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*Michael Copperman*

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# TEACHER

## TWO YEARS IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

MICHAEL COPPERMAN



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**Michael Copperman : Teacher: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Teacher: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Beautiful MemoirBy Terry Minchow-ProffittMike has written a beautiful memoir of his two years of teaching in the Mississippi Delta. His account is honestly sobering yet hopeful in its resolve, offering a keen look into what the vocation of teaching is like from the inside of wholehearted devotion. His depiction of the Delta is spot on, showing us the complicated nature of that region and its ongoing struggle with de

facto segregation. As a native son of the Delta, Mike took me home again, only this time from an "outsider's" perspective, which helped me to see again how the Delta has--and hasn't--changed since I left home in 1979. But don't get me wrong, this is not a book about "issues." It is a book about people at their most human and, yes, inhuman, and their struggle to connect. A beautiful, poetic memoir.<sup>2</sup> of 2 people found the following review helpful. One of my favorite books in recent memory  
By Customer  
One of my favorite books in recent memory. It's shocking, heartbreaking, and uplifting, though not with the usual "Dangerous Minds" and "Dead Poets Society" formula. It's realer than those stories, and undermines the idea of the outsider teacher who will come in and save the students, even as we get to see the way the students and the teacher change each other's lives. It's also a captivating portrait of a world I didn't realize existed anymore, a deep south where segregation between blacks and whites is still strictly enforced and racism is overt. Neither side knows quite what to make of the author/narrator and his Japanese heritage, which allows him a fascinating triangulation on the social dynamics there. It's impossible not to fall in love with his voice, his wry self-deprecation alongside his big heart and his honesty as he watches himself tumble from Stanford-educated idealism into despair and darkness -- and wisdom. The characters come alive off the page, and there's so much at stake that you have to remind yourself to stop tightening your shoulders. It's hard to say how much I enjoyed this book. It's one that keeps returning to me, shoving itself into my mind when I least expect it. I STRONGLY recommend it.<sup>3</sup> of 3 people found the following review helpful. This is an important and timely book. The writing ...  
By Jubilee  
This is an important and timely book. The writing is extraordinary in substance, humility of heart and composition. The book will inform you and deeply touch your heart as you live through Michael's experience in his writing.

When Michael Copperman left Stanford University for the Mississippi Delta in 2002, he imagined he would lift underprivileged children from the narrow horizons of rural poverty. Well-meaning but naive, the Asian American from the West Coast soon lost his bearings in a world divided between black and white. He had no idea how to manage a classroom or help children navigate the considerable challenges they faced. In trying to help students, he often found he couldn't afford to give what they required--sometimes with heartbreaking consequences. His desperate efforts to save child after child were misguided but sincere. He offered children the best invitations to success he could manage. But he still felt like an outsider who was failing the children and himself. Teach For America has for a decade been the nation's largest employer of recent college graduates but has come under increasing criticism in recent years even as it has grown exponentially. This memoir considers the distance between the idealism of the organization's creed that one day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education and reach their full potential and what it actually means to teach in America's poorest and most troubled public schools. Copperman's memoir vividly captures his disorientation in the divided world of the Delta, even as the author marvels at the wit and resilience of the children in his classroom. To them, he is at once an authority figure and a stranger--minority than even they are--lone Asian, an outsider among outsiders. His journey is of great relevance to teachers, administrators, and parents longing for quality education in America. His frank story shows that the solutions for impoverished schools are far from simple.

Teacher is a must-read for any teacher candidate who is inspired to help poor students achieve the American Dream. Copperman tells of his own aspirations as a new teacher and how he came to understand the impossibility of realizing those aspirations in the context of the gross inequality that America visits on its children. He writes with a rare honesty about coming to understand his complicity in that inequality, even as a person of color. Yet, Teacher is not a depressing book. With lyrical prose and many laugh-out-loud stories, Copperman's account is beautiful as well as sobering. It will make young teachers who wish to do good, especially for communities that are not their own, think deeply about what it means to respect their students and what they cannot and should not attempt to accomplish and about what they can do in the space that remains. Nicole Louie, assistant professor of mathematics education at the University of Texas at El Paso; and former middle school mathematics teacher on the south side of Chicago, who has worked with teachers in Chicago, San Francisco, and Oakland  
As an English and writing professor, Teacher: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta has been an excellent book for me to assign to students. The writing is accessible while also being challenging. It moves students while also requiring them to look at their own deeply held beliefs and convictions about race and what we think of as American meritocracy. Because Michael Copperman places himself in shoes we'd like to believe we would fill--we are good people, who only want to help--teachers and students identify with his experiences, and the book resonates deeply because of it. Heather Ryan, professor, Wenatchee Valley Community College  
Michael Copperman's Teacher isn't an easy read. I squirmed. I squinted my eyes as though doing so could make the truth of his words smaller. I continued forward knowing my discomfort was the result of an honest voice I needed to hear. Copperman's story is the truth shared by all educators about our best intentions, our naive betrayals, regrets that hiss in our memories. Teacher in itself is the act of teaching. It's not about naming what's right or wrong. It's about what's real and what we can learn from it. Erin Fristad, educator and author of The Glass Jar  
Teacher is a very important book for aspiring administrators to read. Through a personal story, Copperman powerfully articulates the struggles of

