



Cross-X

Joe Miller

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In "Cross-X," journalist Joe Miller follows the Kansas City Central High School's debate squad through the 2002 season that ends with a top-ten finish at the national championships in Atlanta. By almost all measures, Central is just another failing inner-city school. Ninety-nine percent of the students are minorities. Only one in three graduate. Test scores are so low that Missouri bureaucrats have declared the school "academically deficient." But week after week, a crew of Central kids heads off to debate tournaments in suburbs across the Midwest and South, where they routinely beat teams from top-ranked schools. In a game of fast-talking, wit, and sheer brilliance, these students close the achievement gap between black and white students--an accomplishment that educators and policy makers across the country have been striving toward for years. Here is the riveting and poignant story of four debaters and their coach as they battle formidable opponents from elite prep schools, bureaucrats who seem maddeningly determined to hold them back, friends and family who are mired in poverty and drug addiction, and--perhaps most daunting--their own self-destructive choices. In the end, Miller finds himself on a campaign to change debate itself, certain that these students from the Eastside of Kansas City may be the saviors of a game that is intrinsic to American democracy.

Cross-X Details

Date : Published October 3rd 2006 by Farrar Straus Giroux

ISBN : 9780374131944

Author : Joe Miller

Format : Hardcover 480 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Education, Sociology, Cultural, African American, Adult

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Jill says

I marked this as both nonfiction and memoir because the first half (make that 3/4) is a standard journalistic account of a disadvantaged group of black teens who are on a high school debate team. This is interesting enough as it is, challenging our ideas about what education in America needs today in order to reach our youth. But it's pretty standard fare as far as this goes - it doesn't challenge you too much, especially if you're white and middle or upper class.

What was most fascinating was when Miller dropped this journalistic bent because he became too involved emotionally to keep it up. This is where the story really gets good, because he now has broken through something inside of himself that was keeping him from seeing a more truthful reality, and he is still able to share it with the reader. This part of the story (Part 4: The Post-Round Critique) only lasted about 50 pages, but it was, in my mind, the best part.

The rest of the book is essential to understanding these last 50 pages, so I don't recommend skipping it. Miller is thorough and interesting, and does a good job of pointing out where he is in all this, delineating opinion from "fact" and showing us how a journalist does his job, if he's any good. Unfortunately the book seems to come to an end abruptly, just when it's getting good, as though he had a deadline to meet. Still, it's worth the read, though at nearly 500 pages, it's not quick.

Katherine says

So, I was pre-inclined to love this book because I've been debating my whole life, and I have always been a part of the world of "the game" that Miller describes. I particularly recommend this book for debaters, but I think it could be meaningful for anyone, as it is as much about an inner city debate program as it is about the horrifying state of public education for poor, black kids in this country and as it is about the desire, and means, of bringing real change to a community. Miller crosses all the lines he sets for the objective journalist he begins as, ending up as evangelical about changing the style of national high school policy debate as he is about coaching the team. But I think this made me like the book all the more - even if it did create some self-aggrandizing or biased moments in the narrative. Debate is just like that - it can become all encompassing - and the book depicts that incredibly well. Last, I think the book paints a realistic portrait of urban kids. These aren't perfect angels or drug dealers who transform through the power of education. They are high school debaters facing an uphill battle - often annoying and prone to acting out, but likely brilliant, with not enough people trying to help them use that brilliance to their advantage. I recommend this book.

Longfellow says

I feel lucky to have randomly discovered this book by Joe Miller. Not only is it set in my own city - Kansas City - it is also well-written in an enjoyable journalistic style. As a bonus, *Cross-X* piqued my interest in a subject which I am unlikely to have chosen, the regional and national high school debate scene.

