

A teacher's candid, and sometimes cruel, observations

Boston
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Losing My Faculties: A Teacher's Story

By Brendan Halpin
Villard, 237 pp., \$21.95

By Kim Marshall

In "Losing My Faculties: A Teacher's Story," Brendan Halpin walks us through his first nine years as a high school English teacher. As his story unfolds (written in an informal style laced with profanity), it becomes apparent that he had terrible luck with his job placements, winding up in one dysfunctional setting after another.

When idealistic young teachers like Halpin find themselves in schools that are not functioning well, they have choices. They can leave. They can hunker down and get really good at their craft. They can work with small groups of colleagues to improve one part of their school. Or they can organize the community or become principals and try to transform the whole school.



PHOTO/LISA CALDERONE

BRENDAN HALPIN

Halpin did none of these. By his own account, he was a constant complainer, struggled with the most basic elements of teaching, and could not point to any significant learning gains among his students. By the tender age of 33, he was calling himself a "bitter old [expletive]."

So why did he write this book? It appears that a major reason was to settle scores, especially with a number of people in the Boston

charter school where he taught for three years. He trashes every school and program for which he worked and has negative, often nasty things to say about no fewer than 81 teachers, administrators, consultants, students, and parents. Here is a sampling: a superintendent is a "moron"; a teacher "contrives to show off her ever-thickening legs with shorter skirts"; a science teacher is a "notorious alcoholic"; a student is a "cripple" and subtly provokes classmates; the same student's mother is "a gigantic pain in the ass"; a consultant is "glib, hostile, condescending"; and the president of the charter school is a "dangerously stupid individual."

Is there anything positive in this book? Halpin tells a few touching stories about good moments with his students, briefly describes some creative lessons he taught, and is honest about his own shortcomings. He also has nice things to say about five individuals, especially his mentor teacher in Boston — a man who agonizes every day over how to improve his effectiveness with students.

But Halpin is quick to say that he does not agree with this approach. Halpin believes that great teaching is essentially serendipity, a product of once-in-a-blue-moon inspiration, good combinations of students, and sheer luck. Reflecting on a wonderful lesson, he writes, "Once again, I stumbled into forty-five minutes of greatness." As for workshops on new teaching ideas, Halpin is contemptuous of them all. He admits that his classroom discipline is poor, but he never took the initiative to read a book or get additional training. He clings to the discredited notion that a certain amount of chaos inevitably accompanies creative teaching.

Speaking of chaos, it's striking that everywhere he taught, curriculum anarchy reigned: Halpin was given tremendous freedom to teach what he wanted. As the book progresses, we wonder how he will react to new Massachusetts curriculum standards in the late

1990s and the dreaded MCAS. Astonishingly, Halpin *doesn't mention the MCAS once*.

The explanation may be that Halpin (like many other teachers who came of age in the pre-standards era) does not think in terms of measurable student outcomes. It's very telling that when he describes great classroom moments, the kids are "getting lots of work done," "doing neat projects," or "having fun." Halpin is proud when his kids all pass a writing exam but then says it was due to a unique mix of students. He tells us that he had data to prove he was effective at the charter school but then fails to produce them, saying they are too "boring" to go into. He is asking us to take on faith that he is a good teacher. In the standards era, this will not wash.

There are a few good insights buried in this book. Schools of education do an appallingly bad job preparing new teachers for the realities of classroom discipline. It's crazy to give new teachers the most challenging students. Tracking tends to result in low expectations of students who need help the most. Teacher isolation is bad. Collegiality and communication among teachers are good. When teachers observe one another's classrooms, that's golden.

But "Losing My Faculties" is not about promoting school reform. It's a cynical, mean-spirited, and depressing book that adds nothing of substance to the debate on improving American education. At the end of the book, Halpin bitterly gives up on urban schools. He now teaches at Brookline High School, a less stressful environment for him, and is reportedly doing a good job. We can only wish him success. But listen up, BHS folks: be careful what you say around this guy; you may be reading about yourself in his next book!

Kim Marshall is a former Boston teacher and administrator who now works as a mentor for new urban principals.

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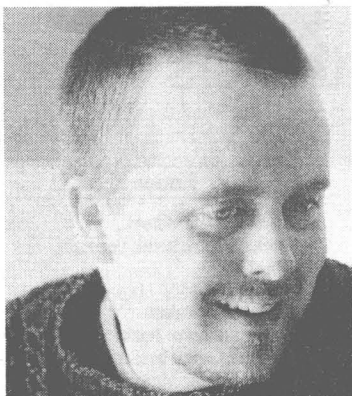
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