

# [Blackboard by Lewis Buzbee](#)

written by John Yohe | April 14, 2015



*Blackboard: A Personal History of the Classroom* by Lewis Buzbee

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Lewis Buzbee, best known as the author of *The Yellow-Lighted Bookshop*, though he's also written three children's books, takes a "memory tour" back to his own childhood, in *Blackboard: A personal history of the classroom*. To begin, he devotes a chapter each to his own kindergarten, first grade, and second grade (where the the almost mythical blackboard appears), and this is where the book is strongest: Buzbee sees (or remembers) those first three years of school as the most formative. He then skips along to middle school and high school each for a chapter or two, and ends finally with his college years, though really that section feels more obligatory than interesting. Or, he doesn't give us much, because the whole point of *Blackboard* is how life-shaping, and life-saving, Buzbee feels his K-12 experience was.

In each chapter, and throughout the whole book, Buzbee weaves three main threads: The first a memoir of his time in California's K-12 public school system, in Santa Clara Valley, in what was then a small, suburban area south of San Francisco. The second, in contrast, includes more recent memories of his daughter's experiences in very different, and more urban (though still Californian), private schools in San Francisco itself. And the third, Buzbee writes mini-histories of America's educational system. In the chapter "A Child's Garden," he explains the idea of kindergarten, where it came from, and how and when it was introduced in America: Before the 1800s, and in fact even way back to the time of the Romans, young children, seven-year-olds, were thrown right into what we think of now as rote learning of grammar and math. The German educator Friedrich Froebel, in the 1830s, introduced the idea of young children needing a little bit more time, and a protective space, a 'garden,' to grow, away from the family and home, but as an introduction to school. Thus, kindergarten.

I only wish *Blackboard* had more of these researched sections. There's certainly room: *Blackboard* is small and barely 200 pages (and yet, the hardcover is \$23!). Plus, a little more info about the various conflicting intentions of American educators might help inform us, and Buzbee, about what's wrong with our current system. Because Buzbee does indeed state that he feels *something* is wrong with our public schools, though he doesn't get beyond the obvious: the system of standardized testing started under Bush II's presidency with No Child Left Behind, and maintained under Obama with Race To The Top and Common Core. But Buzbee offers no solutions, at least not at first, and most frustratingly seems to not quite see his own disconnect when complaining about how people don't seem to want to fund public schools anymore, and he and his wife's (and daughter's) decision to have her attend

elite private schools. He simply seems to mourn the fact that public schools can't have all the neat buildings and art and science supplies that his daughter's schools have, with no talk of how all that private school money could just as well be used for public schools. Nor does he explore the possible underlying reasons for these disparities between public and private education, reasons that are based in inequalities frequently traced to race and class.

In fact, race and class rarely appear in this book. Buzbee seems to have grown up in a pretty whitebread neighborhood, which, being in California, I can hardly believe. Seems like there would be some Chicanos and Latinos somewhere. But that's what we get from Buzbee's memories, which are all good and pleasant. Even when bad things happen to him, like his father dying, he doesn't share much with us, only mentions it more than a few times, though not actually showing or describing that time period. He just *tells* us that it was a really bad time, and that his grades started to slip, and then skips on to, again, *telling* us how school, high school by now, saved his life. I believe him. I'd just be curious to know, or see, more about it. One could write a whole memoir about just high school, but again, this is only one chapter in a very small and short book. While the first few chapters might have too much info (he spends almost three pages listing the things he kept in his second grade desk), by the end, we're skipping whole grades, where surely interesting things were happening to Buzbee, or to those around him. He tells us as much—he almost could have ended up a drug dealer, but instead was inspired to go to college. But that happens in, like, a paragraph.

As a "memory tour," it's a very nostalgic one, even Buzbee admits. For him, the image of the old-fashioned blackboard embodies what school was to him. He describes it in the chapter about second grade, titled, sure enough, "Blackboard." The desks were in rows and the teacher actually lectured. Behind her was the blackboard. Buzbee writes:

we spent most of our time looking at Miss Cleveland, the blackboard behind her, and it is this image, the teacher in front of the blackboard, that dominates memories of my classrooms up through and into college. The blackboard is not merely a convenient teaching tool; it becomes a focus for the student's mind, and a reflection of that mind, both individually and for the larger class. The blackboard is not an object that is merely stared at; the student sees beyond what's written there, to the larger world.