beginning teachers. There are a number of important themes that emerge from the book, such as the desire to be an exemplary teacher but not having the support to make it happen. The author ably articulates the profound needs of students and the system barriers that prevent teachers from meeting these needs. The cultural differences between the families and teachers is another important theme presented in the book. This book makes clear that mentoring and supporting beginning teachers is critical. I am using this book in my University of Oregon administrator licensure course titled Building Leadership and Equity Skills to Improve Education Systems. I chose this book because all administrators must understand the importance of supporting new teachers and have the skills to put supports in place for them. Coppermans words in *Teacher: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta* provide a call to action that cant be ignored by administrators. Nancy Golden, former superintendent of Springfield Public Schools and chief education officer for the state of OregonI assigned *Teacher* in upper-level Education Studies. My intention with the course was to explore issues that students had become familiar with, through phrases like The Achievement Gap and School-to-Prison Pipeline, that distance them from the actual lives that are impacted by these structures. Coppermans book guides students, still a few years from becoming classroom teachers, to think through the complexity of teaching, as ideals, hopes, and intentions entangle with the unforeseensystems of inequity and deep historical injusticeseven while continuing to teach. Neat narratives about teaching are standard in pre-service teacher programs, and students who have become critical appreciate a bit of honesty about how messy the undertaking of teaching is for so many of us. In an educational landscape that increasingly wants to measure and quantify that which is in excess of measurement and quantification, Coppermans book is a welcome opportunity to dive into the uncertainty that characterizes actual teaching lives. Asilia Franklin, School of Education, University of OregonMichael Coppermans book *Teacher* is an honest and at times heart-wrenching account of the ups and many downs of the beginning teacher. With beautiful and evocative prose, Copperman paints a picture of the travails of an idealistic young Teach For America recruit bumping up against the realities of education in a rural Mississippi community where he doesnt easily fit in. He deftly addresses issues of building a teacher identity across lines of difference with both students and structural impediments. *Teacher* should be required reading for pre-service teaching candidates as they prepare for their field placements. They will undoubtedly relate to the steep learning curves that Copperman recounts in the book, but they will also benefit from his joys and celebrations of the occasional victories of increased reading levels and afterschool breakthroughs. They will wrestle with Coppermans ethical tensions to manage his classroom without corporal punishment. They will be challenged to consider their own values and how they can learn from Coppermans two years in the Mississippi Delta and his continued commitment to underserved students. Dr. Michael Cormack Jr., chief executive officer of the Barksdale Reading Institute, a nonprofit educational organization based in Mississippi; former elementary school principal; and adjunct professor at the University of MississippiA compelling story about one of the most urgent challenges facing our country today. Michael Copperman weaves personal history and national statistics into a narrative that is at once heartbreaking and crucial. Crippled by the epidemic of educational disparity, this engaging memoir about a young professors journey into the Mississippi Deltas impoverished districts to teach children how to read and write, how to find their voices and break their silence is what we look for in storytelling. A bold and important new book. Mario Alberto Zambrano, author of *Lotera: A Novel*Riveting. Phenomenal. A fearless memoir, achingly alive with beauty, hope, and heartbreak, Michael Coppermans *Teacher* shines a light on American race, poverty, stereotypes, and the parts of ourselves, as a nation, we desperately need to start talking about but prefer to pretend do not exist. Coppermans humanity is evident on every single page. Margaret Malone, author of *People Like You**Teacher: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta* is a lush, evocative, tough-minded memoir that allows us a glimpse into the troubled public schools of the Mississippi Delta, a world too many of us have no idea exists. As a former Delta TFA corp member, and as someone who cares deeply about Mississippi, I was knocked out by the pure, hard honesty of Coppermans story; with wisdom and care, he hauls this beautiful, troubled world onto the page. And his portrayal of his studentssuch vivid, enchanting young peoplenearly broke my heart. Really, this is a barnburner of a memoirpowerfully told, intellectually convincing, and emotionally fraught. Joe Wilkins, author of *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry**Teacher* is not only the role Michael Copperman struggles to fill as a recent Stanford grad working in one of the poorest schools in rural Mississippi; it is also a fine description of what this memoir does for its reader. We are used to thinking of the children of Americas flagging education system as numbers; Coppermans powerful and revealing storytelling delivers the children to us, their lives, their voices, and their undeniable potential. It is a work of tremendous skill, honesty, and heart. Katie Williams, author of *The Space Between Trees* and *Absent*About the AuthorFrom 2002 to 2004, Michael Copperman, Eugene, Oregon, taught fourth grade in the rural black public schools of the Mississippi Delta with Teach For America. Now, he teaches writing to low-income, first-generation college students of diverse backgrounds at the University of Oregon. His work has appeared in the Sun, the Oxford American, Guernica, Creative Nonfiction, and Copper Nickel and has garnered fellowships and awards from the Munster Literature Centre, the Oregon Arts Commission, Literary Arts, and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.