

## Book Reviews

**Sam Wineburg. *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2018. Pp. 241.**

In discussing the role of his most recent project in history education, Sam Wineburg insists “nor can I say as we approach six million downloads that our work has ‘changed the field’”(137). All of us who teach and research in the field of history education would beg to differ. Wineburg’s seminal work on historical thinking over the past three decades has changed how we think about teaching history. Over his lengthy and productive career, Professor Wineburg has changed the field, and for the better.

His most recent book, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on your Phone)*, provides a “greatest hits” examination of his work. Some chapters rework his previous writings, while others move into new territory. Such an organizational choice results in a choppy structure. While many chapters illustrate Wineburg’s insights, others ironically reflect his weakness as an historian. Despite its flaws, the book provides important new insights in the field of history education.

Wineburg’s discussions of his most recent projects at Stanford are informative and fascinating. He provides thought-provoking ruminations on the valuable websites, “[Reading Like a Historian](#)” and “[Beyond the Bubble](#).” His mind-bending analysis of the differences between science and history education posits that the past, unlike science, “bequeaths jagged fragments that thwart most attempts to form a complete picture.” He concludes that “parsimony in historical explanation often flirts with superficial reductionism”(109). Such articulate nuggets, sprinkled throughout *Why Learn History*, force the reader to put the book down for valuable self-reflection.

Wineburg is at his best when providing windows into new thoughts on teaching and learning in history. One example comes in Wineburg’s examination of newly popular quick-fix courses in media literacy as the antidote to “fake news.” Arguing that such

courses are insufficient, Wineburg insists on “a fundamental reorientation of the curriculum.” He then poses a number of brilliant and provocative questions, concluding that if we are to avoid the victory of tyranny, students must have a deep understanding of how to ask and answer historical questions (158). The book’s biggest strength is Wineburg’s ability to push the envelope regarding the purposes and methods of teaching history in the K-12 curriculum.

However, in this book Wineburg acts as a historian and at times falls short. The early chapters recount a variety of battles over history education in the past 30 years, battles in which Wineburg himself has been a consistent historical actor. In discussing the testing and standards movement, Wineburg recounts many of his earlier criticisms to great effect. In his chapter, “Committing Zinns,” Wineburg rightly criticizes Howard Zinn for lack of context, ahistorical cherry picking, and asking “yes-type” questions. My book, *The Memory Hole: The U.S. History Curriculum Under Siege* (2013), criticizes Zinn for the same failings.

Yet in other chapters Wineburg returns to earlier topics but fails to live up to his own standards. Wineburg commits his own “Zinn” in the chapter on the Teaching American History (TAH) professional development program. Wineburg begins with the supposition that the TAH program failed—a view reflecting his initial opposition to the program due to its political roots in outdated dogmas about learning history. He concludes with the argument that the program had “no national impact” (47).

The formal assessment programs for TAH were a disaster, and some of the programs failed. But Wineburg’s outline is incomplete and inaccurate. In fact, many of the programs moved far beyond the “sit and get” model of historical content knowledge he criticizes. I participated in more than two dozen professional development workshops for the National Council for History Education (NCHE) that went far beyond “putting the knowledge

into the heads of teachers who would in turn pour it in the heads of students”(37). Teachers were not typically “left alone to work amongst themselves” (44). They engaged in multiple discussions and interactive activities—often based on Wineburg’s own work. These programs changed the way they taught and the way their students learned. Wineburg knows about these very programs—he was on the Board of NCHE—but neglects to discuss them. Wineburg ignores too much and asks too many “yes-type questions” that support his conclusion that the program was an utter failure.

Wineburg also fails to explore the TAH program’s impact on professional development goals in history education. He rightly commends the work of a committee convened by the American Historical Association in 2002 that crafted the “Benchmarks for Professional Development in History Education“ (48), but does not consider that those who wrote that document (myself included) drew ideas from work in the TAH program.

We also owed our ideas to the work Sam Wineburg. Uneven as it may be, this book provides an invaluable reminder of the value of historical thinking and of the ways in which this thinking might help students navigate a challenging civic landscape. In the end, Wineburg’s work always forces the reader to think and reflect on how to improve the teaching and learning of history. In a world where so much that is written on education is not helpful to teachers, his insights make this book a valuable read.

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**Rafe Blaufarb and Liz Clarke, *Inhuman Traffick: The International Struggle against the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Graphic History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Xxix + pp 198. \$19.95.**

Fueled by the success of Trevor Getz’s award-winning *Abina and the Important Men*, Oxford University Press has signaled