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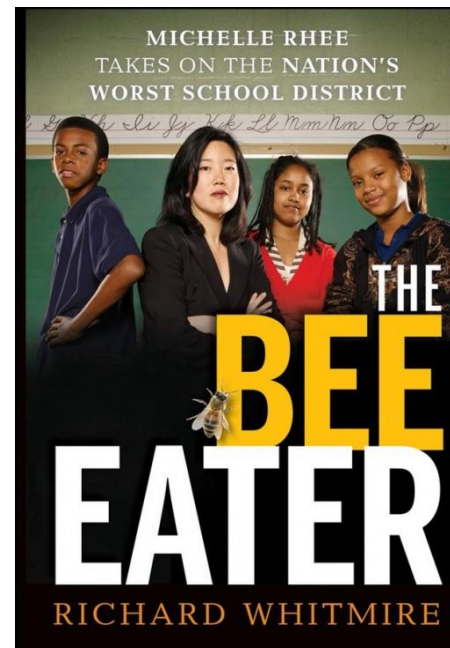
Whitmire, Richard. (2011) *The Bee Eater: Michelle Rhee Takes On the Nation's Worst School District*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

Michelle Rhee is one of the most controversial figures in American education. Her selection by Washington DC mayor Adrienne Fenty to run that city's schools under mayoral control was controversial when it was announced, and remained controversial until she resigned her post after Fenty was defeated in a primary election, largely due to anger within the community directed at Rhee. Her resignation meant that Richard Whitmire had to move up the original publication date of the book by 8 months.

This is not an authorized biography as Whitmire makes clear, but it might as well be. He acknowledges being given extensive access to Rhee and her approval for him to speak with friends and



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colleagues. Further, as he acknowledges, Rhee had written the foreword to his book *Why Boys Fail*. As he makes clear in his preface, he took on this task because he had the gut instinct that Rhee had the best shot in the nation at turning around a failed school district and I ended the book with that instinct mostly intact . (p. xiii)

He acknowledges that despite one chapter that includes a long discussion of Rhee's mistakes and faults, he can be accused of being so favorable to Rhee that he ignored the trauma she inflicted on others. He counters by writing *The Bee Eater* is a narrowly tailored biography, focusing on what made Michelle Rhee who stepped forward to take on the near-impossible task of transforming D. C. schools—and on whether she succeeded. (p. xiii)

The chapter in which Whitmire examines Rhee's weakness, "Lessons Learned," begins with what he thought she did right. Even in going through the criticisms, he has a tendency to find reasons to justify or excuse what Rhee does. This is an unfortunate tendency that somewhat compromises the value of the book.

Since the book went to press, information has come to light that very much undercuts the image of herself that Rhee sought to portray and which Whitmire largely accepts. Thus, it is now fairly clear that the claims Rhee made of extraordinary improvement in student performance while a Teach for America teacher in Baltimore are not only not supported by the evidence, but actually contradicted by it. In fairness to Whitmire, this point was raised at the time Rhee was nominated. He attempts to address it in the book, where he acknowledged the lack of evidence but quotes her principal at the time as saying that Rhee's students tested extremely well. He attempts to defuse the charges with an aside aimed at Nathan Saunders, who had at the time of the writing just taken over as head of the Washington Teachers Union. When he first spoke with Whitmire, Saunders rolled his eyes at the impossibility of the kind of score claims Rhee was making. Whitmire notes that, but goes on to give Rhee credit and say that the experience of raising scores is what "transformed Rhee and shaped everything that would follow in Washington , D. C (p. 38) ." That actually may

be more telling than Whitmire intended, as we now know there was a pattern of erasures on DC tests in schools to whose staff Rhee gave bonuses that are statistically almost impossible to imagine, and present a *prima facie* case of adults altering student answer sheets to obtain higher scores—these events are as I write this review under current investigation (see <http://tinyurl.com/4ces28o> from *USA Today*, which brought the issue to public attention).

The issue is not that Whitmire did not discuss this in his book—the story broke well after the book was in print. The issue is rather that he uncritically accepted the evidence that Rhee was offering for success—both hers personally in Baltimore and that of the schools under her supervision - without doing the kind of probing that someone aware of how tests function should do. Whitmire did not do such an examination, nor did any of the other journalists who touted her achievements. Whitmire may have been president of the Education Writers Association in the past, but the failure to explore these issues in greater depth—which I believe would pretty readily have undercut the claims—demonstrates a lack of understanding of a key aspect of the responsibilities of an education writer. That same lack is unfortunately all too common among those who write about education and schools.

I have more criticisms of the book and of Whitmire's approach, but I do want to give him credit for a thorough exploration of her background—family, schooling, work associations. He presents a wealth of information, including how she came to marry Kevin Huffman, the father of her children, who was also in Teach for America. Michelle Rhee may be flawed, as all of us are, but she is far from the one dimensional cartoon character that has been portrayed by some opponents.

Whitmire also does a very good job of making clear that Rhee never sought the position at DC schools, that others, such as TFA founder Wendy Kopp, were advocating on her behalf to Adrian Fenty. She was also quite up front about how she intended to operate. Neither Fenty nor the DC City Council can claim otherwise.

Whitmire blames a major part of her failures on the ability of her opponents to frame the issue as one of race. There is some truth to that, for if one looks at the voting in the

mayoral primary Fenty did quite well in White wards but did very poorly in the portions of the city across the Anacostia River, the heavily Black 7th and 8th Wards. But that is not all Rhee, even though she was a focus of Black opposition to Fenty. The Mayor had appointed a significant number of non-Blacks to high ranking posts in his administration, and that had generated some animosity.

