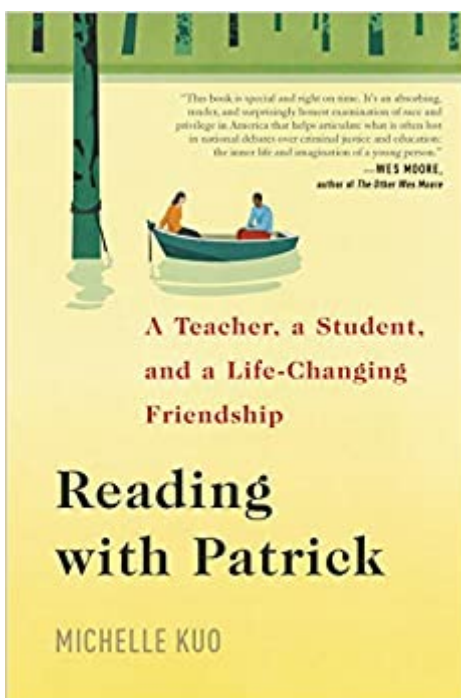


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# Reading With Patrick: A Teacher, A Student, And A Life-Changing Friendship



## Synopsis

A memoir of race, inequality, and the power of literature told through the life-changing friendship between an idealistic young teacher and her gifted student, jailed for murder in the Mississippi Delta

“Reading with Patrick” could be the most affecting book you’ll read this year. •The Christian Science Monitor

“Powerful.” •The Seattle Times

“Tender.” •O: The Oprah Magazine

Recently graduated from Harvard University, Michelle Kuo arrived in the rural town of Helena, Arkansas, as a Teach for America volunteer, bursting with optimism and drive. But she soon encountered the jarring realities of life in one of the poorest counties in America, still disabled by the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. In this stirring memoir, Kuo, the child of Taiwanese immigrants, shares the story of her complicated but rewarding mentorship of one student, Patrick Browning, and his remarkable literary and personal awakening. Convinced she can make a difference in the lives of her teenaged students, Michelle Kuo puts her heart into her work, using quiet reading time and guided writing to foster a sense of self in students left behind by a broken school system. Though Michelle loses some students to truancy and even gun violence, she is inspired by some such as Patrick. Fifteen and in the eighth grade, Patrick begins to thrive under Michelle’s exacting attention. However, after two years of teaching, Michelle feels pressure from her parents and the draw of opportunities outside the Delta and leaves Arkansas to attend law school. Then, on the eve of her law-school graduation, Michelle learns that Patrick has been jailed for murder. Feeling that she left the Delta prematurely and determined to fix her mistake, Michelle returns to Helena and resumes Patrick’s education—even as he sits in a jail cell awaiting trial. Every day for the next seven months they pore over classic novels, poems, and works of history. Little by little, Patrick grows into a confident, expressive writer and a dedicated reader galvanized by the works of Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, Walt Whitman, W. S. Merwin, and others. In her time reading with Patrick, Michelle is herself transformed, contending with the legacy of racism and the questions of what constitutes a “good” life and what the privileged owe to those with bleaker prospects.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Reading with Patrick could be the most affecting book you’ll read this year. To experience such a spectrum of responses—from anger to admiration, disbelief to inspiration, helpless frustration to stand-up-and-shout-cheering—should be enough impetus to get you urgently reading with Patrick as soon as possible. The Christian Science Monitor “Three out of four stars! USA Today “A powerful meditation on how one person can affect the life of another . . . One of the great strengths of Reading with Patrick is its portrayal of the risk inherent to teaching. The Seattle Times “[A] tender memoir. O: The Oprah Magazine “Honest, thoughtful, and humane, Kuo’s book is not only a testament to a remarkable friendship, but a must-read for anyone interested in social justice and race in America. Thoughtfully provocative reading. Kirkus Reviews “This memoir of teaching literature in one of the poorest counties in America is a reminder of how literacy changes lives. Highly recommended. Library Journal (starred review) “Michelle Kuo’s Reading with Patrick is a strikingly candid and insightful meditation on the relationship between a young teacher and a former student as they read together while the student awaits trial for murder in a Southern jail. Compulsively readable, the book manages to do two extraordinary things at once: it offers a poignant and moving account of a specific relationship, and it grapples searchingly with universal themes around families, race, poverty, teaching, and the power of literature. The book will continue to resonate long after you have put it down and returned to the everyday—this is what the best books, the best teachers, do. Carol S. Steiker, Henry J. Friendly Professor of Law, faculty co-director of the Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School “Warmhearted but never sentimental, and acutely self-aware, Michelle Kuo’s memoir is the most profound, tender, and intensely moving

portrait of a student-teacher relationship I've ever read. It shows how deeply a student and teacher can change each other's lives. Kuo knows the complications and the limits of helping, but she is brave and generous and stubborn enough to do it anyway.

• Larissa MacFarquhar, author of *Strangers Drowning* "This book is special and could not be more right on time. It's an absorbing, tender, and surprisingly honest examination of race and privilege in America that helps articulate what is often lost, seemingly intentionally, in national debates over criminal justice and education: the inner life and imagination of a young person.

• Wes Moore, author of *The Other Wes Moore* "Every American should read Michelle Kuo's remarkable memoir. Honest, generous, humble, and wise, *Reading with Patrick* will endure as a defining story for our times and, abidingly, a testament to the power of language and of books.

• Claire Messud, author of *The Woman Upstairs* "I delighted in this book and read it in a single weekend. *Reading with Patrick* is a significant work that could swell the ranks of highly motivated and qualified teachers—people who understand they are not just transferring information but transforming lives.

