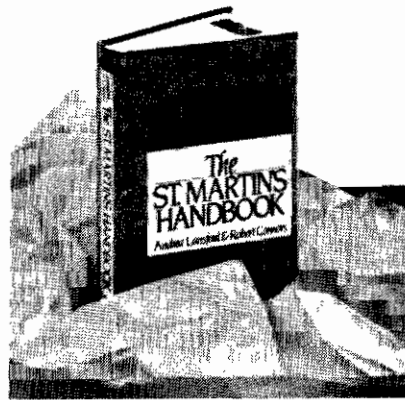




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Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared.*

New York: Free Press, 1989 (hard back); New York:
Penguin, 1990 (paperback)

Reviewed by Edward M. White

When Mike Rose entered high school, he tells us in this brilliant auto-social-biography, his records were mixed up with another boy with the same name. So he spent two years in the vocational track, learning how to be stupid, despite his extraordinary native ability. Since he was a street kid from south Los Angeles, with uneducated immigrant parents, neither he nor his parents questioned the school placement; all his young life he had been "on the boundary" of opportunity, without crossing over, so the dumb track seemed perfectly natural. Besides, he points out with his usual generosity of spirit, he learned some useful things there from some good teachers. How does such a boy make his way into higher education, Rose asks, and what happens to him when he is there?

As the title makes evident, these questions are enormously important to society as a whole; Rose is perfectly right to consider his personal experience of general interest. A prominent scholar in composition, and associate director of UCLA Writing Programs, he might have written one more study of the underprepared, of remedial education, of the need for increasing opportunity in the supposed land of opportunity. We have a number of such scholarly books, resting unread and unattended to, as more and more children sink into poverty and as more and more families drop through the porous "safety net" which has replaced genuine hope for the unprivileged these days. But what Rose has done instead is to ransack his memories, his journals, his psyche, to give us the experience of living and learning on the boundary from the inside; the book reads much more like a novel than a study, and is hard to put down. Why, he asks, do we drop out (as Rose did at one point) even when we have fellowships? Why do even the few successful programs for recruiting and supporting those on the boundary experience so many losses? The answers this book supplies draw on the narrative tradition, giving us an imaginative experience of what the university looks and feels like to those who come to it from an alien culture, alienated to begin with.

The WPA who takes time with *Lives on the Boundary* will find it rewarding for many reasons. For many of us, there will be constant reminders of the moments when education appeared to be impossible: we could never break into the privileged club; the social barriers and cultural walls were hopelessly high. Besides, who would really want to be part of the educated crowd if you could do something more, well, useful? Indeed, as the proletarian acronym deliberately reminds us, the WPA is the day laborer in the university administration, and, as the "parlor" debate in *Rhetoric Review* reminds us, the composition specialist is generally on the outside looking in. More than most others in the university, we sympathize with the plight of the socially excluded, and we often share those origins. For those with the good luck to be born inside the walls, those who moved smoothly from intellectual childhoods into universities and then into faculty positions, the book offers a powerful literary experience of what the rest of us saw and felt. Every reader will wince as the social nature of American education, particularly higher education, becomes dramatically real. Only the good luck of an extraordinary teacher with insight allowed Rose the chance to make it:

The reality of higher education wasn't in my scheme of things. No one in the family had gone to college; only two of my uncles had completed high school. I figured I'd get a night job and go to the local junior college because I knew that Snyder and Company were going there to play ball. But I hadn't even prepared for that. When I finally said [to the concerned teacher asking about his future], "I don't know," MacFarland looked down at me—I was seated in his office—and said, "Listen, you can write."

Much more common was the other kind of teacher:

Physical education was also pretty harsh. Our teacher was a stubby ex-lineman who had played old-time pro ball in the Midwest. He routinely had us grabbing our ankles to receive his stinging paddle across our butts. He did that, he said, to make men of us. "Rose," he bellowed on our first encounter; me standing geeky in line in my baggy shorts. "Rose? What the hell kind of name is that?"

"Italian, sir," I squeaked.

"Italian! Ho, Rose, do you know the sound a bag of shit makes when it hits the wall?"

"No, sir."

"Wop!"

The early chapters are particularly moving, as we see the young Rose find his way and hear the mature Rose speculate about the meanings of

the experience. The chapter titles are expressive: "Our Schools and Our Children," "Just Wanna Be Average," "Entering the Conversation" (this, a powerful metaphor of discovering books), "The Poem Is a Substitute for Love." Less dramatic, but equally vivid, are the later chapters describing Rose's work in crisis centers and adult education settings; here we see individual students of his writing and thinking under inspired tutelage. The chapter on "The Politics of Remediation" is alone worth the price of admission.

The book will be out in paperback by the time this review is printed. No excuses are acceptable. Everyone teaching freshmen in institutions recruiting students from the less privileged classes should make this book required reading.

