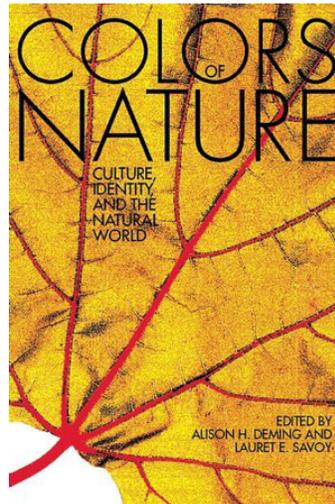


THREE BOOK REVIEWS

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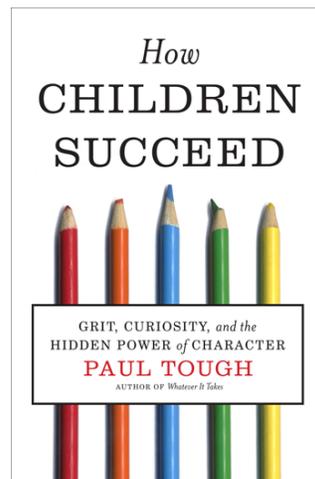
The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World

Edited By Alison Deming and Lauret Savoy
Milkweed Editions, 2011,
Second Edition



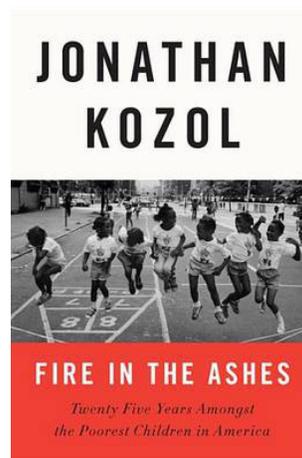
How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character

By Paul Tough
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012



Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America

By Jonathan Kozol
Crown Publishing, 2012



It's not uncommon that I have more than one book that I'm reading, and in September the following three came together with a powerful connection – *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural*

World edited by Alison Deming and Lauret Savoy, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough, and Jonathan Kozol's latest, *Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America*.

The connections are related to our NSRF Mission Statement: “*The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.*”

It is in the “educational and social equity” part of our mission statement where there is the powerful connection in these three recent books. Kozol's book is the most recent, having just been published in September. It is a revisiting of the inner-city children and youth that he met years ago in his earlier books about them – *Rachel and Her Children*, and *Amazing Grace*. *Fire in the*

Ashes is an up-close and personal account of what has happened to some thirteen students of color whom he

first met when they were in elementary school, and follows them through their adolescence and into young adulthood. They are children from one of the poorest neighborhoods, and the some of the worst schools in this country.

The first five chapters in “Part One: The Shadow of the Past” are heart-rending accounts of some who didn’t survive. Despite what seemed to be promising possibilities for them to rise above their unimaginably destructive environments—rat-infested, crime-ridden, shrouded in drug dealing apartment buildings and neighborhoods—they were gunned down or committed suicide. Their deaths came far too early.

Then, the next series of chapters, “Part Two: A Bright Shining Light,” are the moving accounts of those who, to date, have made it out, and are overcoming their terrible situations.

But before I return to more about Kozol’s challenging book, let me make the connection to Paul Tough’s *How Children Succeed*, also published in 2012. His is both a personal account of some of the children he met and followed to their schools, and of researchers from a wide background of professions: educators, psychologists, neuroscientists, and economists. Tough begins by pointing out that our current, predominant educational hypothesis (he traces its rise to the 1994 publication of the Carnegie Corporation’s report, “Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children”) is what he calls the “cognitive hypothesis:”

“...that success today depends primarily on cognitive skills – the kind of intelligence that gets measured on IQ tests, including the abilities to recognize letters and words, to calculate, to de-

tect patterns – and that the best way to develop these skills is to practice them as much as possible, beginning as early as possible.”

Then, citing extensive research from the diverse studies of the professions mentioned above, he concludes that what matters most is *not* how much information we can stuff into a child’s brain. Rather, we should be helping a child develop a very different set of qualities, including “persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence.” He notes further that these are what economists refer to as “non-cognitive skills,” what psychologists call “personality traits,” and the rest of us might call “character.” And here is one of the connections of Tough’s more deeply researched book and Kozol’s personally moving book:

“Some of the kids whose lives have been most difficult are struggling still and have yet to find that place of inner peace in which they can start to shape a vision of contributive maturity.... Success within the lives of those I’ve known for all these years is as much a matter of their inward growth – in decency, in character – as of their outward victories.”

