

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).¹ 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 edu-

cators 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, and 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.²

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

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

²See, however, Sherman and Sage (2011).

lack. Rural people in Sherman's study construct categories of moral capital and self worth in the absence of viable means of earning a living. The categories allow the community and its members to construct alternate criteria of self-worth for themselves based on their positioning on a moral rather than financial scale.

Both authors (Bageant explicitly and Sherman implicitly) suggest that there is a permanent rural underclass long ignored by policy makers across all political persuasions. Understanding why this underclass exists in rural communities suggests a counter-narrative to current mainstream education reforms. A more nuanced explanation of what may appear to be low or inadequate academic performance by rural and economically poor students will better inform policy makers. Those of us engaged in educating poor, rural students know that an "either-or" explanation for poor schools (either it is poor instruction or poverty) is incomplete. Rather, the cultural and economic setting of students should also help inform the practices of the classroom teacher.

Bageant's story reveals a family intensely devoted to their home, land and family. Like many rural Americans today, 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).

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.

Illiterate? In poor health? Underpaid, disposable, superstitious, and exploited? Big Deal. That would describe much of the planet. The difference is American class-denial. The usurious middle-class loan shark in India is just that—a licensed crook. He knows it. And he knows he is a member of a mid-level economic class that is permitted to screw the peasants. The peasants understand that too...In the United States, the middle class is built upon the same extraction of the fruits of production of those below them in India, but is perpetuated through denial of that truth, which runs counter to the nation's egalitarian mythology (p. 269).

Developing an alternative narrative to help cope with sense of powerlessness is one way in which poor, rural Americans can help explain their lives. Sherman argues in her study that poor, rural Americans substitute their own hierarchy of moral worth to replace the financial and cultural capital lacking in their communities. Sherman discusses how the "new" morality is changing perceptions of substance abuse (chapter two), family life (chapter three) and the role of men and changing masculinity (chapter four). Sherman concludes her study by attempting to understand the reasons behind the current status of many rural communities in America's economic margins. One particular finding helps us understand that educational reformers are not reviewing the lessons that can be learned from past policy failures. Sherman states that, "...the first way in which policy failed to recognize the importance of culture was through ignoring the importance of place and community ties for rural residents" (p. 184).

The implications for educational reform are enormous. Educational reformers often want schools (including rural

schools) to de-contextualize curriculum, instruction and management and move toward a unified national “standard” of operation in all of these areas.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.

³As an example, see www.corestandards.org.

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