

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



illegal immigration: fees have jumped from about \$350 to as much as \$1,000 per person for the trip from Mexico. While most immigration researchers have yet to factor smuggling into their analyses, Rotella wisely places it at the center of his account.

Rotella argues that the much-publicized border fence has not so much stopped the influx as redirected it to remote parts of the border where no fence has been built. Still, Rotella acknowledges that the fence has imposed order on what was verging on a Hobbesian state of nature. As recently as the early 1990s, the nightly scene a few minutes from downtown San Diego was one of border bandits robbing, raping, and murdering migrants. And the migrants, massed by the hundreds waiting to make their move, were themselves known to assault U.S. Border Patrol agents.

The violent heart of Rotella's account begins with the 1988 murder of a crusading Tijuana journalist and continues with the 1993 assassination of Cardinal Posadas of Guadalajara. In late February 1994, two Mexican drug traffickers with ties to the presidential campaign of Luis Colosio, presumptive successor to President Carlos Salinas, were shot while driving on Interstate

5, 75 miles north of Los Angeles. Days later, a machine-gun battle between federal and state police in a middle-class Tijuana neighborhood left five dead. Three weeks after that, presidential candidate Colosio was assassinated, apparently by a lone gunman, in a shantytown outside Tijuana. In April, the reform-minded chief of the Tijuana police was gunned down. And in January 1997, the special prosecutor investigating that murder was assassinated at his home; four gunmen riddled his body with more than 120 rounds and then ran over it with their van.

The link between these bloody events is of course the drug trade, specifically the battle among rival clans to control the lucrative U.S. market. In typically incisive fashion, Rotella asks whether the drug smugglers may be connected to the alien smugglers. His answer is no, at least not yet. But to read this remarkable book—all the more remarkable for its complete avoidance of moralizing, invective, sensationalism, and off-the-cuff policy prescriptions—is to feel confident that should this precarious situation change, Rotella will be the reporter who brings us the news.

—Peter Skerry

Science & Technology

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL:
*The Life and Times of the Man
Who Invented the Telephone.*

By Edwin S. Grosvenor and Morgan Wesson. Harry N. Abrams. 304 pp. \$45

This dramatically laid-out volume opens with a full-page blowup of a Victorian photograph. Fourteen-year-old Aleck Bell, book in



hand, leans pensively against a garden urn. The volume closes with a small head shot: Bell 65 years later, an old lion with fierce eyebrows and snow-white beard. This slightly blurred final image packs a surprise. It is not a photo but an early electronic facsimile, wired to New York from Cleveland over an experimental line in 1924.

The bracketing makes a biographical point, for Bell's career epitomizes the mentality that produced the technological leap. Thinking the unthought-of round the clock, he invented not only his world-transforming telephone but a metal detector, an early version of the iron lung, and a "photophone" that sent sound by light waves, preceding Marconi's wireless by 18 years. He built a hydrofoil driven by two 350-horsepower engines that zoomed to a world-record 70 miles per hour. Neck and neck with the Wright brothers, he and some partners constructed a powered air-