

**Foreword to *How to Survive In Your Native Land* by James Herndon  
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1997**

I envy anyone who is about to read this book for the first time. I remember discovering it in a bookstore and then reading it on a train, hardly able to keep from turning to the next passenger to say, “Listen to this!” Instead, I copied passages out and later stuck them above my desk where they hung like beacons, reminding me of what I knew was true, what Herndon had helped me to see.

This is a book about teaching school, but on a deeper level it’s about figuring out how to live, how to go on working in the best way you can. Whereas in Herndon’s first book – the classic account of his year in a ghetto school – he was regularly chastised and ultimately fired, *How to Survive* begins with him as a successful teacher who has won the approval of colleagues, supervisors, and parents. He comes to work “feeling good and ready to go,” and he and another teacher plan an innovative class called Creative Arts in which they’ll be able to offer all the creative projects they never have time for in regular classes. They decide to have no required curriculum, no behavior rules, no grades, and to issue permanent hall passes so that the kids won’t be continually interrupting with requests to go to the bathroom but can simply leave when they need to.

What earns this book its place on the shelf with other education critics of Herndon’s time, and what makes it such essential reading still, is not Herndon’s creative project ideas but his insights, his way of assessing the truth of a situation and summing it up for us in such a graceful and off-the-cuff way. The experimental class didn’t go as the teachers expected it would. Instead of participating in the projects, the kids mostly used the hall passes to wander in and out of the classroom, and then complained that there was nothing to do. Herndon writes:

Well, as a lesson plan, there is nothing I recommend quite so highly as a permanent hall pass. After a while, Frank and I, on the edge of complete despair, began to figure out what was wrong with the ideas that had worked so well in our regular classes. It was very simple. Why did the kids in regular classes like to do all the inventive stuff? Why, only because it was better than the regular stuff.... But that only applied to a regular class where it was clear you had to (1) stay there all period and (2) you had to be doing something or you might get an F. Take away those two items, as Frank and I had done in all innocence, and you get a brief version of the truth.

That’s what Herndon gives us with this book: a brief and compelling vision of what’s really going on, how the conventional school structure actually affects teaching and learning.

And then what? What do we do with that vision? Herndon tells himself, and by implication all of us, that “you have to decide what you are going to do now, wherever you are.” Don’t kid yourself, this book is saying. Start with the real story, and then figure out for yourself how to go on from there. It would be easy to blame freedom, or the kids

themselves, for the failure of Creative Arts or other innovative programs and reforms over the years. What a good idea it was, we say, and how irritating that the kids didn't take advantage of it; it must be that kids really need to be told what to do. But freedom is only a lens, or a compass; it lets us see where we really are. The complicated work of figuring out what to do when one does have a choice only *begins* with freedom. As Herndon says, the real curriculum of his class ought to have been the question, "What shall we do in here?" In other words, "What is truly necessary, important, meaningful, interesting?" – a question not only for kids but for adults as well, which is no doubt why this book grips its readers in such a deep and personal way.

Herndon observes, and offers us, both the details of classroom life and the big and inescapable realities of the school situation: that kids are drawn to work that makes a difference and how seldom school offers them that opportunity; that schools must separate winners from losers; that it's hard for teachers to get real feedback on their work; that a student may be able to do complex calculations outside of school but be helpless in the classroom. Hard realities, but Herndon tells the story of our condition so compellingly that he makes you glad, at least, that you're hearing it from him. Seeing this book come back into print is something like seeing a valued friend after a long absence. Welcome back, I say to Herndon and to *How to Survive in Your Native Land*. We've missed you. Sit down with us and tell us those great stories again. They're as true, as funny, as on the mark as ever.

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