Enter the third book in this series of reviews, *Colors of Nature*, published in 2011. The troubling essential question this anthology of some thirty-three essays by an amazingly diverse series of authors (African American, Arab American, Asian American, Latino/Latina, Native American, “multi-racial,” or “mixed bloods”) is this: “Why is there so little ‘nature writing’ by people of color?” This begs the answer to other questions:

“What if one’s primary experience of land and place is not a place apart but rather indigenous? What if it is ur-

“... persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence ...”

"What if one's primary experience of land and place is not a place apart but rather indigenous? What if it is urban or indentured or exiled or (im)migrant or toxic? To define 'nature writing' as anything that excludes these experiences does not reveal a 'lack' of writing, but reflects, instead, a societal structure of inclusion and exclusion based on othered difference—whether by 'race,' culture, class, or gender."

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There are some essays here by writers with whom I was already familiar, like bell hooks, but most are refreshingly new, like Jennifer Oladipo, a writer and award-winning journalist from Louisville, who recently became Kentucky's first African American state-certified environmental educator. As a former biology and environmental science teacher with my own deep affection for the outdoors and nature, her essay, "Porphyrin Rings," is particularly insightful. Oladipo begins with the recognition that the hemoglobin in our blood and the chlorophyll in plants both have 136 atoms in common in their exact same molecular structure (the "porphyrin rings"), with only one atom of difference, the iron in hemoglobin, and magnesium in chlorophyll. She closes her essay writing metaphorically about invasive, "alien species" of plants like kudzu and winter-creeper, and invites us to view them differently. I see this as a connection to the two books by Kozol and Tough:

"If we, who have cultivated protective and even rhapsodic relationships with native plants, can try to understand, from the inside out, our deep connection to all vegetative life, then perhaps that understanding could also encompass



our connections to other people, however 'alien' they might seem.... Surely our intrinsic sameness should lead us to embrace and value people with the same fervor that we do plants, and to let go of fictions of social and biological stasis in favor of a more inclusive and more accurate view.... With so many lives so intricately enmeshed in the same soil, it is not only the deepest roots that matter in nature. More often than not, what matters most is some connection we can't immediately see, but that makes all the difference—or maybe that shows us all of the sameness—once we do."

Returning to *Fire in the Ashes*, Kozol speaks of the young adolescent males he came to know from his volunteer tutoring in an after school program run by Martha, an incredible pastor of a neighborhood church. Kozol wondered why the adolescents found it so hard to search within themselves to find the inner strength and character needed to surmount their desperate circumstances. Thinking of one young man he calls Benjamin: "Martha's love and loyalty surely had a role in this. More important, I believe, was the model of determination he had seen in her.... He's told me many times that her example of persistence and relentlessness throughout the years he'd lived with her 'helped me find the strength inside of me I didn't know I had'."

This is a point Kozol emphasizes again and again throughout these personal stories, that "all these children had unusual advantages. Someone intervened in every case, and with dramatic consequences." The intervention may have come from a devoted single parent, an-

other relative, a friend, someone in the community, a tutor, a mentor, or a teacher, as well as people from various charitable agencies (sometimes unknown personally to these children) who provided resources. Here, too, is another connection to a similar theme struck by Paul Tough in *How Children Succeed*.

After interviewing the amazing coach of an inner-city middle school's chess club, and following them through their tournaments and consistent national championships, he, too, notes:

“In each case, a teacher or mentor found a way to help a student achieve a rapid and unexpected transformation [many of these chess-playing students had not been particularly stellar students] by using what James Heckman would call non-cognitive skills and David Levin would call character strengths.”

Tough then goes on to challenge all of us, asking, “What if we could do that for large numbers of teenagers – not to help them attain chess mastery or persuade them to quit fighting in school but to help them develop precisely those mental and character strengths they would need to graduate from college?” Note Tough's precise wording: not only for them to enter college, but to graduate!

But what are those “character strengths” that the researchers find are so invaluable and essential for success in college and beyond? They involve developing work habits, study skills, time management, help-seeking behavior, critical thinking, social/academic problem-solving skills, self-control and delayed gratification. Tough recognizes these strengths despite earlier inaccurate research on the development of the adolescent brain which saw young people as captives of neurological changes that make them uncontrollably impulsive, thrill-seeking, shallow thinkers.

