



The Battle for Room 314: My Year of Hope and Despair in a New York City High School

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In a fit of idealism, Ed Boland left a twenty-year career as a non-profit executive to teach in a tough New York City public high school. But his hopes quickly collided headlong with the appalling reality of his students' lives and a hobbled education system unable to help them: Freddy runs a drug ring for his incarcerated brother; Nee-cole is homeschooled on the subway by her brilliant homeless mother; and Byron's Ivy League dream is dashed because he is undocumented.

In the end, Boland isn't hoisted on his students' shoulders and no one passes AP anything. This is no urban fairy tale of at-risk kids saved by a Hollywood hero, but a searing indictment of schools that claim to be progressive but still fail their students. Told with compassion, humor, and a keen eye, Boland's story is sure to ignite debate about the future of American education and attempts to reform it.

The Battle for Room 314: My Year of Hope and Despair in a New York City High School Details

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From Reader Review The Battle for Room 314: My Year of Hope and Despair in a New York City High School for online ebook

Margaret Mechlinus says

I don't know how I feel about this book. He only lasted a year before giving up his ideal of making a difference as a teacher in an inner city school in NYC. Could he have made a difference if he stayed? He got out with his life, went back to his high paying fulfilling career and got a book deal out writing about the horror of it. I can't fault him however, I wouldn't have lasted a week.

Erin says

I am giving this book three stars for entertainment value, but its author is just another disingenuous lefty who keeps trying to force a square peg in to a round hole. He misquotes statistics to suit his purposes, can't see his own hypocrisy and offers the same old failed ideas-bussing black kids into white schools and throwing more money at failing student bodies. He ought to do a study on wealthy Monmouth county, NJ, where the white schools spend \$13,000 per year per student and have their tax money diverted to 97% black Asbury Park, where the district spends \$53,000 per year per child, giving all kids laptops and IPADs and yet they average a ten percent pass rate. It disproves his solutions right there.

The problem with lefties is that their policies are bad for everyone, as you can see from the author's extensive explanation on how Ivy League schools admit prospective students and the frightening Project Advance, which grooms average minority students to take those places. So white males can't get in to the Ivy Leagues anymore unless they are connected and yet they can't apply to low end programs like county vocational schools, because that financial aid is also earmarked for women and minorities.

And yet our author still isn't satisfied. He really believes that his sixteen year old students who can't read or write and most likely have IQs hovering in the 70s could do more if we just throw more money at them. It is dishonest and frankly, it is cruel. It is cruel to try to force people to be something they can't. Admitting that would be the first step to helping these kids, not forcing these lefty fantasies on them. In NC, they have an abundance of these kids. When they IQ test them and see how low their mental capabilities are, they put them in a certificate track program and help them into jobs and careers they can handle. Interestingly enough, many more of those kids graduate and don't end up in prison. NYC could learn a lot from NC.

Pete Wood says

A short and quick read that seemed compulsory given my current change in vocation. In many regards this is the story of my life - however, starkly different in the way in which I've handled the change in vocation. Ed had all of the right information and intentions but learned (as many have) the hard way, that students don't care AT ALL about your motivations, only whether you will care about theirs. I can see many of my students in the anecdotes he presents from NYC public schools, but I share absolutely none of his anger and animosity. I respond to the inevitable outbursts with unconditional acceptance and consistent expectations - they will respond, they want to be able to trust their teachers.

A good book to reflect upon if you are in the business - a vapid waste of time if you aren't.

Diane Yannick says

This author earned my respect for writing his memoir--one without the ending he yearned for. Ed Boland was a second career teacher in a lower Manhattan progressive school for one year. His ideals collided with the reality of ninth graders who had more interest in disrupting his lessons than learning. Their lack of respect for him was never-ending and forced him to the boiling point more than once.

I think the kids' behavior had little to do with the fact that their inexperienced teacher was a gay white man and much to do with the poverty of their families---both financially and experientially. It also was the result of an ineffective administration that is described by one student as "three hundred strikes and you're (sic) out." Mr. Boland saw one of his students, who was being punished for egregious behavior, in the principal's office lying on a couch, listening to his iPod, eating candy. I did feel that mister (as the kids called him) should shoulder a chunk of the "blame". As a first year teacher he didn't have enough tools in his box and needed regular meetings with his selected mentors rather than just crisis meetings. He wasn't consistent about which discipline battles to fight. He also handed out far too many worksheets which 90% of the kids refused to do or did very poorly.

