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Ted Ayres, Social Justice and Education Advocate: "Making it Count" with Book Reviews

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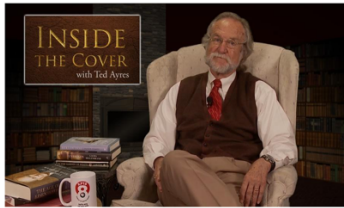
**Ted Ayres, Social Justice and Education
Advocate: “Making it Count”
With Book Reviews**

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The year 2020, like no other year in recent U.S. history, was a raucous reckoning for an array of social justice issues. As this theme continues in 2021, it is heartwarming getting to know a quiet advocate in our midst. Meet Ted Ayres (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Advocate and Book Reviewer Ted Ayres



Note. From PBS Kansas public television: *Seriously good TV* [photograph], KPTS PBS Kansas, 2021, (<https://www.kpts.org/programming/inside-the-cover/>). Copyright 2021 by KPTS.

A Man of Letters

Ayres’s advocacy comes in the form of book reviews. He champions fairness, equality, and justice through his literary wanderings shared on various platforms. He is host of the PBS Kansas Public Television show *Inside the Cover*. He is published in journals and even shares an Annual Book List since 1993. But what he quietly does has become more and more important as our country faces the reality of inequity, racism, and divisive politics. As a guest on the PBS Kansas show *One on One with Victor Hogstrom* (2020), Ayres was described by the host as “an acclaimed barrister and man of letters and literary aficionado.” Ayres’s commitment to reading and sharing reviews stems from a lifelong passion and curiosity of all that is literary.

Erdem: Do you have a first memory of having a book?

Ayres: I do! We had a little public library in my hometown. And I remember, not sure what age I was, but I remember my mother taking me there and getting my first library card. I remember getting that card and being able to take a book home. And the first library book I remember, for whatever reason, was *Black Beauty*.

Originally published in 1877, *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* by Anna Sewell was written in the first person—rather, *Black Beauty* tells his own story as a horse. Some might say the moral of the story is to be kind to animals, but one cannot miss the implied message of this horse not having control of his life as he is sold and passed to the kind and to the cruel. This was perhaps the seed of social justice for Ayres.

In a recent review of the researched, non-fiction work *The Eagles of Heart Mountain: A True Story of Football, Incarceration, and Resistance in World War II America* by Bradford Pearson (published January 5, 2021), Ayres gives a bit of historical context and provides human connections, a trademark of his reviews, in considering the justice or injustice of historical actions.

These actions [internment of the Japanese] were ordered by President Franklin Roosevelt shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Roosevelt authorized Executive Order 9066 which was issued on February 19, 1942. In reading the book, I learned that on March 10, 1942, in the Oval Office of the White House, Roosevelt tasked Kansas-born Milton Eisenhower with the assignment of setting up a War Relocation Authority to move the

Japanese Americans off the Pacific Coast. Less than three months into the job, Eisenhower wrote his former boss, the Secretary of the Agriculture, that: “I feel most deeply that when the war is over ... we as Americans are going to regret the avoidable injustices that may have been done.” Eisenhower resigned from the assignment in June of 1942.

In his book, Pearson really tells two stories: the circumstances of why the relocation of Japanese Americans took place and the details of how it was carried out by the United States Government, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation headed by J. Edgar Hoover. To me, it was extremely interesting to note the paranoia, racism, xenophobia, and misinformation (both accidental AND intentional) that existed at the time of the relocation and to draw parallels to our current world today. (T. Ayres, personal communication, February 8, 2021)

A Legal Career

This lawyer’s professional career is highlighted with work as an attorney performing in an array of disciplines within the legal field. He is humble in describing his career from law clerk at the Missouri Supreme Court to counsel positions in higher education ultimately moving him to Kansas. Stunning is his role in arguing a case before the Supreme Court of the United States. Disciplined always in his approach to find and convey truth, Ayres’s success in his petition on behalf of the university to the highest court of the nation to review a lower court’s decision relating to religious services on the property of public institutions (University of Missouri at Kansas City) is due to his love of reading and writing to a point of pride and pain in “getting it right.” The university lost the argument in *Widmar*

v. Vincent (1981) when the U.S. Supreme Court, in an 8–1 decision, sided with the religious organization by classifying the gatherings under free speech and not worship services. However, this case went on to make impact on a national level when Congress passed the Equal Access Act (1984), which extended similar rights to student organizations in public high school environments. Impact is what Ayres is all about.

The theme of social justice runs through the decorated career of Ayres, with work around Equal Employment Opportunity and Title IX and with many awards, including honored recognition from Diversity Kansas and the Wichita Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As vice president and general counsel at Wichita State University, Kansas (1996–2015), Ayres was instrumental in the university’s acquisition of the collected papers of Gordon Parks, a native son and renowned African American social justice advocate through art, photography, and film spanning 60 years, starting in the 1940s.

