Foreword

"Twenty-first-century America has no clear and consistent remedy for educating its darkest sons." So says Alfred Tatum—and the data he presents makes that proposition unarguable. Even those (Mead 2006) who question the significance of boys generally underperforming girls in literacy have to see that 'crisis' is not too strong a word to use when discussing the literacy achievement of African American young men, especially those from working-class and working-poor families.

Tatum begins his book by explaining the scope of the problem and the racial isolation and social dislocation that contribute to it. But if you know Alfred Tatum you know that he has no patience for excuses. In fact, despite the bleak statistics that he shares, I think this book is profoundly optimistic.

In the first place, this book is profoundly optimistic about the power of literature to transform lives. Tatum shares some of the texts that helped make him who he is today and he thinks hard about the qualities of those enabling texts that promise to occupy an important place in the textual lineages of the African American adolescents with whom he works. Literature isn't a matter of cultural literacy for Tatum; as his subtitle indicates, it's a matter of life and death. As Tatum explains, reading and writing literature can be the vehicle for contemplating such crucial questions as "What are you willing to sacrifice to create the life you want to live?" and "How does one recover a part of one's soul?" Tatum makes a compelling case for the historic importance of "brother and sister" authors of various races, times, and places to African Americans grappling with forces that are working to keep them down. He also makes a compelling case that schools are denying current students a chance to experience the importance of literature in their own lives through a focus on contentless skills and the use of texts that are irrelevant or watered-down. Not only does Tatum share texts that he has read, he also shares stories and poems...
that he has written that get at the heart of the issues important to kids he encounters.

The book is also profoundly optimistic about African American young men. The writing of his summer workshop students is truly powerful.

Yet here I stand
With success and failure in each hand
Will I falter in my ways letting time go [by] like sand
But I tell myself NO . . .
Everything is possible with the right tools in your hand.

Tatum warns against oversimplifying and underestimating. To those who say that these young men reject reading, Tatum asks how can they reject something that [they] have not fully experienced? Instead of following this conventional wisdom, he documents their engagement in texts that matter.

Finally, Tatum is profoundly optimistic about teachers. Although he argues that educators must courageously accept that we are part of a social and educational system that contributes to the underperformance of African American adolescent males, he believes that we have the power to change that sad fact: “It is my hope that through this book, other teachers will find a way to squeeze texts for every ounce of possibility they contain to advance the literacy development of African American adolescent males.” He points the way not only by sharing his ideas about enabling texts, but also by sharing his ideas about enabling instruction. He details how to use essential questions to motivate and reward students’ reading. He explains how to use the text to teach the text. He explains how to use students’ reading in service of their writing and vice versa. In short, we have the power to make a difference. All we need is the will.

This book is a call to action. I hope we heed its cry.

—Michael W. Smith

References: