Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children

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Geraldlynn is a lively, astute 14-year-old. Her family, displaced by Hurricane Katrina, returns home to find a radically altered public education system. Geraldlynn's parents hope their daughter's new school will prepare her for college--but the teenager has ideals and ambitions of her own.

Aidan is a fresh-faced Harvard grad drawn to New Orleans by the possibility of bringing change to a flood-ravaged city. He teaches at an ambitious charter school with a group of newcomers determined to show the world they can use science, data, and hard work to build a model school.

Mary Laurie is a veteran educator who becomes principal of one of the first public high schools to reopen after Katrina. Laurie and her staff find they must fight each day not only to educate the city's teenagers, but to keep the Walker community safe and whole.

In this powerful narrative non-fiction debut, the lives of these three characters provide readers with a vivid and sobering portrait of education in twenty-first-century America. *Hope Against Hope* works in the same tradition as *Random Family* and *There Are No Children Here* to capture the challenges of growing up and learning in a troubled world.

Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children Details

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From Reader Review Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children for online ebook

Terry says

Finally a book that gets more than two stars from me! Seriously, though, this is an excellent book. It's well-written and, specifically, that means it strives to be perfectly objective (it reminded me a bit of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* in that way). The only quibble I might have is that Carr tried to organize the book in what turns out to be a forced way, and so sometimes the same stories get told twice, or we're deep into one anecdote/analysis and suddenly Carr makes a left turn into someone else's life for a moment. But that is a minor quibble. Overall it's an excellent overview of New Orleans' schools on a micro level, but it works on the macro level exactly because charter school operators have basically taken over New Orleans' schools.

It really made me think, for the first time, by what we mean when we create charter school systems focused on "college readiness". I used to think that was a good thing, but I'm beginning to see it's not--or, it is not the ONLY thing that matters; one reason is that, as is the case with all school reforms, so much more of the students' lives need to be supported (housing, safety, food, health care, transportation) than just "preparing you to get into a 'good' college". (Carr touches lightly on the "soft skills" that students need to succeed [like, how to take notes. Or, how to show up to class on time. Or even...WHY to show up to class on time] and this could be the subject of a whole other book.) The sad thing is, as is often the case with school reforms focusing on students who grow up in poverty, the consequences of institutionalized poverty (and racism) have to be addressed, but that's too complex--let's just create a new charter school that chants "NO EXCUSES". Hnph.

Nicole Jennelle says

My friends often ask me why my students are so low academically, or why there is so much violence in the city, why teaching is so hard, or why kids act wild in classes. The complexities of poverty are rooted in hundreds of years of racism and classism, and it's hard to just give an elevator answer to all these questions. There are so many reasons. This book does the complexity of the answer justice.

After teaching in three inner-cities across America, I am about to start a second year in New Orleans. There is nothing perfect about the school system here, but it has the most hope than any other district I've encountered. Aptly named, Hope Against Hope details the experiences in the school system post-Katrina from several points of view of actual humans, not policy. Amidst the stories, Carr examines the history of segregation in schools in New Orleans and explains the complexities of living here. In a post-Katrina city with high gun violence that often takes place midday, the city stands as having one of the highest concentrations of students with PTSD than any American city. However, New Orleans thrives because of the grit of the people; kids work hard in school because they believe they can achieve amazing things.

As a teacher, knowing none of the background of the city besides the basics, I walked into my first year culture-shocked and confused. I know many teachers new to the area do the same. TFA corps members often have the best intentions but they are not given the cultural context of the city and their kids' lives when they come here. It's not clear cut as much as TFA, etc. wants to see it that way: the schools cannot end poverty without serious changes (especially mental health services) to the resources available. As Carr states, "Our leaders should not... use the success of a relatively small number of schools serving low-income children as an excuse for not addressing poverty's many dimensions." Equity is every citizen's task. Everyone should read this book, whether you live in New Orleans or not. Because to care about New Orleans is to care about

the spirit of resilience in the United States. If we can't make the best education system in America here, we can't do it anywhere.

Ariana says

A beautiful, thorough, dedicated work of journalism on a subject that is all too often talked about only in generalities and uninformed assumptions. Particularly interesting to someone who recently graduate from a public high school that rewrote its charter during my time there- I was constantly realizing the background behind new rules and strategies being implemented- and also as an incoming student at Tulane University, an elite, mostly white, wealthy university right next to the disintegrating, desperate and hurricane devastated schools of New Orleans that Sarah Carr so eloquently brings to light. The various perspectives are both pathos driven and necessary for the bigger picture of just how complicated and how many factors there are in this struggle for successful education.