His partner Sam seemed like a huge asset as Ed struggled to come up with motivating lesson plans. He was always there to celebrate small student victories with Ed. As a reader, I was celebrating too. His salary was a huge financial stressor on their lifestyle as Ed had worked for a prestigious educational non- profit both before and after his year of teaching.

This author's description of his first hand experiences were clearly recounted and thought-provoking. **HOWEVER**, the ending solutions that he listed should not be part of this book. Stupid shit like blaming Obama and putting an end to poverty, like that's easy. He wrote a humble memoir about his lack of success turning young lives around and then he arrogantly acts like he has all the solutions. This was a major disconnect for me. He could have stuck with his updates about the kids who were in his class for that one year. My rating was based on his memoir, not that inexcusable ending.

I plan to have my book club read this memoir in 2017 as I think it has a lot of good meat for discussion. I will try to approach the discussion with an open mind, even about the ending.

Liz says

I loved the way that Boland didn't sugarcoat the realities of working with at risk students. He showed that it's not like a movie, it's not Freedom Writers or Stand and Deliver where all the students make some miraculous change and go on to lead highly educated and much more privileged lives than they could imagine. I know I've had students literally tell me that it's not going to happen like one of those movies. That story needs to be told.

The reason I couldn't give this more stars is because I teach at risk students. It was deeply unsettling to me the amount that Boland clearly valued a certain sort of success and lifestyle over others. He definitely thought of most of his students as lesser than him and than other students that his Project Advance program had "rescued" or whatever. Even while respecting their struggles, he still looked down upon them and their

ideas of the world.

The students I've had the most success with are the students who I've let help me redefine my ideas of success. Ivy League colleges are not the end all be all. That's not the best path for everyone. It SHOULDNT be everyone's goal or a determination of your worth. Cosmetology school can be just as much of a success. High school graduation and holding a job can be just as much of a success. The goal should be to help at risk students find pride in themselves and to create dreams that are actually what they want for themselves and then reach them. Whatever that is, without judgement.

Obviously this specific issue is very dear to my heart and it hurts me when people don't see at risk students as being worth as much as other students who achieve more typical measures of success. Even with the huge struggles and stresses of the occupation l, I couldn't forgive some of the things Boland did in his classroom.

Lucas says

Although the book has a very authentic feel to it, I couldn't help feeling like the book was written more for Mr. Boland than for the readers.

So much of the book is filled with negative stories from his one year in teaching, with an almost accidental mention of one of a few students that were actually "good" thrown in for good measure, that I kept hoping Mr. Boland would say he quit halfway through the year. Even with the picture he has painted with extreme detail - the language, the way the students looked, talked, acted, etc. - I find it difficult to believe that there wasn't at least one positive story a week he could have written about. Maybe this is because I've been a teacher for the last 9 years in schools of inclusion and title I and have had my own share of "Nemesis" students in my class and yet I can think of just as many if not more good stories as bad.

I commend Mr. Boland for giving teaching a try, and for being very honest with what he feels were his downfalls right up to the point of going back to his old job, but the way he has been able to stay in touch with his former students only goes to show the stories in this book were only the first chapter. The book would have been better if another 150-200 pages were filled with the same detailed descriptions of what life was like for the students after he taught them, with a focus on the good decisions/results instead of the negative.

The 'battle' for room 314 is still going on whether Mr. Boland realizes it or not.

Ronald says

I was looking forward to this book because I enjoy books of cultural settings. I am also interested in educational settings. However, this book was a whiney, self-indulgent, self-pitying read. How anyone, who is emotionally dysfunctional think he could help a class room full of kids from totally dysfunctional families and neighborhoods. The author thinks that because he was functional in an arrogant protective bubble life he would certainly be able to help the poor ghetto kids. Don't bother reading it, I took one for the team on this one.

Andy says

I did not get much out of this, but there are probably lots of readers who have never been to a failing school and don't know about urban poverty in America; if so, then this might be a good intro. It's a relatively light memoir about a guy who believes that any educated person can just go be a teacher and turn around the lives of poor high school kids. Lots of people believe that because of Hollywood movies and related propaganda. By the end of the book, the author gets why that was silly.

He could have saved himself a lot of trouble by doing some research first on what actually works to improve urban school districts.

Elliot says

Closer to 2.5. I found the author and his writing a little irritating. Petty complaints aside, I do feel this is an important book as it offers a look at a part of society many of us don't realize exists. If you read this book, go into it focused on the things the author is bringing to light, rather than the author himself. At the very end, he does offer an analysis of what's wrong with education/society and what we need to do about it, which is very important.

