

Teachers & Writers

Magazine

Volume 8, Issue 2



Flora Arnstein

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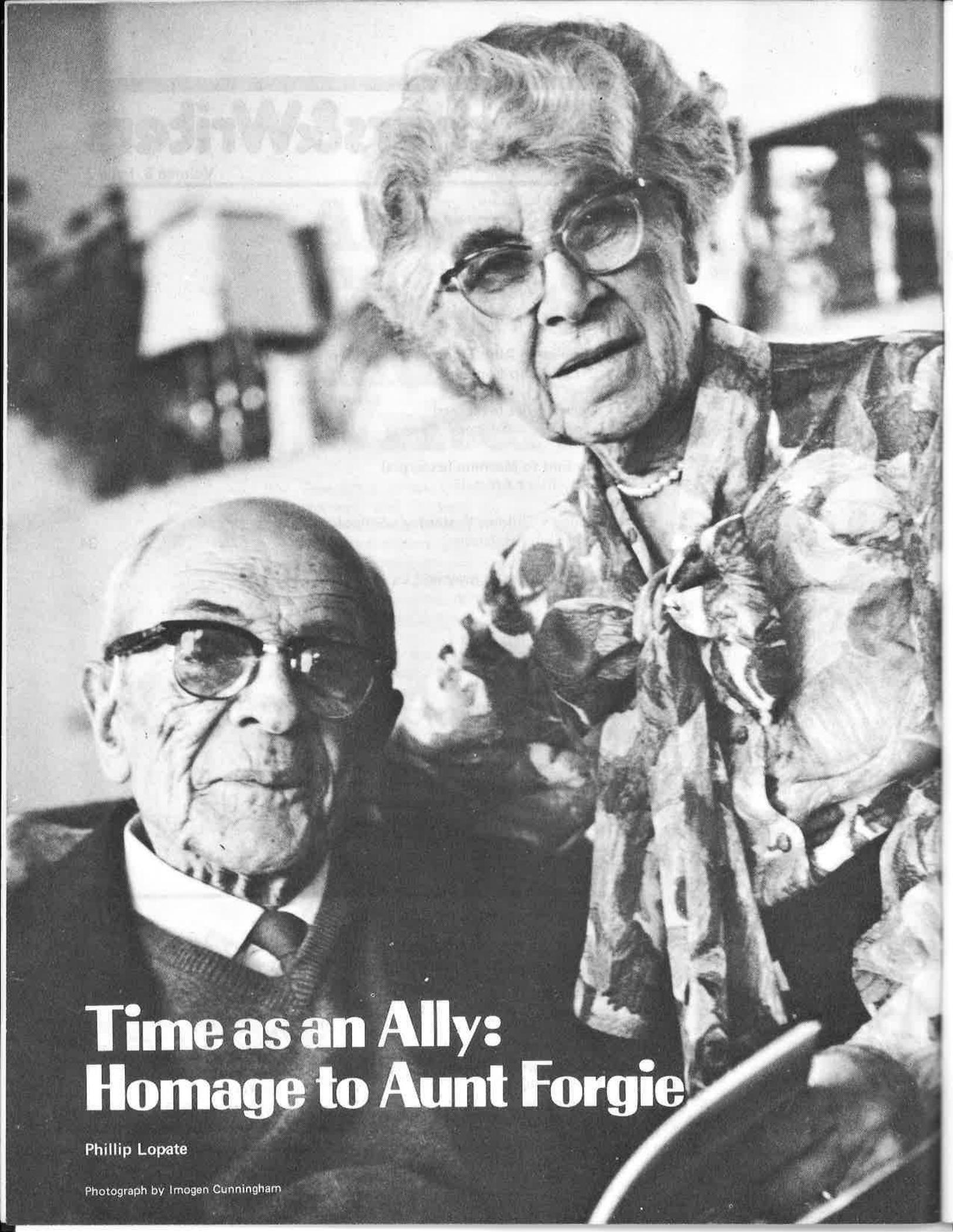
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Time as an Ally: Homage to Aunt Forgie

Phillip Lopate

Photograph by Imogen Cunningham

In the Poetry in the Schools Movement—that eternal ingenue that presents itself to the public as always fresh and original—it is sometimes hard to remember that we have a history, with ancestors who broke the ground we are now standing on. Few of these ancestors are more deserving of respect than Flora Arnstein. She is the author of the classic studies, *Children Write Poetry* and *Poetry in the Classroom*, and one of the pioneers in the field of teaching children to write.

Flora Arnstein is ninety-one years old. That in itself seems remarkable. Even more remarkable is that she continues to hold weekly classes in her home for the appreciation of poetry, as she has done for many years.

I discovered Flora Arnstein's books over eight years ago, when I began trying to teach children to write poetry. In the available literature, her books were among the only ones (David Holbrook's were the others) to treat the subject with a complex, balanced point of view, that took into account not only the tactics for getting children to write, but the child's well-being, and the growth of his or her consciousness over a substantial period of time. Her approach may be termed 'environmentalist,' in the sense of the artist-teacher considering the task of teaching writing as inexorably related to the social conditions of the school and the development of particular children—and therefore tending to stay in one setting over a longer period of time. It is an approach I came to share with her, which partly explains why I felt attracted to her work.

I was glad to be able to quote a passage I admired from *Children Write Poetry* when it came time to write my own book on the subject. One of her students apparently brought my book (with the passage) to Mrs. Arnstein's attention, and she wrote me a friendly letter, which opened a regular exchange of correspondence between us.

In July, I wrote to Mrs. Arnstein that I would soon be in the San Francisco area and, if she didn't mind, I would like to call

on her. She said that would be fine. I had in mind the idea of doing an interview with her and collecting some new texts by her for this magazine as a kind of *hommage*, the way the French do with their aged masters. The form was more clearly in my head than Flora herself. I was unsure what to expect when I went to meet her. Would she be quite feeble? Or one of those capricious, domineering old empresses who hold forth without tolerating interruption? I was almost hoping for the second kind. . . .

A few minutes late, I looked around for the titan I had planned to meet on Geary Street and practically bumped into an alert, extremely small, ordinary-looking woman in a fall coat. "Mr. Lopate?" she said. Her everyday lady-in-the-street quality came as something of a shock: at first a disappointment, then a relief. Of course (it hit me) this is what Flora Arnstein would look like. I should have realized from her prose, which is always so sensible and unaffected. She pointed me to her car, a comfortable large model, and began driving and talking with a matter-of-fact vitality which made me realize I understood very little about the potentials of nonagenarians. Here I had expected to assist a quivering twig-like thing in a wheelchair, and she was not frail at all; quite the contrary, she drove better than I did!

My *mise en scene* aborted, I lapsed into being a passenger. As she drove she began talking about the subject which she knew we shared—children and writing.

"You've been in part responsible for the vogue of teaching chil-

dren to write. What do you think of the recent poetry efforts in the schools?" I asked.

"Well I respect the fact that people are trying. I respect the fact that they have gotten something from the children in terms of writing. But I'm not in accord with their aims—which seem to be based only on *results*, what kinds of thing they have to show for what they've done. Whereas I think the thing that's important is what's happening to the children. Their growth, and their immersion in poetry, which comes if you read to them a lot and talk over the poetry with them."

"So you think there's something wrong with trying to get kids to write poetry immediately?"

"Yes I certainly do," said Mrs. Arnstein. "I was on a panel recently at San Francisco State, and they put on a demonstration of working with children before an audience. First of all, they didn't make the right rapport with the kids. You have to have a rapport with them where the kids are not afraid to say anything they want to say. I didn't feel they did that: I felt they went in to get the kids to write, by hook or by crook, you know? And I think the only way to get kids to write is to write out of their own experience and the things that they've felt. As I've said in my book, poetry is recorded experience—or imagined experience. First introduce some poems to the kids that will get them talking about their own experience."

"How long does it usually take, in terms of weeks, after the first introduction of poetry for the

kids to start writing?"

"Well I don't force them to write. What I've done is to bring in books of poetry by other children and show this to the kids and they say, 'Oh, couldn't we write some poems?'—'If you like.' There's never any pressure on it. And if they don't want to, all right."

"You're probably aware, though," I remarked, "of the kinds of pressures that are put on the young writers who go in and teach. I'm not saying this just to defend them, but sometimes they're expected to fill quotas, to put out a little mimeographed publication in no time at all. I've been in places where, by the second week people say, 'When is the poetry book going to come out?'"

"You know, they don't realize that these things are a matter of growth! And development! I saw one of the guidebooks put out by this group, and as an exemplar of everything awful," she laughed, "it couldn't have been better."

"What did it say exactly?"

"Gosh I don't remember any more, I threw it away! But it was this business of insisting on early writing. And—mostly a lack of understanding of kids. You know, just because a person is a poet isn't any guarantee that he's a teacher or that he understands kids."

"Absolutely. Well, but there's no training for that."

"No." She stopped at a light, and looked sideways at me. "I was very fortunate because in the school that I taught our principal was very advanced. But with most of these teacher training programs, I don't think the emphasis is enough on children. It's on subject matter. Well, I'm not deprecating content, you have to teach something. But it's not enough on kids. And the same with the poets. If they understood kids, they would never exploit a bunch of children like that: taking them all around the country to answer questions about their writing. One little boy

was asked what happens when he writes a bad poem; he says he never writes any bad poems! Imagine!" she laughed incredulously. "It's just an exploitation. It's the wrong emphasis. You can't *plaster* culture on people. You can only develop it . . . under certain circumstances."

"Right. It has to grow from underneath."

"Right. That's why I object so much to criticism, because you don't know where any given child is at any given time. But you don't know with adults either; I've taught adult groups too. There's no way of guessing, outside of finding out where that person is in his own development and his own thinking. And when you do that with children you always come up with wrong answers."

"That's interesting. Still, don't you think you sometimes have to take the chance of criticizing because the kids won't trust you if they feel you're too neutral?"

"But I think they feel when you're with them. You establish that with your class. What I do when they come in is to tell them: 'I try to be fair, but very often a teacher doesn't know all the things that go into a situation. So I'll be glad anytime if you want to tell me what goes into things.' And then they know that you're with them; that you're not going to stand in judgment of them."

We stopped suddenly. "Here we are. Number 30." We had been driving up a steep hill in the Sunset District, near Parnassus Heights, and I had not really been paying attention to the houses except to note that they indicated order, love of flowers. Her house was semi-secluded behind a gate, with a garden in front; it had a multi-faced, two-story design made with natural redwood slats and large curtained picture windows. A 1930s clean, Bauhaus look.

"What an unusual-looking house. How did you come by it?" I asked.

"We built it," said Flora Arnstein, opening the door with her key. "The architect was a man named Wurster—he later became head of the architecture department at the University of California—Berkeley. We wanted an architect who wouldn't look down his nose at designing a small house."

Inside was a comfortable living room with a piano and a large picture window from which one could see all of downtown San Francisco and the bridge. "Excuse me, I'm just going upstairs to see my husband and tell him I've arrived. He doesn't like to be left alone." She disappeared up a cream-carpeted spiral staircase, so steep that it reminded me of a fireman's pole.

"Now," she said, returning a few moments later, "can I get you some lunch?"

"Yes, please," I said simply, since it had already been arranged beforehand that I would eat there.

"Oh, I wanted to show you some of the poetry books that the children made." She went over to the bookcase behind the piano. "These were all hand-printed by the children. They chose the poems from all those that were written during the year, and they learnt how to operate the printing machine. It took so long and they got so involved in the job that I had to get them release time from their other classes."

I looked through the loving, hand-sewn books, dated 1935, 1937, 1939, and in each one a fountain-penned inscription of gratitude to one Aunt Forgie.

"Who's this Aunt Forgie?" I asked.

"Oh, that's me," she said, bashfully. "There were a number of my nephews and nieces in the school, and they called me Aunt Forgie. And so then all the other children demanded that they be able to call me that. So that's how that got started. Would you like to go into the dining room now?"

I followed her inside, and we

sat down by a window with its hypnotizing view of the San Francisco bay. I was tired, the jet travel had slowed me down, and as soon as I sat at the dinette table I realized how much my body just wanted to sit there and look out, with this kindly old lady bringing me lunch. The converse was that I didn't particularly want to interview her about education. In fact I was a great deal more interested in the clouds and the cypress trees at that moment than teaching children. "You have an incredible view."

"Yes," she said, laying down a plate of toast. "Of course it's changed a lot. . . ."

I wondered what particular changes she was thinking of: she who had seen horses run up Van Ness Avenue. "In what ways?"

"Well, downtown they've just instituted a new driving system, with one-way streets. It's confusing at first until you get used to it. And of course, the construction," she said, without any trace of nostalgia.

"There do seem to be a lot of new buildings."

"Do you like sugar and cream in your coffee?"

"Yes, please."

She set an avocado and shrimp salad plate before me.

"This looks wonderful," I said.

"Well I had to make a salad because I couldn't both go out and cook!"

"It's very good, this."

"I beg your pardon? I can't hear too well."

"It tastes wonderful, this fish."

"Well, Easterners like Western shrimps. So I always. . . ." she said, drifting off. Or maybe I was the one who was drifting off. We ate in silence for a few moments. I kept wanting to lie down and take a nap. The tension of producing conversation with a stranger, more and more conversation, especially about classrooms which were so far away from us, began to make me sleepy.

"Would you like a bit more

coffee?" she asked.

"No thanks. Although I probably could use it. Excuse me, I'm a little tired."

"That's quite all right." Flora nodded slowly: her lips were pursed tightly together and she was watching me, more keenly than before.

I decided I had better start the interview in earnest.

"What year did you begin teaching?" I said.

"Don't ask me years. I never remember years."

"How old are you exactly?"

She laughs. "I will be ninety-one next month."

"You know I have to tell you, I just don't believe it!"

"You were probably expecting a tottery old lady."

"I guess we've been misled about old age."

"Well, one way to keep young is to be around young people. If it weren't for the kids, I'd be an old fuddy duddy up on the shelf."

"But the way you walk, for instance, and the way you move around, it doesn't seem possible that anyone over ninety. . . ."

"Well, I've been fortunate, you know. When I was eighty years old, they asked me to speak at a celebration. And I said, 'Well you know it's no virtue to be eighty. You just can't *help* it!' So I feel the same way about ninety."

"I suppose. But what does it *feel like* to be ninety?"

"Well—do you know the photographer Imogen Cunningham who just died?"

"Yes."

"She took a picture of my husband and myself. He's ninety-five; he'll be ninety-six. He's extremely active in public health. He's won all kinds of honors—federal honors that you'll see in the other room. Well, she came up and took our pictures last November before she died. And she said to me, 'How does it feel to be ninety? How do *you* feel being ninety?' And I said, 'Well, not very much different from what I always felt except I

tire very easily.' And she said, 'I just hate it!' She was ninety-three. 'I get vertigo and I hate—hate age.' Well, I think she hated old people too because the pictures that she took of us were so . . . made us look so horrible," Flora laughed good-naturedly.

"There is that whole grotesque strand in modern photography, where the subjects come on looking almost too defined."

"I know," she said. "You finished your salad? Maybe you'd like a little fruit."

"Fine."

"You'll now have another bit of coffee or not?"

"No thanks."

"I'm going to." She stepped into the kitchen to refill her cup.

"Do you eat any different foods now?" I called in. :

"Do I eat? Yes, I'm on a very strict diet. I have been all my life. So. . . ."

Lunch was over, and we moved into the living room to the comfortable couch. There I asked her the usual questions: about her entry into teaching, and the development of her approach, the history of the school she helped to start, and the problem children she worked with. All of this Mrs. Arnstein was delighted to talk about, telling instances and details the way she does in her books. It was the favorite part of her life, I gathered. She offered particular poems and methods that had worked for her. The problem was that everything she said was so sensible, our values were so much the same, there seemed no point in discussing these matters. I had trouble pitching the discussion at a level where we could talk more as peers—where we could push the level of insight one step further. I was too experienced to play any more the acolyte hungry for tips, but too young to be an equal. All I knew was I wanted something sharper from the interview, and this sea of agreement wasn't getting me it.

Yet in all fairness, it was my



problem, not hers, since I had come to her as a *hommagiste*, gathering information to pay her public honor; and she was abiding by the rules of the game.

Mrs. Arnstein showed me an article of hers that had appeared in *The English Journal*. In it, she commented on the amount of poetry published recently by children on the subject of Death. The article raised the question, whether there was not something unwholesome about this phenomenon: Were children being manipulated to write on these morbid subjects? Or was the nature of childhood itself changing, becoming more cynical and sour as a result of global anxieties? She concluded by saying that educators and parents should make up their minds whether to approve or discourage this tendency. . . .

Something in the nature of an objection was bubbling up in me, but I didn't know quite how to put it. I wondered how, on the

one hand, Flora Arnstein could champion the free expression of inner moods by children, in poetry or otherwise, as a healthy outlet; and on the other hand, draw the line in so-called morbid areas like death. Was not that "protection" of the children another name for the repression she had always objected to, and that she had spent her life fighting?

All of us have our areas of dread, which often get projected onto children, in the concern of what to expose them or not expose them to. What struck me about Mrs. Arnstein's argument, however, was the word "wholesome," with its particularly nineteenth-century Victorian flavor. The only way I can get at this is to say it reminded me of Charles Reznikoff, the splendid old poet who died recently. Reznikoff was, like Arnstein, an extremely sensitive, modest, good person, born in the last century. He came once to read at P.S. 75 at my invitation, agreeing with a note that said teaching poetry to the young, "is correct, stimulating and spiritually wholesome." Reznikoff himself wrote gentle visionary poems about everyday incidents and people in the street; but he also produced powerful verse based on court transcripts of America's bloody history, in *Testimony* (not to mention his last, searing volume, *Holocaust*). He was reading to fifth and sixth graders some of his genial poems of the first type, and they were listening politely if drowsily to this small man who must have struck them as an odd sparrow-figure, pecking at words, when I threw out a suggestion that he read his marvelous poem about a Western gunfight in *Testimony*. "Oh no," he said fearfully, "I don't think that would be appropriate for children this age." I had to smile, knowing these kids ate up gunfights for breakfast. Somehow I coaxed him into reading it, and of course it was a great hit. They asked for more like that, and

he may have obliged with one or two more bloodthirsty ones, but against his better judgment. He seemed very much to want to keep an austere separation between the benevolent fantasies and the nightmarish ones, in his own mind, and especially around "innocent children."

From my reading of Mrs. Arnstein's article, she too seemed to be taking the position that childhood was a happy, innocent state. Though her books were filled with poignant observations about anxious, defensive children, she often treated their reactions as the exception. "How sad to burden a child with such baggage," she writes of a disillusioned boy, "when he might go out to life free-hearted, adventurous and trusting." There are references to "legitimate child-illusions" and "the carefree heritage of youth." She writes: "A cynical child is almost as great an anomaly as one with six fingers on his hand." I, on the other hand, had met many, many cynical children, and considered disenchantment to be part of the very music of childhood.

