



## On Subbing: The First Four Years

*Dave Roche*

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*On Subbing* is a quiet classic. It's impossible to put down, or forget, Dave Roche's vivid, self-deprecating, tales of woe from working as a substitute teaching assistant in Portland's elementary schools in the early 2000s. He writes about the good days and the terrible ones, helping kids who can't function in normal classrooms focus on their work, keeping kids from fighting, and keeping his composure while they tease him or adorably flirt with him. It's a real heartwarming ticket to putting a smile on your face and turning your day around. Illustrations from Clutch McBastard, Nicole Georges, Keith Rosson, Nate Beaty, Shawn Granton, and Aaron Renier.

## On Subbing: The First Four Years Details

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## From Reader Review On Subbing: The First Four Years for online ebook

### Esme says

This is a collection of zine's David Roche made during his four years as a TA sub for special needs classes all over Portland. This is the comment I left on the microcosm publishing website: "This book was a birthday gift and it goes above and beyond the word gift! I'm glad this book exists. I am in the same field as Dave and it feels good to be able to feel connected to similar experiences (good & bad). I can relate to so much of it; the tantrums, the frustrations, the tension, the depressing moments, the tender moments that make it worth it and just trying to just do your best. Love, love, love it."

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### Jason Koivu says

Engrossing and often gross stories about being a teacher's assistant for mentally-challenged children.

Dave Roche is not a perfect person, but he's clearly got guts to do this job. The situations he finds himself in - whether it's helping a kid in the bathroom or working with them on basic tasks that are beyond their capabilities - are hilarious and heartbreaking, and his low-key though seldom absent sense of humor makes even the difficult to read sections within *On Subbing* a joy.

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### Lisa says

A true story, originally published as a series of 'zines, about subbing as a special ed assistant in Portland Public Schools. Dave is a young aimless punk who is getting just a bit too old for his series of meaningless jobs, but doesn't have the skills, experience, direction, or interest for anything more solid. When he starts subbing, his world view is both strongly reinforced and radically changed.

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### Elizabeth says

I work with developmentally disabled adults, staying at a group home alone for 20 hour shifts twice a week. I have worked with D.D. folks on and off since high school and have experienced some very weird, sad, and amazing things. In Annie Oakley's introduction to *Working Sex she tells a story about a customer who had a Partridge Family fetish and wanted her to pretend to drive the school bus in the peep show. This story is what we want to hear about sex work- not the drudgery and the assholes. I feel the same way about what I stories I tell about work. The weird and disgusting and the funny. Emo Dave has managed to put together little snippets of a world that most of us avoid in a way that is not tokenistic. Put out by Microcosm and hard to get but well worth it. Inspires me to put together some of the amazing things I have been privy to.*

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### **Graybird says**

Dave Roche has a lot of good things to say about trying to be a mentor/teacher to kids in a non-hierarchical and respectful way. The way that he describes trying to handle conflict, sexism, homophobia, and gettin' harassed by his students on a regular basis says a lot for finding effective ways to learn and teach in a way that isn't founded on blatant authoritarianism and power trips but instead on trying to approach these issues in a mutual, respectful manner and trying to meet kids on their level. This was a good, quick read, and I only wish that it wasn't published and distributed by Microcosm so that I could recommend without compunction that others get a copy.

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### **Mrlunch says**

Nice journal from a slacker-punk who originally decides to start subbing as a Education Assistant for disabled kids because it pays more than his job at Goodwill. Over the course of the book though, it is interesting to see how engaged he becomes and how important it is for him to be working with these needy students.

Because this is in journal form, it's actually more fulfilling to read this a couple entries at a time, rather than in long stretches.

Also cool how cheap it is--I paid \$5 for it at Powells.

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### **Trixie Fontaine says**

If cool weblogs were perfect they'd actually be books . . . exactly like this! Trim personal topical journals published independently and/or by small presses . . . exactly like this!

Note to some of the critics: the guy wasn't a certified teacher, he was an ASSISTANT in special ed classrooms. How can you read the book and not get that? Further proof that we need more true stories like this from inside the special sub-sub-culture that is authority figures within schools-within-schools.

Captured the awkwardness of trying to relate on a human level to children while retaining some of the boundaries required and/or necessary to maintain order in the classroom and some of the ethical struggles of BEING ethical within systems that are paradoxically UNethical.