Central High School in Kansas City, MO, is part of one of the worst performing school districts in the country; the district has even lost its accreditation since Miller published his book in 2006 (this loss became official in January 2012), though it admittedly had been heading in that direction for two or three decades. A few years ago, I regularly ran laps on Central's track with a couple of friends, and our time would often overlap with after school track workouts, with a few parents sprinkled throughout the bleachers, watching; this is one of the connections that made Miller's book particularly interesting to me when I came across it in the clearance racks.

As most of my favorite non-fiction does, Miller's book weaves several narrative strands together to tell a compelling story. He profiles several of the debaters on Central's teams from 2001 - 2004, and with a few of these we see his relationship grow considerably in depth over the course of his time at Central. The debate teacher, Jane Reinhart, is of course integral to the story, not least because her program is perhaps the only example of academic engagement and achievement to which Central can lay claim. Another of Miller's fascinating narratives is a historical survey of the school district's dysfunction, which is almost unbelievable. Scandal, mismanagement, stubborn-headedness, and apathy (just to name a few) all play parts in the KCMO school district's disastrous run. But debate remains a bright light, at least through the period of Miller's experience there. To keep this light glowing, however, requires a constant fight, which is yet another example of the unbelievable determination the district seems to have toward self-destruction.

Miller's narrative is a classic case of a journalist reaching a point in his documentation where he becomes ambivalent toward the ethics of his profession. There are lines that are not to be crossed; the subjects of the story must only be observed, never interfered with. But Miller becomes too involved, too invested both emotionally and intellectually to remain completely removed from events. And it is this evolution in his experience that leads to the book's climax and resolution. I can't speak for every potential reader, but not a single page of Miller's writing was a disappointment. I highly recommend his work, particularly to those who have an interest in political, economic, or educational equality, and especially as these issues relate to urban settings.

Elizabeth K. says

A journalist spends a year (and change) following a high school debate team from Kansas City Central. At first I was a little wary this was going to be one of those Stand and Deliver type stories, because Central is a predominately black, academically at risk, urban school. It didn't go down that path, fortunately. The book itself is structured a bit along the lines of a formal debate (not in a gimmicky, in your face way, thank goodness). The author provides in-depth profiles of several of the debate students, and the day to day, competition to competition stories are interesting and move along briskly. At the same time, Miller also raises more philosophical issues about debate, pedagogy, public policy, race and class. During his time with the debate team, his own ideas about these things change -- although I was a little disappointed with the way he wrote about his self-described epiphany. It's the kind of thing where it must have seemed so obvious to *him*, after a *year* covering debate, that he doesn't take a lot of trouble to articulate much to the reader, who presumably has only been reading his book for a few hours. I'm happy to take his word for his own experiences, but he didn't manage to convince me (following the debate structure of the narrative) to cast my ballot. It also left me wondering why he observed inconsistencies related to race and gender fairly early on, yet he became so much more invested in those surrounding race.

Grade: A-, although in parts it seemed a little like an intriguing magazine article that went on a bit.

Recommended: To people who were involved with any kind of competitive speaking in high school or

college, and people interested in race and class as they play out in educational settings.
2008/20

Amanda says

I thought this was great. It usually takes me weeks to finish nonfiction books. I knocked this one out in four days, and it's a *tome* at 500+ pages. This appealed to me on a few levels:

1. As a recovering policy debater: I competed in the 2002-2003 season at several of the tournaments these guys attended, so I remember that topic and the cases well (oh, Natives). As a girl, I remember how furious I felt all the time at the way I was treated by a lot of those all-white, all-male teams you'd hit on the circuit. I worked for Doug Springer at a debate program around the time this book was published, and I wish I'd read it back then, when debate was even fresher in my memory.
 2. As an urban educator: I really do believe in debate, but to me, the best part of the book was in Part Two, where Marcus spends some time with the Louisville debate team and has to contend with their controversial tactics and the challenge they present to the kind of debate he excels at. This is a perennial problem for people who are interested in social justice: are you better off learning the game and getting better at it than anyone else, or rejecting it as the deeply flawed, racist institution that it is?
 3. As a person who actually only enjoys memoirs: Joe Miller drops all pretense of journalistic objectivity really early on - by the end of the book, he's a debate coach. This is not at all a disinterested chronicle of a couple years spent with a famous debate squad. By the end, this book is more about Joe Miller than anyone else. As a person from a similar background, I found him a relatable guide to the world of Central High School. He's the better for his time there, and my bet is that most readers are better for reading about it.
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Chloe says