If children were sometimes lucky enough to be carefree, they were also fairly miserable sometimes. I explained this position, haltingly, to Flora—Mrs. Arnstein. I said that by no means did I consider happiness to be the given birthright of every child. Ever since Freud, etc. etc., people have been more willing to appreciate the sufferings of children, and not to lay on them the burden of having to be happy, which adults ascribe to children because they would like it for themselves but which has so little to do with the condition of childhood.

Whether I was raising this objection just to force a disagreement between us, or to move the discussion into darker, deeper waters, I don't know. I was worried now that she would take offense. I added that perhaps I felt particularly strongly this way because my own childhood was so grim.

Mrs. Arnstein sat thoughtfully for a few moments. Her old mottled finger rested on her cheek. Then she said, "You know it's funny that you say that . . . because my childhood was not very happy; I lost two of my brothers when I was still young. One of them I had helped to bring up myself—he was practically my child. Then he died when I was just twelve years old. I was shattered."

Her voice caught. I had the urge to put my hand on her and comfort this old, old lady for the loss of her baby brother. It had happened almost eighty years ago, but it was perfectly real to her. It was in the room with us. The sight of him seemed to be before her eyes.

She went on: "But I couldn't go to anyone about it. I couldn't go to my mother. My mother was too broken with grief herself. Besides . . . I came from a very repressed family. We didn't talk about those things. . . . I don't mean to say that my childhood was completely unhappy. It was happy enough. But it took me awhile to get over some of the bad parts." Again, her voice seemed to go dry. I was no longer surprised that she might be a little squeamish about death and children, or that she still had certain contradictory values regarding expression. The wonder was only that she had come so far by herself, in throwing off the mental restrictions of a Victorian girlhood. In any case, I was finally learning what I had come to hear. The story of her life.

Flora Jacobi was born in 1885, into a German-Jewish family of merchants in San Francisco. They were well-off enough to have a large house with columns and bay windows, and servants and nurses for the children. In their benevolently (and sometimes not so benevolently) autocratic, extended household, with the grandmother holding the most power, Flora was kept at a considerable distance

from the adults around her. Flora's father seems to have been a frightening figure to his children: sarcastic, teasing, silent, locked-up in himself, obsessed with neatness and daily rituals. Her mother was warmer, but distracted easily.

Flora was the kind of child who suffered hurts deeply. In the sensitive, honest memoir she wrote about her childhood, *No End to Morning*, renaming herself Amy, she is able to call up the feelings and embarrassments of an intelligent child who is forced to doubt her own perceptions because they seem so antisocial. Mrs. Arnstein writes: "One such incident occurred to Amy when she was very small, before her brother was born. The family had made an excursion to the Golden Gate Park, ostensibly, Amy was given to understand, for the purpose of 'ordering' a baby brother. They repaired to a little bridge overlooking a lake, and here she was instructed by her mother to ask the stork to bring her the baby. Amy clamped her lips. Something in the tone of the situation made her suspicious. 'Go on, Amy,' Mama prodded her, and finally to have it over with, Amy murmured something under her breath. But the grown-ups weren't satisfied with this, so Amy was forced to repeat the request aloud, whereupon she caught the exchange of glances between Mama and the aunts. What did all this mean? Self-conscious and uneasy, Amy felt somehow betrayed, and the consequent embarrassment troubled her for long afterwards."

Flora/Amy chafed against the prison which is the role of "child" (with all the naiveté and fond deception that that meant in a Victorian age). Yet her rebellion was so inward that it never seemed to reach the stage of fighting with her parents. She behaved always as a good, somewhat cowed child. One gets the impression of a girl who was not strong enough then to stand up to her repressive fami-



ly, but whose resistance took the *decades-delayed* form of vowing never to oppress others when she grew up. Her modesty today, almost a century later, seems not so much a consequence of undervaluing her worth, as a willed decision to be different from the elders of her childhood. Not overbearing and domineering, but accessible, unprepossessing, kind—Aunt Forgie. One has only to compare the portrait of her grandparents from *No End to Morning* (see p. 25), so arbitrary and God-like, with the kind of old person she is. Flora Arnstein today gives the impression of someone still searching to understand, to improve herself.

When she was a teenager, Flora fell in love with the piano. She left school at fourteen to study music. She spent three winters in New York with respected teachers of the day, such as Paulo Gallico, Rafael Joseffy, and the composer Ruben Goldmark. After several

years of study, she began to doubt, however, that she was good enough to be a concert pianist.

At the age of twenty-five she married Lawrence Arnstein, a member of her social circle in San Francisco. "He was the brother of a close friend, and at first I took little notice of him. But afterwards," she says with a twinkle, "I started taking a good deal more notice of him." Flora settled down, having two children and taking care of the household and continuing her music. The next fifteen years seem to have slipped by rather uneventfully—or at least when I asked for details, she couldn't think of any. "I was raising a family," she said, unadorning that. "You know, it's a funny thing. Both my husband and I had to wait till we were over forty to find the activity that would give us most pleasure in life. I waited till forty to discover poetry and teaching, the things I love best."

"And your husband?" I asked.

"He was over sixty and retired when he started his second career, in public health." Mrs. Arnstein called my attention to the photographs of her husband with various public figures, framed and resting on the bookcase. "He's still active as a lobbyist in the state legislature in getting health measures passed. One of the California hospitals is going to name a ward after him."

"But why did he start so late?" I asked.

"Well, that's a long story," she said uncomfortably, reluctant to burden me with old family troubles. But, as I indicated I still wanted to hear it, she went on. "He inherited a business from his father, and he went into business—which he never liked. He never liked being a businessman. He wanted to sell it off many times. But he felt a responsibility to the workers who had been there a long time—he didn't want to throw them out on the street, and at that time they couldn't find any other jobs. They had

On The Stylistics of Children's Poems

It was something of a surprise in studying the children's poems to discover certain recurrent forms of expression. One of these which seems characteristic of the poems of seven or eight year olds is enumeration. A child will, for example, choose flowers as a topic, and then proceed to enumerate all the flowers he can think of. Doris (aged eight) writes:

*There are green flowers,
And yellow flowers,
There are tiny flowers,
And great flowers.
There are very, very blue flowers,
And then there are little pink flowers.
There are pictures of flowers,
And flowers that children press—
Like marigolds and things.*

Apparently the children, as an early step in the manipulation of ideas, tend to assemble them into categories. There are hundreds of poems of this type. One might be inclined to think that the children borrowed the enumerative form from one another, except for the fact that it appears spontaneously in each new group. . . .

Along with enumeration there occasionally appears some sort of evaluation or appraisal of the material. Appraisal, however, is encountered more frequently in the poems of the older than in those of the younger children. . . .

Another mode of expression occurring simultaneously with enumeration is that employing the words "I like" or "I love." This form is somewhat more mature than the catalogue; it implies a commentary on the material. It occurs at its peak in the eight- and nine-year-olds, and the "likes" and "loves" apply to everything, from sensory experience to contemplation and speculation. . . .

Reference to color in the children's poems serves two ends, identification and description. In the enumerative poems, color identifies objects: "there are red houses, white houses," etc., and is used descriptively in direct statement, such as "the clouds are white." . . . Subtlety of color observation comes, as one would assume, only in the poems of older children. Donna (aged twelve) notes:

*The warm sunlit sky
Is blue with the color of endlessness.
The soft brown earth
Has the smell of the ground after rain.*

"The color of endlessness" is an inspired observation, and lifts the poem out of the realm of literal observation.

—From *Children Write Poetry*, by Flora Arnstein

been with the firm many years. So he waited. Finally, during World War II, he was advised that the manpower shortage was so great, because of the draft, that his workers would be able to find other jobs. It was the most opportune moment, and it might never come again."

Waiting is a motif in Flora Arnstein's educational books—not surprisingly, given the arc of her life—and a favorite strategem to be recommended to others. About one tricky problem, she wrote: "Chance played into my hands, as it sometimes does when I take time as an ally, and postpone action." Or: "When expedients as to how to handle situations are not at hand, I find if I wait, sometimes they clear up by themselves, and if they do not, and I am not under pressure to take immediate action, alternatives do present themselves." There is probably no shortcut to this faith in the wisdom of time to clarify confusion, so rare and yet so necessary in the weaponry of teaching; it needs the perspective of long experience, disappointments and rebounds.

When she was forty, Flora Arnstein's patience was rewarded. She had what seems to have been almost a conversion experience. One night she sat up reading Hughes Mearns' book, *Creative Youth*, about the success he had had in eliciting poetry from teen-age children, and decided that she herself wanted to try it. She stayed up that whole night writing poem after poem. It was something she had never done before; but once having made contact with that source, she found herself returning to it for months afterward. A curious thing is that she never played the piano seriously after that. Poetry had won her over completely. The little girl who whispered in *No End to Morning*, "Better keep things to yourself . . . better not tell too much!" had apparently decided to try another way.

The writing of poetry was cer-

tainly connected with the lifting of old traumas. At the beginning of *No End to Morning* Mrs. Arnstein places an epigraph from a work by A.D. Van Nostrand with the significant title, *Everyman His Own Poet*: "Only to the extent that he can understand how the past has determined him can the character be free of it." Expression is seen as an excavation of one's memories and inner moods and a first necessary step toward personal freedom. Thus, poetry has a therapeutic function, the bringing to the surface of the hidden life of feelings—a position which Flora Arnstein has consistently taken in her writing and her teaching. Her students' poetry and her own poetry tend to reach for a kind of lyrical cleansing. Humor, worldliness and everyday incident may be present at times, but they are subordinated to this other ideal, the pure surge of inner life.

One should not get the impression, however, that Flora was attracted to poetry merely for its purgative value. She loved the music in it. And if she stopped playing piano after taking up poetry, it was partly because she was able to transfer her musical inclinations to the newer medium. The first poems she wrote were, like Mearns' students, in rhyme and meter. Afterwards she switched to free-verse—though making sure to keep it strongly cadenced. "I prefer poems with cadence," she says, half-proudly, half apologetically. The sophisticated modern style she finally evolved for her poetry is scalped, lean, dense, lyrical, compact, with rhythms that catch one up short, and metaphors extending from the interior toward the metaphysical: in a way, reminiscent of Emily Dickinson.

Flora Arnstein's involvement in poetry seemed to develop side-by-side, chronologically, with her interest in educating children. Dissatisfied with the schools in the Bay Area available to her children, she and her sister-in-law started

As if to escape light widening

I shrink to the shape of my bones,
But light pries, and like a brush
Coats all the chinks,
Probes through to the skin.

Shutters, shades, clenched lids
Cannot smother it. It is like
tyranny,
Like fighting the air
That never fights back.

Call to darkness from whatever
crevasses,
You get no answer.
It is as though the earth never
turns,
And light has linked arms with
you,
To lead you closer and closer,
Through rungs of brush
Up to the crest of the pyre.

Doppelgänger

The creature with the slitted mask
Weaves up and down before me,
Never a glance my way, but knows
My hackle rises at each passing—
His sure antenna notes
My breath is footed to his step.

He is the discredited self,
Whose journey is nowhere
Except away, rayed from this
pivot
That holds him to a yard's end
For sure return.

Neither the suave glove
Nor hobbled fist stays him—
My under-face, closer to bone, and
nearer
To longing.

their own school, the Presidio Open Air School. From its name it is clear that the founders had a belief in the educative value of children's play—although the traditional academic subjects were also taught. Enrollment was to be kept small, and the school was to be run along progressive education lines; and there was an energetic scholarship program to keep the place from turning into a snooty

private school.

What made the school especially unique was that it hosted a successful experiment in children's self-governance. Mrs. Arnstein and her sister-in-law had hired as their principal Marion Turner, an innovative thinker who had trained with the Deweyites and William Kilpatrick at Columbia University. Marion Turner's idea was to have children learn democratic behavior empirically—starting at five years old in kindergarten—by deciding their own code of conduct, discussing, voting, holding trials, and forming a school-wide representative body. "They made up rules about things of their own," explained Mrs. Arnstein, "issues that pertained to them: the schoolyard, and things in the classroom that disturbed them. And therefore it had vitality, and validity."

In her straightforward, useful book, *The Child Within The Group: An Experiment in Self-Government* (Stanford University Press—unfortunately now out-of-print), Marion Turner explains the procedure:

When a child found himself in trouble and needing assistance, I would summon a meeting of all the children in the group and, acting as chairman, call upon the individuals who raised their hands to say what they thought about the matter. When the sentiment of the class had clearly revealed itself, it was generalized in a summary by the teacher and voted upon by the children; a statement of the ruling was then hung upon the wall as an article of the constitution. A Chinese gong was hung in the room, and the children soon learned to use it on their own initiative to call a council meeting for the consideration of a problem.

In this manner, out of each child's problem there arose a formulated standard of conduct. When an offender listened to all that was said about what he had done, when he had a chance to state his side of the matter, when he heard what his peers thought about it—both those who would excuse him and those who were less tolerant—he knew where he

stood and why. As one of the children succinctly put it, 'You know the reasons for things.'

One of Marion Turner's most valuable contributions was in getting her board director, Flora Arnstein, to teach at the school. As Flora tells it: "One day Marion Turner said to me: 'I'm troubled about the music teaching at the school. If I get a person who knows music, she doesn't seem to know how to handle a group, and if I get someone who does know how to handle a group, she isn't well equipped in music. So the children are getting to hate it. In a moment of egotism, I said, 'If I taught them they wouldn't hate music.' To which she replied, 'I'll take you up on that—will you come over to school and take a class?' Without a moment's hesitation I said, 'No—I couldn't—I don't know anything about teaching.' And the matter rested there, until some time later when I told my husband that Miss T. had asked me to teach a class. 'You're going to,' he said. And I said, 'No, I don't know how to teach.' 'Well you go anyway,' he said. 'What can you do but fail?' So he pushed me over the ledge."

Her first classes were rather uneven. An amusing incident from those days is recounted in Mrs. Arnstein's book, *Dear Harriet*: it captures both her greenness and her stunning gift, even then, for hitting on the intuitively tactful, human teaching solution:

I came upon Harry's stubbornness on one occasion during a folk dance session. At large, on the dancing floor, with my back so propitiously turned as I played the piano, Harry was unable to resist the temptation for aggression. A swift kick to another child brought forth a wail, and a definite request from me that Harry take his seat. But Harry stood four-square facing me and refused to comply. I repeated my request only to be met implacably by the announcement that he wasn't going to sit down.

All this took place at an early

stage of my teaching career, when I was none too sure of myself. So here I was confronted with a child who I knew could neither be coerced, nor solicited into compliance, and surrounded by an audience of children, whose heightened expressions told me only too plainly that I was on the spot. To my added consternation, at this moment the door opened and my principal appeared with two visiting guests. To say I was petrified puts the situation mildly. In desperation I turned around all the expedients I could summon up, only to discard each in turn. Then suddenly, out of the blue, I had an inspiration. I played the musical signal for the children to take their seats and, as a matter of course, Harry had to take his seat with the rest.

Over the next few months, Flora Arnstein became more comfortable in the classroom, though she never liked teaching music. She was fortunate in having such a sympathetic supervisor and mentor in Marion Turner, who trained her as well in the self-government method. The facility with which Flora Arnstein handled it as a problem-solving tool may be evidenced by her own accounts of class discussions (see the Juan chapters from *Dear Harriet*, excerpted here, p. 17). And the freedom of children's expression encouraged in the political realm may well be connected to that which eventually came to flower in the emotional-literary realm.

Her major breakthrough as a teacher occurred when she decided to give up music instructorship and switch to poetry classes. This shift, in keeping with what was happening in her private life, brought the two pieces closer together and made her much happier. Eventually she was teaching poetry to every class and grade in the school. There had never been a poetry class in the Presidio Open Air School—nor were there, according to Mrs. Arnstein, creative writing courses offered in the West Coast colleges in those days. In short, there were no poetry classes for adults, much less children: which meant there was no way to

acquire a professional model for what she hoped to achieve at the elementary school level. She had to feel her way in the dark, groping step by step into unknown, unsettled territory.

It is this solitary, heroic effort that we pay homage to most. Working alone, her instincts proved sound again and again.

Consider her contributions. She was among the first to encourage children to write poems in free verse. She stressed the authentic, the personally felt, seen and experienced, as against posture-striking. She advocated using "the language of today." She appreciated and knew how to value the expression of child thought, child feeling, "pure child communication," whether it was poetry or not. She denounced the red-inking of poems, and argued that it was a mistake to impose grammar and spelling lessons on creative expression. She encouraged her students to edit and hand-print their own books of poetry (on multigraph machines), which were then hand-bound. She took dictated poems from very little children and published the results. She read children modern poems that were ostensibly above their level; she argued against introducing poems that were sentimental, preachy, arch, cute or "written down" to children. She made penetrating insights into the stylistics or recurring features of children's writing. She was the first to try to evaluate in a systematic manner the growth of poetic criteria in children. She spoke out against I.Q. tests and the whole machinery of categorizing and labeling children, before it was fashionable to do so. She involved herself in the problems of the school and the lives of children and their families, to such an extent that, forty years later, her ex-students still keep in touch with her.

From about 1934 to 1946 Mrs. Arnstein had accumulated a substantial amount of children's poetry, and a vast collection of

On Overpraise

Often creative work seems to some people to call for a sort of special consideration—as though the mere fact of writing a poem casts some sort of aura around the activity. If the teacher does not overweight the writing, the children are relieved of certain fears surrounding it. . . .

Parents are naturally, and in some cases justifiably, proud of the achievements of their offspring, but in certain instances the expression of much pride is likely to place barriers in the way of the child. Matthew, aged twelve, instead of handing in his poem at the end of the writing session asked, "Would it be all right if I take my poem home first to show to my mother?" Not foreseeing any unfavorable circumstances, I made no objections. [He had written a poem called "News."]

It was a very acceptable piece of work, especially as an early attempt. But Matthew's mother was so impressed by it that she read it to a friend who was in some way connected with publishing and who suggested the poem's publication. Matthew's mother arrived at school the next day to discuss the matter. I advised her against taking such a step, but unfortunately the damage had already been done to Matthew. He had been made to feel he had accomplished something especially noteworthy, and as a result he became self-conscious about his writing. Whether he was wondering before embarking on a new poem if it would be "as good as 'News'," or whether in the writing the same idea obtruded, there was no knowing. In any event a long time elapsed before he could write spontaneously again. His subsequent poems were stilted and wooden. Overpraise, strangely enough, seems to block a child's creativity, and this is an additional reason for the teacher to accept the child's poem in a casual manner.