Bill Tierney says

I was oddly unaffected by this book. Normally, I resonate to people's stories struggling against all odds. Sarah Carr's 316 page narrative chronicles the challenges that primarily three individuals face in schools in post-Katrina New Orleans. There is a 14 year old who we want to see succeed. There is an ambitious, idealistic, TFA teacher who has a new interpretation on what it takes to succeed and bring about reform. And then there is an old-time educator who faces the daily challenges of not simply running a school, but also assuring that the children are safe and that learning actually takes place.

Carr is a talented writer and has not only received fellowships to support her work, but also has written for mainstream publications. Of consequence, the writing is quick, crisp, and to the point. So why was I left unimpressed?

I'm not sure what the point of the text was, perhaps. With someone like Jonathan Kozol, I find that I have a sense of what the author wants me to believe. I can reject or embrace his beliefs, but there is a moral narrative that comes through in the text. In more traditional work, we have a research methodology, a hypothesis and findings that we again can either support or reject. But, in Hope Against Hope, we are told facts in a dispassionate manner that presumably enables us to feel passion or to analyze the situation in a clear-headed manner. I'm not sure Carr succeeded.
The situation in New Orleans is complex, and we probably need greater analysis, rather than merely reportage. The makeover in New Orleans that is being attempted has fierce opponents and proponents. While we don't necessarily need to know the correct answers via the author's stated opinion, I didn't come away from the book with any greater insight than when I had started.

Over a generation ago, Harry Wolcott penned The Man in the Principal's Office to document the goings on of a school's principal. The text was a workmanlike ethnography and somewhat current for its time, but I was never much impressed by it. When I work in schools, they are highly-charged, emotional places with an awful lot going on; either an author should capture that dynamism or step back and analyze it in a manner that enables us to understand a particular problem better than if we had not read the text. When I concluded Carr's book, I simply felt that there sure are a lot of problems down there in the Big Easy, and I didn't worry about or cheer on any of the book's central characters.

Matt says

Fascinating to read about a world you're working in -- and to know some of the characters in the book. Carr's reporting is terrific -- all the scenes at Sci Academy, O. Perry Walker, and KIPP Renaissance (and behind the scenes with the characters from those schools) were revealing and powerful. I think the book is vital reading for folks interested in what is happening here in New Orleans.
All the same, there are places where I disagree with Carr's analysis and thinks she shades things in ways other than the ways I would choose. The reporting suggests (accurately, I think) a more nuanced and complicated world than the "this or that" choices that sometimes seem to frame the associated analysis.
I'm very opinionated on all the issues in this book, and so it's probably inevitable that I won't completely align with Carr's thinking or framing always. But I tried to keep an open mind throughout (I probably was most frustrated by the first 30-40 pages, but I kept on), I mostly enjoyed the book, and I felt like I learned a lot.

Melinda says

Read this one on the recommendation of a close friend who is a school psychologist in New Orleans. I love how balanced Carr's approach is -- she manages to cover a variety of different schools and a variety of different stakeholders/participants without doing the kind of inappropriate direct comparisons that you often hear during discussions of urban education and education reform. Her research is really thorough and the writing is excellent. I appreciate that while Carr makes suggestions for education in New Orleans and beyond (particularly in her epilogue) she makes it very clear that no are no easy answers.

Amanda says

I saw this author speak at a conference and have wanted to read the book for over a year. I'm glad I finally got around to it. This is one of the most balanced books I've read on the subject of public education reform and charter schools. I also appreciated that Carr was honest from the start...this whole fight is really about race. We so rarely talk about race when we talk about education and I'm so glad Carr wasn't afraid to broach a subject that can be so intimidating.

I also agreed with a previous reviewer that recommends that Teach For America teachers read this book. As a former TFA recruiter, I couldn't agree more.

Patricia says

New Orleans became a testing ground for educational theories after Katrina's devastation led the the firing of the New Orleans school system teachers and the educational system was rebuilt with many outside run charter schools. Even traditional schools had to measure their progress by an increasing number of tests. The author follows the stories of a teacher at a charter school, a principal at a traditional school, and a family whose daughters attend charter schools to tell a story of both success and failure. She objectively reports on the positives and negatives of the schools and how children's lives are affected. As in life, nothing is black and white. I found the book readable, interesting and helpful in illuminating many of the issues (poverty, racism, language, health care, transportation, school rules, teaching methods, etc.) that affect the education of

children. This was definitely worth reading.

Estilla says

This book, for all of its grittiness, embodies the struggles and the underlying heartache and hope that I have a difficult time putting into words when people ask me about teaching in New Orleans post Katrina. Sarah Carr goes beyond the human story though to give an accurate and objective portrayal of the political climate of education reform.