• Bill Moyers "Riveting . . . *Reading with Patrick* is an essential addition to our national conversation about institutional racism. It is also an empathic story of connection: between a dedicated teacher and her student, between history and our current times, and between literature and life. It is hard to imagine a more inspiring testament to the transformative power of reading.

• Elliott Holt, author of *You Are One of Them* "In *Reading with Patrick*, Michelle Kuo takes on the subjects of race, privilege, and the debt that the human community owes to its most disadvantaged members with a bracing intelligence, honesty, and self-scrutiny. This is a gorgeous, urgent, and heartbreaking memoir.

• Darcy Frey, senior lecturer on English, Harvard University, and author of *The Last Shot* "Reading with Patrick could not be more timely. Kuo underscores the power of tender attention and shows us that if we go to the margins, we all find rescue.

• Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries and author of *Tattoos on the Heart*

Michelle Kuo taught English at a school in the Arkansas Delta for two years. After teaching, she graduated from Harvard Law School and worked as an immigrants' rights lawyer in the Fruitvale district of Oakland, California, on a Skadden Fellowship, with a focus on tenants' and workers' rights. She also clerked for a federal appeals court judge in the Ninth Circuit and has taught courses at San Quentin Prison. Currently she teaches courses on race, law, and society at the American University of Paris. The daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, Michelle grew up in

Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Reading with Patrick is many books in one, all of them worthy of being read. It is a coming-of-age reflection by a young Asian American woman, who simultaneously experiences elite status in education, but always tempers it with efforts to improve the lot of others. It is a rich analysis of the economic and social conditions in the Mississippi Delta, in Helena Arkansas, using the local dialect to describe human relationships in poverty and hopelessness. The Author's Note on sources is almost worth the price of purchasing the book. It is, furthermore an exploration of the value of teaching, using literature, to help mature a promising student living in depressed circumstances. Finally, it is an essay on the role of chance in framing a life and its future. Well worth a reader's time.

Many of the readers' comments focus on the literary values of the book; and some of them are written by sympathetic teachers on their noble profession, to which I have only agreements with little to add. As a first-generation immigrant and father to a daughter of Michelle's age, I also understand her parents' anguish and moments of disappointment during Michelle's Helena years: What if she decided to give up law school and just teach kids in the Delta? What if she fell in love and married someone from such a different background? What if something bad should happen to her physically? Of course we know now that everything turned out great and Michelle is a heroine in the eyes of us, and we celebrate her debut as a writer. Nevertheless, one may still ask, "Is it really worth those years in Michelle's young life?" Bill Moyers wrote these words for the back cover of the book: "Reading with Patrick is a significant work that could swell the ranks of highly motivated and qualified teachers—people who understand they are not just transferring information but transforming lives. For that, how has Patrick's life been transformed? He is now a highly literate young man with a high school diploma, and his mind has been opened to a world of feelings and the wonders of nature. But, as far as we know from the book, he has no special job skill and is set back further by a serious criminal record (which is not Michelle's fault.) In the economically depressed and socially toxic environment of the rural South, a fragile personality like Patrick's would be easy victim of circumstances (unemployment, broken marriage, drug abuse, random violence, etc.) How many

more Michelle do we need to rescue all the other Patricks? Perhaps the crucial question has already been answered in the positive, by the publication of this book: her extraordinary determination to fight for social justice, her fierce courage to confront adverse situations, and her brutal honesty to admit her own limitations will continue to excite young minds and raise the awareness of all readers of her book, long after the lives of Patrick and those of other students of Michelle have merged into the American history. Bit by bit, lives are transformed.

If I could give more than five stars then I would!! I enjoyed reading this book so much that I asked my 17 year old daughter to read it and she loved it too! The story is so compelling and relevant with the world that we are living in right now. We need more love, more understanding, more kindness, more tolerance and more books!! Words are so much stronger than hatred, division, racism and through her story, Michelle proves just that! Thank you Michelle for writing such a beautiful book!! We need more books like this one!

I finished this book in 2 days. It is a beautifully written, honest account of what it means to make a connection with someone from a completely different background. The book has inspired me to think about how I can make impact on others.

The story is so beautifully told and feels so honest and vulnerable. I'm inspired to be more thoughtful and to read more.

Excellent story!

This book makes me wish I were a teacher!!! Michelle Kuo is an incredible writer. She is so honest which makes it so powerful. A quote from her book sums it all up I think. This is what she writes, "I know what I am doing: wishful thinking, crazy thinking . . . And I know it sounds as if I could have saved him, as if I think I'm so important in his life. It's not like that. Or maybe it is, in the sense that the alternative, the rational thought, would be to say to myself, "You can't do that much, you're not that important, there are so many forces in a person's life, good and bad, who do you think you are? That's what I said to make myself feel better after I left the Delta, and sometimes I still say it. But then what is a human for? A person must matter to another, it must mean something for two people to have passed time together, to have put work into each other and into becoming more fully themselves. So even if I am wrong, if my dreaming is wrong, the alternative, to not dream at all,

seems wrong, too."This is a necessary read for all teachers. I am urging my husband who is a new teacher on an Indian reservation to read this book. So many of Kuo's discussions apply on the Rez too. Thank you Michelle Kuo for your honesty, your growth, sharing that you gained weight and lost weight, that your house was a mess and that you caved in to your parents because you still wanted their approval. This is a very powerful book. Wow!

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