: to show them one can have very different assumptions from the ones that govern their own lives; that those assumptions result in reasoning that leads in alternative directions; and that those directions lead to very different outcomes.

It is a worthy assertion, but hardly an arresting one. Anonymous respects his craft, and his hopes as a teacher are reasonable and responsible. But modesty and good common sense do not add up to a compelling book: once revealed, Anonymous's secrets are too comfortable. Reading should not be akin to slipping on a well-worn tweed jacket. We should rather return Anonymous to the students who are lucky to be in his classroom.

There are, unfortunately, no fundamentally provoking truths to be mined from these two works. The takeaways are modest, though not unimportant: Both books remind us that school teachers are human, fallible, and far from Hollywood's "teacher as hero" caricatures. The world of difference that characterizes the two New York schools is in itself powerful testimony to the inequities that continue to bedevil our education system. Let us not forget, either, that even among America's more-privileged students, the majority are performing below their international peers. The subject matters of these books require far more urgent, sharp, and probing attention than they here receive.

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