

School's Out For Good

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a review of

People's Republic of Neverland: The Child versus the State by Robb Johnson. PM Press 2020

Raising Free People by Akilah Richards. PM Press 2020

In the grammar of education, children are often passive objects. Children get educated; children get schooled. And what does education do to them? Charles Dickens described schoolchildren as “little parrots and small calculating machines.” A century and an ocean away from Victorian-era England, another artist and resistance worker, the musician Bob Marley, disavowed traditional education entirely: “If I was educated, I would be a damn fool.”

Two new books share the premise that education must involve children as autonomous people—and not render them objects, parrots, machines, or damn fools. *People's Republic of Neverland: The Child versus the State*, by the English musician and teacher Robb Johnson, takes up Dickens' criticism of British education. *Raising Free People: Unschooling as Liberation and Healing Work*, by the Jamaican-American writer and public speaker Akilah Richards, leads the way out of school altogether, outlining the author and her family's radical and holistic practice of “unschooling.”

Part memoir, part manifesto, *People's Republic of Neverland* reads like a punk-rock anti-textbook on English education. Johnson spent thirty-five years teaching in state-run primary schools, starting in the 1980s, and his tenure coincided with the policies of educational “reform” by which the state asserted centralised control over schools. Johnson started at the Andrew Ewing School, a “do as you like” idyll of yellow brick, open-plan classrooms where children pursued individual interests and teachers embraced progressive, child-centered pedagogies. Now, nearly four decades later, Andrew Ewing is shut. The state tests five-year-olds on phonic digraphs—only those who attend fee-based “public” schools like Eton are exempt. Teachers, subject to oversight by the Office for Standards in Education, must promote “British Values” by law.

Ever since schooling became mandatory in the Victorian age, Johnson writes, schools have been “contested spaces.” On one side are the “reformers” (or “deformers,” Johnson remarks), who view education as a manufacturing process that treats child as product and learning as outcome. On the other are those who, like the radical educators A.S. Neill and Francisco Ferrer, would have schools respect children as independent beings. These child-centered environments are the Neverlands of Johnson's title, “where people can grow, not up, not old, but as individuals.”

The book describes several real-life Neverlands. What these Neverlands share, more than place or population, is an atmosphere of respect, enthusiasm, and autonomy. There's only one rule: “No one gets hurt.” Children pursue their interests. Teachers, wary of their own authority, employ their professional knowledge and enthusiasm in the service of children. One teacher spent her weekend cutting down shrubbery so kindergartners could play outside. Johnson, a musician by night, wrote songs with and about his students. He folds his lyrics into his prose; they are songs of protest, of people and animated by the children he taught. One song, “Hands Off Hove Park,” became the rallying anthem of a successful collective action to prevent state takeover of Hove Park School.

Johnson's Neverlands have some-thing else in common: they're in the past. *People's Republic of Neverland* is ultimately nostalgic. “We need to reclaim our schools,” he concludes. He urges determined collective action against

further reforms, and declares that “a good place to reset education would be the 1970s.” Faced with a future of more state control and less teacher or student autonomy, Johnson looks back to once upon a time—but the way to Neverland is hazy.

If this seems insufficient, it might help to turn to *Raising Free People*. For Richards, as Johnson, school in its typical form is inimical to self-realization. When education is compulsory and standardized, she writes, it is “an act of colonization.” But where Johnson reflects and reminisces, Richards acts. *Raising Free People* chronicles Richards’ pursuit of education for her daughters outside of school, and offers guidance for the would-be unschooled.

Richards’ two daughters, Marley and Sage, went on summer vacation from their public school in 2012, when the girls were six and nine. They have never returned. In school, they were “Gifted and Talented,” but they were also “assets to develop,” students first and children second. Soon afterwards, Richards and her husband, both web-based workers, decided to live as “digital nomads.” The family spent six months of the year or more in Jamaica and elsewhere abroad.

At first, Marley and Sage hauled textbooks to the beach and completed assignments through an online virtual academy. Soon, the textbooks stayed shut. The girls drew maps of new neighborhoods, read books, interviewed locals. Richards emphasizes that unschooling is not the same as school at home. Unschooling, she explains, is first a literal act—to leave school. Then, it is “not so much about what to learn or how to learn, but, instead, about how to nurture trust and a child’s sense of autonomy.” Finally, it is “an entire approach to life and relationships.”

Richards embodies that approach. She invites the reader to witness her question her own “schoolish” thinking and collaborate with her daughters in their self-directed education. Growing up in Jamaica and Florida, she understood “from being told” that education was key to Black liberation. Yet school taught her to perform whiteness and good studenthood for adult authorities. Reckoning with her daughter’s education, Richards applies a tactic she calls “mad question-askin’,” after the Notorious B.I.G. lyric. She interrogates her own impulses, tracing some back to the strictures of colonial oppression in Jamaica, and works to decolonize her parenting. She chooses to stop slapping her daughters. She accepts one daughter’s decision to go braless. She reasons with Marley and Sage, and she trusts them.

Her book encourages others to do the same. She peppers every chapter with advice and wisdom, in addition to the illustrative scenes and mad question-askin’ from her own life. In warm, brisk prose, Richards mixed anecdotes with action tips, and she draws from an active community of twenty-first century unschoolers. One chapter profiles a group of “living examples,” parents and educators who have, like Richards, embraced self-directed education as a form of liberation. In others, Richards advises readers on how to respond to skeptical family and friends, discusses unschooling in the context of ongoing anti-Black violence, and lists essays and articles for further reading on anarchist and anti-colonial theories of education.

Still, self-directed education remains its own kind of Neverland for most. Most parents won’t be willing or able to self-reflect and adapt as Richards does in *Raising Free People*. As Johnson points out in *People’s Republic of Neverland*, schools can at least get kids away from their families and into rooms with other kids and books.

If *People’s Republic of Neverland* looks back at the recent and oppressive history of British state-run education, *Raising Free People* looks forward, imagining a philosophy alternative to the hierarchies of compulsory schools. If we refuse the premise that children must get educated, these books suggest, then we begin to insist that people get free.

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