Mg says

Just heartwrenching. I can feel your despair, Mr. Boland. I too was a NYC teacher who felt the same despair at the lack of respect I got since Day 1. Somehow I managed to survive 8 years of hell. This is the book I could never bring myself to write because I too wanted the success story you desired as well. Like you I had a middle-class upbringing and I so wanted to help students learn. Unlike you though, I am Puerto Rican but I didn't grow up in the kind of neighborhoods my students grew up in. I can say that being Puerto Rican just like them didn't help me win the respect of my most disruptive students.

I see some reviewers have said the author belittled some students and read with that in my mind looking for confirmation of this. I saw instances where the author lost his cool and I as a teacher recalled some things I myself said out of anger. None but a teacher can understand how these kids can push anyone's buttons. I don't think this author was necessarily proud of those instances and neither was I when they happened to me.

It's a sobering book for anyone who wants to enter the teaching profession. I myself had no clue public schools were that bad when I was getting my Master's degree as a Reading Specialist at Teachers College, Columbia University. I was really naive. Too bad I didn't come across this book before I decided on teaching as a profession.

One part of the book particularly resonated with me is that time that the author asks himself while observing how well his students pay attention to an elderly Jewish lady. He took them to a synagogue where they sat quietly listening to her for about 30 minutes. He wondered how she was able to do that. I know that feeling well when I compared myself to other teachers who seem to have control over their students. This reflection made me feel ten times worse than I already felt. I had always been successful at my studies with hard work but try as hard as I could, I couldn't seem to master this.

The book is not in the least depressing. It manages to stay upbeat despite his not continuing to teach. There are some funny moments and some moments when he seems to make a dent in their lives. I also had plenty of those moments and I guess they helped me to continue for 8 years.

Brenda Ayala says

This is a fantastic way to get people involved in the discussion about education reformation. It is an extremely necessary change, and one that is fundamentally tied to poverty and the eradication of it.

There's a page on Facebook called Humans of New York. Most people around my age have heard of it. There's a photographer, Brandon, who goes around and takes photos of random people in New York. He asks them questions. Sometimes he'll get a fun tidbit, sometimes he'll get something profound. Recently, he has been focusing on inmates throughout prisons in New York. When he posts those pictures and the corresponding stories, the responses are astounding.

Frankly, and this may be going a little too in-depth for a book review, I think most people who blame poor people are idiots. When a kid's mother is working three jobs to support her kids and barely has enough for food, clothes and shelter, he's desperate. When he finds out he can make a couple hundred dollars in a week by selling some weed, and that money can go toward feeding his younger siblings and himself, is he really such a hooligan for choosing that option? For choosing to do what he can to support them?

A girl who has never had a positive male role model acts out against a male teacher. Is she just doing it because she's psycho? Probably not; more than likely she has been abused in some way. Physically, emotionally, sexually--it doesn't matter. It happens far more often than it should. Does that mean she deserves to be kicked out of school when she acts out?

It is a truly hard thing to discuss. Boland did an admirably strong job of reflecting both sides. He was candid, and I think that's what I appreciated the most. He admitted when he thought a kid's inappropriate comment was funny; he admitted when he wanted to shout profanities at a difficult student; he admitted to having a white savior complex on top of having a gay savior complex. He seems to be very aware of himself and of his own actions, and that comes across beautifully here.

Fact is, we need reform. And I think this book provides an entertaining, funny, and heartbreakingly real way to bridge the gap between legislative policies and every day people. Because realistically, most people don't follow politics. Most don't understand the verbiage, or don't want to take the time to. **It is a real thing that needs to change.** So I loved Boland's stories for being both fascinating and informational. The outline in the end about what actions should be taken were well thought out and concise.

I have nothing but praise for this book. Boland owned up to all his flaws and to his errors. Even if he's not in the streets dealing with the nitty gritty anymore, at least he's still doing some good with Project Advance. I had no idea what the project was before this, and all I can say is that I'm ecstatic such a program exists. It's a step in the right direction, and people like Boland have got it right.