—From *Poetry and the Child*,
by Flora Arnstein

insights into how to inspire such expression from children. She began to consider how to take this material a step further, and came East, to New York, to see what other people were doing in the field. There she was told by Nelly Sargent that almost no one was working with children in poetry—except for Hughes Mearns, of Columbia Teachers College. She met with him and he was instantly enthusiastic about her results. She showed him an article she had written on "The Development of

Poetic Criteria in Children," which told how she had recorded all her students' comments about their poems some time after they had been written, and dated the comments in order to indicate some measure of growth of poetic consciousness; and he got very excited. Mearns also urged her to write a book. Mrs. Arnstein objected that he had already written *the* book. He answered, "No, no, that was for older children, and nothing's been done for younger children. It's the hardest thing in

the world to find any material on creativity. I want you to write this book because I need it for myself."

Mearns also showed his enthusiasm for her storehouse, as he called it, by annexing a portion of it into his next popularizing work, *The Creative Adult*. Apparently he forgot to ask her permission; but he rectified the oversight later by writing a very gracious introduction to her first book, *Adventure Into Poetry*. In it, he said:

As a teacher and as an artist Flora Arnstein displays here her two great gifts: she knows the way into the inner spirit of childhood where lies unexpressed beauty; and she knows how to entice that dormant power into attractive self-expression. . . . Flora Arnstein belongs to that small but growing group of artist teachers who know that guided self-expression opens up important paths not only to cultural living but also to learning, to morality, and to health; that each revelation of the inner spirit thus successfully handled by adult guides has canceled at once a hundred personal and social problems of the faraway future.

There is some confusion about the titles of Mrs. Arnstein's books. The first, published by Stanford University Press in 1951 under the name *Adventure Into Poetry*, was later reissued by Dover Paperbacks under the more familiar name, *Children Write Poetry*. Her second book was originally titled *Poetry in the Elementary Classroom*, and published by the National Council of Teachers of English and Appleton-Century Crofts in 1962. This was later reissued, again by Dover Paperbacks, under the changed name, *Poetry and the Child*. The Dover Paperbacks have been continuously in print, and have sold thousands of copies—though Mrs. Arnstein says with good-natured resignation that she never made any money off of them. Dover bought the rights outright for "something like \$150 or \$500 apiece—I'm notoriously forgetful about figures."

I was curious what had happened to her teaching career and the Presidio school. "Did you stay with poetry classes right along?"

"For awhile I did. Then the principal asked me later on, whether I wouldn't like to take a grade. And I said yes; I didn't like this thing of being an 'occasional' teacher. I'd much rather be with the children right along. So I taught the grades from the second through the eighth. And I had no training except what I got from her."

"Now you were a regular classroom teacher? A 9 to 3? You had no certificate. . . ?"

"This was a private school. No, I had no certificate. In fact, after I left the school I opened an office for coaching children who were having trouble with their schooling. And I went down to the Board of Ed and they said, 'Oh, we're so glad. We need somebody so much! What are your qualifications?' And when I told them I didn't have any—any tags, they said 'Oh, we can't use you.' I said, 'Look, I've graduated children who are doing marvelously in high school.' But nothing counts, you know, unless you have a handle to your name."

"Why did you leave the Presidio School?"

"Well, after Marion Turner left, they had a series of principals, one worse than the next. The final one was somebody I myself was instrumental in getting to come out. Because she came from Columbia University, I thought, now that woman has had the experience and knows the whole Dewey approach. But when she came, she couldn't handle the children, she couldn't handle many situations. Things like this would happen. At lunchtime one little boy was burning a sweater out the window. And we had little children sleeping in the lower floor. The place was a tinder box, it was just wood. I went to the principal about it, and I said I think we ought to have somebody supervising the halls. I

said I'd be willing, and I'm sure the other teachers would be willing to take a day each to do the supervision. Well, she never acted on it. And there were a number of instances of things like that. Finally I just felt I couldn't be associated with it; it was just too alien to me. So I sent in my resignation to the Board."

"What happened to Presidio?"

"It still exists. . . . Under a changed name. It's changed ownership several times."

Mrs. Arnstein continued to conduct poetry classes for young people, ex-students, in her home. The sessions were as much opportunities for them to vent their feelings through group talk in a supportive atmosphere, as lessons in poetic craft. She also wrote a third book on education, *Dear Harriet* (excerpted in this Magazine), and two book-length memoirs about her childhood and adolescence. Her poetry has appeared in *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest* and many other periodicals and journals. Recently she brought out a beautiful collection of her selected poems, *Light Widening*.

At ninety-one she keeps writing, taking care of her fragile husband, Lawrence, and conducting poetry classes in her home. Her students are all voluntary.

"I have a group of adults that comes once a week. They come Monday nights. They range all the way from in their seventies to my granddaughter who's twenty-eight. It was started in fact by my granddaughter, who had been working with me as a teen-ager so many years. She said, 'You know, I never read poetry when I'm alone. And I think if we got a group together, we'd read it.'—Well, I said, that would be fun. So I tell them I'm not equipped, really, to do a teaching job such as a professor of English could do. I haven't got the background. I never had an orthodox education at all. So I tell them, let's just enjoy poetry together. And we do. They ask me

to pick out something, or I ask them: Who would you like to read next? And they tell me. I prepare a program, and have copies for each member, because we're all eye-minded as well as ear-minded."

"What are the poems you've been reading recently?"

"Oh, we've been picking everything from Yeats down to Carlos Williams, to—everybody. Anyone they pick, that they hear about and like. They were *very* enthusiastic about Yeats, and strangely enough they liked Edward Arlington Robinson, which I didn't think they would. But this is a very unusual group that I have now. Very gifted group of people. And they're not there to tear a poem to pieces. They're there to find out what they can like about it."

It had been a full story; I felt satisfied. But we had a little more time before I had to go. I asked what had become of some of her old students. Mrs. Arnstein grew alternatively fond and thoughtful as she spoke of each. Paradoxes

and reversals were what struck her most. A surprising number whom everyone had feared would not turn out well have gone on to brilliant careers in cancer research and so on, while some of the most accomplished students petered out. Not surprisingly, a good number also became writers and artists. One favorite of hers is a widely read syndicated columnist. Another of her pupils became a well-known politician and government figure. It is quite amazing to read the portrait of him as a child in *Dear Harriet* (where he appears under the name Juan, p. 17), with that double vision of his ascendancy in mind. Poor "Juan" was so unpopular with the other children, and so irresponsible and disorganized, that another ex-pupil said, "We would have predicted him *least* likely to succeed."

She also spoke about one of her students whose life had ended in suicide. She said she had "never known a happier child." Mrs. Arnstein shook her head. Her eyes were focused in the long distance,

as if in wonder at the path of a human life. There is something almost naive, I started to think, about a woman her age still finding amazement in such a turn-about. But thinking further, it seemed that anyone who has lived so long, and has seen so many twists and turns and overturnings of human potential, must be either jaded, or awestruck.

Flora Arnstein has always taken the side of those who choose to be amazed and impressed with human growth. Herself a late bloomer, she asks again and again that the same chance of Time be given children who seem stereotyped as hopelessly slow or bad. Perhaps a little of the poet may be raised out of them. What she has given witness to, in her own maturation and in the careers of her students, is that anything may happen in a human life. An individual's capacities, either for productivity or for tragedy, are not predictable. As she phrases it: "The sources of human behavior are still a mystery to us. And so, no one has the right to say the final word about a child."

Dear Harriet

Flora Arnstein

Dear Harriet is unique among Flora Arnstein's books in that it concentrates entirely on classroom life: portraits of children, and the ethical and personal quandaries of being a responsive, just teacher, take precedence over the techniques of helping children write poetry. In Dear Harriet one can appreciate how deeply Flora Arnstein's pedagogy rested on her involvement with the psychological welfare of the individual child, the home situation, the vitality of the group, and the atmosphere throughout the school. This 'environmental approach' to the teaching of writing is extended even further, to the political and socio-economic currents in the air. The book takes place during World War II: and the war against Hitler Germany, and the defense of American democracy, with all its flaws, became real issues to the children, who naturally reflected the anxieties of the day.

The book was never published—owing, perhaps, to what was thought to be its limited historical context. In any case, we are proud to have the opportunity to publish for the first time here a number of chapters from it. The structure of Dear Harriet is a series of letters to a friend, from a teacher who is puzzled about her newly assigned pupils and blindly feeling her way—a situation that should be familiar to most readers.

LETTER XVIII.

Ralph, "The Worried Child"

Dear Harriet:

It has come to me how little consideration we give to the effect that war, the existence of the atomic bomb, may have on children who manifest certain aberrant behavior. My attention was drawn to the matter by a twelve-year-old boy who was in my class at the height of World War II. During an arithmetic period Ralph complained to me that he was disturbed by noise and by his thoughts. I asked him if he would care to stay after class and talk with me—that perhaps if he talked about what was bothering him it might help.

He did stay, and the first thing he said was, "My head is full of war." He was worried about what would happen to him if Germany won or lost. He said, "I take this war seriously, not like the other kids." I said I could understand, that the war was a serious business, but, I added, maybe he was worrying needlessly. I went on to say that our leaders realized the seriousness of the situation, but were not afraid, that they had confidence in our resources, our skills, our men. He answered, "I get to bothering about the war, and then I wrap my feet around my chair, and I get more bothered. Noises bother me—the children playing outside, the table squeaking. I can't work then." I suggested that he had still to learn that we can't always have absolute quiet. He said that at the last school he had attended he had had a man teacher,

and "he made the kids keep quiet. I like men teachers," he said, "I'm used to them. I like them to be strict. I can't get along with women teachers; I don't like *them* to be strict." His man teacher, he went on, had given home assignments, and in class the children had only corrected the home work. I said I would be glad to do the same, except I could not take the time to correct his work in class since I had other children to whom I had to give my attention. If he wanted to see me before class, I would be glad to look over his work, and if he was too disturbed to work in class, I'd let him go to the library, provided he brought back his work finished.

He complained that his previous teacher in our school had "dropped my education completely. When I came here I was doing fractions and she put me back to easy stuff." "Well," I said, "maybe you feel that you need hard stuff. How would it be if we go back to fractions tomorrow?" "That would be swell," he said. "I think I'll get ahead with you. What I want to do is get ahead in arithmetic, get as high as the sky." What this meant to him I didn't know.

That afternoon he wrote the following poem:

*Hitler and Mussolini smashing at the Russ,
Hirohito smashing at the Chinese and
Americans and British—
They want to get the world,
But maybe we'll stop them . . .
We hope . . .*

One might "hope" that Ralph's morning revelation had relieved him of some of his anxiety.

The day following our conversation he applied himself to his arithmetic with only a couple of outbursts of talking. In class he said, "I'm daydreaming again," so I told him to take a few minutes off and then start afresh.

He had been in the habit of barging into the library without apology while I was working, sitting beside me and talking, mostly about the war. I did not reject his visits for I wanted to establish a rapport with him, but finally I thought I should take a stand. The next time he burst into the room I asked him whether he had noticed anything when he had entered. He said he hadn't. I said, "Suppose you go to the door again and see what you notice when you come in." He did so but again said he hadn't noticed anything. "Nothing about me?" I asked. "No," he said. "What am I doing?" I said. "Correcting papers, I guess," he answered. "Right!" I said, "and what does that convey to you?" "Nothing," he said. "It might suggest that I'm busy," I said. "What would you say was the thing to do when you see a person busy?" "Knock on the door I suppose," he said. "In this case, that wouldn't be necessary," I said, "because this is the library and open to anyone. What else could you do?" "I don't know," he answered. "This is what," I said. "You could say, 'Mrs. A. are you too busy to talk to me?'" He immediately responded. "Are you too busy to talk to me now?" I thought it better to say I was, but asked him to come back a little later. In about ten minutes he turned up, and with a smile repeated the "formula." I said, "I'm still busy, but I like the way you came in, and I'll take time out to talk with you." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "This is the first time in my whole life I've ever thought of anybody else." I said he was making a good beginning.

He began to speak about a collection of war pictures he was making and said, "What is your telephone number? I'll phone you and you could come to see my collection at my home." I evaded the request, feeling that my relation with him had better be restricted to the school setting. He then suddenly burst out, "My mother screams at me so much that sometimes I feel like fainting." He did not pursue the subject, nor did I.

From this time on his class behavior improved notably. Only occasionally did he interrupt proceedings, and at one such time, I went over to him and explained how difficult it was for me to work individually with all the children, and that as he knew I did not willingly make things hard for him, I didn't think he willingly would do so for me. Since then his controls have been better; he works for longer stretches and does not make the constant demands upon me he previously did. He is not unintelligent, but extremely egocentric and undisciplined, however he is so responsive that I do not think it will be too long before he adjusts to school requirements.

Some of his special teachers informed me at one of our faculty meetings that he was not turning up on time in their classes. He seemed to be wandering around the school with no sense of responsibility for remaining with his group. I mentioned to him later that there was a problem I would like to discuss and would he make an appointment with me to do so. He wanted to talk right then, but I said that I was busy and would he set a convenient time later. When he appeared, after approaching me various times before the one we had decided on, I explained to him his obligations for being on time in his classes, and said I would bring him a little notebook and get his schedule from his special teachers. Then he could check with himself whether he entered his classes with his group. "I'll put a good mark for *on* time, and a bad one for *not*," he said. He hounded me until I had secured his schedule, and the day following the one on which I gave him the book, he came to me to show his entry. He seemed much pleased with himself.

A week later one of this teachers reported that he had been checking "on time" regardless if he was late, and what should she do? I told her I would speak to him. When the opportunity arose I told him I thought he had not quite understood our arrangement. "I could have told you," I said, "to have your teachers check you in, but I thought you would prefer helping yourself, so I left the matter to you." I added that I had learned he was checking himself "on time" when he was not. I said, "Of course we can't count this week, but you can begin again next week." He was disappointed and said, "Then next week you want my teachers to check me?" I said, "No, I feel you can check yourself now that you understand." He went off cheerfully, and at the end of the second week brought me his book with six late marks. He was waiting at the front door for me. I said, "Good, but I wonder if you can improve on that this coming week." "Yes," he said, "I think I can."

Ralph's problems, I feel, were of long standing. From what I gathered from his occasional remarks, his relation to his mother was not too good. She was inconsistent, at times over-critical, at others over-indulgent. In addition she had been recently divorced from his father, and this situation had no doubt played upon the boy's instability. His worry about the war may have stemmed from his own insecurity.

Aside from Ralph I ask myself what effect war in general may have on children—I refer to those children who are not directly affected by being in war zones, or having relatives in the forces. In the case of Ralph, he left the school before the year was out, and I never heard of him later. But his story has made me wonder how many children are carrying his burden of worry and has made me hope that we will cease to be embroiled in wars which threaten in one way or another all the children of the world.

LETTER X.

Ricky, "The Popular Child"

Dear Harriet:

Coming up the outer school stairs with Ricky this morning, I was struck for the first time with the thought how revealing it is the way a child enters the schoolyard. Ricky's greeting to the other children is a hand-wave and a cheery "How's everybody?" And of course everybody's response is an equally breezy, "Hi, ya, Ricky!"

The secret of some children's popularity is sometimes baffling, but not Ricky's. His every word and gesture give the clue: Ricky loves the world. He's not good looking, but his smile is infectious—he's not outstandingly intelligent, but he is capable and resourceful. Above all, he's a good sport.

For a time, though, there is a danger of Ricky's exploiting his popularity. He lunches in our room, where I preside over the children who have brought box lunches instead of eating in the cafeteria. "What contributions today?" he asks airily, whereupon there descend upon him everything from sandwiches to fruit, cakes and candy. He accepts all these graciously, though I do call a halt to the children giving him the more nutritive portions of their lunches.

At a certain point it seems to me that things are going too far, so I waylay Ricky for a little private talk. "Do you really like, Ricky," I say, "to be always taking things from the other children?" He looks surprised, "I never thought of that," he says. The next day he arrives with a large bag of candy which he distributes to his classmates, and from then on he never asks for contributions, and when these arrive unrequested, he limits the number he accepts.

Ricky's whole school career has been one of happy social participation, not only with the youngsters, but with his teachers as well. So that it seems strange when suddenly he is being sent to our room out of the special classes, music, shop, etc. "Something wrong?" I ask him one day, but he has no explanation to offer. How can he? There's nothing to tell him what is really happening. His teachers report to me he is noisy, disruptive and can't settle down to anything. In my room all I notice is that he is somewhat restless and that his work isn't up to his usual standard. He is distressed by this, but doesn't seem able to improve.

Accidentally I discover what seems to me may be the cause of his difficulties. His father, the school doctor, stops in my room occasionally to chat with me. I enjoy his informal visits—he is so genuinely interested in the children. One day I decide to speak to him about Ricky and an incident that had occurred the previous day.

In their social studies the group had been studying current events, which at that time were nothing if not dramatic. One of the children brought a portable

radio to school, announcing that Hitler was to give a speech and asked if they could listen to it. At the recess hour the raucous, passionate voice of Hitler was on the air. He spoke in German, so the children couldn't understand him, and one by one, their curiosity satisfied, they left the room for the more congenial atmosphere of the playground. All but Ricky. He sat as though glued to the radio, and since he didn't understand German, I kept wondering what was holding him.

I had no sooner mentioned this incident to his father, than the latter broke out in great distress concerning the predicament in which he found himself. He had left Germany after World War I because he felt out of sympathy with the Germans, had settled in America, taken out citizenship, married and reared a family. Now, with the persecutions taking place under Hitler's regime, he is besieged to send money, file affidavits for distant relatives and friends. He has already rescued close members of his family and has drawn all he feels able to on his resources, so that the continuing demands are causing him great unhappiness. "What should I do?" he says on a note of desperation. "I left Germany because I don't care for these people and their ideas, but now they write me in terrible need." He knows only too well the fate to which they are destined if he does not accede to their requests. I understand how torn he must feel as to his obligations and at what point he can draw the line, so I decide not to add to his distress by further talk about Ricky.

Ricky's disturbance continues. He is no longer the carefree boy he was before, and I am beginning to wonder whether his unrest is related to his father's. Anyway, here is another case where one has to withhold final judgment.

Suddenly Ricky changes—he is back in his own skin. I can't explain this any more than I could his other behavior. Later I hear that his father has had recourse to psychiatric treatment, and I notice, when I next see him, that he seems more relaxed. And Ricky is relaxed, too. His work improves, he is no longer dismissed from special classes, and we have our old gay companion back, entertaining us at our lunch hour with amusing stories.

