Clarion Review

General

Unschooling Kelly
John D. McEwan
iUniverse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

"The system will not tolerate the truth. Fail a student and you have administrators and parents jumping down your throat" Mr. Cordray tells his protégée. "If they fail it is your fault. You didn't try hard enough didn't give them enough chances or didn't give them enough help….It's almost comical really. Teachers scurry about desperate to get a kid to care. They threaten and reward yet still students don't care. How do you get a kid to care?"

Unschooling Kelly a novel by John D. McEwen tells the story of Kelly's student teaching experience under Mr. Cordray. The young teacher learns more than she expected as she enters the classroom for the first time and as Mr. Cordray pours out the wisdom of his experience. McEwen with a master's degree in education many years of teaching experience and awards for excellence weaves Mr. Cordray's didactic comments into the tale effectively making his points. Generally his ideas suggest that most schools fail to prepare students for the life ahead of them. He claims that schools are often counterproductive that teaching is often little more than classroom management that grades are detrimental textbooks are poor children are poorly socialized and actually discouraged from learning and that even students who do well and graduate high school and many who graduate college are still not qualified for a job.

When Mr. Cordray coaches the girls' basketball team he has the opportunity to share his insights on teens' social involvement. "Teenagers want to define themselves as individuals" he says. "What they end up doing is defining themselves as groups. You were saying 'I'm Kelly Mathews and I am not like everyone else.' But that is what most teenagers do. They join clubs gangs or sports teams or they smoke take drugs or do whatever they need to do in order to create an identity separate from others. But in reality they are not separating themselves from others. They are simply choosing one group identity over another."

Teaching through fiction without sounding preachy is difficult and is done reasonably

well in *Unschooling Kelly* except that Mr. Cordray's comments are never challenged. The conclusions presented seem too simple and obvious leaving readers to wonder why those in power don't see the problems and whether someone with a differing opinion might have a valid argument. Few readers besides those who teach or plan to will find *Unschooling Kelly* an enjoyable novel.