By the author of *The Yellow-Lighted Bookshop*

**Blackboard**

*A personal history of the classroom*

Lewis Buzbee
“Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be,” Peter DeVries once quipped. But, as Lewis Buzbee, a writer of children’s books who teaches at the University of San Francisco, demonstrates, it can serve a useful purpose. Looking back at his experiences from kindergarten to college, Buzbee reminds us that public schooling, though imperfect, remains essential — and that “focusing on what happens inside the classroom … is the answer to improving our schools.”

Buzbee’s trip down memory lane includes stops familiar to Baby Boomers. In an age before backpacks, he writes, boys carried books like apes, arms hanging down, while girls held them close to their chests. An assignment to bang two erasers together to knock loose the chalk in their pores was a privilege, while a call to the blackboard to solve an equation was terrifying.

Most important, Buzbee emphasizes, he was blessed with teachers who took him seriously, and showed him that he could move beyond himself “into what I did not yet know.”

It’s a familiar message, of course, and even if we are skeptical that a five-page report on John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” and a comment by a fellow student (“if you tried just a little bit, put in a little effort, you’d get straight As”) provided the “lightning moments” that rescued him from a drug-induced downward spiral, it’s a timely one. After all, as Buzbee points out, California spent more money per student in 1977 than any other state and now ranks 47th.

And so, who can disagree with him — and the sentiment expressed in a bumper sticker — that “it will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.”

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