Ricky, besides being a raconteur, is gifted in acting. When he was in the second grade, he was the star in the pantomime, *Jongleur of Notre Dame*. The scene in which he brings his only gift, his juggling, to the statue of the Virgin, and in which he finally dies, was so moving one could hardly believe it was a child acting. Later his mother told me that he hadn't the vaguest idea of what the play was all about, so that his sensing of it must have been a case of sheer intuition. *

* Ricky, now an adult, has become an actor and has taken the lead in many Italian movies that have been shown at international festivals.

Today he sits on the horizontal bars in the playground and calls the plays of a football game in progress. He imitates to perfection the radio sports announcer: his voice rising in tension at critical moments, varying the speed of his delivery, and offering the humorous ad-libbing that often accompanies sport reports. And in a play we are rehearsing, he gives a fine characterization of the hero, with a sure instinct how certain lines should be read.

Ricky is another example of the danger of characterizing any given child at any moment. Had one seen him during his involvement in the Hitler incident one might have been inclined to diagnose him as a basically disturbed child, yet when the source of his disturbance was removed he reverted to his earlier self—well-functioning, happy, creative.

LETTER XXVI.

Juan, "The Successful Child"

Dear Harriet:

Here is the story I promised you—of a boy I had in my class for five years. He entered one of my poetry groups at seven years old, being one of two children who could read fluently at that age, and later was in my eighth grade before he graduated to High School. But it is not because I knew him over such a span of years that I want to tell you about him, but because he is one of those youngsters who illustrates so graphically my contention that one dare not say the last word about any child.

Not so long ago I met one of his classmates, a newspaper columnist, now married and the father of a family. I asked him how he would answer the classic question: "Who in your class is most likely to succeed?" only in this case I worded the question, "Who in all our class would you have said was the least likely to succeed?" Without a moment's hesitation he said, "Juan, of course."

Juan's "success" has been so outstanding, that it is worth tracing from what an unpropitious start he attained it. At seven he was the type of child that invariably attracts adults. Sturdy and well-built, with the most disarmingly trustful expression, he drew the notice of every visitor to our room. Perhaps his attractiveness to adults played a part in the other children's distaste for him, for I have found that children feel in some way that the solidarity of their relationship to one another is adversely affected by a child's too easy adaptation to adults. However that may be, there was enough in Juan's behavior to have made him unpopular in any case.

Suggestible to the degree that he adopted as his own every story he read, every remark anyone else made, he soon drew down upon himself an impatience from his classmates that was evidenced by the disgusted, "Oh, Juan!" with which they greeted his

remarks. In addition to his emotionalism (he was forever bursting into tears), his noisiness, and chiefly his immaturity and lack of judgment irritated them, so that he was subject to their constant criticism.

On the playground he was always in trouble—dubbed a "cheater," and the children refused to choose him for their sides in competitive games. It might be appropriate here to quote a discussion of the class relative to a stormy session on the playground that centered around Juan. Keith brought the issue to the group and chaired the meeting.

Keith: In the games we've been playing most people lose their tempers and say other people are cheating. This starts a mob spirit and a fight. * People try just for points and not for the fun of the game. I do, too, sometimes.

Kay: It would help if we made rules before the games: people get into arguments.

Joyce: The way it is now, it's just loud noise, and the louder voices master.

Juan: People haven't any right to bring in new rules during the game. When people bring in new rules the majority side with them.

Keith: (accusingly) Juan, what were you doing? Making up rules! If everybody lost their tempers like you. . . .

Van: Suppose you don't know all the rules? Can't somebody tell them? . . .

Kay: . . . *You* may know the rules but if we don't we're unarmed. If someone told you when you were scratching your neck that it was unlawful, it would seem silly to you.

Keith: There should be some rule: People who lose tempers should be taken out of the game as a lesson.

Kay: Some people can't help it, others work it up to show off and so scare people. If you could only get at the source of things ahead, and prevent it.

Juan: Who does that! (lose tempers on purpose)

All the children, challenging Juan: Yes, who?

Juan: People don't lose tempers to show off.

* I had discussed with the group the nature of mob spirit, and they had become aware of what took place when this emotion was let loose. They were unequivocally opposed to its manifestation, and referred to it in a derogatory manner.

- Van: What would be the sense of that: Why should they do it to show off?
- Kay: I don't know why, but that's their logic.
- Edna: Can't we bring this up at assembly, that you can't lose your temper?
- Joyce: What's the use at assembly? It's our class that does it. You're never supposed to lose your temper. . . .
- Edna: I think the only way we can settle this is in a general assembly meeting. Other classes do it, too.
- Joyce: I think it is nothing to go into a constitution. Everybody knows not to lose temper and cheat.
- Kay: I think it would be a shame to the school to have a rule about cheating and tempers in our constitution.
- Jane: You should have enough self-respect and pride not to be put out of temper.
- Edna: Some people haven't the self-respect not to lose tempers. I used to bite when I was little, and I was kept in at recess, and gradually I got over some of it. I haven't got over all yet.
- Joyce: I don't know where this discussion has gotten to.
- Keith: I think it has gotten to a good point. You should not call people cheater if they don't know the rules. . . .
- Kay: Before we go on we should make a definition of cheating. A rule brought up in the middle of a game is not cheating, just because others don't know it.
- Joyce: Cheating is arguing when you do something unfair, just to gain your point.
- Kay: Lots of times when you're playing baseball a person says he was safe and just because the person on his own side agrees, it's not fair saying he's right.
- Joyce: There's nothing to be done if a person cheats.
- Jane: He'll always be chosen last in the games, nobody will like you or be your friend if you cheat. . . .
- Juan: I move that a person who loses his temper be put out of the game.
- Keith: There ought to be some rule about going after people—shouting, spitting in people's ears even if not hitting—some definition of temper.
- Jane: Just kicking a person out of a game is nothing. Letting them cool down and explaining will have more effect.
- Juan: I amend the motion to read that a person who loses his temper is out of the game the next day, and starts over fresh the third. (The amendment is voted on and carried.)
- Van: Suppose I lose my temper at noon, then I'm out only fifteen minutes.
- Juan: No, you're out the whole next day.
- Joyce: I think Juan's idea is a good one: starting fresh.
- Edna: Don't argue about it any more—you don't have to vote for it.
- Joyce: Edna, you often say that. Everyone has a right for discussion. If I want to get some exercise can't I play or does the rule mean just not playing in the big games?
- Kay: I don't think it's fair you should play any other game.
- Joyce: I amend the motion that you are kicked out of the big game.
- Kay: I don't think that's right. You've been kicked out for cheating and you shouldn't be allowed to play any game next day. It's as though a robber were put in jail for stealing gold, and then he was allowed out if he stole only silver. . . .
- Juan: I amend the amendment to read you can't play with anyone when you are out. (This is not carried.)
- Joyce: A person must understand what he is doing that is cheating, not just be told he is cheating.

There is much that would bear analysis in this discussion: the children's groping to arrive at the real issue, their realization of the necessity of defining terms, such as cheating, but I want to focus here on the result upon Juan. At the outset of the discussion

he was very much on the defensive: (it is all right to lose tempers), but as he gradually becomes aware of the elements involved in the situation under discussion, he is able to become more objective and fair enough to formulate a new rule pertaining to his own conduct. This is a spectacular enough about-face, and I believe it would never have become possible had he not been given the chance to see his conduct in the light of the other children's estimation.

The sum of the discussion was a clarification of several points: what constitutes cheating, what is fair (you don't uphold a person just because he is on your side in a game), the repudiation of temper, how to deal with a person who infringes the rule of fair play, and what is a relevant and fair punishment. *

I think you will be impressed, Harriet, as I am always, by the children's sense of what is fair and what not. This type of (should I call it) morality is not something plastered upon the children from without. Ordinarily we do not place enough trust in the innate fairness of children. I have frequently heard adults say that children should not be enlisted to judge one another, that they tend to be unfair and vindictive, but I have not found this to be the case. If any one child, on occasion, takes such a stance, he is immediately overruled by his classmates, and it is the sober, steady children, such as Keith, Joyce and Kay who in the end prevail. In the discussion quoted above, Joyce's concession to Juan that his idea of starting afresh is a good one, goes a long way toward reinstating a youngster who has been in the wrong, and helps him to a new orientation to situations involving his personal behavior. In the instance of Juan, because of his impulsiveness, and the fact that the children were not too well disposed toward him, there was little notable change in his general attitude; but I think it is not too unreasonable to assume that the fairness with which the children treated him, and his recognition of the correctness of their position did play some role in his later development. *

I shall write you more about Juan in another letter—this one is already too long, but I thought the content would interest you.

LETTER XXVII.

More about Juan

Dear Harriet:

More about Juan. Having dealt at some length with

* This is the only incident I know of in the children's self-government procedures in which any penalty was imposed.

* I have been in a position to follow Juan's career as an adult. He has manifested a marked ability to get along with people, to handle tactfully situations of great delicacy, to become very popular, and, as a final triumph, to achieve a position of outstanding trust.

his disabilities it is only just to speak of his considerable assets. These, however, are attended by concomitants which are not conducive to the furthering of his endowment. At the age of seven Juan was living in the period when Yehudi Menuhin was receiving great public acclaim, and any child who seemed to have pretensions to talent was deemed by his parents to be a potential Yehudi. In my own experience I knew of two gifted children who were exploited cruelly by their fathers. Juan was such a child, though whether his gift was sufficient to warrant his parents' expectations was open to question. In any case he refused to submit to exploitation, though he was required to make several public appearances as a "wunderkind." His resistance to being forced into this role took the form of daily fights with his father, who insisted on practising the piano with him every morning before school. By the time Juan entered our room it was evident by his swollen eyes and his general nervousness, that some sort of fracas had occurred.

That Juan had a certain precocity in playing the piano was amply evident. He had unusual finger dexterity and a prodigious musical memory. It took little persuasion to get him to the piano where he rattled off a series of Bach preludes with amazing facility. His playing, though, seemed to me a matter of manual skill only, as he gave no evidence of the music having any significance for him. A poem he wrote at the time will illustrate what I mean.

Pictures

*There are pictures of everything,
And nearly every people like them,
Especially I. I love pictures.
When I work my piano,
I look at the pictures
To make me express.*

The phrase "work my piano" seemed to me particularly pertinent to what Juan was doing. As for making him "express" I am convinced the concept was imposed on him, since at no time did I hear him play with any expression. Curiously the first time I had any inkling that Juan was genuinely musical was during our music period. I had acquired a musical score for piano which had separate parts for different percussion instruments. The children had been learning musical notation, and because Juan was already proficient in reading music, I made the mistake of appointing him director of the little band. But here again his immaturity manifested itself. He became so engrossed with playing the part of conductor, posturing, gesticulating, as he had seen professionals do in concerts, that he forgot to give the children their entry cues. They promptly protested his leadership, so he was demoted to being a member of the band. It was then, when Juan was playing the triangle, that I

saw evidence of his musicality. His score called for the lightest touch of the triangle on the down beat, and I suddenly became aware that Juan, completely unself-conscious, was swaying gently to the lilt of the music with that inward look one sees on the faces of those whose absorption in music is complete and profound.

It was all the more unfortunate, it seemed to me, that through his parents and music teachers he was being led into a false relation to music. We had been rehearsing a little operetta in which Juan was taking part. He enjoyed the experience immensely, especially those features which corresponded to what he felt was a "real" opera. One of these was the overture, and Juan announced that next year he would write an operetta for us to produce. I said that would be fine, and a day or so later he appeared with a score which he said was the overture to the operetta. When I opened the paper I noted that the heading "Sonata for Piano" had been struck through and above it was written Overture. I made no comment, and we repaired to the music room, where he sat at the piano and began to play. But he could hardly read the music, and after stumbling unsuccessfully through several measures, he finally gave up. "When did you write this, Juan?" I asked. With some evasiveness he answered, "Oh, a little while ago." "Who wrote the notes for you?" I went on. "My piano teacher," he said. "It was written as a sonata, wasn't it?" I pursued. He did not answer. "You see," I said, "a sonata is an entirely different sort of piece from an overture—did you know that?" "No," he said. "Well, you'll learn about that some day," I said, and handed the manuscript back to him. The fact is I was not even sure that Juan had written the piece as a sonata. Probably he had made up a theme or two and his teacher had doctored it up and written it out. This sort of dishonest procedure gave Juan an entirely wrong conception of himself and his powers. Since he hadn't written the piece in the first place, there seemed no more reason to him for not calling it an overture, than for putting his name to it as its composer.

Music, however, played a lesser role in Juan's life as the years went on. The daily battles, no doubt, wore his father out, as the boy grew more and more resistant to the prodding. But though he conformed in our classroom to what the situation required, in his special classes he was a source of trouble to all his teachers. According to their reports he was inattentive, silly, and spent all his time either annoying the other children or trying to make them laugh. In consequence he was continually sent back to our room.

Here he would vent his grievances, one of the most persistent of which was that he was discriminated against, in that he was never chosen for any school office by the children. He could not understand this,

and did not see that his behavior had any bearing on the manner in which he was treated.

One day I asked him if he really cared enough to be elected to an office to be willing to work for it. "I sure do," he said. "Well," I said, "perhaps we can figure out a way for you to get into the children's good graces." He was unable to formulate any reasons for his unpopularity, so I called his attention to certain of his doings that antagonized the children. "Would it help, do you think," I said, "if we wrote down a few of these things on a little chart that you could check from time to time to remind yourself of what not to do?" He agreed and thereafter for a while he came to me at the day's end to talk matters over. On the whole his conduct improved to the extent that he was reinstated in his special classes, but unfortunately he was never able to win over the children . . . his very eagerness may have stood in the way. * His frustration at never having been chosen for either a school or class office also may have been responsible for the fantasies expressed in the following poems.

I Wish

*I wish I was a king with a golden crown.
I wish I was a king with a very large throne.
I wish I was a king and had a kingdom large
With many people in it.*

Thoughts of the Prince of Wales

*I am the Prince of Wales and two score years am I.
Yet I am king over a vast empire.
My father is dead and the whole world mourns,
Yet I am king over a vast empire.*

Towards the end of the year Juan wrote several poems which I felt might be the beginning of a reflectiveness he had never manifested before. Though it must be added that nothing in his behavior testified to any change in him, still the poems cannot be dismissed as of no significance. Apparently more was going on in Juan than was evidenced by his outward actions.

* During a class discussion of the qualifications necessary for the office of president of the school, on one child's saying, "A president should be popular—he represents the group. People won't respect someone they don't like," Juan asked, "What happens if a person goes through the whole school without being popular, but would make a good president?" To which another child replied, "How could you tell that he'd be a good president if he'd never held office?"

Loneliness

*Something is missing from my life.
It makes me sad and lonely.
I can't play, I can't think.
My heart shakes in me like a hammer.
I try to take my thought off it,
But I cannot.*

*The dark somber night—
It makes me feel the world is dead.
Only the flickering of the stars is visible.*

*I decide to take a walk.
I pass street-light after street-light,
Then I return home—*

But the night passes on.

In a previous letter I mentioned Juan's assets, and here I must comment on his intelligence, which was of a very high order. He learned with great facility, had a retentive memory, and his interests were wide and readily evoked. History was his favorite subject, and in this field he read avidly everything that our library provided. In consequence he was far in advance of his classmates, when in the spring of his last year at school we were studying American history.

Here I must digress to explain the situation existing in the school at that time. When I first began teaching there, a constitution consisting of rules the children had formulated had been in operation for some time. But by now, all the children who had participated in the original formulation had graduated, and the succeeding group of children, who had not been party to the original plan, decided that a constitution was not necessary and proceeded at a general assembly to disregard it. I was somewhat surprised that our principal took no steps to forestall this action, but I learned later that she thought the need for rules would inevitably arise again, and that in any case the educational value to the new group of making their own formulations took precedence over continuing a procedure that no longer had any meaning for them. *

Either because of our studying of the American Constitution, or from some felt need of one in the school, Juan initiated a discussion with the following remark:

I thought of this over the weekend. I don't know whether the others will approve of the idea. I move that all classes get together in their separate rooms and make rules to be voted on by the whole school, and then make these into a

constitution.

Though the drama of the situation may have constituted the appeal, Juan nevertheless had given the subject some thought, and this alone represented growth in him. I transcribe the meeting as I noted it at the time. While it took place in our room and not in the general assembly, the children apparently thought it sufficiently important to invite the principal to be present.

Kay: We've been getting along so beautifully without rules. The only reason for rules is if there is trouble.

Edna: Well, you don't need to vote for it if you don't want it.

Cary: It's never been brought up in a general meeting.

Kay: You could show us the minutes of our meetings and see whether we discarded the idea of a constitution.

Joyce: Nothing came up where we needed one.

Myra: It's like going outside of school territory. What do we need a constitution for? We take it for granted.

Kay: Still I think a constitution isn't a bad idea. The laws should come as needed, the constitution should not be made first. The president of the school should bring up the laws as needed.

Juan: When the United States started it had a constitution. Just because this school threw out its constitution two years ago is no reason we shouldn't have one now.

Myra: The government is different.

Dean: This ought to be brought up in the whole school meeting.

Joyce: Juan is right. If the U.S. needs one, we do. But we know the rules already.

Kay: For instance, what laws would you make, Juan?

Juan: I wouldn't expect to make laws myself. Everyone would make them together. The ideas of everybody are better than one.

This is a new stance for Juan, and also testifies to his growth.

* See *The Child within the Group*, An experiment in self-government, by Marion E. Turner, published by The Stanford University Press.

Edna: It's not up to our class, but to the whole school.

Joyce: Juan brought it up. It's a good idea. If this class votes on it, it can be brought up in a general meeting.

Juan: Kay is right. Everyone knows the rules, but nobody follows them.

Kay: They wouldn't anyway, even with a constitution.

Cary: If you have no proof of the laws and have to go through all the minutes every time something comes up, having a constitution would be quicker.

Miss Turner (the Principal felt here the need for elucidation): There seems to be confusion about what a constitution is. The constitution is inherent in the minutes. It is just more convenient to see the rules in a condensed form. A constitution is the basis for self-government.

Edna: Then haven't we a constitution now?

Miss T: Yes, but not in constitution form.

Kay: Can the rules in a constitution be changed or thrown out?

Miss T: Yes.

Edna: This motion is funny. It is only whether we have our rules on a sheet of paper or not.

Miss T: The reason the old constitution was thrown out was because the children who had made it had left the school, and the new ones hadn't made the rules.

Kay: If we do have a constitution we should have it in a form that you can repeal certain motions and not throw out the whole constitution.

A motion was made to the effect, carried, and the remainder of the discussion centered upon the manner of presentation of a constitution to the whole school—in what form the motion should be submitted, and what groups should have the franchise. Cary ended the discussion with this caution:

Cary: We shouldn't go too far ahead. Our plan might be all ruined, but I have an idea they wouldn't throw it out. I move we have further discussions here.

Edna: We wouldn't be going ahead at all until we get the school's vote.

