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dreams. At times the sense of loss is solemn, other times it's more biting. And that may be the point of putting these particular stories together. Sometimes people lose little parts of themselves or their loved ones day by day, sometimes it's sudden. Sometimes we choose to move

on and sometimes we are forced to.

All of the stories are linked by their exploration of relationships and the complexities that arise, from the relationship between a father and his daughter to the relationships between couples.

While the stories are vividly told, some of them felt slightly less relatable

than others and, compared to previous works, the storytelling wasn't quite as charming or humorous. But there's a realness to them. There's also more ambiguity in some of the stories that should keep readers on their toes. Overall, the stories are interesting and the art is definitely impressive. —Katie Moore

## A Dispiriting and Beautiful Experience

### **THE BATTLE FOR ROOM 314: MY YEAR OF HOPE AND DESPAIR IN A NEW YORK CITY HIGH SCHOOL by Ed Boland (Grand Central)**

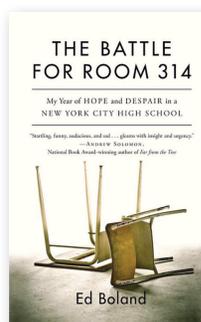
When his work raising money for an education nonprofit left him feeling only somewhat fulfilled, Ed Boland quit his job mid-career, earned a teaching degree, and went into the trenches as a ninth-grade history teacher at a struggling public high school in New York City. After a year, he wrote this book about his experiences. There are so many stories of big-dreaming middle class teachers (who are usually white) toughing it out in poor, underserved, and sometimes violent city schools (whose students are overwhelmingly black and brown) that it has almost become a genre unto itself—and one that could easily be unpalatable if handled poorly.

Happily, Boland is modest, likable, and realistic about, well, reality. He knows that “Being a whitey with a savior complex isn't going to help [my students].” Problem is, it's hard to know what will. Boland devotes whole weekends to making creative lesson plans, and he has diverse educational experience to draw

from, as both a former Catholic school kid and a Yale admissions officer. But in a chaotic environment where most students are performing way below their grade level, he finds it hard to tell whether he's making a difference.

A gay man in his forties with clear memories of the way feminine-seeming boys were bullied in his own high school, Boland also harbors dreams of helping his gay students who are being tormented by their classmates. But he soon finds that connecting with them—indeed, with most of the students, most of the time—is a tricky proposition, and his attempts to do so are often met with anger and rejection.

As an author, Boland has a charming way with words that makes the book entertaining to read, even laugh-out-loud funny—as when he shamefacedly admits to understanding only “Sesame Street Spanish.” As his story unfolds, it becomes clear that his snappy approach



isn't just stylistic, but actually goes a long way in making the dire situations he describes easier to read about. The plain facts, when presented in stark language, are shocking. The public schools of New York are more racially segregated than in any other system in the United States, Boland reports. In his “worst” class, the one he focuses on in the book, he teaches a girl who worked on the street as a prostitute in the seventh grade; another girl whose homeless mother had pulled her out of a worse school in order to tutor her on the subway for a year; and a few students who are already members of drug rings and notorious gangs. Getting them to pay attention to a lesson on the Silk Road is a tall order.

Boland describes his students vividly—so vividly, in fact, that one wonders with a wince if any of them will read the book—and he concludes his story with an update on all of them some years down the line. The results of his experiment in teaching are dispiriting and absolutely beautiful, in turn.

—Katie Haegle

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