

# Los Angeles Times

## BOOK REVIEW

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LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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### Children, seen and heard

By DAVID L. ULIN

#### **My So-Called Digital Life**

2,000 Teenagers, 300 Cameras, and 30 Days to Document Their World

Bob Pletka

Santa Monica Press: 168 pp., \$24.95 paper

#### **Nothing Held Back**

Truth & Fiction From WriteGirl

Edited by Keren Taylor

WriteGirl Publications: 238 pp., \$19.95 paper

**H**OW do we give kids a voice? In a world where the divide between adults and adolescents seems to widen daily, how do we let our children tell us what is going on? If these two books are any indication, the best way is to provide them with the tools to speak for themselves. "I found the truth in what Gary Anderson, an educational researcher from New York University, wrote," Covina-Valley Unified School District technology director Bob Pletka notes in his introduction to "My So-Called Digital Life": "'Children are experts on their own lives.'"

"My So-Called Digital Life" is an ambitious project, an attempt to map from the inside the daily experience of adolescence. Students at 32 schools across California were given digital cameras and asked to document a month in their lives. The images range from the mundane (a boy sprawled on a pile of backpacks, listening to his iPod) to the heartbreaking (a girl sitting by herself in an outdoor amphitheater, the caption reading, "I often find myself alone at times when everyone else is with friends"). But the

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book is also surprisingly hopeful, revealing a territory we all recognize, in which kids do homework, play sports, attend class and behave like, well, students anywhere. It's a small point but important, for among our most persistent myths is one that describes adolescence as an alien territory, dangerous, dark and full of malice. There are traces of that here — "TAKE A HINT! LEAVE ME ALONE," reads the magic marker scrawl on one student's bedroom door. But if "My So-Called Digital Life" has a defining message, it's that our children are more like us than we know.

"Nothing Held Back" offers a similar perspective, although here the medium is the written word. The fourth annual anthology from WriteGirl, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that brings teenage girls together with women writers in workshops and one-on-one mentorships, it features many styles and voices, mixing poetry, prose and personal reflection, interweaving student work with that of the adults. The idea, explains editor (and WriteGirl Executive Director) Keren Taylor, is to encourage girls to abandon "their fear of the white page . . . to explore their identity, to examine their family and culture, to pay tribute to someone they love or someone they had lost." Like all such collections, it's hit or miss, but at best it suggests that reports of literacy's death have been greatly exaggerated, that language remains a transformative force. For these girls (and their mentors), writing is a lens, a filter, a way to cut through the nonsense and see the possibilities. As 16-year-old Zoe Beyer puts it in her poem "Glass":

*And if we cracked seashells at dawn we would  
be better people.  
We would look into ourselves, about ourselves,  
under our  
Fingernails and broken body parts for that  
missing  
Shard of conch or cerith.  
And if you found that dried mussel under your  
white bed sheet,  
The sun would come up over our dead city.  
Like the time my grandmother sliced her foot on  
a piece of sea glass,  
We will bleed into the ocean and the sand and  
the salt will sing. ■*