Joyce: Cary means we should not have any more discussion here until the vote.

Though Juan had brought up the subject of a constitution, he took little part in the class discussion, except for the not inconsiderable comment I have noted above, that he would not make the laws. It is of interest that the entire class concurred in the need for laws, and I take this fact as evidence that the children had come to some real evaluation of democracy, and realized both their privileges and their obligations in relation to it.

LETTER XX.

New Problems—Mark, Aggie, Jeff

Dear Harriet:

Here I am in a new setting which seems on first glance to present one large and overwhelming problem. By which I mean that while up to now I have always taught children from ten years old up, this year I am confronted with a wriggling and hyperactive group of sixes and sevens, in more senses than one. I know their activity is not unusual, but in contrast to older children this age child can deal chiefly in matters in which the teacher participates, which fact makes me realize as never before the luxury it has been to have children able to work on their own. These wrigglers must more or less have everything done *with* them, and that after soliciting attention at every turn of the road. Before you conclude, though, that I am not happy in the situation I must introduce you to my brood and, as is usual with me, every group I am teaching at the time becomes one of the most attractive I have ever taught.

Meet Mark: Mark is a tow-head, a stocky, hefty boy of six, of whom it did not surprise me to learn that his father is Swedish. Mark never walks, he never runs either. His propulsion is that of the breakfast cereal that is advertised as "shot from guns." In the course of his trajectory, Mark knocks down any stationary child in his path, disrupts games, and is death to static materials. His only social contacts are in the nature of provocations: he pinches, kicks, commits any act of aggression that occurs to him, and his inventiveness in this field is inexhaustible. In consequence after a week of school he is cordially disliked, which only results in prodding him to further aggression. My hunch is that Mark is hungry for attention, and that this is the one method at his command for obtaining it. Toward me he is docile, and except for occasional outbursts in speech and song, he is obedient and responsive. But his excess

energy is too much for him to deal with. Only when drawing is he relaxed, and then only partially. His drawings are all of air combat, violent dog-fights between planes, beneath a furious red belligerent sun. He is a coiled spring always on the point of going off.

Then there is Aggie. She is a spring, too, but a delicate one—a tiny wristwatch spring. Dark haired, dark eyed, sharp featured, she is constantly demanding attention. She has a wraithlike look, and her slim fingers are always lacing, plucking. She is afraid of the other children, is touchy and hovers near me for protection. No work holds her long. Her belongings are scattered all over the room. The clean-up signal finds her in a state of blank abstraction—she has to be called from play to put away her things. Altogether she is the most disorganized child I have ever known. She is also sophisticated far beyond her years. She entertains the children at great length about her parents' divorce, which neither interests them nor gains for her any status. What to do about Aggie? She needs building up if she is to survive the early dislocations to which she has been subjected.

In contrast to these dynamics there is Jeff. Not that Jeff is passive, but his nervous organization is apparently low-keyed, and to hear him talk with his slow deliberate drawl, one would be apt to conclude that one had a lethargic child to deal with. Woe to you if you act on that assumption! Jeff is slow only in speech and approach to work. My first glimpse of his fist-thrust attack on the stomach of his neighbor, jolted me out of any preconceptions. It might have been compared to a snake's tongue-thrust, nothing less speedy. His onslaughts are committed only when he thinks I am not looking. Except for these furtive outbursts, I would put him down as sluggish, and his facial expression bears this out. If ever there was a generic pokerface, that one is Jeff's. With large confiding eyes, and a steady glance of the most disarming candor, he lies deliberately though every circumstance refutes what he says. A couple of weeks with Jeff convinces one that here is a thoroughly amoral child, lying, stealing, and into every kind of malicious mischief. With all this, he is the most delightful, round-faced, freckle-nosed youngster, the sort that illustrators choose to represent the typical all-American boy. What to do to get Jeff on to the "straight and narrow"—this is the problem, but I haven't the vaguest notion how to deal with it.

LETTER XXI.

More Problems—Lila, Jimmy

Dear Harriet:

I think I left off my last letter on the note of Jeff, and I feel I ought to qualify what I said about that angel-imp. Lying and stealing sound pretty bad, but

we know they don't signify with youngsters what they do with adults. There's hope for Jeff, I feel sure, but whether I'll be the one to set him right, I truly don't know.

Meet Lila: Lila is the smallest, though not the youngest, in the group. Everything about her is round: her face, her eyes, her fat little hands, and her prominent little fanny. She is an American version of a Diego Rivera baby. Her interests are catholic, by which I mean that she is equally uninterested in anything that goes on in the classroom. So far as I can see, her only enthusiasm is for food. She appears in the morning with her lunch-box full of candy, and she distributes this with a great show of power. "No, Mark, you can't have any," and poor Mark's mouth waters as he watches the more privileged children. Aggie, too, can't have any, but Connie and Myra, the two largest children in the group come in for a generous share.

Lila reads like a flash, quite outstripping her contemporaries, so that it was with incredulity that I discover she does not know the meaning of anything she reads so glibly. Of numbers she hasn't the vaguest concept—any absurdity goes with her, and apparently she has decided to rule out arithmetic in favor of her virtuosity in reading. She is very gregarious—chums indiscriminately, very intimate with some pal for three days, then this one disgarded and a new one chosen. Well, she, too, is another poser. How am I going to meet all this diversity? Sometimes I'm near despair.

What would *you* do with a child who deliberately refuses to look at a book, just turns his head away? One can't clamp it as the old-time photographers used to do, and even if one could, what is to prevent his closing his eyes? This is one to "stump the experts." Jimmy is an attractive boy, with large brown eyes, erect posture, and a general air of physical competence. But he will try nothing new—perhaps is afraid of failure. Something about his sensitive mouth, his shyness, suggests he is too vulnerable, and apparently he protects himself by "not doing." I decide to let him be for a while, and watch for anything that seems to indicate interest.

One day he comes to me and asks if I have any book about knights. Of course I have none at hand, but in the library I find a beautifully illustrated volume. "Oh, boy!" Jimmy exclaims and returns to his desk, and from then on is not of this world: on page after page he copies pictures of knights, armor, lances, shields. I get an idea. "How would you like to make a scrapbook of drawings?" brings another laconic "Oh, boy!" and initiates an activity of long-spanned interest. At my suggestions he devotes a page each to shields, helmets, and the rest of the knight's accoutrement, and then, off-handedly I suggest that each page be labelled. He agrees, and I write the appropriate word at the head of the page.

By this time, Dick, another non-reader, joins Jimmy and asks if he too may make an armor book. The outcome of his request is more advantageous than I could have hoped. I invent a game. On tiny cards I print the name of each piece of armor, trusting that the headings on the album pages might somehow have been absorbed. Each card they "guess" (I avoid the word "read"), they are allowed to keep, the ones they do not, I keep. When the first guessing is completed the boys play the game without me, each in turn dealing out the cards—this competitive device providing two bites of the apple. Almost before I can believe it, the boys have mastered twenty words. At this point I introduce "slips." These are short sentences employing the armor words, and the rules of this game give a score of five points for slips as against one for a word. From then on word cards are scorned, even though we must have new words to complete sentences. Verbs, adjectives are painlessly injected, and then I have another suggestion. "How would you like to make a story of a knight's adventures?" Previous to this I have combed libraries and book stores for a reader on the subject of knights, but to no avail. Nothing of the sort apparently has been written. So I am reduced to writing my own text, and believe me, I have gained a new respect for writers of elementary readers. To make a story of even moderate interest using a strictly limited vocabulary is no easy matter. With our old strips as guide, I write one page, leaving the opposite one for illustrations. In the end, actually, a book of sorts gets written. And are the boys proud! They enter their book triumphantly on the bulletin board which displays the books read by the other children.

LETTER XXII.

And still more—Jinny and Carol

Dear Harriet:

I haven't introduced you to Jinny, have I? Picture to yourself a pixie child, blond almost tow-headed, except for a golden glow that seems to pervade her hair, her skin, her whole person. But she is no pixie so far as extroversion is concerned—she is withdrawn almost to the point of coma. A remark directed at her does not penetrate her retreat, and her previous school experience, if not a direct cause of her withdrawal, at least contributed to it, so that school has practically no existence for her. She is critical of other children, except for two or three whom she has accepted, I can't say as playmates, but as sister conspirators. Towards the adult world her attitude is one of complete rejection, and she implements this not by overt action against me, but by deflecting it to attacks on her classmates. She finds a ready accom-

plish in Carol.

Carol is perhaps the most challenging child in the group: Intelligent, strong-willed, and, as her poems show, in close touch with her inner self. By this I mean that she knows how she feels about things, and is acceptant of her feelings.

*When I like something very much
They say it isn't good for me,
But when I don't like something,
They say it is good for me.*

Unfortunately many of these feelings are in the nature of protest, so that she initiates anti-social acts, and attracts to herself other children equally anti-social. Incidentally, she has been the last child in the group from whom I have gained acceptance, or at least a measure of tolerance.

I must tell you about an incident that occurred in the first week of school, in which the last two mentioned insurgents were involved. I don't think for a minute that they concocted it deliberately to try me out, but it was one which might easily have been so inspired. The first days with a new teacher provide the children with the temptation to see how far they can go and what they can get away with. They employ a variety of approaches that for sheer ingenuity would be hard to equal.

About the third day of school Lila comes to me complaining that she can't find her rubbers, and that she has seen Carol and Jinny moving a locker in the hall. I ask her to send the children to me. They arrive with that look of concerted resistance, slightly tempered by humor, which immediately conveys that they are trying to put the adult on the spot. I wait without saying anything, and Jinny is the first to speak. "We didn't do anything," she says defensively. "Lila seems to think you've taken her rubbers," I say. "We didn't." Carol's voice has a provocative note in its rising inflection, and says quite plainly, "What are you going to do about it?" I answer lightly, "Well, if you haven't taken them, perhaps you'll help me find them."

The children exchange glances—they have been checkmated and they know it, but I feel they think the situation is funny, too. "Come along," I say, leading the way. We repair to the lockers, the two culprits in a sort of huddle, obviously sparring for time and the opportunity to devise their next move, but stymied by my presence. There is a space between the lower lockers and the wall, a ready-made place for hiding things, so I ask the children to help me move Lila's locker. It is, of course, no surprise that the rubbers are there. With somewhat sheepish glances at one another, the two start to sidle off. "The rubbers couldn't have gotten there by themselves, do you think?" I say with a smile, and the

youngsters smile back at me. They know as well as I what the whole affair is about, also they are satisfied that I haven't made a solemn issue of it. Actually I believe the incident proved a turning-point in my relation to these children; they decided I was a "good sport," and as is paradoxically often the case, were rather pleased than not that they hadn't been able to "put something over" on me. Children, strangely enough, while enjoying harrassing adults in authority are often relieved when they come up against someone steady enough to withstand their assaults. *

My difficulty in my present class is that I have no precedents to go on—I have to play everything "by ear." Also I am learning to take time as an ally—when

expedients as to how to handle situations are not at hand, I find if I wait, sometimes things clear up of themselves, and if they do not, and I am not under the pressure to take immediate action, alternatives do present themselves.

* I met Carol, now a practising psychologist, recently, and the following conversation ensued. "I sure was a hellion in school," she said. "Not in my class, you weren't," I said. "Well, I was in all the others, and do you know it's funny, I remember distinctly saying to myself at the time, 'I'm not going to be bad with her.'"

These chapters are from *No End to Morning*, an autobiographical memoir by Flora Arnstein. Amy = Flora.

No End to Morning

Flora Arnstein

GRANDPARENTS

The Family was One. It had existed from all time, it would exist for all time. It was one because it hung together. The members quarreled sometimes, but no quarrel lasted. To Grandma a lasting quarrel was the unforgivable sin. So everyone belonged to everyone else, everyone stood up for everyone else, nobody pulled away.

Grandpa and Grandma were the most important people in the Family. Grandpa was somehow imposing, for all of his being small. His forehead was not high, but his hair fountained up from it like fine spray, and his white beard flared out from the far sides of his cheeks. He looked a little like a picture in Amy's game of AUTHORS—with more beard might easily have been taken for Longfellow. Broad, unruly eyebrows pointed every which way, like tawny straw and under them his eyes looked bluer for having hardly any lashes. Though he held his eyes open wide, it seemed to Amy that he looked at things without seeing them.

Sometimes he was almost like a stranger. Alone with him, Amy could never think of anything to say. Once in a while he asked her to play the piano, but he hardly listened. The music seemed to unlatch something in him, and he would begin to sing. It was like the canary at home that sang as soon as the sewing-machine started. He knew only one tune—"The

Soiree de Vienne," which he sang a little off pitch, and all one level rhythm, so that Amy could never tell where the beat came. To please him on his birthday she performed the "Soiree" which she had learned especially for the occasion. The result exceeded her expectations. "Next Sunday you'll play it for the old people at the ALTENHEIM," * he said.

Amy gasped. She had never played for strangers. Would she be one of the members in a concert, or would she have to play alone? She didn't dare ask, and Grandpa said nothing further about it.

All week she practised feverishly, not only the "Soiree" but other pieces as well. She had a little secret contempt for the "Soiree," and decided to reserve it for the encore—that would, she felt, remove it from the spot-light.

When Sunday came around, Grandpa called for her and Tottie, and they started on the ferry-ride across the bay to Fruitvale. Grandpa carried by its thick end a green cone-shaped parcel, unmistakably a bouquet. It was a warm day and Amy hoped that she would be able to wash her hands before playing. But as soon as they arrived at the Altenheim, Grandpa hurried them into the assembly hall.

Here on folding chairs facing a stage the old people sat—men with faces ridged like walnut-shells, ladies

* The ALTENHEIM was the old people's home of which Grandpa was president.

with skin creased like crumpled tissue-paper. They sat, patient and enduring, the heat pressing down on them, so that their motions looked wavering, like things seen under water. When Grandpa, shoving Tottie unceremoniously aside, led Amy down the center aisle, they turned slowly to peer at her, then back to one another, murmuring something in breathy whispers.

Grandpa with Amy's hand still in his, walked out from behind the side-curtains to the center of the footlights. From the height of the stage looking down, Amy felt as though all the eyes focused on her were one single eye, huge and terrifying, glaring in a sort of challenge, "What are you doing up there?" Her ears pounded like the breakers at the beach, and she thought she had never been so frightened in her whole life.

Grandpa made a little bow to the audience and pointed a finger at Amy. Then he ripped off the green paper from the bouquet and, with a more courtly bow, handed it to her.

Without thinking Amy made a step back. A fiery hotness rose within her, spread over her face, up into her hair, down her neck. How *could* Grandpa do such a thing! Didn't he know that bouquets came at the *end*, not the *beginning* of a concert?

She stood for a moment in a flurry, looking down at the bouquet, not knowing what to do with it. Then she walked over and placed it upon the piano. But in her embarrassment she laid it too close to the edge, so that as she smoothed her skirts to sit on the stool, the bouquet slid and dropped to the floor. Now what should she do? She couldn't leave it there, could she? She stood up, retrieved the bouquet, replaced it on the piano, when suddenly she became aware of a rustle of little laughs from different parts of the hall. They seemed to come at her like darts, and she shuddered as though each dart had found a special nerve. Had she too committed some dreadful faux pas? What a way to begin a concert!

Her heart thumped wildly. She parted her lips. She found she could only breathe with her mouth open. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she began to play, but fortunately her fingers somehow took over of themselves. It seemed a miracle that she was able to reach the end of the piece. She was so relieved to have got this far, that she forgot to acknowledge the applause. When she did remember, it was too late, so she went on to the next number. She tried to avoid seeing, out of the corner of her eye, the audience, some of whom sat leaning forward, hands cupping their ears—and especially one old man, bony as a goat, sitting in the very front row with a trumpet, like a misplaced horn, emerging from his ear, the wide end pointed directly at her.

After the encore, Grandpa came out from the side of the stage and kissed her. Then without a word he departed down the stage-stairs into the auditorium.

The old people crowded around him, talking and laughing, and some of the old ladies kissed him. Nobody took any further notice of Amy.

She stood for a while alone, still frightened and breathing hard. Presently she caught sight of Tottie, also alone, where Grandpa had abandoned her at the rear of the hall. She made for her, down the stairs and through the group still milling around Grandpa.

"How did I play?" she asked, longing for some word of reassurance. But Tottie was little comfort. Music meant less than nothing to her. "I don't know," she said. "It sounds all the same to me—like water running out of a faucet."

Amy turned away. The feeling of disappointment she had had in dreams, of arriving too late for something, something pleasant that she had been looking forward to, came over her. What had she been expecting? She didn't know, but surely not this! She realized suddenly that her hands were icy cold; she stood rubbing them, waiting with Tottie until Grandpa was ready to leave.

On the ride home Grandpa didn't mention her playing. Hadn't he liked it, she wondered. It occurred to her that she ought to thank him for the flowers. Heavens! She had forgotten them, left them on the piano. Perhaps it would be better not to remind him of them. Besides when she thought of that moment of presentation she went hot again all over. How could she look him in the face and say thank you for that!

Grandpa never referred to the concert again, and whenever Amy thought of it, it was like a tooth that you touch with your tongue to see if it still aches. For months afterwards even in the dark in bed, she could feel herself blushing.

The concert did nothing to improve things for her with Grandpa. On the contrary, when she was with him she tried to erase herself as much as she could. But he noticed this as little as he did everything else. How did it happen, then, that one day she found herself sitting on a footstool in the library and Grandpa standing before her reciting? Why, of all his children and grandchildren, had he chosen her for audience to whom the soliloquy of Hamlet was addressed? That and "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," and the lamentations of King Lear, Grandpa declaiming, focussing his unseeing eyes somewhere above her head, savoring the verse roundly, and looking at her when he had finished with a little air of triumph, as though saying, "See!" This was the beginning—later on came Schiller and Goethe, and it would have been hard for Amy to say which she enjoyed most, the recitations or the mark of Grandpa's favor.

Sometimes he recited poems. There was one, a little nostalgic French poem that made her uneasy. "La vie est brève/ Un peu d'amour/ Un peu de rêve/ Et puis bonjour" it went. When Grandpa came to the

lines, "Un peu de gloire/ Et puis bonsoir," tears came into Amy's eyes. She didn't want to think that Grandpa wouldn't live forever. He himself wasn't sad. He translated the poem into English, then into German, but Amy liked the French best, if she could be said to like it at all.

For special family celebrations Grandpa composed long poems. They were so revealing that they would have embarrassed Amy if they had been in English; but in German they seemed somehow impersonal—one could imagine they were by Heine. Generally they were addressed to Grandma, and Grandpa's voice grew unsteady as he read them. Grandma remained unaffected. All the while he was reading she had a little excusing smile on her face, but when he had folded the paper and sat down, she gave him two gentle pats on the hand.