Sometimes I start to tell people about my experiences in high school and they look at me as though I'm from another planet. Every day for four years I would wake up at 5:30, deliver papers around my neighborhood, defrost my toes, and head to school by 6:30 for zero hour chamber choir rehearsals. I typically would not leave the building again until 8 or 9 in the evening, having eaten very little but sustained on a near constant drip of Mountain Dew and the occasional banana or apple. I had the security deactivation code for several teachers, keys to the teacher's lounge, complete unfettered access to the photocopier, could walk the halls with impunity during class time, and keys to more than a few classrooms.

"What sort of odd utopian high school did I go to?", you may wonder. Was I the child of some overworked teacher or administrator? Not at all. I was a member of the Debate Team. Every year, starting in July and continuing until the National Qualifying Tournament, we would research the assigned topic, write our cases, continue to research, cram ourselves and our tubs full of evidence onto buses that vented exhaust directly into the interior and flee travel from North Idaho over to whichever University or high school was hosting this particular weekend's tournament. Along the way we would miss a lot of class time, meet extremely interesting people from all over the nation, and get to argue about whether the United States Government's support of the International Space Station would trigger a nuclear conflict with Russia or whether the use of gender specific language in the debate round served to reentrench patriarchal systems of behavior.

Without putting too melodramatic of a point on it, debate saved my life. At a time when I had no interest in compulsory education, it provided an outlet for me to advance my own studies and, later, provided the means (a much coveted scholarship) by which I could flee Idaho. It was with great excitement then that I picked up Joe Miller's *Cross-X*, a recounting of the 2002-2003 debate season for Central Kansas City High School. An inner city school that has been the focus of national attention time and again for its academic deficiency and struggles with desegregation, Central doesn't really have a lot going for it other than its nationally-ranked debate team.

Miller follows two teams of debaters, a varsity team that ranked in the top 75 teams in the country and a novice team just getting their first taste of the weird and hyper-specialized world of cross-x, or policy-style, debate. This book could have easily become another example of the "struggling inner city youth makes good" cliché if Miller had maintained his journalistic integrity. Fortunately, as he gets to know these debaters, watch their rounds, fight against the recalcitrant Missouri HS activities association trying to bar them from national-level competitions, and confront the structural racism of both the education system as a whole and the debate community in particular, Miller himself gets drawn into the story. It's little things at first (writing letters to the school board to draw their attention to problems, convincing a debater that an upcoming tournament is more important than a computer game) but soon enough he is helping chaperone, cutting cards as a new Assistant Coach and, finally, setting up his own debate program at another urban Kansas City high school.

A lot of this read as old hat for a while, anyone who has been involved in the activity for long is well aware that there is a very serious dearth of female or minority debaters. It's also clear that, on the national level, it is dominated by just a few very well-funded public schools and private academies. The book really begins to take off when Miller's debaters begin to question these underlying truths of the debate world using Paulo Freire's seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and flip the traditional structure of the debate round on its head. It was incredibly nostalgic to hear about the case they write using UN peacekeepers in the Third World as a metaphor for the rich/poor (privileged/put down?) dichotomy that splits the Nationally-ranked elite from the struggling inner city teams.