Sometimes moving, sometimes funny and a very fast read conveying both the absurdity and value of public education for kids with special needs and for all of us just getting through our days doing shit that society tells us is important but is basically meaningless . . . and coming to see its importance anyway.

Existentialism lite, like The Plague with drool, diapers, and kids throwing sticks at raccoons while they're trying to fuck.

Edited to add: you might "get it" better if you've taught or worked in classrooms in some capacity. Folks who can't remember what school was like or have no experience in schools as adults might not be able to relate or accept some aspects of the reality of public education.

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## **Matt Skeels says**

This little book comes from the zine subculture. It's about a punk rock substitute school teacher. He gets shipped around to various jobs in his school district. Often finding himself the butt of jokes. The school kids belittle him and are very insensitive, but then there are these really cool moments where some of the kids realize how cool he is. And then, there are those bizarre moments where he has to watch a class of mentally-handicapped students wipe their asses when they have to go to the bathroom. Hilarious, outrageous, and entertaining! I highly recommend this book.

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## **Peter Derk says**

This has been on the To-Read list for a long time, and I regret taking so long to get to it.

Before getting to the standard non-review part of the review, this is a great little book about subbing in special needs classes. It's in no way mean-spirited, but also it's not too much *Children Are the Future* horseshit. Read it.

Now the standard non-review part of the review, a little love letter to Powell's Bookstore in Portland, OR. Which is where I picked up this little book.

Goddamn, if you're a book person and you've never been there, go. Absolutely go. It's really something.

We haven't had a book store in town for some time. Not really, anyway. Even when we did, there were some problems.

I'm aware that Amazon is undercutting bookstores left and right and that it's hard to compete. I get that. And someday when I'm a lot more wealthy than I am today, I'll do my best to buy more books. For gifts and for myself. That's a promise. Right now? Well, it's not really worth debating because I don't have that option.

The other problem is that the stuff I like to read isn't on a shelf anywhere near here. It's just not. In fact, if I wanted to get a copy of *On Subbing* from a library, I'd have to go to Casper, WY. Or, barring that, the next closest location is about 500 miles away. No joke.

So when you go into a store like Powells and you see all the stuff they have, and when you find all the stuff you've ever looked out for AND a bunch of other stuff, it's a pretty exciting feeling for a book nerd.

In order to really get into it, I thought it might be fun to look at some excerpts from some negative Yelp reviews to see if there's really any reason to NOT visit this store:

"Interestingly, the reason it gets two stars is because I was brushing my teeth one time in the restroom, and some staff politely asked me to not do it. Wait... do I look a hobo? Am I not allowed to use the bathroom mirror to brush my teeth? Hello?"

Ah. Well, as a fellow toothbrusher, I identify with what you're saying. But at the same time, as a fellow

toothbrusher, you should know by now how to be a little more discreet about your teeth-cleaning activities. You don't need to grimace at yourself in the mirror to keep your teeth clean, dodo. And if you think it's gross to brush your teeth in a bathroom stall, then it shouldn't be too confusing as to why someone else might find it gross for you to brush your teeth at the sink. If you're ever unsure, ask yourself this: If I walked in on someone clipping her toenails here, would I be upset? If the answer is yes, then it's also not appropriate to brush your teeth, use a nose hair trimmer, or perform body maintenance.

"The worst part of this experience was parking in the garage. I am not sure how that passes any kind of city inspection but it is an accident, make that accidents waiting to happen. If you come here do not park in their garage, it is a one way ticket to collision potential."

Wow. Sounds like a life of the party. Geez, I'd love to come to the biggest book store on the planet, but I hear the parking sucks. You're in the downtown of a metro area. Expect it. By that same token, some complain that the place is crowded. Yeah? So it turns out that one of the bigger attractions in a city is something that people other than you are into? What a world, huh?

" I thought prices were high. Used mass market paperbacks, which I usually get at Goodwill for \$0.99 - \$1.99 were \$4.99 and up."

Oh, honey. First of all, the nearest legitimate used book store to me sells that stuff for double. I was actually at our local goodwill yesterday. It was about 15 minutes from closing, and because I'm just that lonely and bored I decided to look at the books and decide which one I would take if I HAD to take one. The selection was pretty awful. I mean, we're talking Kodak how-to books from the late 80's. We're talking a full row of South Beach Diet. Maybe \$4.99 seems like a lot compared to a buck, but you're not going to find a whole lot of what you want for that price anywhere, especially if you throw in shipping.

