

A Book a Week, Quite a Challenge

By Michael Kaufman

I just started my fourth semester of graduate school at CUNY and all signs are pointing towards this being a tough one. I finally got the required education courses out of the way and now I am able to take graduate level history classes. My strategy for choosing my first class was to pick one on a topic that I am marginally familiar with in an effort not to be totally overwhelmed. I chose “Arab-Israeli Conflict.”

Before being admitted to a graduate school class, I had to have an interview with the Professor. During this meeting, Dr. Craig Daigle did his best to make sure I knew what I was getting into. He told me that I was going to be required to read at least one book each week. I would also be writing three reaction papers to assigned reading that were in addition to books. Finally, there would be a 20-page historiography on a mutually agreed upon topic that would be due by the end of the semester. He also said that the class met only once a week for 90 minutes and 30% of my grade would be based on class participation. I knew that I would have no problem expressing my opinions in class, assuming that I did the readings, and even though I had no idea what a “historiography” is, how difficult could it be? It sounded very challenging but not unmanageable.

I was very aware that I was venturing out of my comfort zone by taking this class. I had taken three classes since I resumed being a student, all of which were about specific teaching strategies. They required lesson preparation and planning but very little reading and writing. The actual classroom time was spent discussing teaching methods and styles with other teachers. They were more “experience based” conversations, which required the “gift of gab” as opposed to hard facts. Those of us who had ever been students or teachers, which included us all, could

contribute to the class just by making our observations. Since teaching and learning are very subjective, everyone has something valid to say.

Now I would be required to cite specific sources before I spoke. I was not totally unfamiliar with this format, but the last time I took a class like this was in 1977. I had changed a lot since then. I lost my hair, gained a little weight, and raised a family. Also, I was well aware of the fact that the professor and I would probably be the only two people in the class who were already born in 1977. I was concerned about that, but I was not sure what it would mean. It could help me because many of the topics we were going to discuss I had lived through. It could hurt me because I was rusty on the academic rigors that are required when taking a class like this. I had not read one book a month in the last 30 years. I was not sure if I was going to be able to read one a week.

Now that I am three weeks into the class, I can tell you that the jury is still out as to how well I am faring. The books are challenging to read and they are far from being “page turners.” They all walk that fine line between being tremendously informative and unbearably tedious. You might think that reading one 500-page book on the history of Zionism would be enough to get you up to speed on the topic but you would be wrong. On the graduate school level, no topic is ever covered in one book. Students must be exposed to every side of an issue, and when it comes to a topic like the Middle East, there are an infinite number of sides.

As of right now, I am current on all the reading and writing assignments. I even presented a “reaction paper” last week. However, one thing that has not changed since 1977 is that a week is still 7 days, and if I start falling behind in the work, it will be very hard to catch up. I am very curious to find out if I can keep this pace up.