

Review of *Teachers Who Change Lives*, by Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game, MUP, 2006, xviii + 172 pp. Price:??

By Don Aitkin

This is a fine book. I read it in two bites within 24 hours, which tells you something, and throughout I kept nodding, exclaiming 'Yes!' and interrupting my wife to read bits of it aloud. All this for three reasons: it is important, it is challenging, and it is a good read.

The title is only part of the argument, because the book is as much about teaching and learning as it is about particular teachers themselves. But the authors use lengthy extracts from tape-recorded interviews with interesting notables like Shane Gould, Greg Chappell, Michael Kirby and Helen Garner, not only to show how particular teachers connected with students who went on to become famous, but what the essence of good teaching is.

By doing that they have moved discussions about 'schools' and 'education' far past what are (to me at least) recurringly boring arguments about funding, assessment and standards. Teaching our children is just about the most important domestic activity our society undertakes, and it ought to be done well. Mostly it is, yet teachers and schools are denigrated in all sorts of ways, and have been at other times and in other societies.

The authors do not get into why this is so, though any reader is likely to want to ask that question. I think that there are three broad answers. The first is that some remember only bad experiences from school, or that the bad experiences they had outweighed the good.

Another is that as parents we see schools both as a blessed relief from the business of child-minding and as a threat to our authority as parents. Third, we would like our children to turn out in a particular way (like the best parts of ourselves, most probably), and fear the capacity of the school to turn them out differently.

Whatever we say, the evidence does not support the view that our society really values, let alone understands, what goes on in schools. Neither they, nor the teachers who staff them, are well funded or well-respected, and in contemporary Australia they are constantly in trouble.

It would be instructive if every Minister in every government in Australia read this book and asked themselves whether or not they had a teacher or two who really made a difference in their shaping as human beings. How could they make it possible for more students to have more such experiences? After all, the Ministers seem to have turned out all right.

My fortunate experience is only to have had competent teachers through out my schooling, courtesy of the NSW Department of Education. But as a 'difficult' adolescent, out of sorts with teachers, my peer group and myself, it was not until my Leaving Certificate year that I found a teacher, Jack Williams, who was prepared to take the class pest seriously. He happened also to be the Deputy Headmaster, with whom I had had

some disciplinary moments already (one of them very similar to that described in the book by Michael Kirby). He appeared as our English teacher and responsible for English Honours, which I was also taking.

His demeanour to me now was thoroughly professional and courteous. It was as though everything in the past was irrelevant. I was in his senior class, and in the most senior part of it. I must therefore share his love of English literature, and we would go through the curriculum together. It was the subject I enjoyed most in my entire secondary experience, and I did tolerably well in it as well. I was never a pest for him.

The book is full of comparable stories, and from them the authors have distilled the essence of good teaching, which starts with a passion for the subject and a respect for its rules. Couple that with a disinterested love for the students, and you are likely to do well. A disinterested love? Yes. Don't be a teacher unless you are able to love your students as human beings, full of a potential that you just may be able to unlock, if you care for and respect them, and wait for the moment.

The moment is that flash of understanding, or recognition, when the student understands an important point. He or she will never have to learn that again; it will be locked into the mind, available ever afterwards. My father, a mathematics teacher, described such a moment in his own education, in Broken Hill the best part of a century ago. His maths teacher introduced them to geometry, and suddenly he was hooked. 'I realised that I could work it out for myself — I didn't have to *learn* it. From that time on I always gave the teacher my full attention when any new theorem was explained. At the end of the lesson I *knew* it.'

The moment is a moment of understanding, not of teaching. Greg Chappell is one of a number in the book who emphasises that you can't actually teach people cricket (or bike-riding, or Latin): they have to learn it for themselves, and the best teaching draws the student into that learning moment effectively and carefully.

Two themes emerged for me in reading the book, and I would have liked to hear the authors spend more time on them. The first is the capacity of good teachers to bring whole classes, not just single students, on at a rush. One of my mathematics teachers, Clare Lindsay, was one such. We loved her enthusiasm and friendliness, and we all did well for her.

The second is the utterly basic question of how to ensure that all teachers are good teachers, in the terms the authors set out. How can teachers gain confidence in their own capacities in the classroom? Some never do. Good teaching is both exhausting and fulfilling. If teachers have too many to teach and too much busywork to undertake, then their energy levels will be low, and their effectiveness reduced. This is not simply a question of funding. It is above all a question of recognising the enormous power of good teaching, and its value to our society.

And yet I can already hear disbelieving voices. 'Surely with all those holidays they ought to be fit! After all, I only get four weeks a year, and my job is just as demanding as theirs...'