

Getting Schooled by Garret Keizer

written by John Yohe | March 3, 2015



Getting Schooled: The Reeducation of an American Teacher by Garret Keizer
Metropolitan Books (Macmillan), 2014

320 pages – [Macmillan](#) / [Amazon](#)

In 2011, Garret Keizer published an article in *Harper's* titled "Getting Schooled," about his return for a year as a full-time high school English teacher. The article really seemed to tap into the growing debate about where public education was (and still is) heading. After eight years of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) under the Bush regime, which seemed to many (me included) as a way to force public schools to 'fail' and be taken over by for-profit charter schools, many of us hoped that the Obama Administration might make a course correction. Instead, Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education under Obama, doubled down on the idea of standardization, both in testing and in curriculum, with Race To The Top (RTTT). Both of these policies formed under the idea that the 'problem' with education is, of course (and always), with the teachers, while ignoring the economics, and national priorities like putting funding for the military way above education.

Keizer's essay also spoke to me personally. After five years of part-time teaching, and returning to grad school (yet again) to get a degree, I was in my second year of full-time teaching writing at the community college level, and starting to have some of the same doubts the Keizer describes: Not about students, not about being in the actual classroom, but the encroachment of 'standards' in teaching, the preference and deference administrators at the higher levels give to 'preparing' students for the business world (versus students just learning to be better humans). And the actual work load, which at the end of the day could leave me feeling raw and unwilling to do anything besides crawl into bed and sleep for ten hours.

Getting Schooled: The Reeducation of an American Teacher expands on Keizer's *Harper's* article, allowing him both the space to go into more depth about certain topics, and the freedom to wander off into reminiscences and rants about his own education. There are twelve chapters, each about one month of the school year, including the beginning and wind-down phases. Keizer actually was a teacher at that very school earlier in his life but, to my envy, left to pursue a writing career. Only when his wife decided to leave her horrid (not because of the students, but because of the administration) job does he come back to fill in for another teacher on leave, in order to keep he and his wife's health care plan.

Keizer is more than upfront with telling us what kind of teacher, and thinker he is: "I'm a homeschoolin' gun-totin' Bible-bangin'...SOCIALIST" (16). As his

greatest act of rebellion returning to the classroom, he puts a picture of Malcolm X up on the wall. Conservatives and so-called liberal education reformists will be comforted to know that Keizer's students seem relatively unfazed by this, or anything else crazy and creative Keizer tries in his classroom, though they do seem to appreciate him, and *like* him, for his actual *care* about them, both in his written feedback, and in his real life interactions. Which may be what teaching is really about anyways: just being there to care.

And who knows, as Keizer himself says, we just don't know how or why or when what we 'teach' will end up helping/influencing our students. Keizer definitely likes to put up the front of being the curmudgeon, the grumpy unappreciated old man. By working with that 'myth' or archetype throughout the narrative, he allows for a cynical humor, a 'see I told you so' kind of distance which might not only be necessary for us readers, but for himself, so as not to collapse with heartbreak.

The thing is, Keizer's entire year *actually doesn't seem that bad*. Or, it could have been so much worse. He's not in an under-funded urban district or in a school that's placed under state control. This is a rural school in Vermont, with an actual supportive principal (a former student of his). The biggest problem is the poverty of the area: what used to be a thriving agricultural/dairy area is now not, with no other industry to fill in the gap. Sound familiar? Sound like America in general? This is where *Getting Schooled* is the most relevant: we're not distracted by 'blame' or by jargon about closing the so-called "Achievement Gap" or by 21st-century Common Core State Standards and instead are able to see the connection between our education systems and the general economic woes of the entire country.

Though a note on poverty: Keizer shows that his school, and his students, and their parents too, suffer not just from a lack of money, say, but a poverty of *culture*. Or, that is, a *lack* of culture. They don't reject book reading so much as books don't exist for them: their parents don't read, none of their friends read, so reading books, and reading in general (and therefore writing) is a non-issue for students, though surprisingly, for me anyways, even though Keizer came back to teach in the 2010 school year, there's hardly mention of anything that his students might be reading, or looking at, instead, like computers or cellphones, though 'smoking in the boy's room' has now been replaced by 'texting in the boys room.' Technology appears in the narrative, but not like we all might assume kids would be obsessed with. Instead, again, poverty: there's nothing much of *anything* for relatively poor high school kids to be interested in. Or, so it would appear. Keizer *seems* to assume kids are using all their technology-toys to just text each other, rather than surfing the interwebs highway and, maybe, reading things. Maybe that's true, maybe not. But he doesn't bother to ask.

Instead, Keizer sees the biggest change, and danger, in schools not in the influx of technology, but in "the move toward uniform instruction" a la NCLB and RTTT, with standardized testing and curriculum, not leaving teachers, or their students, much room for creative thinking. It's all rote memorization, teaching to the tests, the NECAPS. Even on the writing sections on these tests, Keizer comes to the conclusion that the best strategy for his students

is to fall back on the five paragraph essay, a monstrosity I'd thought had died off long ago. If all teachers must 'teach' the same things, Keizer is "not sure students are best served by a faculty of conformist, by teachers who are less shepherds than sheep" (34). This is my exact doubt about teaching.

Overall, we get a pretty good description of how much work is required from a teacher, leaving one to imagine just how back-breaking working at one of the 'bad' schools might be. And despite all his curmudgeon-ness, I really do get a sense that Keizer wanted to come back to teaching not just for the healthcare plan, but because he really was curious (passionate?) about teaching as a way help his students, and by help you might say influence, but to be a good influence on students, to serve as some kind of model, and maybe get students thinking about change: about changing their lives, and the system. Not just the educational system, but the system as a whole, the whole for-profit market model that's getting foisted on us all: as if doing anything for profit benefits anybody but stockholders. He's at his most sincere when in the *Harper's* article he urges his students, and us, to burn down Carthage (ie the system)(ie America)(not literally I don't think, though now that you mention it....)

That message gets watered down in the book. Which is understandable, and I wonder if Keizer regretted that much hyperbole in the original article. Or if it's just with a bit more reflection, by the time he'd written the book, he was less fired up and being more practical. Though I miss the passion of the article, and urge readers to find it (David Brooks chose it for the *Best American Essays of 2012*). The softened passion in the book gets replaced by Keizer's relief that he can actually leave and return to his solitary writing life, with more than a twinge of regret, too, I think. Keizer wrestles with the idea of staying on and continuing to teach, in the chance that the teacher he's filling in for decides not to come back, even though his wife, the voice of reason, urges him not to. I know that feeling: the urge to stay and teach, to be able to help people, and damn the administration and the workload, while at the same time knowing that to keep any kind of flame, any spark, any passion, and to commit to teaching, is acknowledging a lifetime of heartbreak and stress and doubt about whether one is just still part of the system that 'teaches' conformity more than anything.

Because after a year we, and Keizer, see that educational reform is going to be almost impossible. And since Keizer has/had bigger hopes/desires than educational reform, which is a "pathetic substitute for social revolution." (39), therefore, the message left un-said here is that there's not gonna be much chance of any social revolution. Though if there is, it'll be through dispatches like this.