Book Review

_Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir_ and

_Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America_

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The poverty rate among children increased from 12 million children in 2000 to over 16 million in 2012, representing a 6% increase during that 12-year span. In total, 23% of children in the United States now live at or below the poverty line. Overall in the United States, 15.9% of our population (48.5 million) fell below the poverty line in 2011 (Bishaw, 2012), while 45% (32.7 million) children lived within 200% of the poverty line (Mattingly, Bean & Schaefer, 2012). Meanwhile, income inequality is growing in the United States. Between 1979 and 2007, the top 1% of wage earners realized a 275% increase in their wages, while the bottom 20% realized only an 18% increase (CBO, 2011). Income inequality and poverty are realities that too many of our families and students are confronted with every day. The associated cost in poverty for our population is tremendous. Whether it is poor health or poor community schools, those living in poverty face a myriad of problems that are simply not a part of the dominant policy narrative.

Two recent books bring the topic of poverty to the forefront, offering explanations (and hope) for educators and communities to combat the scourge of poverty. The books _Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality and Family in Rural America_ by Jennifer Sherman and Joe Bageant’s stirring autobiography _Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir_ attempt to explain how communities and citizens cope with poverty and economic powerlessness in rural America.

Rural educators must understand the culture and communities in which their students live. To prepare children to live in the 21st century, the important question for rural educators to consider is what will continue to happen to our rural children if we do not understand the community and culture in which they live. And by extension, what are the implications for our educational system? Even though neither book is explicitly focused on rural education, each author uses different stylistic and methodological approaches, _Rainbow Pie_ and _Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t_ are nonetheless both important books not only for rural educators’ understanding of rural culture and society, but also for their understanding of their practice.

Bageant’s story is largely autobiographical, told in an informal, conversational fashion. However, as Bageant spins a story of his rural family and its heritage, triumphs and disasters, he also unlocks a story of rural America. While Bageant is not pretending to be a rural expert (he would have probably scoffed at the idea), his story is a personal voyage in an attempt to answer why he and his friends and family find themselves in the same (disadvantaged) economic and political strata generation after generation.

While Bageant’s book is memoir embedded within a broader social and economic commentary, Sherman’s book is a scholarly study. Sherman spent a year in a small, isolated logging community in northern California facing economic collapse in the wake of the shutdown of the logging industry. Sherman’s book helps the reader uncover some of the questions that go unanswered in Bageant’s book by offering a framework providing insight into how economically distressed rural communities adopt different forms of moral, social, and cultural capital to stand in place of the financial capital they

1See, The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kids Count Data Center at: datacenter.kidscount.org.

2See, however, Sherman and Sage (2011).
Bageant posits that for generations, policy makers have allowed and encouraged a rural underclass in America. The resulting rural out-migration after World War II left those remaining rural residents in an ever more precarious economic position. Advertising and government propaganda made an effort to shed a positive light on the rural out-migration that resulted in this time period.

Even as the white underclass was accumulating, it was being hidden, buried under a narrative proclaiming otherwise. The popular imagination was swamped with images that remain today as the national memory of that era [post WWII].

A government brochure of the time assured everyone that ‘an onrushing new age of opportunity, prosperity, convenience and comfort has arrived for all Americans. I quoted this to an old WWII veteran…[he] answered, ‘I wish somebody had told me; I would have waved at the prosperity as it went by’ (p. 6).

In one of the final chapters of the book Bageant offers an explanation of American class denial, arguing that rural communities have been pawns in an economic game that consistently places them at disadvantage.

Bageant’s ancestors were farmers who scratched a lifestyle (if not a living) off the land, and the chapters of the book help explain how Bageant places his family history into the larger context of rural American society. Bageant’s introduction “Lost in the American Undertow” explicitly sets the stage for what the reader will experience in the rest of the book. In the chapter, Bageant specifically states that he believes there is an American underclass that no one is willing to discuss; that of the white, rural poor. In a revealing remark that speaks to a historical rural wariness of outsiders, Bageant remembers how, as a child, his neighbors claimed that accepting an outside paycheck was equal to “wage slavery.”

Ultimately, Bageant’s story allows the reader to experience the history of one poor, rural family and to understand how that story also tells a larger story of rural America. As his family gradually moved over the course of three generations from a self-sustaining (and self-esteem sustaining) lifestyle of agrarianism to one of permanent underclass in an industrialized economy, Bageant reflects on the causes of these changes. His explanation is more than a nostalgic screed for an agrarian culture that is long ago passed. Rather, he places the current state of rural America in the context of specific policies that have helped corporations and have devastated rural communities. Ultimately, Bageant also places responsibility on our educational system:

The bottom line, however, is that they (rural students) can’t read. Feel free to blame anyone you choose, except the free-market system’s extreme preference for dim-witted consumers and workers. You can blast the public school teachers, who actually don’t have much say in any of this, but at least they are close to the crime and easy to hit (p. 205).
schools) to de-contextualize curriculum, instruction and management and move toward a unified national “standard” of operation in all of these areas.\textsuperscript{3} By placing a wedge between school and community, the policies advocated by educational reformers will further diminish opportunities for rural students and fatally weaken the social bonds that tenuously hold rural communities together. Sherman states, “The rural poor will not disappear simply by being ignored” (p. 197). Rural educators therefore have a unique opportunity to benefit the students they work with by ensuring that curriculum and instruction are tied to their local communities and that students are taught in a school that acknowledges what John Dewey recognized 100 years ago -- that there is no separation between our schools and society (Dewey, 1909).

Ultimately, these two books together will help educators understand the social contexts within which rural educational institutions operate. They raise important questions regarding curriculum, instruction and general operation of their school system, such as how curriculum and instruction decisions frame student understandings of the world in which they live. Do our schools help students build a hopeful narrative about their lives or reinforce a negative narrative? What is clear after reading these books is that schools must assist students in developing alternate conceptions of themselves and society (other than what is presented by current educational reformers). A vibrant democracy ought to create schools in which alternate views of society and life are made available to students. Bageant and Sherman do an admirable job presenting us with arguments suggesting exactly why this is the case.

\textsuperscript{3}As an example, see www.corestandards.org.
References


