

## Book Notes

### TO TEACH: THE JOURNEY, IN COMICS

by William Ayers and Ryan Alexander-Tanner.

*New York: Teachers College Press, 2010. 128 pp. \$15.95.*

Teaching at its best is not a matter of technique—it is primarily an act of love.

*William Ayers*

If I am left with only one lingering feeling from reading *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*, it is love. This book exudes love: love for the profession of teaching and the brave, creative souls who engage in it; love for the children and youth who inspire, challenge, and teach the teacher; and even, in the end, love for the educational bureaucrats who are lampooned at various points in the book. William Ayers and Ryan Alexander-Tanner obviously adore teaching in all its messiness, and that adoration is infectious.

This book is a graphic novel adaptation of William Ayers's classic work *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, first published in 1993. The original text has been brought to life through striking black-and-white cartoons from artist Ryan Alexander-Tanner. As in the original, the graphic novel is made up of eight chapters, each delving into a different aspect of teaching. The ideas are grounded in Ayers's time as a kindergarten teacher, his experiences as a parent, and the work of other innovative educators. *To Teach* is a book about what is possible; the educators featured are real people making real magic in real classrooms.

Ayers and Alexander-Tanner offer an impassioned plea for sloughing off the “myths” of teaching, such as the idea that children are worse than they were in the past or that a teacher's work is to “save” students. They argue for a vision of education that is child-centered, creative, social, investigative, and holistic, while taking aim at the forces that seek to standardize and dehumanize the art of teaching.

The authors recenter our attention on the reasons educators are drawn to teaching in the first place: the vibrancy and complexity of children, the mystery and adventure of teaching, and, of course, the love. They call for creative insubordination and breaking down the walls between schools and communities. While the ideas are certainly not new, they continue to be both radical and necessary. And the presentation is highly enjoyable, laced throughout with humor. At his most preachy moments, for example, the narrator—a young Ayers—is shown orating from an upside-down soapbox.

Alexander-Tanner draws in a disarmingly simple, cartoony style rather than naturalistically. This choice allows him full access to the language of visual symbols. The artist transforms the rich, symbolic language of the original book into simple, effective metaphors that communicate powerful ideas in a single glance. For example, we see Ayers literally drowning in his first class of kindergarteners, an image that speaks to the experience of many new teachers, my younger self included. These visual metaphors will likely stay with readers longer than the adjoining prose. We are offered images of what teaching often is, side-by-side with what it should be. The authors reject the metaphor of the teacher as captain of a ship, for example, offering instead an image of teacher and students as explorers, walking hand-in-hand along the seashore.

There are certainly trade-offs in the translation of Ayers's book to comic form, particularly since Ayers and Alexander-Tanner keep the book at a short 126 pages. The complexity of some of Ayer's concepts is lost, while others have been left out. In particular, readers looking for practical ideas about how to make these radical practices possible in an era of increased standardization may be disappointed by the graphic novel. In the chapters on working with imposed systems of tracking and standards, the quick, cartoony rendition makes resisting and reshaping these influences seem a little too easy.

At the same time, the graphic novel is able to breathe new life into the individuals it features. As a reader, I found myself empathizing and connecting deeply with these children and educators, many smiling at me and speaking directly out of the pages. In the end, this graphic novel feels like it has been streamlined and trimmed down to its essence, much like a good haiku. As most of the book is made up of images, Ayers and Alexander-Tanner have been forced to be choosy about the words they include, picking only the most profound, the most powerful. Combined with drawings that speak to the reader on both a conscious and subconscious level, this book packs a serious punch. Although this book will be enjoyable to a wide audience, I particularly wish I had had it by my side when I first began teaching. Ayers and Alexander-Tanner offer us an inspiring, heartwarming book that serves as a reminder of what teaching should, and can, be.

P. J. K.