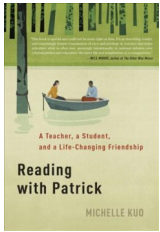


Reading with Patrick



[view in catalog](#)

Everyone has heard about the talented, super-smart teachers who work for the Teach for America program. But why do many of these new teachers only stay for a year or two and then move on? In *Reading with Patrick*, compelling and emotionally resonant memoir, Michelle Kuo, a Harvard-educated Asian American, relates her two years teaching in poverty-torn Helena, Arkansas, a delta town close to the Mississippi state line that has lost nearly all of its industry. Kuo also describes her parents' great expectations for her career, and their deep disappointment when she takes a low-paying position in education.

Michelle feels stifled by Helena, where there are no bookstore and few cultural events?just poverty and suffering everywhere. She believes that other than fast food franchises, undertaking may be the chief business in the poor community. Drugs are rampant, and there is nowhere for students to work after they graduate except at poorly-paying jobs; most lose hope long before that.

Inspired by the civil rights writing of Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and Malcolm X, Kuo wants to teach their work to her students, so they can learn about significant moments in civil rights history. However, the high school students do not relate to these great writers with the passion Kuo felt and expected that they would. Nevertheless, she does not leave the Delta in May as she had planned, but spends the summer there.

We learn about the relationships Michelle builds in Helena, particularly one with a student named Patrick. Michelle finds in Patrick a sharp mind and an eagerness to learn. When he fails to show up for school, she goes to his house and tells him he must come back. To her amazement, he does, and makes much progress in school.

Kuo's parents continue to pressure her about her career plans. So in her second year in Helena, she decides to enroll in law school, but feels extremely torn by this decision. While in law school, she receives word that Patrick has killed a man and gone to prison. Michelle flies down to visit him, feeling immense guilt at the way his life has turned out. As her own graduation nears, she decides instead of the high-pressure New York City job she has groomed for, she will take time off, go back to Helena, and help Patrick in the only way she knows how, through books and reading. This time, Michelle finds books that impress Patrick and connect with him immediately: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The two begin to memorize poems together, and take turns saying them aloud.

Under deplorable living conditions and with a legal system that provides only one lawyer for hundreds of indigent litigants, Michelle and Patrick discover joy and vital life lessons through books. The power of friendship and the importance of a caring teacher make an otherwise dark subject inspiring?and, at times, hopeful.

Posted by Dory L. on May 9, 2018

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