Teacher, The One Who Made the Difference

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Reviewed by Alexander H. Joffe

High school is the Great American Mystery. Somewhere between a police procedural and a whodunit, the central question is identity. How and why did Mark Edmundson change—during the course of a single school year—from a beer-drinking brawler whose only passion and sense of self revolved around football, to something more thoughtful, introspective, and tentative? Now a professor of English at the University of Virginia, Edmundson recounts his senior year in high school, 1969-1970, and the changes it brought, primarily thanks to an unconventional teacher named Franklin Lears.

In the badly worn, working class town of Medford, Massachusetts, Edmundson grew up in a typical American nuclear family, two parents, two children, strained inside and out. His father is described in the book's most effective chapter. He was intelligent and opinionated, dissipated, thanks in part to his own sense of failure, distant but dedicated to Johnny Carson and Humphrey Bogart, and the need to bring his sons into the small hearth which surrounded their television set, and most of all, forever haunted by the death of Edmundson's younger sister. About his mother, brother and sister Edmundson says almost nothing.

Edmundson's description of himself could also fit thousands of others; unfocused but fearful of a future spent emptying garbage cans for the City of Medford, dedicated to television and its salving emissions, and finding meaning in the pain inflicted and received in football. As his religious faith ebbed, his belief in football surged. Coaches replaced priests, practice was a form of confession, penitence mixing with self-punishment, and games became holy war, but one where Homeric honor reigned. Into this untidy world entered Franklin Lears.

Franklin Lears was an obvious misfit at Medford High. A slender Harvard graduate with glasses, an ill-fitting suit, and giant black shoes, he was taken for an easy mark by Edmundson's class. Anyone who walks into a high school philosophy class and writes a quote from Nietzsche on the board is calling an airstrike in on himself. And indeed, Edmundson's friend Dubby O'Day, "pipe-cleaner thin, with an onion-shaped head" immediately began manufacturing spitballs. It was not a promising beginning.

High school may be read as a kind of cosmological narrative, a limnal space between Order and Disorder, or Containment and Chaos. Edmundson's often hilarious descriptions of his classmates in that "meager cosmos", mostly incurious and unrestrained, contrasts sharply with the drab institutional setting and its warders. The "genetically encoded animosity between proletariat kids and their teachers" is described in almost loving detail, but Edmundson's descriptions of himself are vivid and even frightening, evoking from the reader a sense of dread at glimpsing our own long vanquished and unmourned selves.

Prematurely categorized as a weakling, Lears slowly began to challenge and then surprise his jaded students. For unlike the "washed out Jiminy Cricket" math teacher Mr. Repucci or the fearsome submaster "Jingles" McDermott, Lears does not approach the class as a forum for combat or even apostolic conversion. "His method was irony, questioning, hanging around, being annoying. Lears … was made for the Socratic method." Lears patiently introduced them to Plato, and to what would become his classroom mantra, "What do people think?" He also, Edmundson suggests, regarded his students with a healthy amount of contempt, although of a fairly benign sort. But Lears was more than simply a novelty; he was a source of genuine fascination since "to find someone who was actually engaged but wasn't there to curry our favor, who felt himself to be better than we were, or at least further along the road, and believed that we were lucky to have him-this was strange."

By November Lears fights back with a discussion of the Milgram experiment, and Edmundson takes the bait with his first sustained expostulation. Shortly thereafter the textbook is discarded in a unilateral act of curriculum reform. Discussions on the nature of leadership and group-think began to unnerve Edmundson. His sense of mistrust grew further when a SDS representative from Harvard proved himself to be a smug and self-interested, and lacking either relatives or friends in Vietnam. A classroom invasion by Medford High's junior version of the Black Panthers prompts a discussion of Malcolm X, and Lears' concern for both his class and the black students touches Edmundson.