By now Amy had outgrown her shyness with Grandpa, so that it was easy for her to ask him, as they sat in the library, "Tell me about the olden days, Grandpa." He looked up at the ceiling, took a few puffs of his cigar, and began as though he were in the middle of a "continued-in-our next" story from ST. NICHOLAS.

"Yes, I just missed being a '49er'," he said. "It was '50 when I came to California. Before that, in Nevada, I was a boy-of-all-work in a general merchandise store in a mining town. The people paid for their purchases in gold dust."

"Really, gold dust, Grandpa?"

"Yes, gold dust," Grandpa said. "I slept under the store counter at night with the gold dust bags under my head. One morning a bag was missing. I went to my boss. I was frightened; I thought he would be angry with me. But he wasn't." Grandpa took a puff of his cigar, flicked off the ashes, and, with a twinkle at Amy, brushed them with his foot under the corner of the rug. "After that happened," he went on, "I felt uncomfortable, so I left. I worked hard at all sorts of jobs and saved every cent I could spare. When I had saved the amount that was the worth of the dust in the bag, I sent it to my boss. I wrote him," and Grandpa emphasized every word with a down-motion of his cigar, "I didn't take the gold, but I want my name to be clear. I didn't have to come all the way from Germany to be a thief."

He stopped and looked at Amy, as though he expected her to say something; but she didn't know what to say. It was a nice story and there was a point to it, she felt sure, but she couldn't at the moment decide what it was. "Tell me some more," she said.

Grandpa smiled and looked again at the ceiling, as though his memories were written there for him to read. "Well, let's see," he said. "You know, when your Grandmother and I were young, our only amusement was to go for a walk on Sunday afternoons. There never was a time when I didn't have a baby on my arm." This was hardly surprising to Amy,

considering that Grandpa had had eleven children. Actually, Amy knew only ten, but that was because Solly, the eldest, had died when he was a child. "Of brain fever," Mama said. "He was too bright. After that," she said, "Grandpa never took any interest in his other children. Solly had been his pride."

Amy remembered that she had never heard anyone in the family mention brains. Perhaps, she thought, they didn't approve of people having them.

Grandma was as important in the family as Grandpa, maybe even more so. Her children called her "Ma," and obeyed her without question, which seemed strange to Amy, since they were grown-ups of whom obedience is hardly expected. She was the most loving person, the same to her children, their husbands and wives, and all the grandchildren.

Every Sunday morning, regular as the week came around, the grandchildren visited her, dressed always in their best clothes. Amy was supposed to wear her Sunday hat and coat, though Grandma lived only just across the street from her, cater-corner, and on week days she ran from house to house however she happened to be dressed.

Grandma would be sitting crocheting in the dressing room off her bedroom. She had on a black challis wrapper, all-over bright sprigs of flowers, with a ruffle of lace at throat and sleeve-end. Beside her on the sofa was her workbasket, bulging with dexter cottons and crochet hooks of all sizes; and here she kept the special purse that held the nickels each child was given for pin-money—a nickel a child. Sometimes Amy sat with her while the other children went outdoors to play, and once Grandma asked her to read aloud from her favorite paper, "Die Gartenlaube."

What a thrill to be singled out this way! Amy seated herself on the footstool at Grandma's feet, flattened her skirts under her, and followed Grandma's finger to the place where she was to begin. In her best German, and feeling very important, she began to read, being especially careful of the pronunciation of the 'ch's' and the "Umlauts." When she had finished the page, she looked up, anticipating the words of praise she was certain would follow. She could hardly believe it when Grandma said, shaking her head, "Child, you have a terrible accent!" But Grandma didn't mean anything by that, because she was really kind to everybody, except, perhaps, to Mr. Fongy, the vegetable man. One time, Mama said, she scolded him so harshly for sending her some wilted lettuce, that he fainted dead away.

From the dining-room window of her own house Amy watched Grandma on Saturday mornings, as she walked down the hill on her way to Temple. Her black broad-cloth cape was sewn all over with tiny jet beads, and it had standing-up sleeves on top—that weren't sleeves really at all, for her hands came out of slits in the side. A little bonnet trimmed with purple

violets was tied by a bow under her chin. The bonnet sat up high, just behind her pompadour, which was dark and thick except in places where the rat showed through. She walked always the same way, one hand bent at the wrist, bunching up her skirt behind to keep it from brushing along the side-walk. In the other hand she carried a little black prayer-book that glistened gold along the edges of the pages. Her white gloves were too tight and puckered up the skin in the round opening beneath her palms. Someone always had to button them for her.

Once in a great while Amy accompanied Grandma to Temple. The service, with the ritual of standing up and sitting down, the alternate responses of rabbi and congregation, and the rabbi's sermon, which seemed to her to be mostly scolding . . . what was it all about?

The rabbi was a tall man with hair slick as shoe-polish, until it narrowed into thin strips at the sides of his ears, where it curled into a mesh like the stuffing of a mattress. Farther down his beard burst out sideways from his chin into two angry points. His eyes were stiff as an eagle's, and, when he spoke, he turned sharply and aimed a sudden finger first at one person and then at another. His look was like a stab. He terrified Amy so that she tried not to watch him, but she kept having to in order to make sure his eyes weren't stabbing at her. Whenever he was most severe, the people nodded their heads. It was as if they enjoyed the scolding, for, on their way out when the service was over, and they stopped and greeted one another, they would say, "Wonderful sermon!"

But the music Amy liked, except that it didn't seem solemn enough. Sometimes the singing was even gay, and the organ thumped out tunes that made her think of parades rather than of religious things. Nobody mentioned this—she guessed they liked it that way; and they never seemed to mind, either, the moany songs the cantor was always breaking in with.

On the Holy Days, especially on Rosh Hashona, it was a family custom for the children, each in turn, to be brought to Temple. It was a sort of respect they paid to Grandpa and Grandma. The visits were only of short duration, and Amy always hoped her turn would not come during the "Mourner's Service" or the blowing of the Shofar. When the mourners stood up, Amy had to turn away—she could not bear to see the tears on Mama's face.

The Shofar was something else. It was a ram's horn, and was blown from the altar. The sound was not like that of any instrument Amy had ever heard—a blast, like a stupendous burp, explosive and without timbre. The worst of it was, it struck her as irresistibly funny. It caught her in the pit of her stomach, no matter how much she stiffened in advance to prepare herself. Before that, in the silence which preceded it, she grew more and more nervous, until as the moment neared, panic seized her that she

would not be able to control her laughter. With handkerchief wadded against her mouth, she braced herself against the back of the pew, and held her breath as she watched the player mount the altar steps and lift the Shofar to his lips. The struggle was a horrible ordeal—to have laughed would have disgraced her, and reflected on Grandpa and Grandma as well. How she survived she never knew; something inside her stopped at the first assaulting sound, as though she had actually been stunned by a blow.

Every year as the Holy Days approached, she suffered in anticipation: would she or wouldn't she have to be present at the sounding of the Shofar? But since she never told anyone her fears, she never knew in advance whether she would be spared this part of the service.

Earlier, when she had walked down the aisle to Grandpa's pew, Grandma had moved over to make room for her and had taken her hand in her usual gentle way. But now there was something different about her, something a little remote that seemed to say, "I'm not only your Grandma." She would reach for one of the prayer-books in the rack on the pew ahead, and turn the pages to find the place in the service for Amy to follow. Then she would seem to leave—as though she were retiring into some place where Amy might not follow. Left to herself, Amy was never sure whether she was supposed to join in the responses, so she compromised by moving her lips without sounding the words.

She kissed Grandpa and Grandma when her time was up, and one of the other children came along to relieve her. But out in the street she opened her mouth and took in long and grateful breaths of the cool air. The daylight and sunshine, sweet and familiar, after the heavy-laden subdued light of the temple, flowed comfortingly around her. Rosh Hashona was something to be forgotten until next year.

What was there about Grandma that made her different from everybody else? Amy could never discover. When her children said, "Ma," or any of the grandchildren, "Grandma," it was as though they were saying something a little like "Amen," something solemn that said, "This is everything."

Not that Grandma was solemn. Her laugh, explosive and warm, delighted Amy: the sudden burst that threw her head back, the chuckle that followed, and finally the tears, so that she had to take her glasses off and wipe them. Amy remembered Grandma's laugh longer than anything else about her, together with something that "goodness" seemed too light a word for. It was difficult to define, but, as Amy grew older, a thought came to her that seemed nearest to explaining Grandma, fantastic though she knew it to be: Grandma was like the hills and the sea—she was sort of everlasting.

AND THERE WAS TONY

Tony was the youngest of the Eastern cousins, and "Tony" wasn't his name. But that was what everyone called him. To every member of the family it meant something different, because with every aunt and uncle and cousin he was a different person, not through dissembling, but because with each he shared little private sayings and jokes that belonged only to the two of them.

He was slender and small-boned, with eyes too large for his face, and lids that looked sleepy, and a soft mouth holding in a smile. And he loved everybody and everybody loved him—only Amy wanted him to love her the most. Nobody but she knew how "special" he was, with his long brown hands caressing the keyboard, the hands that melted when she held them, as though they had no bones. Nobody but she knew (because nobody in the Family cared about music) how "special" he was in this—picking out tunes on the piano—anything he had ever heard, playing them as though he were making them up himself, out of his own head. Oh, yes, he did that, too—make up things—little marches and songs for birthdays, the notes written in a round owlish script, and the dedication in bold fat letters at the top of the page.

For hours and hours he sat at the piano, his fingers wandering among the keys as though looking for tunes, for happy chords that floated one into another, for little runs, like children in and out of sun and shade, and for the rolled arpeggios that tumbled like seashore waves. But he jumped up whenever the children appeared—always ready for play.

"I'm Hector, Danny, you be Achilles." Out into the garden, stopping by the kitchen for sauce-pans to serve as helmets, raiding the basement for garbage-can lids for shields. "Oh, Zeus," Tony stood on the lawn, his eyes raised aloft, "grant me victory over my enemy!" Broomsticks clashed on garbage lids, prayers and imprecations filled the air, the odds went first to one hero, then to the other—no mightier battle was ever fought!

All summer long Tony joined in the games, running from Grandma's house, where he slept, across the street to Amy's where he spent most of his waking time. When Amy's family took off for the country, Tony was always with them, rooming with Danny. At the seashore, after Amy had read them stories of the Wagner operas, Tony climbed the rocks, and with hand shading his eyes, hailed the "Flying Dutchman" sailing the California coast. Siefried and Hundig (he and Danny) wound their horns from behind an abandoned jetty, or standing on the beach invoked the Rhine Maidens sporting in the great shore breakers.

As the years went on, the difference in age between Tony and Amy (she was five years his senior) seemed to lessen. Five years is a good span of time in the life of a child, but Tony was no ordinary child. It was not long before he was abreast of Amy in music, playing the same pieces, trading records, arguing furiously over the merits of their preferred composers. He, who was so gentle and complaisant with every one else, would concede her no inch. Something told him that she would dominate him if he allowed her to do so. Always quick-tempered, he became explosive in argument, and arguments led to quarrels. He forgot them as soon as they were over, but Amy brooded over them at night, and tossed in bed rehearsing what each of them had said. It was bad enough to differ from him, but to have him angry with her and think less of her—that was hard to bear.

Because she had such dreams for him, he was to be a great musician, a famous pianist. She pictured him walking across the stage (somehow, paradoxically, he was still a little boy, with his hair always too long and tousled, and wearing his baggy knickers) and she watched him sit at the piano, lift his long brown hands, and drop them on the keys with the tenderness that made the overtones echo like songs heard distantly over the mountain lake. She could see the audience, at the concert's end, rise of one accord, stand and clap till the hall was one great clamor, the "bravo's" the "encore's" resounding into the wings. And he, alone on the stage, small and modest, and looking surprised as he always did when anyone praised him.

Even now, when, with his back to the piano, he sang out the notes Amy struck, or called the chords—one note above the other—he brushed aside her praise with, "Oh, it's nothing. Anyone can do it."

Music was no solemn matter to him as it was to Amy, who hugged it fiercely to herself and admitted only a few, perhaps Papa and Tony alone, into the hallowed sanctuary. Merry and lighthearted, Tony took his music as he did everything else: seriously if there was work to be done, lightly, if there was not. It grew, of course, to be his life interest, but for him it was never a thing apart—always a bond to people, a pleasure both in solitude and when shared, and a commitment to high endeavor, a dedication when he was alone.

Amy loved and envied him. He was everything she was not: gifted and gracious, easy and generous, and, in her own tight and shy withdrawal, fretted by a conscience that shut her off from whatever impulses might have brought her release, she saw in him the ideal of what a person might be. Not that he ceased being a little boy, distressing her sometimes with his clumsy humor, his irrepressible giggle. He was always the two; and though in their common interest in music she felt him close and contemporary, at other times he was elusive, a cool, little detached creature,

with, toward her, she felt, "the hard heart of a child." This grieved and saddened her, but for all that he was still Tony, and that was enough for anyone to be.

The summer eventually drew to a close, and the Eastern cousins assembled their gear, said their good-byes. Tony packed his personal satchel (the envy of

the other children, whose belongings were always stowed away anonymously in Mama's voluminous black trunk) and the day of departure came. There were no sad farewells; all knew they would meet next year, and Amy and Danny settled down to the winter round. And for Amy school began again.

FOUR POEMS BY FLORA ARNSTEIN

Against the dark

Stand over against the dark,
There is still light enough to see.

Why must I read forecasts in you,
Not clock my own? Was it in sleep
I willed away my weather? Now I am rooted
Like a sundial that angles time
Only in your presence.

You speak

as if *never* were a place
One could find or leave—
Finger-marks below the lock
To tell you had been there.

But never is not a place,
Not an opening nor a closing,
Or even a key-hole to breathe through.

I know the never—from my lungs,
From the cold that drips from my thumbs.
It is a thrust, at once in and out,
Like air on the wet and dry side of a window.

I beg it to leave off grasping,
Take the shape of its fingers off my ears,
Cease prying into my sockets,
Let my furrows ride,
Till I taste the ocean,
Till the salt leavens my tongue.

For M.E.T.

You are unanswerable:

Filament of summer,
A shell whorl,
A submerged footprint
In the outdrifting tide,
A grape vine grappling,
Trees, twigs, temples . . .

Because of shade and shadow,
Promise of no promises,
Because in this inch of time
You begrudge no breath,
Because before you I am a pilgrim
Who worships and departs,
His cup empty, but with a ringing of bells.

The Swan

There is that motionless motion of the swan,
Level on the water—
A going that but for the wake
Is no going, as though the water
Propelled, and the swan, still and acceptant,
Balanced its whiteness, turning its head
On the limpid stem
To note what grosser eyes can never see.

What is this otherness, this whiteness,
This repose?

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EXCHANGES

THE TEACHERS & WRITERS COLLABORATIVE MAGAZINE with this issue is initiating a new section for the exchange of readers' ideas. We hope you will use this space *first* if you have some strong reaction to an article in a back issue of this magazine or to some other educational question and would like to express your views; *second* if you would like to share a teaching experience—especially if it includes ideas for teaching creative writing or the other arts; *third* if you have some specific question that might be answered by our staff or the other readers.

Sue Willis
Miguel Ortiz

Dear Ms. Willis,

With great interest I read your article on linguistics and creative writing. I am a teacher of elementary language arts and have used linguistics in my teaching. I, too, used the ancient "Lord's Prayer" to stimulate thinking about language. My third-sixth graders were wild with the enthusiasm of recognition as they picked out words from it. After a brief discussion on language history, I sent them to the dictionaries to seek out derivations of English words. They threw words at me as I filled the blackboard under columns headed French, Latin, Greek, German, etc. It presented an easily comprehended illustration of where English came from.

However, I disagree with your rejection of teaching grammar. "Only three kinds of sentences?" you say. That seems only as relevant as saying "Only two kinds of people?" to the idea of male and female. No, that's not the only description of a person. People may be characterized in dozens of ways. So can sentences, of course, but the patterns come down to the basic three (or four if exclamatory is used). I do not think this classification, nor others such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, needs to be restrictive. They tell about our language, and I think the more any student learns about his language the more it will interest him. If he learns to apply these

language patterns to bring his language into his command, he will be able to communicate more effectively.

You say children have an innate understanding of grammar which is enough. True, there is a basic understanding, but I believe only if this is expanded upon will language become a personal facility at one's disposal instead of something that buries one in confusion. Language classifications help children deal with new words as they meet them. If new words will fit into familiar patterns, they can easily become part of one's language repertoire.

As children grow up they will meet many situations in which they will need to present themselves. A job interview and relating an important issue to others are two examples. A person in this setting who appears knowledgeable in all areas, including language use, would seem to inspire more confidence.

If I include language structure in my teaching, I believe I am best preparing my students to communicate freely, effectively, and creatively. For, to my mind, the greatest knowledge allows the greatest freedom.

I can see that a strict, prescriptive grammar as the only facet of language taught can be stifling, not to mention boring. But I feel there needs to be a balance. Creativity is important, but it is worth much more when accompanied by

a strong grasp on language structure.

I look forward to more articles on linguistics in the NEWSLETTER.

Margaret Gentile
Delmar, New York

Sue Willis replies:

Margaret Gentile sounds like a teacher who genuinely enjoys language, and I suspect she is able to share her excitement with her students. I like the exercises she uses in her teaching—I wish someone had been so inventive when I was tediously writing out my homework as an elementary student in West Virginia twenty years ago. The main point at which she and I seem to differ is on whether or not the rules of grammar are true or not. Children are generally delighted to have any subject, grammar included, presented to them as an exact science, the more precise the rules, the better. I would only want to point out that the system is *not* logical and is still being studied. Language is organic and in flux, constantly losing old forms and words and adding new ones. In my opinion the main educational challenge with children whose native language is standard English is to give them tools for extending their conversational fluency to the written word. In the main, then, I would concentrate on giving children lots and lots of practice at doing all kinds of writing—once they have made the connection between the plea-

sure of spoken communication and the pleasure of written communication, then there is time to do editorial analysis and polishing of their work.

There is another issue which I did not discuss in my article. This is the great social issue, and it has to do with children whose native language is some dialect of English. Margaret Gentile touches on it when she speaks of the need of using English in a way that will satisfy a job interviewer at some future point in a student's life. I think the learning of conventional English for such a reason is a practical goal that should be presented to students as an option. It is certainly a disservice not to be frank about the prejudice in many job markets in favor of a certain kind of spoken and written English. This does not, however, mean that job-market English is necessarily the richest or even most literary. The great twentieth century poets and novelists are notorious for use of dialect and strained syntax and experimental grammar and even invented vocabulary. Particularly in a city as ethnically mixed as New York, the spoken dialects have special power. A teacher who approaches black English as "bad" English is making a terrible attack on the child's ego and birthright. It seems to me that the only solution is to be frank about the job market and in some way to begin to teach standard English and written English as a second language—but to supplement, not to replace the child's native language. We don't try to replace Spanish with English for a child whose family intends to return permanently to the Dominican Republic in a couple of years; we try to give the child a second language.