A Literary Aficionado

And Ted is still making it count as a retiree (see Figure 2). “Working was always meaningful to me” (T. Ayers, personal communication, March 16, 2021). Retirement means continuing to make impact with his leadership at the Kansas African-American Museum and with projects such as the Kansas African American History Trail and the recent national attention given to the history of the Dockum Drugstore sit-ins in Wichita. NBC’s TODAY Show (2021) aired the story of the Wichita NAACP Youth Organization members who protested segregation at the counter. Included in the news segment was the daughter of the owner of Dockum

Drugstore apologizing on behalf of her family for their participation in systemic racism. The sit-ins were successful, with the Dockum Drugstore counter declared integrated to end the protest. The morning news show is proof that what happens or starts in the Midwest does not stay in the Midwest, whether it is Ayres's opportunity to argue before the Supreme Court of the United States, John Brown's concerns about slavery, Gordon Parks's creative genius, or the first sit-in protest of segregation two years prior to the Greensboro, North Carolina, beginning of the Civil Rights movement.

Figure 2

Ayers at a 2020 Art Show Featuring his Travel Photography at Wichita State University.



Note. Photo courtesy of Ted Ayres. Reprinted with permission.

I had to ask Ayres for his thoughts on the current Black Lives Matter movement, particularly in light of the divisive politics and sentiment around race in the country today.

Erdem: Why do Black Lives Matter? How would you respond to someone

who is perhaps of the mindset that "All Lives Matter"?

Ayres: It is hard to challenge the general statement or principle that "All Lives Matter." Of course, we should believe/feel/want this to be the true and guiding principle for living our lives. However, I think there is an unfortunate factual breakdown when one considers the definition or meaning of ALL. I suggest that the reality is that since the founding days of this country, ALL lives have NOT mattered. Starting with a constitution that deemed African Americans to be "less than whole," through Jim Crow, through racial profiling, through the now sadly repetitive news of black men and women being harmed by those who are asked to protect us ALL, the need for a BLACK LIVES MOVEMENT seems readily apparent to me. As Dr. King noted, the dream is to have each and every one of us treated equally and based on our merits, achievements, contributions or our faults, errors, or lack of judgement, regardless of the color of our face, our ethnicity, or our family heritage ... then truly ALL lives will matter. (T. Ayres, personal communication, March 23, 2021)

Ayres is a balanced, honest, and thoughtful voice at a time when such a disposition is needed the most in our society. Just as he holds no prejudice against people, Ayres knows no prejudice when it comes to selecting books to read and review—fiction, non-fiction, historical, or biographical—even if he is of differing or decisive views of the content. An example of this is his reading and review of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's book, *Scalia Speaks: Reflections on Law, Faith, and Life Well Lived*. Ayres's scope and honesty are wonderful.

Before reading this book, I was not a fan of Justice Scalia or his jurisprudential philosophy. However, after reading Scalia's point of view as explained in his various speeches and presentations, I came away with a begrudging respect for his perspective and admiration for his wit, humor, and writing ability. After all, if Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg respected and appreciated him (she wrote the Foreword to this book, and there is a roast of Ginsberg by Scalia included in the speeches) ... I certainly can as well. (T. Ayres, script notes for *Inside the Cover*, February 9, 2021)

In the few short months of working on this article with Ayres, I was surprised to find myself reaching for and reading books that I would never have thought of consuming. This bibliophile, Ayres, has challenged what I would have considered to be a good read. In the end, this is true advocacy for greater knowledge from books and forced re-thinking of what there is to gain from a book not necessarily on my radar. I am already grateful to have read books he reviewed, and I read them because of what he had to say about them.

Erdem: Do you ever not finish reading a book for whatever reason?

Ayres: No, I finish reading every book. If I opened it and started reading it, I read it to the end.

Ayres has a talent for finding quotable language and delivers it eloquently on air or in print (see Figure 3). Ayres calls these *literary gems*.

Yet history, along with kindred social studies like ethnology, anthropology, and sociology when honestly used helps

enormously to splinter those barriers of prejudice and explode those lies which create hatred between races, sections, and national groups. Few indeed are the bigots and reactionaries found among true historians. (Wecter, 1957)

Where can you find the book reviews of Ted Ayres? Anyone can view *Inside the Cover* at the PBS Kansas website:

<https://www.kpts.org/programming/inside-the-cover/>

Figure 3

Ayres's Collections and Quotes



Note. Photos courtesy of Ted Ayres. Reprinted with permission.

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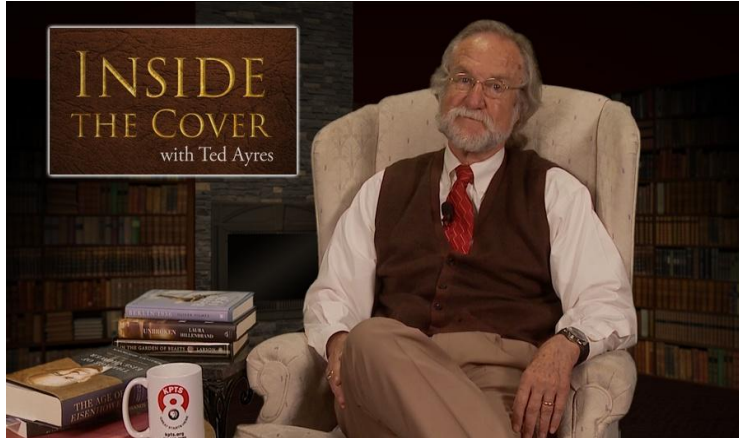
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Appendix A

Figure 1

Advocate and Book Reviewer Ted Ayres



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Appendix B

Figure 2

Ayers at a 2020 Art Show Featuring his Travel Photography at Wichita State University.



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Appendix C

Figure 3

Ayres's Collections and Quotes



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