Late winter sees the enlistment of Billie Holiday, Mozart, Velvet Underground and the Amazing String Band. But *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with its system of discipline and punish that seemingly echoed Medford High, brought Edmundson to the point where he himself began to seek out new books. Even Dubby O'Day got on the program. The remainder of the semester was spent on Thoreau and Emerson, while Edmundson dove into Hemingway and Steinbeck, Burroughs, Kerouac, and Kesey. The first book he bought with his own

money was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. He was launched.

One of Edmundson's techniques is to periodically cast his discussion in classical terms. Lears' and his hero is Socrates, rather than confident but moderate Plato, and Edmundson offers insightful riffs on the Homeric nature of football from the perspective of the warrior-participant. In doing so he is one of the few American intellectuals, Mark Lilla being another notable exception, who strives to situate problems in the broad Greek philosophical framework. That tradition was if nothing else, opposed to hubris, a particularly grave sin characterizes modern intellectual life, perhaps above all others. Edmundson points out that the Socratic method does not prescribe what to think but rather how; the rejection of *doxa* or general opinion is fundamental.

Edmundson's loose classical framework in itself is a rebuke to the anti-intellectualism and utilitarianism that focused, and remains focused, on a dramatically shallow concept of educating for life as lived. Lears too should be credited for discarding potted textbooks and introducing students to Socrates and Plato, Hegel and Kant. His introduction of the classics must be counterbalanced by questionable wisdom of a SDS representative and the Amazing String Band as pedagogical tools, although we should recall what the Velvet Underground meant for Vaclav Havel. Perhaps in 1969-70 the quotidian was so skewed and the conformity so stultifying that we all would have done the same.

What phoniness was to Holden Caulfield in the 1950s, conformity is to Franklin Lears and his students in the late 1960s. Lears' comment on Kesey that "prisons, hospitals, and schools were on a continuum" strikes a nerve with the quietly enraged adolescents. But ironically, as Diane Ravitch points out in her fundamental book *Left Back, A Century of Failed School Reforms*, the notion of conformism as an *explicit* goal of education grew initially out of the child-centered approaches of the 1920s. By the 1930s, convinced that "rugged individualism" was anathema in an era when the young needed to be indoctrinated for the reconstruction of society, conformity to the will of the collective became the pedagogical ideal. But while the more radical collectivist ideology was not adopted fully by the majority of public schools, conformity was adaptable to the "needs of society," not to mention the immediate goal of managing children and adolescents. Coupled with the pervasive shifts toward non-academic curricula, justified by claims of "relevance"—both social integrative and vocational schools dispensed with "subject matter." In post-war America conformism and usefulness served the custodial mission well, in the context of renewed emphasis on citizenship in a consumer society.

Perhaps Franklin Lears should be contrasted with Paul Goodman, a cranky, libertarian educational reformer of the 1950s and 1960s. His collected essays in *Growing Up Absurd*, *Compulsory Mis-education* and *The Community of Scholars* explained how the then quaintly named "juvenile delinquency" was, along with the Beats and the Organization Man, a symptom of the "Organized System, [with] its role playing, its competitiveness, its canned culture, its public relations, an its avoidance of risk and self-exposure" (*Growing Up Absurd*, p. 241). Young people were spiritually depraved because they were deprived, not materially of course, but of all the wholesome goodness which *gemeinschaft* presumably provided.

Situated somewhere between Dewey and Marcuse, Goodman advocated a variety of unusual reforms based around rational but technophobic planning, with the goal of educating toward some of that old-time "fraternity, animality, and sexuality" (*Growing Up Absurd*, p. 240) which the Beats had presumably succeeded in recapturing. While his suggestion that inner city students be rented to farmers does not seem to have caught on, the ideas that the city itself should be the school, that attendance should be voluntary, and that schools and classrooms should be dramatically decentralized have been tried. For his part, Lears reacted to palpable problems in a creative way, which, if nothing else, produced one striking success story.