"I know this is one of the trademarks of Portland....but I'm not a book worm. So just looked for 2 minutes."

I should point out that this is the ENTIRETY of the review. Okay. So that's like me reviewing an opera having never been to one before and watching the first 45 seconds. Thanks for taking the time to review.

"I guess it's a PDX thing? I mean it's a bookstore. They have books, both used and new. And that's it."

This reviewer seems to spend most of her time reviewing bars that she visits on her way to Blackhawks games. So I guess it was disappointing that there were no old jerseys taped to the wall? I did wonder though. It seemed like a lot of people in Portland were reading on the bus or the train or just whenever they were sitting around. So maybe books and reading are a Portland thing?

"about twice as expensive as Amazon on about everything"

Interesting.

On Subbing at Powells: \$5.00

On Subbing from Amazon: \$8.49

Not to mention the added bonus of walking away with the thing in hand.

"I pretty much hated this bookstore. The guy at the info. desk was totally not helpful and in fact told me "We don't have that book" but I found it myself on the shelf later. I'm pretty sure he was a racist. Screw you

Powell's."

Okay. There are a lot of comments about rude staff. And...well, I haven't interacted with the staff too much. The one interaction I did have wasn't bad, just unsuccessful (asking for a book by Harold Brodkey I was directed to the poetry section, to Joesph Brodsky. Not at all what I was looking for, and I wish the guy had just said he didn't know). So maybe it's killing them a bit. However. I would encourage visitors to wander and look around. Check out a section you're not normally browsing at your regular bookstore. Honestly, if you show up to the city of books looking for one particular title, what's the point? This is a browsing spot. If you're bee-lining, you're wasting the experience.

"That's effectively all it is though: a library more well-stocked than all but the largest metropolitan and academic libraries... except you have to pay bookstore list price here instead of borrowing them for free. That's laudable, and I support the proliferation of the written word, but why is this place the best ever?"

Okay people. Here are a couple things you need to know about used book stores.

1. You will get a low price when you sell, especially if it's not a particularly valuable book. They will then sell it for what they think they can get, which is more than they paid you. This is not an insult or a trick. This is how the store makes profits.
2. NEW Books sell for NEW books prices. Most bookstores do not reduce the cover price on a brand new title. I don't know where you're shopping that you expect it, but it must be a lil slice of heaven.

I mean, this person is complaining that she's not getting books for free? Lady, I'm not going to say that writers should or should not expect financial rewards for their work. But if you're a supporter of the written word, then surely you've read a book or two and thought, "This person has earned it"? If you hold a decent book in your hands, I guarantee you that more hours went into it than the average year of working at a job. And I also suspect that the authors saw less monetary return. If you tipped a waiter at a restaurant who essentially picked up food on one side of a room and brought it to another, then how about you consider the book purchase a tip for the author, eh?

Overall, you need to go. And a lot of the negative reviews speak to a larger issue about being a tourist.

Locals sometimes tend to hate on whatever their biggest local thing might be. Voodoo Doughnut in Portland is a great example. Yeah, if you live there, why would you want to wait in line for 45 minutes with a bunch of drunks to get a doughnut? I get it. For me, Colorado, it's Red Rocks. Man, I think that place is totally overrated, it's not that great a venue, the concrete slabs are shit chairs, and it takes goddamn two hours to get out of that place. BUT. If people come from out of town and that's what they want to do, that's what we'll do.

The thing is, there are pretenders, but a lot of the things that are most famous about a city become famous because they're pretty great. Or iconic. I'm aware that residents of Manhattan aren't visiting the top of the Empire State building on a monthly basis. But it's fun. Residents of San Francisco probably don't drive over the Golden Gate bridge all the time. But it's fun. And I could see why a Portland resident wouldn't take a bus to stand in line for the better part of an hour for a doughnut. But every once in a while, and when you're out of town and every once in a while might be "once, period", just fucking go for it. And when you come from out of town, I don't think you should be embarrassed about doing the touristy stuff. If someone visits Colorado, we might try some food or something that's not so well-known. But if they want to stop at Johnson's Corner and have a cinnamon roll that's not my favorite, that's what we're going to do.