It is worth noting, in connection with the personal transformations that Kozol and Tough see some young people exhibiting, that extensive research presented at the recent annual meeting of the Society of Neuroscience, shows that adolescents do have the ability to control impulsivity and to think through problems, particularly when the rewards are significant and meaningful. And, that the ongoing development of the “social brain” in adolescence can give young people the flexibility they need to navigate

successfully the changes they inevitably encounter in such multi-faceted social environments as found in entering college.

Returning to *Colors of Nature*, and the development of social skills, there is the wonderful personal essay by Nalini Nadkarni, who is the daughter of an Indian/Hindu father and a Brooklyn/Jewish mother, “A Tapestry of Browns and Greens.” Now a member of the faculty in environmental studies at The Evergreen State College, her research concerns the ecology of tropical and temperate forest canopies. What captivated me most in her essay was the way she has gone about seeking connections with non-professional communities, public audiences outside of academia, “the concept that all voices, all approaches, and all types of people can contribute to keeping the great tapestry of nature intact.”

“Urban youth is a segment of the population that can be hard to educate about the importance of nature. To connect young people from the inner city with science and natural ecosystems, I engaged a young rapper named C.A.U.T.I.O.N. to interact with field scientists – a marine biologist, a forest ecologist, and an entomologist – along with thirty middle school children from Tacoma, Washington. Each day included field time – with the rapper singing about the trees, clams and bugs we encountered – and sound studio time – when the students made up their own rap songs about their field experiences. By the end of the week, the children had cut their own CD, which they presented to their families and peers.”

Here's a second example:

“I initiated the Sustainable Prisons Project at Cedar Creek Correctional Center, a local prison, to help solve the problem of the non-sustainability of moss harvesting, working with prisoners as partners in exploring ways to best cultivate moss.... Prisoners observed and recorded the vigor of moss samples, which we then weighed to quantify growth rates. After eighteen months, the results of the project were dramatic. The corrections center staff were astonished at the energy, interest, and patience the participants exhibited. Several of the inmates found training in the horticulture field after they were released. As an outgrowth, I launched an in-prison lecture series called ‘Sustainable Living – Sustainable Lives’.”



"Martha's love and loyalty surely had a role in this. More important, I believe, was the model of determination he had seen in her.... He's told me many times that her example of persistence and relentlessness throughout the years he'd lived with her 'helped me find the strength inside of me I didn't know I had.'"

I close this three-part review with something from each book; first, from bell hooks' essay in *Colors of Nature* entitled "Earth Bound, On Solid Ground:

"More than ever before in our nation's history, black folks must collectively renew our relationship to the earth, to our agrarian roots. For when we are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the dark earth, we collude with the domination of the earth's dark people, both here and globally. Reclaiming our history, our relationship to nature, to farming in America, and proclaiming the humanizing restorative of living in harmony with nature so that the earth can be our witness is meaningful resistance."

And this from Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed*:

"When I spend time with young people growing up in adversity, I can't help but feel two things. First, a sense of anger for what they're already missed....my second reaction: a feeling of admiration and hope when I watch young people making the difficult and often painful choice to follow a better path, to turn away from what might have seemed like their inevitable destiny.... Every day they pull themselves up one more rung on the ladder to a more successful future. But for the rest of us, it's not enough to just applaud their efforts and hope that someday, more young people follow their lead. They did not get onto that ladder alone. They are there only because someone helped them take the first step."

Lastly, striking a similar theme, is this from Jonathan Kozol's *Fire in the Ashes*:

"If any lesson may be learned from the academic breakthroughs achieved by Pineapple and Jeremy, it is not that we celebrate exceptionalism of opportunity but that the public schools themselves in neighborhoods of wide-spread destitution ought to have the rich resources, small classes, and well-prepared and well-rewarded teachers that would enable us to give to every child the feast of learning that is now available to children of the poor only on the basis of a careful selectivity or by catching the attention of empathetic people like the pastor of a church or another grown-up whom they meet by chance. Charity and chance and narrow selectivity are not the way to educate the children of a genuine democracy."

There is so much more to these three wonderful books, so do yourself a favor this holiday season—treat yourself to at least one of them. Then buy one for another teacher friend, or perhaps give one to your school's principal, or have your librarian purchase a copy for the professional shelves of your school's library. You can even give one to the pastor or rabbi at a nearby church or synagogue, or an elected official in or from your region. All three of these books I strongly believe are essential reading to transform our schools into developing global citizens in the 21st century. 