That's maybe the best piece of writing in the whole book, and the most fascinating. Unfortunately, except for a couple mentions here and there, it's the last we see and hear of it. Buzbee could have lingered here, or lingered in this grade, or lingered in the lower grades, because that seems to be where his main interest lies, with Miss Cleveland and her blackboard and the blank slate of a child's mind ready to be written on.

Buzbee's good, clear, storytelling style allows him to linger when he wants to, although he rarely does. Perhaps, structurally, the text itself could have worked more as a collage, something closer to David Shield's *How Literature Saved My Life*, with white space between the text chunks, and maybe

even no chapters. That way, the narrative thread might not feel interrupted by those interesting historical tidbits, which sometimes come out of nowhere, with no follow up, not even an attempt to weave them into whatever's going on in that chapter, like in Chapter Five, "The Life of the Classroom," where a one-page mini-history of the Pledge of Allegiance appears. Though it's just the facts, including the interesting tidbit that students used to recite it while raising their right hand pointed up, until the Nazis became known for doing the same thing. Only then did we place our hands over our hearts.

Interesting. And yet, Buzbee doesn't mention the controversy about having the "under God" part included in the Pledge. Buzbee doesn't want to go there, or anywhere *near* anything too controversial. The closest he gets to any opinion here is: "Having attended a French immersion lower school, and now a Quaker middle school, Maddy has never had to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. But most American public school days begin with this inescapable ritual." What does he mean by 'inescapable'? Who knows? He seems more interested in bragging about his daughter and her amazing schools. Plus, that's it, that's all he really says about the Pledge. It comes and goes, a page having nothing to do, really, with the rest of the chapter.

Buzbee admits he's "lapsing into nostalgia's glow" here. And, reading *Blackboard* is not unpleasant. Perhaps my expectations were wrong: I thought, or was hoping, this book would be more of a critique of the American educational system. And/or, based on the subtitle, would contain more history about the classroom and American schools. And if it is to be a memoir, I'd at least expect a willingness to confront the dark moments in life. Because if Buzbee doesn't explore these challenges, and he hasn't, then he comes off as yet another privileged white male, and even though he says over and over that school saved his life, I kind of find him ending up in college a bit inevitable. That is, no matter how many drugs he did, and how much school he skipped (one day to drive to the beach on his own and read *Catch-22!*), the system itself (though of course his teachers too) seemed set up to give him a more decent chance to turn his life around. Whereas, with a Latino boy in similar circumstances, growing up in the same California (though it's a California that seems invisible to Buzbee), I'm not so sure.

Only in *Blackboard's* Epilogue does Buzbee come out of his admitted "naive lens of memory" and get a little righteous, proceeding with the outrage-causing facts about the current dysfunction that is the American education system, as if to say, 'See? See how great my education was? Why can't we have schools like I had?' Which means that, instead of conservatives, liberals are now the ones harkening back to a supposed golden age. Or, not so supposed in this case. As much as I suspect not all California schools, and Californian kids' experiences, were as good as Buzbee's, there is something wrong when "some 62 percent of today's K-12 teachers need a second job to make ends meet; 46 percent of teachers...will leave the profession within their first five years."

This is an issue no amount of nostalgia can smooth over: It comes down to money. Americans in general don't want to pay taxes. Even Americans who say they want to support education don't want to pay taxes, though we have some of the lowest in the world. Buzbee's solution, or plea really, with which I

agree, is: "Raise my taxes!...Guarantee me that these new taxes will only go to the classroom—meaning to teachers and students directly—you can raise my taxes through the roof. Yes, raise them to Swedish levels, to 'socialist' levels." Not as easily done as said, as Buzbee demonstrates, with a brief history of how California passed the infamous Proposition 13 in 1978, which reduced property taxes, and property taxes are the single most important source of funding for public schools. During the Reagan years, this kind of 'no taxes' mentality was taken to the national level. And, later in the Clinton years and even now, raising those taxes back has been made purposefully difficult.

The answer to Buzbee's solution/plea will probably not come from the feds. For example, voters in my own city of Portland, Oregon approved a new city tax to fund arts in the schools. Not a property tax, but a straight amount for every resident. There has been some grumbling, but it seems to be working: money going straight to schools. Unfortunately, not all communities nationwide will be able, or willing, to pass something like this. But, it's a start? The key, I think, is to get people, even those who prefer to send their kids to private schools, to recognize the life-changing, and again, even life-saving, value of public schools for all children, and that their benefit is to the benefit of all of us. As much as I might have been a little impatient with Buzbee's *Blackboard*, books like his might help persuade people of this value. Though I fear not any time soon.