People will always encourage you to try this or that local dive bar or coffee shop. Sometimes those experiences pay off, and sometimes they don't. Just like the big stuff. But the difference, when we're talking about the big stuff, is now you know.

So as a multi-visit tourist of Portland, I'm telling you that you have to visit Powells. It's a must. Get a coffee and plan on spending a good hour there. Maybe it's the Empire State Building or The Bean of Portland. But whatever it is, it's worth a wander. Oh, and get Voodoo Doughnuts too. They're fucking good. I don't care what anyone says.

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### **kittenlogic says**

this dude had a table next to me at a zine fest and was selling only this. he traded me a copy for my recipe zine because it had a dinosaur on the cover. initially, i wasn't going to read it, but since i was in school trying to get my teaching cert at the time, i thought it would be particularly relevant to my interests.

it was just awesome. i can't really say anything else about it. if you think you're going to go into education, particularly special ed, read this. the kids' artwork was the best part!

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### **Eric p-h says**

a selfish and indulgent story about an unqualified lazy guy who decides to be a substitute teacher in Portland. the narrative is meandering and unfocused, which I could accept for a journal-based book like this, but throw in his constant half-assed aspirations for "activism" and his complete disregard for his students' well-being, and you've got a book that is a chore to read and just makes you feel bad about the world.

positively one of the worst books i've actually finished.

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### **Catherine says**

This is the journal of a guy who was subbing during the time I was teaching, so it was interesting reading about the earthquake I remember from my student teaching & the administrative reaction to 9/11.

While I was teaching mainstreamed suburban high school kids in Vancouver, Washington, he was working as an educational assistant on the other side of the Columbia River in Portland, working with special ed students of all ability levels, as well as high risk students. Definitely a different group of students.

His stories, written in the form of journal entries, were alternately funny and sad, and most were pretty interesting.

The over-emphasis on his "alternative life style" I could have done without. Wait...you're a punk? Oh, you didn't mention that about a hundred time, or imply that you're too cool to talk to kids about music if they like mainstream punk or (heaven forbid) some other type of music. And you're a vegan? Really? Because I didn't pick that up the first two dozen times. I don't have anything against punks or vegans, but the constant references were distracting, and it was especially annoying that when he tried to impress students with his

coolness.

Overall, a quick interesting read.

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### **Ryan Mishap says**

Well done collection of zines about, well, the title. The short entries cover one or two events or interaction with the mostly "special needs" children Dave works with. One will make you smile while the next will fill you with the frustration the some of the kids, Dave, and the school system deal with. Other entries will just be sad.

I would wish for more detail because I always like to read more, but this is recommended.

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### **Brimate says**

this is a great little book. a quick, enjoyable read. the author, an anarchist substitute teacher aide in special education classes in portland, chronicles each day he subs over four years. he is funny yet sensitive. i learned a lot about spec ed classes from it, and the other day at my work a group of special ed adults came in, and i felt more comfortable with them and had a basic level of understanding of their differing abilities and function levels after reading some of this book. I love when books are enjoyable, radical, AND help me in real life. this is ones of those books.

i'm starting to sub myself, although not in special ed classes, so it's a nice time to read it.

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### **James says**

Having tried subbing for a very short while, and seeing exactly where it sucks, it's amazing that Dave Roche stuck it out for four years. It's a fairly important job, but there's virtually no training, depending on where one lives (I did it in Connecticut, where all you need is two years of college and a fingerprint check, then an afternoon seminar, after which, boom, you're a teacher). You have to enter the class with an air of confidence that can be deflated immediately after trying to help some kid with the lattice method of math (which I still don't understand). The pay is crap, the respect level is low, and all you get at the end of the day is a feeling like you've had your ass kicked while wondering if you will get a job the next day.

Dave's story is pretty impressive. Throughout the book, he details his trying to balance his punk rock lifestyle (going to shows, playing shows, shoplifting [not really exclusively punk, but he has a fairly anarchist moral rationalization for it, and tries to get his punk friends to shoplift for the good]), and being an uncomfortable authority figure. All in all, I think that he sets a damn good example for kids, and for people who are tired of dead end jobs, but don't want to serve the corporate structure, either.

I was sad for this book to end, and I hope there's a second four years coming up. If not, I'd love to read an extended version.

Mad love to KRD who sent this to me. Thank you! And Andy Z, who sent me the spoilers! You gets love, anyway!

