

preamblings

Since the days when our high school graduating class voted James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan its favorite book, thereby saying something about its affection for the books their English teachers had assigned for classroom reading, our own quest for literary adventures has taken us to Fanny Hill (briefly), Tropic of Capricorn (tiresome), Lolita (interesting, but not to our taste), Candy (tasteless), and so on. We won't say we have known them all, all those books that entrepreneurs have pushed into gaudy paperback commercial successes and long-run Hollywood films, that the public openly condemns and quietly buys. But we've seen a representative sample.

In our view, the "corruptive" force of any single book is far outweighed by the constant pandering to sex-obsessiveness for a national audience on the part of mass media, of which that piously educational friend of the family Life magazine is a prime example. Fresh from looking at Life's blown-up photographs of Danielle Devereux as she exhales "Passion is the only way out," and Anne Heywood playing the role of a nun being raped in "The Lady," which she describes as one of "the kinds of pictures people want to see," come students who have been and may continue to be officially denied access to such works of literary merit or social interest as To Kill A Mockingbird, Brave New World, Black Like Me, not to mention Catcher, on the grounds that they contain "harmful materials" or purvey smut. But if students in the tranquil days before World War II, the paperback explosion, the scientific sanction for parental permissiveness, TV, activism, and so on, had enough enterprise to discover that Studs Lonigan was a book that would tell them about Life, students today will be no less enterprising in seeking out what they want to get.

We are almost tempted to argue that the most efficient way of dulling interest in a book is to establish it as required reading in the curriculum. We would rather argue that it is time to let the good drive out the bad, to let our students discover that sex in literature is like sex in life, only part of the whole, and if the book is literature a necessary part of the context of that whole. This kind of realization is as much of the substance of education as the so-called sex-education courses that so many school systems are now adopting at the elementary school level. Students who are convinced that their teachers are open-minded and unflappable, that educators and legislators reject pornography because it is puerile and tawdry, not because it is in some mysterious, tantalizing way "dangerous," are likely to be more receptive to an education designed to develop their self-discipline and refine their taste. The virtue we would develop cannot be

cloistered one, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race. There is, in fact, in our age unlike Milton's, no place to slink to that can't be found by the marketers.

The schools ought to have as much freedom, if not more, than the market place. This is a point that seems to us often to get obscured. Legislation directed against the commercial exploitation of young, immature people by purveyors of pornography has a motive which we support. If such legislation will, in fact, drive the exploiters out of business we can only cheer. But the effects of legislation so well intended have in the past often been different from the ideal that has animated it. Purveyors go underground, and the shadow of the legislation begins to affect school boards, administrators, and teachers of literature.

We are certainly not advocating the use or teaching of pornography in the classrooms. What we are urging is that we guard against the side-effects of pornography legislation that may intimidate us subtly. Such legislation makes us uneasy, we become reluctant to assign books that we believe in but that those who have not read or understood may distrust. We sidestep the risks and fall back on the safe. And by so doing we run the risk easier for us to take (since we can't, after all, be held personally responsible) of driving students to the market place in search of what they may come to think of as vital and true and stimulating because it is forbidden.

Here we have a painful irony: since we as the public are willing to consign our children for at least twelve years to the ministrations of our school systems, we must believe that teachers are more about what happens to the minds of our children than the peddlars of commercialized forms of "education" and communication. Yet when we raise difficulties about students' access to books in their school instruction we are also affirming our distrust that teachers will know how to use these books relevantly and discreetly. The way in which the public exercises its right to regulate its schools is, of course, the subject of more than one irony and the source of more than one pain as those who have anything to do with scheduling time for curriculum revision have reason to know.

Guarding the rights of the public with respect to instruction in English classrooms would be satisfied, we think, by the action proposed by Sy Yesner in the September 1968 issue of the "Language Arts Newsletter" (Minneapolis Public Schools): the English teacher should categorically state that no student is expected to read any book that would be offensive to, and therefore forbidden by, parents. But we think the defense of the complaint should lie with the parents, and that teachers should not automatically be expected to assume the defensive posture. For that matter, why aren't English teachers who are technically, at least, assumed to

be authorities on literary values, and social science teachers who are authorities on social values, routinely included on public boards and committees involved in censorship?

The NCTE has available three publications on censorship that are of interest to our point: How Censorship Affects the School by Lee A. Burrell Jr. (Stock No. 19009, \$.35); Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies (19330, \$1.00); The Students' Right to Read (20809, \$.25). We are happy to print an article on the subject written by the Director of the Minneapolis Library, Ervin Gaines, an outspoken opponent of censorship who would welcome the support of those others of us who believe that minds grow strong in the exercise of confronting reality, with the help of teachers at first, later by themselves, strong enough to hold on to the good and to exorcize the fantastic and the perverted.

* * * *

We'd like to call to your attention to two workshops at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, one on "The Teaching of the Humanities" to be given by Fred E. H. Schroeder, assistant professor of English, the other on "Cinematics" to be given by Mrs. Carol Beatty, head of the Cinematics Department at Central High School in Duluth, and Anna Lee Stensland, associate professor of English and Executive Secretary of the MCTE. For more information, write: C. M. Milbrat, Director of Conferences, Institutes and Special Projects, 2205 E. 5th St., Duluth 55812.

* * * *

A selection of essays in criticism by undergraduate English majors in the liberal arts colleges of the state is printed in this issue. Focused on post-World War II fiction, the selection represents the choice of the undergraduates themselves and we hope will serve to demonstrate not only the range of attitudes but also the level of accomplishment of our students. In a subsequent issue of M E J, the selection from this February's Conference on post-World War II poetry will appear. Knowing how galvanizing it can be to us all, and the more so to our students, to see ourselves in print (in the grip of this passion, these preambulings have been picking up mileage), we would like teachers on all levels to consider this journal as a potential source of publication for their students' writing as well as for their own. How about a set of spoofs on tired old subjects ("What I Did on My Summer Vacation" combined with "My Favorite Pet")? Our next issue will be devoted to the writings of elementary school children.

* * * *

Tom Walton, of John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Ely, has agreed to serve as book reviewer for elementary school materials, and will do his next review on Weston Woods publications.