

engaging in their version of good clean fun by dressing as Civil War soldiers and taking part in battlefield “re-enactments.”

Bouncing from the contested history of the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia, to the debate over whether Richmond, Virginia, will raise a statue to the black tennis player Arthur Ashe, Horwitz at times seems a bit lost in the implications of a topic that, followed to its limits, would touch most of the major preoccupations and battlefields of contemporary American culture. Mostly, though, he steers a wobbly but illuminating course between high seriousness and high camp, faithfully reflecting the peculiarly American way of constructing a shared history.

—Amy E. Schwartz

**CLASS STRUGGLE:**  
*What's Wrong (and Right) with  
America's Best Public High Schools.*

By Jay Mathews. Random House.  
304 pp. \$24.50

Venturing inside America's elite public high schools, Mathews finds fabulous teachers, students with heart-stopping talents, and parents willing to bear any burden in exchange for Ivy League admission letters for their children. He also discovers a darker side to these schools: the middling students—those who are bright but not brilliant, as well as those with learning disabilities or language problems—tend to receive mediocre educations.

The fault lies less with teachers and administrators, Mathews contends, than with the overly zealous parents of the superior students. A superb education for their own children is not enough; the parents also insist that the schools set their offspring apart from the masses. So when administrators try to expand advanced-placement classes or to mix the gifted with the average, these parents

balk. And they usually prevail. Mathews, an education reporter at the *Washington Post*, reveals that elite public schools are structured, to an alarming degree, by pressure for even more elitism.

*Class Struggle* is principally set at suburban New York's Mamaroneck High School (which Mathews studied for three years), with occasional vignettes from elsewhere. With a journalist's wiles, the author extracts self-revealing comments from students, parents, principals, and others. We eavesdrop on the teachers who stealthily try to soften the edges of a relentless tracking system, the parents who spar to retain the privileges and prerogatives of their gifted children, the school board member who crafts a Machiavellian plot to save an excellent but ornery physics teacher. In a field plagued by abstraction and jargon, Mathews stresses character and conflict with a novelist's sure touch. His engaging, economical book shows how overweening parental ambition perverts even the best public schools.

—Harriet Tyson

**TWILIGHT ON THE LINE:**  
*Underworlds and Politics at the  
U.S.-Mexico Border.*

By Sebastian Rotella. Norton.  
320 pp. \$25

A book blurbed by Bruce Springsteen (“Rotella's passionate reporting on the street kids of San Diego led me to write ‘Balboa Park’”) may not immediately inspire scholarly confidence. Is this yet another pop dramatization of a complicated policy issue? The fear is unfounded. Rotella, who covered the U.S.-Mexico border for the *Los Angeles Times* from 1991 to 1996, reveals the violence and tragedy unfolding in a region at once very close and very far away. Some of the events he recounts have made headlines. But most Americans, including most elites, have yet to come to grips with them. This evenhanded book will help.

Rotella begins by portraying the dangers endured by the hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens who continue to stream into the United States. Not least among the perils is mistreatment at the hands of the criminal rings that smuggle people across the border. As Rotella points out, long-thriving smuggling rings have become even more profitable recently, thanks to American efforts to stem