Picture-Writing

A lesson that I've had a lot of fun with in classes from fourth to

sixth grade uses material from Garrick Mallery's *Picture-Writing of American Indians*.

I usually xerox a page or two from the section called "Lone-Dog's Winter Count," (p. 273ff.). The pictures are beautiful and mysterious, and I ask the class what they might mean, after explaining that they are a way of recording history when you don't have a written alphabet. We go through them, and the class guesses at meanings and argues.

They then move into making up stories in "picture-writing." Surprisingly enough, I've been able to explain, even to fourth graders, the idea that the pictures to be made up aren't the same as comic-strip pictures because they have to be the *simplest* picture of the idea without being so simple that it would become unclear. Part of the game then becomes reducing the original pictures to simple lines. Somebody goes up to the board and tries, and the class offers suggestions on simplification.

The obvious game for the whole class is to have someone go up and tell a story on the board in pictures, and then have it be figured out.

One thing that happened was that certain "symbols" had to be introduced, and they became popular. The "Winter Count" uses a symbol of two long bars bracketing shorter lines to indicate the number of people who died in a particular situation. Thus means that six people died.

One class evolved the fairly obvious symbol of an exploding asterisk for disaster. Another tended to use the "number of people died" symbol again and again, so that it became a rule to end with it.

I like the lesson because it allows me to talk about American Indians, about writing as taking down what happens to a people, about the difference between al-

phabets and pictures, at the same time as it allows for a wild playfulness that's different from elaborate cartooning. It's a kind of introduction to systems of representation in which the line between symbols and "representative" pictures tends to disappear, so that both are the same.

Sometimes I've had classes write stories-in-pictures individually, and then transcribe them into words. It can be a way into storytelling.

Aaron Fogel
New York City

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A note: Aaron mentions Dover books. If you write to them for their catalogue (at 180 Varick Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10014), every six weeks or so you'll get in the mail an envelope full of flyers describing books on everything from recognizing wildflowers to the Doré illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. One interesting book called *Egyptian Language* by Sir E.A. Wallis Budge could be another source for a study of picture-writing, perhaps as an introduction to the history of alphabets and writing.

For general fun with language there is a small quarterly called *Verbatim* available for \$4.00 a year at Essex, Connecticut 06426. This publication covers the oddities and eccentricities of human language.

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QUERY: For a New York City teacher who is working up a fiction and short story course for fifth and sixth graders and needs short (one page) pieces of excellent prose that can be xeroxed for use in the classroom. Aesop's fables are obvious, as are Biblical parables and certain prose poems by Franz Kafka and Russell Edson. What else is there?

“The real question is whether it is still normal for a school child to live for years amid irrational terrors and lunatic misunderstandings. And here one is really up against the very great difficulty of knowing what a child really feels and thinks. A child which appears reasonably happy may actually be suffering horrors which it cannot or will not reveal.”

—George Orwell*

Today's Child in Yesterday's School

John H. Noble

It's 8:15 A.M. and I'm walking towards a large two-story brick and fieldstone building. Although no one is in sight, the whole building seems alive and there is sort of a humming from all corners. As I walk into the lobby the humming turns into the sound of children's voices and the shuffling of feet. Most of the kids are out near the office waiting for the bell that will let them into their classrooms. After signing in at the office, I head down the hall for Room # 10, the kindergarten. Another day begins with seventeen five year olds. The classroom is quiet now and ready for use. It's a large room with lots of open space and light coming in through a wall of large windows. Four hexagonal tables are spread about the middle of the room; in each corner there is an activity center. In one corner there is a reading-library space; in another, a miniature store and kitchen; a rug for kids to sit on during lessons lies in another corner. In the last corner hangs a sign-up board for the workshop activities. Games, blocks, a cage of gerbils, plants, puzzles, magic markers, paints, easels, crayons, pencils, ink pads, construction paper, a turtle, and more are all around the room for the kids' use. Children's drawings appear on the walls. High on one wall there is the traditional set of alphabet letters; another homemade, more original set, is spread on another wall. The room is full of different colors and smells and things to explore, and it is a bright

and cheerful place. It seems to be a place where kids would want to be.

How does this classroom look to a five year old? What happens to him when he arrives at school? Let's look at one student: Ben.

Ben is very active and curious, always interested in doing or learning something new and exciting. And he is responsive to what goes on in the classroom. These traits are common to most of the kids in this class. This school is located in the "nice" part of Cambridge: most of its students come from middle-income and university families. There are no low-income minorities in this class, and in most cases this is true for the rest of the school as well. Poverty is rare.

In the pages that follow, one will find a picture of the school through the eyes of a student. Obviously this is an adult's reconstruction of Ben's experience, but it is a picture derived from careful observation and participation with the children over a period of seven months. I was a volunteer in the classroom five times a week. Ben is just one of these children. Looking at this picture I hope that one will be able to get an idea of what is going on today in a typical middle-American classroom.

11/8/73

Ben and Matthew came in early today and we spent the minutes before the morning lesson building a house of plastic leggo blocks.

Both Matthew and Ben became quite involved and interested in completing their house, but the time came for the lesson, and they left the project unfinished for the time being. Over at the rug they were still chattering away about the window they might put in the second story and the garage door they would build when the class was called to order by Nancy, the teacher. She started explaining the day's lesson about the letter "O." Ben's interest soon faded, and he started whispering to Matthew, who tried to ignore him.

"Ben? Ben! Please turn around and pay attention. You won't know what to do, and you can talk to Matthew later."

Ben, hearing the warning slowly turned around with a sheepish smile on his face and started "listening." He had been told many times before to "turn around and pay attention," and he knew what to do. Earlier in the year he would have turned around with a jerk to ask, with an embarrassing sense of urgency, what the matter was. But, he now knew what was expected of him, and there was no need for a verbal reply.

What was expected of him? On a very specific level, Nancy expected Ben to be listening to her explain the lesson for the day. She was concerned that Ben under-

* George Orwell, "Such were the days" in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell*, (New York, Doubleday, 1954) pp. 17-18.

stand the point of the lesson, so that he could successfully complete the exercise that was later to be passed out. The importance of learning the alphabet and the importance of "quiet" during the lesson outweighed the importance of Ben's private conversation.

On a larger scale one can also see what was expected of Ben. He, as part of a group and a group activity, was expected to realize that the needs of the group were somehow more important than his own personal needs. Also, he was expected to be aware of the authority of the teacher and the importance of her messages. In short, he must learn to be sensitive to group needs and to respect authority. Nancy, as representative of the school, hoped that Ben would learn this sensitivity and realize that in so doing he would do much better in school. If he did not learn these values early on, he would not be a successful student and, to go even further, he would not be a good citizen.

But, what did Ben think of the situation and what did *he* expect of the school? Taking his point of view, one can see how frustrating the above situation might have been for Ben. He had become very interested in a project he had undertaken at school and he wanted to pursue this interest. However, when he did so, by talking to Matthew, he had to delay his interest and excitement. Why? Because the teacher said so! This may sound like a cynical assessment of the reason behind the delay, but actually this is not the case at all. Throughout the course of the fall, Ben had come to value Nancy's opinions and knowledge and, therefore, had come to respect her wishes. He, too, had come to like Nancy very much. He sensed, therefore, that whatever Nancy asked him to do should be carried out. He was not aware of the underlying social value of Nancy's command. He only knew that the teacher commanded and deserved authority and, while he

was under that authority, he had better obey it.

It was interesting to note, however, that Ben's respect for authority was a very conditional respect. One can see what Ben expected of his school in terms of authority in the following example.

3/4/74

Nancy had just finished her lesson for the morning when Mrs. Smith walked in ready to give her twenty-minute music lesson. Ben, as well as a few others, gave a rather loud groan when they saw the music teacher walk into the room. She came over to the rug where all the kids were already seated and took over from Nancy by asking,

"All right, who will start the 'Hello' song for me?"

One of the kids volunteered and started in, but not too many joined, and those who did, did so by shouting or being silly. Ben was being silly, and I could see that he was already dead set against cooperating. The lesson continued with an "echo" exercise in which the kids repeated rhythms which Mrs. Smith sang out. Unfortunately, she chose to give the words "TEE" and "TA" to her rhythms, and her rendition sounded something like this:

"TEE, TEE, TA,
TA, TEE, TA,"

or, what sounded to me like baby talk. Apparently I was not the only one who thought it sounded like baby talk, because Ben repeated the rhythms in baby talk with a sarcastic and rude tone. The teacher scolded him and told him to repeat the rhythms "nicely"; however, Ben only gave her a blank stare, and he decided not to participate at all from then on. For the rest of the lesson Ben just sat and watched or whispered to his friends who had also lost interest. Fortunately for Mrs. Smith, there were seven or eight "willing" students, and she was

able to complete her lesson with some attendance. Ben, however, had turned himself off to the music lesson. Sadly, this had been the situation for several weeks, since the arrival of Mrs. Smith, the new music teacher. The music lesson had turned into a battle between students and teacher.

What had happened to Ben's concept of authority? One might say that it had gone by the wayside. However, I think one can see how his concept was still intact in a very concrete way. Simply, Ben's respect for authority was prefaced by certain of his own personal requirements. He did not cooperate because these requirements were not fulfilled in the case of the music teacher. What did Ben expect of the teacher? Looking at his relationship with Nancy one can perhaps gain an insight.

Nancy, as a good teacher, had shown respect for Ben and had introduced him to many new and interesting ideas. Ben, therefore, was willing to respect Nancy's wishes even when her lessons were not all that interesting. Ben expected that either the teacher should show him respect or that the lesson be somewhat interesting and fun. In the case of the music teacher and her lesson, none of his requirements were met, and although he did not cause uncontrollable conditions in the class, he did choose not to participate. The music teacher, by asking Ben to do something he considered babyish, did not show respect for his interests and past experience. She did not make the lesson either interesting or fun, so the lesson had no redeeming value to Ben. His concept of authority, then, was still strongly present. Where Nancy provided all of Ben's requirements, the music teacher provided none. It was not that Ben disliked music in general (for example, he would often sing songs to himself and beat rhythms on his desk), he disliked the music teacher. Therefore, the music

teacher held no authority in Ben's eyes.

3/20/74

Nancy had to leave for a morning meeting, and she asked me to take over the lesson and the other responsibilities until she returned; so, I was "in charge." I called all the kids over to the rug for the morning exercises, attendance, etc. Of course, there were questions as to Nancy's whereabouts, and I answered, explaining that we would do the lesson as usual until she returned. Chaos slowly spread around the class. All were attentive at first, then Ben and Patrick began wrestling; and, when I tried to calm them down, other disturbances broke out. It was like trying to rake in a big pile of leaves on a windy day. Only by "gentle" persuasion *and* by my advantage in height and weight was I able to calm down Ben and the others. We proceeded with the lesson for the day (something to do with the mathematical set of two) only under the most strained conditions. Ben and Patrick were particularly trying, because they continued to make fun and stir up trouble. Near the end of the lesson (and my patience) when I was explaining the worksheet over a general murmuring of voices, Nancy came back into the room. Seeing that I was in need of assistance she quietly walked over and stood by the edge of the rug. As soon as Ben saw her he was quiet. He poked Patrick and Patrick was quiet. Soon everyone was quiet. It was almost frightening. I finished my lesson, with Nancy near by, without any problem, and then the kids started their papers.

What had happened? One might say that Ben was not interested in the lesson or that he did not respect (me) his teacher. However, the explanation is not so simple. I had been in the classroom for approximately six months before this episode occurred, and I had established a very good relationship with Ben and the rest of the

kids. They frequently came to me with questions, requests, and problems, and they respected my opinions and knowledge. Up to that point I had done very little group teaching and very little serious disciplining. Therefore, in my new role as teacher, I was in a new position and out of place. It was not that Ben had changed his opinion of me that made him act the way he did, rather it was that he did not see me as an authority figure. To Ben and the others Nancy was the authority in the classroom, as were some of the other teachers who visited the room. I did nothing that varied from Nancy's morning lesson plan, yet I was unable to keep the same kind of order because I was not an authority figure to Ben. When "authority" returned, Ben settled back into his normal good behavior. Again Ben knew how to react to the presence of authority, and it was remarkable that not one word was spoken. It was not with a sense of fear that quiet fell over the room, but rather a sense of embarrassment. Ben, in the absence of authority, had taken liberties not usually available to him, those he knew were normally off limits. So, when he was "caught," he felt more embarrassment and guilt than fear.

3/27/74

Miss Jones, a rather large and elderly woman, arrived in the classroom with,

"Good morning, children."

Ben and his fellow classmates followed in unison,

"Good morning, Miss Jones," and they sat quietly on the rug. Miss Jones began her science lesson and Ben made sure to pay close attention and behave. Libby, a rather talkative five year old, blurted out a question that she just *had* to have answered. Miss Jones sternly said,

"Little girl, when I am talking you should be quiet *and* if you want to ask a question, raise your hand! Now, sit down and be



quiet."

Libby sat down and was quiet. Miss Jones continued her lesson which kept most of the children interested. A question period followed, but only the boldest in the class dared ask questions. Ben and the others preferred to listen. Miss Jones ended her lesson with,

"Goodbye, children" and received a prompt,

"Goodbye, Miss Jones."

Miss Jones commanded Ben's respect, and she was definitely an authority figure to him. He knew that she would send a disorderly student out of the classroom. Ben knew also that the safest way to get through the science lesson was to listen quietly and not ask any questions. This was all from fear of being reprimanded.

Therefore, taking the four episodes above into consideration, one can understand the developed aspect of the part that authority played in Ben's school life. First, one can see that Nancy, as a representative of the school, expected certain behavior from Ben, based on certain moral and social values. Her authority was based, in her eyes, on these values; and because they were good values, she expected her authority to be respected. She expected, also, that her authority be shared equally by other teachers and those to whom she gave authority. In other words, respect for a teacher's authority was looked upon by Nancy as a general concept; something that should not change or transcend individuals. However, looking through Ben's eyes, one can see that authority came to mean something quite different. For Ben, authority was a very specific concept, a concept, nonetheless, that remained constant and required certain criteria in each case. Only certain people commanded or deserved authority. Authority, then, was defined in terms of the qualities of each person who, in Ben's eyes, commanded it. In the above example, Nancy's personal qualities as a

teacher would be part of Ben's conception of authority. The music teacher had no authority because she had not fulfilled Ben's authority criteria. I had no authority because I had never pretended to have any. The science teacher, on the other hand, commanded authority because of Ben's fear of being reprimanded. Therefore, Ben's respect and conception of authority were based on particular authority figures.

Now that one has an idea of what authority meant to Nancy, as a representative of the school and to Ben, as a representative of his classmates, one might ask what effect authority had on Ben's life in school. As is seen above, authority played a direct role in determining what and how much Ben learned in the school's terms. In one case, where he chose to obey authority, he learned a great deal academically. In two cases above when Ben chose not to cooperate, he learned very little academically. The word "academically" should be stressed here because one can see that Ben was learning all the time while he was at school. For example, he was learning that when the science teacher came in the room he should be seen and not heard; when Nancy was present he should pay attention; when the music teacher was in the room (and Nancy absent), he could make mischief. Of course, Ben's conception of authority had great effect on his school life. In one case, he chose to turn off to what was being taught, and in the other, he considered his lesson optional. Fortunately, Nancy was a very good teacher, and Ben was able to learn many things that would help him in his school career. However, if Nancy had commanded respect by other means than by her sensitivity to children, by force or punishment for example, one can see the detrimental effects that may have occurred. (The science teacher's authority could only encourage passivity and sub-

mission.) Unfortunately, this has been the case in many schools across the country. Nonetheless, one can see how Nancy's individual teaching technique affected Ben's attitude toward school. In a way, when Ben chose to respect Nancy's authority, he also chose to conform to her principles and wishes. So, one may feel that Ben did not have much freedom when it came to what he learned in school. He could have chosen to conform to the wishes of his teacher and learn what she taught, or he could have chosen to ignore his teacher and learn nothing academically. The important point here is that Ben could not make the choice to leave the school. He had to learn to deal with authority within the confines of the classroom. One can see that Ben, in kindergarten, was well on his way to learning how to confront authority within the classroom environment.

Authority, then, can be seen as a concept which was part of Ben's initiation into the school system. He was forced to deal with authority in many different ways because he could not leave the school. Ben's definition of authority, as seen above, was a result of his having to deal with this very important part of school life. Because of Ben's compulsory confinement to the classroom, he had to confront and learn about other concepts of school life as well. Such a concept was briefly mentioned above: that of the group.

4/23/74

Tuesday was our reading day. Five kids: Caile, Matt, Christine, Matthew and Ben were in my group, and we went off to the cafeteria for our lesson. Because we had been doing reading since early January and because each child had different abilities, everyone was on a different page in his or her reading workbooks. Therefore, each required a different kind of help. Ben was almost finished with his book and wanted

very much to complete a lot of pages. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the exercise, he could not work on his own, so I had to help him individually. Furthermore, all the others needed the same kind of individual help. So, from Caile,

"John! What do I do now?" and from Matthew I heard,

"I hate reading . . . you never help me!" and from Ben,

"John, please listen to me."

Matt and Christine were working on their own or running around the room. I managed to keep three of the five kids working on their reading and then only by rapid-fire question-answer technique. Ben needed oral quizzing; Matthew needed directions; and Caile needed help with one letter he could not figure out. Matt and Christine were, by this time, doing something else. I had to tell Ben many times to wait while I helped Caile or Matthew. Each time he gave me a look of disappointment and resignation. Of course, this happened to Caile and Matthew as well. All three had finished only a few pages when we had to get ready to go home for the day. We returned to the room with a feeling of frustration.

From this episode one might get the distinct impression that with groups one gets delay. Ben, as part of a group, was asked to learn that delay is inevitable, and he must learn how to cope with it. I tried to help as many of the kids as I could, given the circumstances, and it worked only with minimal success: I was able to help three of the five children. The three who did stay around were able to get some work done. Each had periods of time, though, when he or she had to sit, wait and do nothing until I finished helping with another. Christine and Matt, however, chose not to wait and occupied themselves with something more entertaining. Ben, because he wanted to get his book finished, chose to wait for my help. He was, however, impatient.



Ben wanted to finish, and he was losing time just sitting, so he expressed his frustrations. I expected Ben to learn that he simply must wait his turn while I tried to give equal time to all. This, for Ben, was the most difficult concept to learn. The fact that his activity was limited due to the group was very frustrating to him.