My senior year of high school, when the topic was increasing education, my partner and I ran a very similar case using Sr. Freire's powerful philosophy, eschewing the traditional format of writing a plan to do so and advocating the adoption of a critical consciousness in the debate community itself. It made people incredibly upset when they first heard it (just as the case Miller's debaters create offended) because it attacked the very foundations of the sport that we all very much loved, but as the year went on and opposing teams kept losing to it, it gained a grudging respect in the North-West. To read of another team attempting the same thing, and succeeding on a level that we could only dream of (there is only one possible tournament that teams from the NW can compete in to gain a TOC bid and that's all the way down in Berkeley. Kansas City may have been stuck because of bureaucratic waffling but we were stuck due to budget constraints- who can afford to go to Texas to compete?) was an utter delight.

While those outside the debate community may not find this book too interesting, it deserves to be read by anyone who has ever stacked their debate tubs atop one another, given a roadmap and then proceeded to speed-read several dozen pages of evidence in a five minute rebuttal. It's a niche market, to be sure, but an important one that Miller clearly loves yet remains unafraid of criticizing. It's definitely reawakened a side of myself I thought long dead and has me contemplating getting involved in the activity once more.

Kathy McC says

The true story of of the Central High debate team from the east side of Kansas City. It was a tale of the "haves" and the "have nots". My favaoirite parts were the commentaries on actual debate rounds and the explanations of the debate process. While my debaters do not have to contend with life in the ghetto and they do not face the uphill battles that come with attending a poorly achieving urban school, the angst and political issues they have faced in the past were similar.

"This coach and these kids are the real saviors, with thier own plan to save a game so intrinsic to democracy- a game that is, by all appearances, dying out in America."

"Impending doom is common in the debate world. Cases are all about impact. They're about saying cool things like 'total thermal nuclear meltdown' and 'utter annihilation'.

"I sat down near Marcus and watched him read through a stack of documents. After a few minutes he started tapping a frantic beat with his highlighter. Then he spun it on his fingers like a helicopter blade."

"I really find it philosophically unacceptable, that there are certain haves and have nots.. WHich is what made it all the more satisfying when her have-nots beat the snot out of the haves at debate tournaments."

Chalida says

This has been my between books book since November and I am not sure if reading all 512 pages was worth it.

Joe Miller, journalist, follows Central High's debate team at the beginning of this decade. I appreciated reading about Central High, an urban school in Kansas City.

But what I learned is that debate makes you crazy.

The teacher coach is a debate martyr. Every weekend she is driving her van of students to debate competition. She is fighting for her kids to be allowed to compete, writing their speeches and making sure they graduate on time. While her students adore her, her whole identity becomes debate. How she manages to maintain her grading, lesson planning, let alone her marriage and health had me puzzled throughout.

It's not just the teacher. Debate causes this reporter Joe Miller to lose any sense of objectivity. He takes the journalist creed of "Giving voice to the voiceless" a whole new level. He spends every waking moment with these students. Going to the movies, deciphering Freire, shepherding them to Los Angeles, DC, Iowa, watching them get stoned and drunk and winning tournament after tournament repeatedly. Every detail of every debate is chronicled to ennui here. By the end, Miller is running his own debate program.

While part of me gets sucked into underdogs, especially students, triumphing, this book had me really worried about the adults. And with my partner as a debate coach, that anxiety didn't bode too well.

Krista says

A tremendously good book that not only addresses cross-x or policy-style debate, but also race, gender, and class in competitive academic arenas and in the larger world. I loved it as a former policy debater, but I also liked it as someone interested in race, gender, and class in the academic environment. Highly recommended.

Mommassa says

OK, it took me 5 years to finally finish this book. It was recommended by my son who did debate in High school. I felt so hopeful for the students from Central High in Kansas City , MO to succeed. even after so much time had passed in my reading. They were up against New Trier and top school in the midwest. I really connected with the staff and the struggle of the students. What a challenge to move forward with so many strikes against them.

Cynthia says

As a fairly recently graduated former debater (LD though, not CX) I was immediately intrigued by this book and beyond the way it touches on issues of racism and unequal access to education, I found it also appealed to the bit of nostalgia I continue to have for the activity.