Perhaps Edmundson gives Franklin Lears too much credit, and toward the end of the memoir he questions how much of Lear's Socratic method was by design and how much inadvertent. Certainly the admittedly undramatic nature of Edmundson's emergence from the chrysalis of that cold Medford winter, pointedly lacking in a single revelatory thought or moment, at least suggests another possibility. We need not delve deeply into the nature-nurture problem to suggest gently that Edmundson had some advantage that predisposed him to taking a few tiny steps toward listening, reading, and thinking. This may only have been the stated desire to defy his situation and likely occupational future. But Frank Zappa once described high school as a state of mind, and Edmundson's amply illustrates this point. Once he opts out and begins to read, even football starts to lose its meaning.

Unfortunately, whatever the level of Socratic insight Franklin Lears really possessed, the approach often fell flat in less gifted or lucky hands and with less receptive students. Ravitch discusses in painful detail the quickening pace of "open education" during the 1960s, which gave slackers on both sides of the educational equation the opportunity to do less.

By the 1970s Massachusetts high school students such as myself enjoyed a rich environment of options, and consequently spent not a little time in teacher-less contemplation. Even more notably, the stolid literary curriculum of Edmundson's experience, *Ivanhoe*, *The Good Earth* and the like, was exchanged for a more hip corpus, of which *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Rhinoceros* were the standouts for me. What, exactly, such works were supposed to impress upon us is unclear, although they certainly sharpened our nascent senses of absurdity and foreboding. Still, at least for some of us there was give and take in the classroom, some genuine moments of thought, debate and provocation, as we struggled to overcome what Edmundson calls the "archetypal world" of our high school selves, and learn some fund of knowledge. This too has changed.

If we wish to situate Edmundson's experience from then until now, we need look no further than a remarkable piece he published in *Harper's* in 1997 called "On the Uses of a Liberal Education as Lite Entertainment For Bored College Students." In it he excoriates his elite University of Virginia students for their drab, passionless and uncritical consumption of higher education, clicking through courses and professors as if they were channels on a cable television system. These non-judgmental yet facilely skeptical consumers are not asked to challenge themselves, only to proceed, "smooth, serene, unflustered," and to evaluate their professors as entertainers.

How did this evolution come about? As usual, we have met the enemy and he is us. As Edmundson discovered, the progressivism that inclined toward social integration and collective self-improvement has, for all its pretensions, failed utterly to inoculate against commercial mass media. In lieu of any common civic culture or ideals, indeed, the deliberate inculcation of attitudes implacably skeptical about the same, mass culture with its own conformity assuaging ideals took hold. The "other-directed" triumphed, and Edmundson does not shrink from the blame.

It is a sad fact that education is not a one size fits all kind of proposition. The variability in maturity, attitude, emotional stability, intellectual receptiveness and curiosity, hormonal balance, size, ability to sit still, intelligence, sexual development, nature and nurture, all mitigate against the enterprise. The wonder is anyone gets "educated" at all. In all likelihood approaches to secondary education will continue to follow both society as a whole and disciplinary fads, and oscillate between the dead poles of stultifying conformity and high-minded anarchy. If you're lucky, your kids will make it through during the midpoint of the cycle and without too much damage. And if you're luckier, you won't be reincarnated and have to experience high school again yourself.

Sadly, but perhaps wisely, Edmundson does not inform us of the fate of either Franklin Lears or his classmates, such as Donny Perkins, who looked like a "cross between Satan and Burl Ives" or Tommy Buller, "tremendously, spectacularly rude, like a cross between Jimmy Hoffa and Nikita Khruschev." All we know is that Lears left teaching after that one year and became a lawyer in Vermont, which somehow seems fitting. Edmundson went on the University of Massachusetts and to Yale. But a straight line connects Charlottesville to Medford.

Edmundson's memoir is vivid, poignant and personal, filled with allusions to Dickinson and Wordsworth but not self-consciously literary. Like Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* or even Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys" Edmundson brings us as close to being reincarnated as a student in that "tedious, mean, anxiety-ridden, and sad" place as any level-headed person would want to get. In the deeply personal nature of the book, and his quiet celebration of Franklin Lears and Socrates, we share in his exorcism of demons and honoring of those who made a difference.

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