

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

Column Editor: H. Gordon Hullfish

Indirect Censorship

THE RECENT appearance of another answer to Rudolph Fleisch¹ brings to mind a disturbing experience of the current academic year. The writer sat in a two-day conference with a group of professional people whose advice was sought on a variety of problems, among them "how to help parents understand what is now known about the teaching of reading, what advice to give them with respect to ways in which they may help their children in this critical area of learning, and what to suggest that they read." My associates were not without ideas on these and other equally complicated questions and, needless to say, this fact neither disturbed nor surprised me.

I was concerned, however, when some of our number would not have listed *Why Johnny Can't Read* among the book titles to suggest to parents. My opinion of this book is easily stated. I don't like it. I never like to see a problem tortured through distortion. Yet the book appeared. It has been read (as was surely anticipated by the author and the publisher, even though, had the author been correct, it should have had but a limited public). And, having been read, as school people know, it has been talked about. Moreover, there is need that it be further "talked about and about." What better way to have this happen than to have it read in relationship to other books that

challenge its swashbuckling style? We shall not serve education well by blacklisting (and to withhold is to blacklist by default) writings we do not approve, especially when these writings have been widely publicized. There are too many forces outside of education ready to do this. We ought not create a comparable force within.

In the same issue of the *Saturday Review* in which the *The Truth About Your Child's Reading* was reviewed² an article, "Sometimes Good Things Are Free," by Thomas E. Cooney³ and a boxed column, "Are 'Free' Films Good," by Cecile Starr,⁴ brought the same problem to the fore by indirection. Cecile Starr notes, for instance, that "According to one survey, 86 per cent of the high schools in this country use 'free films' in the classroom as direct teaching aids or as general background information"; and adds, "If the report errs, I would imagine it is on the conservative side." Cooney, without mentioning this, reveals the plight of the mailman as he considers the problem of educators in dealing with the teaching aids private groups now supply the schools, saying:

Just about every day's mail brings to the desk of a school superintendent, a principal, or a classroom teacher some kind of book, pamphlet, or chart designed to show that

¹ Sam Duker and Thomas Nally. *The Truth about Your Child's Reading*. New York: Crown. 1957.

² Review by Hazel Arnold Trumble, February 16, 1957, p. 47-48.

³ *Saturday Review*, February 16, 1957, p. 33-35.

⁴ *Saturday Review*, February 16, 1957, p. 34.

Western civilization would grind to a halt if it were not for the starry-eyed efforts of the folks who produce plastic covers for push buttons and the like.

Taking advantage of the fact that modern theories of education are hospitable to "units of work" on subjects which, like transportation and communication, cut across traditional subject-matter lines, many of these private organizations now offer such units completely tailored to classroom use.

Cooney illustrates his point by reference to differing types of unit offerings, such as those from the Petroleum Institute of America and the units from the Hartford Fire Insurance Company which present a year-round program of fire prevention. "So numerous have these teaching aids become that a whole secondary field of commercially produced catalogues of them has sprung up," he states; adding, "A current catalogue devoted almost exclusively two hundred pages to films and film strips that are available either free or at a nominal cost."

Neither author writes of this development in an approving manner; each recognizes, however, as one title suggests, that some good may appear in these "self-interest materials." Cecile Starr concludes that there "is nothing wrong with business-sponsored films that a little competition couldn't cure." She reports, as one road to improvement, the developing policy on the part of some firms to contribute money for "needed educational films" to non-commercial organizations, which then produce them. Cooney calls attention to the standards suggested by the American Association of School Administrators in a pamphlet titled, *Choosing Free Materials*. These were developed to help the educator evaluate the many materials he is offered. He believes the mailman may have to ring twice, or more, however. Educators maintain a healthy skepticism toward these offerings. They operate, as he sees

it, under a protective motto, "Let the receiver beware" and, generally, are "alert and steadfast in protecting their pupils from advertising, propaganda and indoctrination."

The simple and direct way to deal with the problem of free materials, of course, is to make use of the round file which is emptied daily. A plausible case can be made for this solution. The producers of the material are, in the name of education, seeking a special advertising outlet, one which, if it can be exploited, will repay the investment many times. They should not be given access to the classroom, to a captive audience, with teachers asked to serve as middle-men for the wearers of gray flannel suits.

Reflective Activity

This solution is too easy, however. It does nothing to meet the basic issue, the education of young people. Education is not, from the standpoint of the learner, a matter of accepting as true everything encountered within a classroom. Nor is it, from the standpoint of the teacher, a matter of presenting as true everything printed within the field in which he works. Yet, so close has it come at times to representing these conceptions, it is small wonder that many within the culture make no distinction between education, advertising, propaganda, and indoctrination. Those who produce these materials may in all honesty, if naively, believe themselves to be engaged in an important educational undertaking. To refuse to use free materials at all, or to use only those materials which have been judged to be good after a process of screening, will do nothing to change the underlying educational conceptions which have led to their development. We may succeed only in getting better materials to serve bad ends.

The classroom should be a place where reflective activity occurs. It should not be a place of mere absorption. Whatever goes forward within it should go forward meaningfully. Education is a process in which meanings are ordered and organized, examined and evaluated, accepted and rejected, believed in and reconstructed. At times it is a process, after the meaning of an act has been grasped, of directed practice to establish a skill appropriate to the maintenance of meaningful activity. It is never a process of unquestioned acceptance.

All that we think of as the "required materials" of the classroom have to meet these tests, if education, rather than training, is our interest. Free materials should be admitted, therefore, on the same terms. If their motives show at a glance, this is a fact to be established through study. If they have been produced more subtly, this, too, may be discovered. In either instance, young people will learn, as they should always be learning, to examine ideas in terms of the claims they make. Where educative conditions prevail, ideas, so to speak, are

asked to make good and are given the chance to do so. They are not honored merely because they look good.

No materials, free or otherwise, should be used simply as filler, as busy work. When used, they should bear upon the work in hand, should promise to advance understanding. They should have, in short, an educative function. Thus, the most flagrant efforts at propagandizing, if they challenge ideas and compel a reconstruction of what has been believed, may be better educative materials than those which present sterilized information. The excessive care to censor what may be read, viewed or experienced may seem, at first blush, a proper function of the educator. But this reaction needs to be watched. It may lead to the production of sterilized minds, a fact that is lost neither on those who make free materials available nor on those who try to keep others from reading the books they don't like.

—H. GORDON HULLFISH, *professor of education, Ohio State University, Columbus.*

Yellow

Across the floor the morning sunshine
Makes a lovely yellow path.
In his cage a wee canary
Preens his feathers from his bath.

Yellow sunshine,
Yellow feathers—
Bird and sun
Melt into one.

—JUNE DESMARETS—*Grade 9A, South Pasadena, California, Junior High School.*

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