I guess this book is consistent with any number of "poor, minority kids get inspired and find that they can succeed" stories you constantly see at the movies and does risk being a cliché. As someone who knows for a fact how "true" the story is, though, I never feel that way about this book. It talks about larger social issues while also conveying a good story, and altogether there's nothing to dislike. Cross-X does a very good job knitting together a story and putting a story about debate very well into a larger context.

Though my experience in the activity was very different, I found the book to be a very true to life account of the high school forensics community in general. Part of it is the gender bias aspect, and much as in real life, the debate community as Joe Miller experienced it is very a boy's world. It exposes many of the problems with the debate community that also exist in LD, as well as capturing the excitement that goes along with being a part of it.

Hemi says

I liked reading about something that happened in Missouri since I recently moved here. I feel like I witnessed a real-life application of Freire. The frequent mention of Dismantling Racism makes me want to read that, too, among other sources the debaters used. If only Foucault was as good as Miller at writing non-fiction page-turners, Eric Schlosser-style.

This is a story of how high school students transformed the debate circuit through the use of personal narrative. It does follow the Hollywood trope of two white teachers' shepherding of poor, black students but there is a nice twist in that each teacher is also transformed. (Which then creates another trope where the

marginalized character of color brings enlightenment to the white main character.) But overall it works well because of how honest Miller is about what becomes a personal obsession/group mission. He details his own deficiencies - especially in the last chapter with his over the top reactions and mystical revelation - in a way that was so real that it was humorous.

I'd like for Miller to give more detail about how he transgresses journalistic boundaries, since so much time is spent on pushing the norms of the debate world.

Kirby says

Underdog stories are seductive, but I tend not to like them, especially when they involve Black youth. Intentionally or not, these stories tend to give the public permission to forego pushing for, or even paying attention to, the need for systemic change. So halfway through reading this book, I got annoyed since it seemed like the same GangstasParadiseFreedomWritersLeanonMe story that makes smart, Black children the exception and not the rule. ("If only you have the right educator who can really reach the kids...") Then I got over myself and finished reading the damn book.

And the book itself is well done. The story is not at all tidy which I appreciate. It essentially tracks the ups and downs of an excellent urban debate team at Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri. It walks you through the unknown, esoteric world of high school debate, which I had a very different conception of prior to reading this book. (For example, I didn't know that, at the national level, debaters argue at breakneck speed -- very counterintuitive.)

The most instructive section of the book is Part Four, which loosely focuses on how individuals and institutions can begin to change norms within incredibly privileged and exclusive spaces. A few elements needed for this type of change that the book brings forth: persistent, borderline zealots (the author Joe Miller is clearly one of these); public and authentic expressions of truth, both planned (Geoffrey's speech to Montgomery Bell Academy) and spontaneous (Shantel's speech at the Mid-America Cup) that shift momentum; partners on the side of privilege who are willing to communicate the message to communities that the zealots offend or simply cannot reach (MBA); and concrete ideas about what the practical result of inclusion looks like (MBA coach running Central's case at the Nat'l Forensics League final round).

The cursory focus on the deep-seated gender bias that existed at every level--how the students and coaches virtually ignored the development of girls who debated, how the larger debate community did the same--was disappointing. Miller ultimately pointed to inherent skill as the reason for the disparities, not acknowledging how the drastic differences in attention and support given to the boys played a role.

At several points, I thought Miller to be a little too involved in the lives of his subjects, but I admired his passion and believe that his conversion experience was real. He embodied, however imperfectly, one of my favorite passages from the book, a quote from philosophy professor Todd May, "Rather than standing above or outside their society, 'specific intellectuals' are immersed within it. They cite, analyze, and engage in struggles not in the name of the oppressed, but alongside them, in solidarity with them."

Joe Miller says

I wrote this book.

Catherine Carithers says

I began Cross-X expecting that it would be a standard uplifting tale of how an unlikely group of teenagers became debate champions. It turned out to be all that I expected, plus a fascinating examination of race and socioeconomic status.