Ben says

Excellent but for a book with hope in its title it feels very dispiriting. Charting the waters between charters and traditional schools/teachers unions is a tough journalistic task these days, but Carr does a nice job not appearing to take sides in her portrayal of a student/family, a principal, and a teacher in different schools in New Orleans. Instead, what's presented feels like heartbreak after heartbreak. Well meaning people trying to exist in or change a series of schools and behaviors that seem unchangeable. For example, the no-excuses atmosphere of two of the schools--a new KIPP high school and another one called Sci--maybe raise passage rates on state tests, but seem to do nothing about college preparation.

What Carr effectively captures really well is some of the cultural disconnect between teachers/schools and students--talking about how the vernacular does not always match up, but also expectations about what it means to be ready for and go to college also don't line up. This leads to the unfortunate recommendation at the end of the book that the approach to education should be more "holistic"--I can't emphasize enough how much I hate seeing that word in policy discussions. But it's hard to argue against the premise that there are some non-academic challenges to be faced as well.

A few caveats: New Orleans is in some ways a fascinating place to locate a discussion around public education because all the upheaval has led to a lot of experimentation with charters and essentially the end of a major urban school system. But that turmoil also means that there's a lot of new schools that by virtue of their newness are likely still working the kinks out. That raises some questions, about the KIPP school particularly, as the book profiles its first year. It's possible that even now it's still as much of a mess or it could be better after the school gets more established.

Back to the hopelessness, though. The parts around higher education in many ways felt like the roughest part to read. The institutions try to instill a lot of enthusiasm for the students to go to college, but there appears to be no content behind that message. Students seem very place-bound and afraid to go anywhere far away from their homes. The teachers and schools are trying hard to prepare students academically, but they seem so far below where they need to be and the strong hand-holding environment they are in will be ripped apart by most colleges' you're on your own mentality. It's clear that more must be done to give people a better sense of what they need to do, but this is already a problem in schools with a longer day, weekend classes, and some summer work.

Some have argued that this book is about school choice and neo-liberalism see here for example. I didn't see it that way. Yes, all of the schools here are charters, but it really feels like a discussion of just how hard it is to succeed in an urban environment with very real considerations and concerns of the working poor. I highly doubt that the problems with behavior, getting kids engaged, etc. really differ depending on the school that much. That too just adds to the sense of hopelessness, though. In most issues of public policy it's easy to find

a scapegoat and argue that removing/reforming them is all that's needed to change the situation. This book presents a much more complex picture, one that unfortunately doesn't seem to have any easy solutions.

KC says

The greatest weakness of the current literature addressing educational reform is its level of abstraction. "How Children Succeed," for instance, is an excellent primer on emerging theories of what allows children to be successful in school and in life, but its personal narratives are necessarily limited and largely devoted to the researchers who are developing these theories. Diane Ravitch's "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" provides a strong macro-view of the arc of school reform, but cannot dig down into the actual thoughts and perceptions of the low-level actors (teachers, principals, parents, and students). Daniel Koretz's "Measuring Up" is a thorough and nuanced account of the limitations of standardized testing design, but also lacks compelling characters and narratives. Across the board, the school reform debate has been driven by over-arching theories of elite-actor motivations and strategies. The lives of those who are directly affected by educational reform are reduced down to superficially compelling yet context-free anecdotes that can support a main thesis.

I am very happy to say that "Hope Against Hope" reverses the prevailing dynamic and focuses on the personal narratives and perceptions of those who must engage with school reform on a day-to-day basis. The trifurcated focus on three different actors within the New Orleans school system (a principal with deep roots in the local community, a Harvard TFA alum who now teaches in a new charter school, and a family with experience in both the older public new system and the new charter regime) can hardly be described as "innovative" yet provides a desperately needed counterweight to the abstract and politically charged accounts of educational elites.

Carr's emphasis on the thoughts and actions of her primary characters (bolstered by a host of supporting players) allows her to pull off a subtle but important trick; she is able to humanize her characters to the point where the reader can absorb Carr's criticisms of prevailing attitudes while still appreciating the good intentions of different interest groups. This is not an accident; Carr opens her book with a declared intention to frame the conflict over education reform as one born of personal experiences rather than partisan politics. Her criticisms of American education, which acknowledge the failures of past educational regimes but are more concretely directed at the current “magic bullet” ideology of charter schools, carry more weight than other criticisms because they are carefully framed by events at New Orleans schools and the perceptions of the people served by them. It’s a welcome change of pace from the more sweeping and dramatic rhetoric employed elsewhere.

