The Boys on the Bus: A Teacher's Mindful Commute

Editor's Note: As editors of NWP publications, we engage in an ongoing search for ideas and writing that connect with literacy education. This essay by Santa Clara University teacher Jeff Zorn resides somewhere outside these perimeters, yet we believe its perspective will resonate with all thoughtful teachers. A longer version of Zorn's essay won the 1997 NCTE Literary Festival Award for non-fiction.

by Jeff Zorn

Beating the backup, I commute on Caltrain from San Francisco to Santa Clara daily. The return trip puts me on a train filled to near-capacity by boys from Bellarmine College Preparatory School. Often the Bellarmine boys are loud, rude, and obnoxious — total jerks.

In San Francisco, I often ride the 44-O'Shaughnessy bus from Glen Park to the Richmond District just when McAteer High School lets out. As the bus crawls up O'Shaughnessy Blvd., regular riders brace for the onslaught, securing their possessions and stiffening their posture.

It's quite a contrast with the train, where I am observing the day's-end behavior of preppies in packs, their day having consisted mostly of "please her, please him" recitations.

In an interval between school discipline and family discipline, and outnumbering the other passengers, many of the Bell boys tend to misbehave. They talk more loudly than they know is acceptable on a public conveyance. They maul each other, blocking the center aisle in mock fights.

When schoolgirls from St. Francis and Castillejo parade past, the boys make crude remarks and, when the girls are safely out of earshot, they wax obscenely descriptive. To hear them tell it, Bellarmine boys treasure "sluts," though one suspects that none has yet personally encountered such a person. St. Francis girls are "darned near useless." And for favorite insults, the Bell boys call each other "hooms."

Their macho posturing always borders on the ludicrous. A small, pale-white boy brags loudly to his mates about how tough he was in the golf match yesterday. Yeah, if that guy from St. Ignatius had stepped on his line one more time while he was lining up a putt, he'd have kicked his ass.

The Caltrain staff and passengers put up with this in good humor, significantly more than deserved. Bellarmine boys have innocent faces, and their obscene yelling is no worse than the yapping of spaniel puppies. They scare nobody. A diminutive female conductor can set them back to order with the slightest displeasure in her voice.

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On the 44 bus, however, McAteer students file past the driver in cool nonchalance and find their places, some much too exuberantly. Almost all are African American or Asian American, their styles contemporary urban.

The bus careers down Laguna Honda Blvd., through the streets of the Inner Sunset and into Golden Gate Park. Crammed together at close quarters, students huddle into ethnic groupings. Their conversations, never about schoolwork, are full of the harshest profanities, girls same as boys.

Many fellow passengers react to McAteer students as if they are meracas, avoiding eye contact and showing no reaction to the swearing and horseplay. From the shades and hooded sweat shirts to the gaudy makeup, extra-long nails and sharp-pointed shoes, every accessory of the McAteer kids seems planned to increase their aura of formidability.

McAteer students sometimes fail to make accommodations for other passengers. Seeing you pull the exit rope and rise, they hold their positions, ignore "excuse me" and dare you to push through them. Sprawling across two seats each, they challenge you to tell them to sit up and share the bench. Body language suggests that to voice complaint is to start a piece of trouble you may not be able to finish.

For all the threatening postures, however, I have not seen a single McAteer student seriously misbehave on the bus. Still, passengers often express great relief when they make it safely out the door, muttering how disrespectful kids today are.

Hoodlums? Good kids acting up? Who's to say?

What I see is off-putting public behavior in two distinct cultural styles. But the Bellarmine boys have secured a rite of passage that writes off their transgressions as harmless. McAteer kids get no such exemption.

Whatever else it says in the Bellarmine catalog, one advantage of enrolling there is to secure this privilege of safely passing through a rebellious stage. The "boys will be boys" exemption remains denied to kids riding a city bus from a non-academic high school.

Many Bell boys matriculate at elite colleges, then join the ranks of professionals and executives. Few McAteer students even bother to take the SAT. Their futures do not include Stanford and Dartmouth and Harvard.

The misbehavior I see, and the reactions to the misbehavior, turn on foreknowledge of precisely this sort.

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