Christy says

It's really brave to write about your career failures. And especially to write with humor, humility, and sensitivity. Teaching is hard. If you haven't done it, you'd be surprised how much of it has nothing to do with the teaching part. I think every teacher goes into the profession hoping to be the type who can reach the neediest, most unreachable student, and then you get in there and reality hits. Teachers who persist, thrive even, in the toughest schools should be making \$1 million per year. I knew I was not cut out for that setting, but boy do I admire those who are. Boland is doing important work with his foundation. And being in the classroom gave him a much greater understanding of the issues that schools and students face. I wish others who are forming opinion and policy on education would have the guts to get in a damn classroom!

I think he did a better job than he gave himself credit for. It's a testament to him that he stayed in touch with many of his students. They held his feet to the fire, but I do think he earned their respect. He ends the book with some very good, practical ideas about what needs to happen to improve our education system. Guess what? None of it involves giving more standardized tests.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

Let me start by telling you the ending....

*****SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT!*****

...he quits.

Yes, he gives it a year, one year, and he tosses in the towel.

But I will tell you that after I read chapter one I doubted he'd make it through the first semester. Those kids are difficult. Exhausting. (Almost?) impossible.

This book just left me with lots of questions for the Powers That Be. What could have been done to keep this teacher in the classroom? What support did he need that he didn't get? Is this what goes on in lots of schools? Should we just give up on some schools? Are there teachers who are doing well in schools like these?

The author, in the final chapter, runs across a fellow who has been given an exceptional education and now has opportunities to either go into a lucrative career or teaching. The author writes up a wonderful letter to this fellow, sharing thoughts about ways his teaching could have been better. It's quite wise for a man who gave it a year in the trenches.

It's a downer, but it's a story you need to hear, whether you are a teacher in a similar situation or just a member of our American society. It's a story you need to hear and think about. We have to do better. We just do.

Karen Chung says

I really thank the author for his honesty and informativeness in writing this book – it certainly took

uncommon courage to do this.

This book is an excellent starting point for drawing up a new agenda for at-risk schools and students, and in fact all other students as well.

First, we must start from whatever point in their learning each student currently finds him- or herself, and not expect them to be able to process and learn content that is pre-decided on based on age or previous curricula taught mainly out of tradition and habit to more privileged kids. That starting point may well be learning how to care enough about oneself to show respect for other people, and to treat property and things with respect as well.

Second, kids need to learn about the workings of power. The currency they trade in is power, such as it is among school kids. If they better understand how it works, they'll be less thrown off when others are simply playing power games with them – and they can also learn how to deal with people beyond judging and manipulating a tangle of power equations. This is something **everybody** needs training in. Anybody who remembers high school cliques would be greatly helped by such training.

We have so much talent from around the world focused on creating things like an Internet-connected appliance that can determine the freshness of packaged juice before you open it. Imagine what we could do if we put just a fraction of that brainpower into figuring out how we can help every single child love him- or herself, have respect for others, and build up a solid foundation of knowledge and skills for success in work and life. I believe we can do it. Ed Boland sets out very clearly many of the obstacles we need to overcome in this process.

Peacegal says

4.5 stars -- This is a book that will stick with you long after you've closed it. I've found myself thinking about the various individual students and their situations, as well as the school that serves as the backdrop in this drama.

This is no *To Sir, with Love* or *Dangerous Minds*. Instead, it's the story of a teacher who was filled with those idealistic visions when he applied to teach at a NYC high school--and had those hopes dashed to the ground when he came upon reality. Interacting with these students from the poorest and most desperate situations imaginable, Boland is forced to confront just how easy he's had it as a privileged white male--and how difficult it could be at times to relate to kids facing issues that most people will never have to struggle with at any point in their lives.

As he described his lesson plans and multimedia-infused teaching style, I thought that in any other situation, Boland would be considered the "cool teacher" in school. He really was a good educator, it seems, tailoring his lessons to not only keep kids engaged, but help those who were having trouble catch up. But all of the trivia-show style learning games and real world-tie ins couldn't save most of the kids in his classroom.

So, whose fault is it? Is it the teachers (Boland describes the burned-out teachers at another NY school who are practically sleeping in class)? The school administration, which seem more focused on trying one trendy "learning system" after another, which never seem to work? The parents, for not being more invested in their kids' lives? The kids themselves (Boland does have a few "good apples," who, despite being raised in the same poverty-stricken and desperate situations as the other kids, still manage to treat others with civility and

try their best in class)? Society, for its institutionalized racism and complete lack of concern for the poor and struggling? Or the government, for its lack of investment in helping inner-city schools and inhumane policies? Maybe it's all of these things, that's what I think. They combine into the perfect storm and more kids end up incarcerated, addicted, homeless or dead.