But perhaps the greatest revelation in this book is Geraldlynn, the young girl who we first encounter as a freshman at a new KIPP high school. At one point Carr refers to Geraldlynn as a “Greek chorus of one” for the events at her school. And indeed, Geraldlynn proves to be remarkably attuned to the promise and problems associated with her school. The experiences of Geraldlynn’s family provide some desperately needed insight into the aspirations and burdens of the populations school reform is supposed to benefit. Geraldlynn herself is neither a dramatic charter student success story nor an obvious failure, which together with her observational skills lends her commentary a unique form of credibility. Of all the education writers I’ve encountered, only Jonathan Kozol has given ordinary students such a large platform to express their thoughts and feelings – yet Carr provides a more thorough treatment of Geraldlynn’s evolving perceptions and places then within the context of broader changes within New Orleans and across the country.

This book is a laudable effort to fill a massive narrative gap in our national discussion about the future of education. While I don't completely buy into Carr's assertion that New Orleans is truly representative of other places throughout the country, the same types of problems, motivations, and forces are certainly at work in other districts. Some aspects of school reform (such as the campaign against teacher unions) cannot be covered effectively in a book like this, but Carr has written an excellent and engaging book that works equally well as a supplement to more abstract and politicized narratives or as a thoughtful introduction for the general reader.

April says

I think *Hope Against Hope* should be a must-read for every adult New Orleanian and every educator nationwide. Sarah Carr explores post-Katrina education reform in New Orleans through narratives and humanizes the complex issues (race, class, infrastructure, economy, politics, crime, etc.) that impact learning in America.

Jack says

I'm no education expert, but this book was well written, informative, and interesting. Efforts to improve New Orleans public schools after Katrina and with right-leaning charter school policies made for a most fascinating look at an effort that has been pushed around the country where conservatives gain power. In places here and there, I hope we recover useful data that objectively analyzes how these approaches work. Sadly, ideologues of any stripe never admit mistakes, but open-minded folk can use a book like that is a useful early commentary on what New Orleans is doing.
As a person in education, the charter school movement scares me. People who have dedicated their lives to teaching can be let go of for 25 year old college grads who aren't married, don't have kids, can work 80s a week, and for just $30-40 grand. But that's just me thinking about me. I do that well.
Then there are the concerns for the community: outsiders come in and tell folks how to become educated, then those outsiders go back to their happy lives, leaving students to struggle through the world. Lots of complex issues at play here.
However, I get why parents in New Orleans are hopeful about these young energetic do-gooders. They have not had much reason to hope (the title makes more sense now that I'm writing this).
Great read overall.

Katy says

This book surprised me with how interesting I found it. The thing I liked best was the way the author managed to make all the players seem human on the page (even those who I really disagree with in policy, like the Sci Academy founder) and make their motives understandable, without seeming to take sides. After reading, I'm still not sure where Sarah Carr herself would fall on the many debates the ed world is gripped with -- and that's a good thing. She raises a LOT of really powerful and important questions and doesn't take the easy way out of trying to scapegoat one side/group/person over another. It's also really well written and enjoyable.

Jimmy says

A readable book, in the lines of a fair number of recent non-fiction works on the social realities and stories of New Orleans. Has the feel of "Zeitoun" or "Nine Lives" in its focus on personalized stories of individuals. Only in this context, the central topic around which the stories revolve is the post-Katrina reform of the New Orleans education system. While the book is probably a worthwhile primer on the charter school movement in New Orleans post Katrina, and the aspirations and debates surrounding it, the book really fails, I think, in some critically important ways. First, there is no argument or thesis. I guess it's fine to tell the stories of a few individuals who are actively participating in the education reform movement in the city, but what's the point other than to tell a few human-interest stories, engaging though they are? I guess it could be simply that there is a controversy about whether the charter movement is good or bad, but that's not an argument, it's just reiterating a fact that we already know. Second, telling a few stories inevitably leaves many stories out. This is the big danger in all such works (and shapes my critique of "Nine Lives," too) in the sense that a book that embraces human storytelling as a methodology tends to enforce a generalization of the topic that inevitably fails because it leaves so many other stories out and untold. Third, the book fails structurally, too. There is no coherent rhyme nor reason to much of the sections in each of the chapters and their corresponding parts. The book jumps from stories about one of the teachers or students or principals, to commentaries on education policy, to stories about other individuals that aren't really connected except only tangentially to the main human interest story narratives. While I did find the book an easy and even enjoyable read, I found it was also a mish-mash of storytelling that just weakened the point of the book, whatever that point might have been.