Whitmire spends a fair amount of time focusing on antipathy between the American Federation of Teachers and its president Randi Weingarten and Rhee, with the clear intent of showing that the opposition to Rhee on the part of that organization was in part motivated by personal and political issues. Chapter Six is titled simply “Randi and Michelle” and runs 23 pages. One quickly grasps Whitmire’s intent when he writes “Rhee and Weingarten, regardless of sharing Cornell University as an alma mater, truly dislike one another” (p. 108) I found this focus somewhat overplayed, and too dismissive of the possibility that the AFT had a different view of how to reform education. Here I think it is important to note that Whitmire is very much in tune with the “reform” movement represented by organizations such as Teach for America and its progeny New Leaders for New Schools and the New Teacher Project (which Rhee led before coming to DC). He compliments the KIPP program. He acknowledges assistance from Democrats for Education Reform, has served on the jury for the Broad Prize for Urban Education, and received funding for this project from the Broad Foundation as well as others. In fairness, the Foundation did not ask for any input to the book. One questions given Whitmire’s track record whether they would have felt it necessary.

The title of the book, *The Bee Eater*, comes from an incident when Rhee was teaching in Baltimore. It is I think important to provide the two paragraphs that justify using this as the title for the book. It includes Rhee’s words and Whitmire’s evaluation. It was a hot day, and a bee flew into the classroom. The class became excited.

“Literally, the kids started going nuts,” she recalled. “A bee! A Bee! A bee!” They were running around the room, jumping on the chairs. It was 100 percent chaos. I was trying to settle them down when the bee landed near the air vent, right by the window. I had my rolled-up

lesson plan about the marshmallows, which was now no good, and I smacked the bee and then flipped it into my hand—and ate it. It wasn't that bad. I didn't chew. I couldn't feel it moving in my mouth. I just swallowed it.

Suddenly, the class grew quiet in amazement. For the first time, they realized that their teacher, this diminutive young Korean woman lacking any powers of intimidation, might just be crazy, someone deserving of respect. Swallowing the bee that day didn't solve Rhee's discipline problems. That breakthrough was still months away. But after that day, the students afforded her just a bit of deference, just as they would any potentially crazy person on the street corner. (p. 3)

Perhaps a more complete portrayal of Rhee's tenure as a teacher in Baltimore would be two stories she told on herself when addressing a gathering of new teachers at the start of the 2010-2011 school year, as reported here <http://tinyurl.com/29xzjzo> by the *Washington Post's* Bill Turque, with Rhee's response to the story. Rhee told about taping shut the mouths of students, and of dropping off students in their neighborhood, not with their parents. One wonders how Rhee would have acted toward any teacher under her supervision who committed either act, much less both. I further question her judgment in sharing those stories with beginning teachers, and am appalled by her response to Turque that "The feedback that I got was positive and folks said my stories were humorous and helpful." I found no mention of this in Whitmire's book. One would think these incidents are as important in forming a judgment of Michelle Rhee as is the tale of her eating the bee, especially as Rhee herself thought them sufficiently noteworthy to tell incoming teachers, something one might want to know in evaluating whether she had the appropriate judgment for the position she held at the time.

Whitmire does cover many of the problems Rhee encountered or created for herself. For one who lacks background knowledge about Rhee, it is a somewhat useful volume, even though I find it at times insufficiently critical of Rhee, or rather, too willing to justify her

actions. Whitmire can be quite critical when he chooses to be, for example, about the firing of the highly regarded principal of Oyster-Adams Bilingual School. Since Rhee's children attended that school, one might question whether she should have recused herself from that decision.

There are other incidents in Rhee's tenure that should have been examined and were not. Bruce-Monroe Elementary school was making AYP, had an active parent community, and served a community full of minority children. When Rhee first moved to close the school even though it met all criteria for staying open, the parents object. After negotiation, Rhee promised a new school in the near future if the school were temporarily relocated elsewhere. Thus the parents believed they had been promised a new building. Yet Rhee moved to close the school, and many in the community believed that was because the Fenty administration wanted to turn the property over to developers. This was a current issue *before* Rhee resigned, got some coverage in the local media, including by Valerie Strauss of the *Post*: <http://tinyurl.com/3jca6qm>. The parents even had a website: <http://www.empowerdc.org/node/148>. I find it somewhat troubling that there is no mention of this in Whitmire's book. If he was covering Rhee all that closely, I would have expected at least some mention of it, unless to mention it would in some fashion have contradicted the picture he was trying to paint of Rhee.

Whitmire is not uncritical of Rhee, but the book is largely supportive. Thus, Michelle Rhee is likely to be a part of our national discussion on education for some time to come. Whitmire's book is the most thorough source of material on Rhee and her background, although I find it incomplete on some issues and too accepting of Rhee on others. It is worth reading for a somewhat more complete picture of Rhee than one gets from listening either to her strong supporters or her strong opponents, but only if one keeps in mind that in general, as he acknowledges, Whitmire is a supporter, and thus the portrayal one encounters will not be either complete nor necessarily unslanted. If one keeps that in mind, perhaps the book can be of some use.

In his final two pages, Whitmire explores Rhee's new endeavor, Students First <http://www.studentsfirst.org/> which she announced on the Oprah television show in

December, 2010. She is trying to raise \$1 billion to fund the endeavor. Given her connections to the funders of the so-called education reform movement, that figure is not an impossible goal.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's education proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was recently named 2010 *Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.



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