2/28/74

Ben had a question for Nancy today during the morning exercises. Patrick, Libby, Larry, Betsy, Josh and Caile also had questions or bits of information to share. So, there were seven hands in the air. Patrick was chosen first, and he talked about some TV show on Africa, his favorite subject. Then Betsy talked about her trip to Alabama; then Larry about *his* TV show; and Libby, Josh and Caile all talked about their own topics or questions. When Nancy called on Ben he looked somewhat surprised and puzzled, and said, "I forgot."

Ben, for no particular reason,

was called on last. He had become engrossed in the others' topics and had, obviously, forgotten his own. Again delay due to the group caused Ben frustration. His immediate needs were sacrificed to the group situation. What could Ben do to prevent this situation from taking place again? He had done it many times before: he simply had tried to ignore the others' conversation, so that he would not run the risk of forgetting his own question. In this way, then, Ben learned how to deal with the problem of being part of a group. Fortunately, Ben was not chosen last all the time. Indeed, if he was it would be considered unfair, by the teacher, Ben, and the rest of the class. Therefore, both the teacher and the kids felt the frustration of the group situation. The teacher hoped that her students would learn to be patient and expect delay when part of a large group. There is nothing that can be done about it in the present system of education without a total revamping of curriculum and class size. This sounds quite discouraging; however, it becomes commonplace when looking at the total system of our society. Groups and delay are part of everyday life. The schools are, however, the main manifestation to the child of the "larger social system." And, it is in the schools that the child must learn to cope with groups and delay. In his own way, Ben learned that in group situations his interests would be delayed. He found that he could do one of three things to deal with group situations: (1) he could simply be patient and wait his turn, or wait until school was out; (2) he could strike back and show his anger to the teacher (and be chastized for selfishness); or (3) he could withdraw from the activity until his individual interests could be satisfied. Looking at these three strategies one can see how they affect classroom life. It certainly made a difference through-

out the year whether or not Ben and his classmates chose to participate or to "make trouble." If a few kids decided to make trouble, the whole class would suffer because of it. Fortunately, most of the kids saw that patience, although painful, was the best strategy if anything was to be accomplished.

Groups, then, created a new problem for Ben. He had never had to deal with this problem until he arrived at school, and one can see how he came to cope with the problem. But, there is still another aspect of group dynamics not covered in the discussion above.

3/29/74

At recess a strange thing happened. During the course of a kickball game Patrick and Caile broke into a battle over who would pitch the next ball. Before I could break it up Patrick had Caile on the ground and had given him a good pounding. Ben had been closely watching and was standing over Caile when Caile got up. Caile was ready for retaliation, but in Patrick he had met his match. Ben was another story, however, and Caile proceeded to take his anger out on Ben. Luckily, Ben was faster than Caile so that Caile's anger was released in the chase, and the game was resumed without further incident.

What does this have to do with groups and with Ben in particular? One of the most striking facts about the first few years in school is that a child is obliged to come in contact with others his age. He must learn somehow to exist peaceably in a classroom with children who are not all necessarily his friends. He must learn how to avoid being hurt. He must learn not to provoke anger in people stronger than himself, and he must learn to respect his classmates' feelings and property. In other words, he must learn a little bit of social psychology. In the case above, Caile took a chance when



arguing with Patrick, who was the strongest in the class, and Ben made the mistake of being too close and too interested in Caile's defeat. Ben only managed to escape a beating by being faster than Caile. He learned that it was not wise to take an overjoyant interest in Caile's sorry state. However, this was just one of the many interpersonal peer level contacts that took place every day.

3/20/74

Ben and the others got out to recess a little late and were forced off the kickball field by the upper-graders. Although they had obviously been playing there, the older kids, seeing the five year olds, immediately took over. Ben came running over to me in protest, and I managed to have the older kids take some kindergartners on as teammates. However, soon the five year olds were forced out altogether in a sequence of rough plays and rough words by the older kids.

As a kindergartener, Ben knew

that he was at the bottom of the ladder in all respects when it came to school activities. The group not only required getting along with peer groups, but also with those slightly older and in a different group.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the dynamics of social psychology. However, it is certainly appropriate to point out that Ben, for the first time, had to learn to associate with people his own age in a compulsory group situation. The relationship between Ben and the rest of his peers influenced Ben's attitude towards himself and towards his school. For example, if Ben had a hard day at recess, either by being bullied or falling and being laughed at, his pride would receive a mean blow. "Having a bad day at school" too many times can affect one's attitude in many ways. This aspect of the group influence on school life leads to another aspect of Ben's encounter with the school.

4/23/74

Josh finished his reading book today. Because of this accomplishment he received a round of applause from the class and a lollipop from Nancy. (Later in the day the episode mentioned above concerning Ben's reading class took place.)

Here, Josh was singled out and praised for work well done. He was, in this way, being compared to the rest of the class. All those in the room who had not finished their books now wanted more than ever to finish theirs. Those who *had* finished welcomed the newcomer into their "smart" group. One can see here that comparison, evaluation and praise became part of Ben's experience in school. Being part of a large group he naturally was compared to the rest of his classmates. Admittedly, the kind of evaluation and praise that went on in this kindergarten may seem mild when looking at higher levels of education. How-

ever, it was in the kindergarten that Ben first learned about these factors of school life. He wanted to get his workbook finished so that he, too, could receive praise from his teacher and friends. He knew that in order to do this he must work hard at his reading. A question arises here: does reading take place for reading's sake or for the sake of the "lollipop?" I find it difficult to believe that Ben enjoyed his reading, simply because of the great difficulty he had with it and the fact that it caused him a lot of frustration. Ben understood that if he did his reading well, he would be rewarded. Therefore, one would say that Ben was motivated by the reward rather than by the intrinsic value of reading.

Is this what Nancy hoped for? I would say "no." She saw that reading was the important factor and that Ben should learn that skill. She found that praise was the best way to promote reading in the classroom. Hopefully, Ben would later see the intrinsic value of his learning to read. Nancy could also stress the values of reading hoping that they would somehow sink in. But, one might ask what would happen when the praiseworthy activities were not necessarily worth the praise. Reading, writing and arithmetic, and the other academic subjects were worth learning and deserved praise if done well. However, what about praise for behavior that conformed to school rules. For example, being quiet when one wants to talk, walking in the halls, sitting up straight when one wants to lounge, and walking when one wants to run are activities that are extremely difficult to justify to anyone, much less a five year old. The intrinsic value of the acts is not clear. For Ben, then, conformity to these parts of school life was based on his need for praise and his respect for authority. He, therefore, gained praise by learning that certain behavior and actions were praiseworthy, and by learning to hide his unworthy

actions, i.e. the embarrassment he felt in the 3/20/74 incident (when I was in charge). Nancy hoped that Ben would sometime, somehow see that her praise was based on the intrinsic value of his behavior and work, however unrealistic a hope that may have been.

4/25/74

We had an alphabet worksheet that reviewed some of the sounds and letters. I was helping Larry who had trouble with these concepts. All the kids were about finished, but Larry and I were far from it. Eventually, as usually happened, some kids gathered around me, ready to have me help them with a new activity. I told them to go play a game or something while I finished up with Larry. Ben saw that the way to get my help was to "help" Larry.

"Ben, let Larry do it by himself. He has to learn on his own; I'll be right with you."

Ben smiled and went on to do something else.

Although Ben was part of a group, he was expected to act as an individual. In the above episode, Ben was violating Larry's right to do his paper on his own (although Larry did not mind the help). Nancy and I saw the value of independence and individuality in Larry's work. Larry would only learn how to read if he could read on his own without help. One can see that Ben also realized this by his smile and his willing departure from the scene. It must have been puzzling to Ben in that he was expected, in so many cases, to act like one of a group and at the same time preserve his autonomy when it came to his work.

"Why not help Larry, he's my friend and part of our class?" he may have thought. Ben, however, learned that individuality was praised when manifested in the proper way. An individual drawing brought praise, good work on an exercise brought praise, as did finishing one's workbook. Individuality was called for in some cases

and not in others. Ben learned throughout the year how to make this distinction.

Looking back on the discussion of the last few pages one can see that Ben learned much more than the "Three R's," painting, drawing and science. He learned what it is to be a student, what it is the school expected of him, and what he should expect of the school. Involved in that learning process was a personal understanding of authority, the group, praise and individuality; fairly complex concepts for a five year old, but concepts necessary for survival in our school system and society. Ben learned how to gauge his teachers' expectations within his own. He learned how to get along with the others in his class so that he could maintain as many friendships as possible. He became aware that he must encounter the delay of his own interests for the benefit of the group. He learned, too, that authority was at the base of all his activity at school, and in order to get along he had to bend to the wishes of authority in some way or another. Thus, Ben was initiated into the American School System.

Is the present initiation rite the proper one? According to Orwell, it is not. What are the weaknesses of the present system that bring about such depressing conclusions from educational thinkers? One may conceptualize these conclusions by looking at Ben's life in the classroom.

First, one might point out the positive aspects of Ben's schooling and examine their qualities. One would agree that his compulsory confrontation with his peers was a beneficial one. After all, in any social setting, crowds are a "fact of life," and to learn how to get along with one's fellow human is a valuable lesson. Ben definitely learned, as mentioned above, a little school psychology, and therefore, his school life could be seen as a valuable experience, one

that will help him at school in the future. However, one might argue that any school would provide this social interaction, and therefore, it would not be unique to the present school system, and thus, not necessarily a saving grace of the system. Moreover, the benefits of learning about crowds can be a mixed blessing.

Ben's response to delay is one example of an aspect that could present problems in the future. Because of the authority of his teachers, Ben chose to become passive to these delays. He accepted the postponement of his active interest in building the house, and this subordination of his personal excitement can be seen as detrimental to the development of independent thinking that, ironically, the school also attempts to foster. "Why be creative and different only to see your creativity and individuality subordinated to the wishes of the teacher?" This attitude could be a serious problem for Ben in the future when looking at the development of his creative instincts and self-confidence. So, one can

see the contradiction that the present school system faces. Even when the school teaches the most necessary skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, they are still faced with inherent contradictions.

One would consider the introduction of reading and writing in the kindergarten as something necessary and good, for example. However, look at Ben's introduction to these subjects. He was confronted every morning with either a math or a writing lesson and every Tuesday with a reading lesson. All were compulsory. Success in these subjects was rewarded. One can see from the episodes above that reading, for example, became valuable to Ben not for its own sake, but for the sake of the reward it brought. He had to do his reading, and therefore, there was no room for his own value judgment. What does Ben's attitude lead to? One can predict that it may very well lead to a sterile and external view of the value of reading, which also could be true for the other subjects mentioned. While their value

is for the most part undisputed, the method of teaching these subjects becomes self-defeating.

There is something fundamentally wrong with today's method of schooling. It is evident from Ben's experience that curriculum takes precedence over any other sort of activity in the school. Indeed, "readin', writin' and 'rithmetic" are the focal points of Ben's day. The concern for slow readers and slow mathematicians keeps teachers, teacher aides, specialists and parents busy and worried more than any other aspect of school life. Perhaps this emphasis on the curriculum and the effort expended for it provides a hint at the source of the fundamental problem in our schools. With so much energy being spent worrying about the three "R's," the problem of teaching the child is overshadowed. The concept of what a child is, to begin with, is never discussed. In other words, while schools have been trying to fit as many kids through the curriculum as possible in the most effective way, they have lost sight of, or possibly never had, the idea that schools exist for children.

Baldwin, Hemingway and Us

Richard Perry



I had long wanted to try a fiction course in a public school setting, and inspired by the success several of my Teachers and Writers colleagues had written about, I set about last June to put such a course together. After consultation with Ms. Hollis, librarian at P.S. 11, I decided on a mixed bag: a collection of tall tales, a history, a romance, a mystery, etc. All the chosen books fit neatly beneath that euphemistic heading: "Young Adult."

In the fall, a little nervous, I asked for a group of the best readers from the sixth grade and started in. They seemed to be an alert, bright collection. They had known one another for several years and related well. At first Jocelyn and Luis were the most verbal; Luis had so much to say that his words seemed to be fighting their way past his lips, his face grimacing, smiling, opening and closing as it sought to match the meaning of his speech. Jocelyn, from the beginning, was bouncy, possessor of vast energy, quick to laugh. Michelle's face wore a careful "wait and see" attitude, much like Theresa's, but more formidable. P.J.'s quiet demeanor I first misinterpreted as shyness; it was not. He just generally does not have a lot to say, but when he does speak it is obvious that he has been thinking. Stephen seemed older than his years; I think it is his thin, studious appearance that causes this impression.

All of this was filtering through my mind as we began to talk about fiction, what it was, where it came from, and out of what needs it might have grown. After about five minutes I realized that the only nervous person in the room was me. The idea that fiction had oral antecedents prompted discussion about stories told to us by grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and friends, and I began to sense an excitement that something special was going to happen. But I held this

excitement in check, because the next place I was going was one I had never been with children; it was a place fraught with technical terms, inept introduction of which, I'd discovered, had turned off many a college freshman.

During the next session, after talking about fiction's major categories (short story, novella, novel), I asked: "What makes a work of fiction different from a play, or a newspaper article, or a poem?"

"Fiction's longer."

"Newspaper articles are true. Fiction isn't."

"People talk in a play."

"Poems rhyme."

"Not always they don't."

"Sometimes."

And we all jumped into what I called "elements of fiction."

Now terms like plot and theme are relatively easy to grasp, but I expected some rocky going when we got to "points of view" and "characterization." But they grasped the terms and were able to articulate their understanding of them. I remember standing at the chalkboard, slightly dazed, as Luis distinguished between a first person narrator and an omniscient narrator in two books he'd read. It was at that point that I began to realize that I was guilty of underestimating these students and that they were ready to bite into more sophisticated fiction. But I wasn't totally sure and I didn't want to move too fast. We'd had two great sessions, but two sessions did not a year make. I remembered something my grandfather is fond of saying: "Lots of things get two days old, and die."

Our first book was a collection of tall tales (Pecos Bill, John Henry, Paul Bunyan), and we spent some time discovering that it was exaggeration that made these stories "fun" and successful. We talked about the conflict between man and machine in "John Henry," and the ways, both positive and negative, in which tech-

nology had affected our lives. I ran smack into their definition of hero—a person who overcomes against great odds and who *lives* to enjoy his/her victory.

"If that's the case," I said, "John Henry wasn't a hero. Not only did he not overcome, he died."

There was a heavy silence. They dug John Henry and I was denying him his rightful place. But *they*, after all, had come up with the definition. "And Martin Luther King wasn't a hero. Neither was Malcolm X. Nor John Brown."

"Get back! Oh no, not true! They were heroes."

"Well, then," I said, "maybe we need another definition." And we talked about it, and I suggested that perhaps the *act* of taking on an obstacle when all the odds were against you—because you knew you were right—perhaps that was the heroic act; success or failure had nothing to do with the definition.

I had planned to use the reading we did as models for our own writing, and after we finished the tall tales, I suggested that the group try writing their own. The stories they turned in, all of which reflected a conscious appreciation for the elements of fiction we'd discussed, convinced me that they were ready to read "adult literature." We read their tall tales out loud, talked about strengths and weaknesses, and spent the rest of the session re-writing. When they left, I gave each a copy of Ernest Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home." I chose Hemingway for two reasons. First, I like most of his short fiction, and secondly, the surface of his style is usually accessible. I expected the tone of the story to present some problems, but at least they would be able to read it.

"Soldier's Home" is the story of a young man who returns to America disillusioned by his experiences in WWI. When I taught this story to freshmen at Pratt

Institute, I discovered that the primary stumbling block in coming to grips with the piece was an inability to understand how foreign war and domestic corruption could serve to devastate the moral values of a significant part of a generation. My freshmen's fathers had fought in WW II, their older brothers in Korea; Vietnam had flared nightly across television screens, and we had all recently grimaced and begun to digest Watergate. If the moral implication of this was there to be drawn, equally so was the practical implication, which was that life, for the majority of us, went on. Life always went on. So what was all the fuss about? We talked about war and what it meant to us. Most of their answers were slick and superficial, "War's bad." "People should get along with one another," and everyone believed at this point in the fall of 1975, since the war in Vietnam was "over," that the world was at peace.

I suggested that the sixth graders write letters to one or the other of their parents, asking that he or she describe a way that war had affected his/her life. While they were at it, I asked that they find out where the parent was born and inquire about his/her background. We'd discussed the relationship between the main character of "Soldier's Home" and his parents, a relationship defined by a lack of communication. Everyone had found that relationship disturbing. Theresa, I think, said that maybe they couldn't talk to one another because they didn't know one another.

This is one of the letters, and a parent's response:

Dear Mom,

I would like to know when you were born and where. I want to learn about your background. You lived in a time of war. Tell me about it.

Thank you,
Your sweet baby,
Jocelyn

Dear Jocelyn,

I'm happy to know that you are

interested about my past; these kinds of things put us in touch with our roots. I was born in New York City on Jan. 15, 1943 at St. Vincent's Hospital on 13th Street in Manhattan. Both my parents were also born in New York, so that makes you a third generation New Yorker.

As for war. It was a big part of my childhood. I remember being on 42nd Street with my mother when the war ended in 1945. It is probably my earliest recollection. I remember it so well because a woman picked me up in the crowd and for a time I was separated from my mother. I remember thinking it strange that everyone in the crowd was so happy while I was so upset because I couldn't find my mother.

As I write this my mind is being flooded with other memories about other wars: the Korean, Vietnam, etc., but enough of letters. Let's sit down and share these things face to face. What a nice way of becoming closer this "homework" assignment has turned out to be.

Love always,
Mommy

As it turned out, only one parent who wrote back had been in the service, but all, as this mother did, had some recollection of war. Those parents who answered were pleased that their children had expressed an interest in their lives, and what they revealed suggested to each child a vast store of information which was there for the

asking. The room that day had a kind of simmering excitement as we read and talked about those letters. I remembered how my grandfather and father, who seldom voluntarily talked about their pasts (except to impress upon me how hard it had been for them), could go on for an hour when I expressed a real interest in where they had come from. And knowing where they had come from was, of course, answering my questions about where I had come from. That information was invaluable to me, both as an individual and as a writer.

One session, during a discussion of James Baldwin's short story, "The Manchild," I noticed that Michelle, head bent, was busily writing. "The Manchild" is a moving, bittersweet and horrifying story in which Baldwin examines the paternalistic relationship between two men, one of whom, Jamie, owns a dog, which, one gathers, serves as Jamie's only connection to, and source of love in, the world around him.

When Michelle finished writing, I asked her if she'd like to read what she'd written to the group. She declined, but said that she didn't mind if I read it. This is what she'd written:

*I sit up here in my weeping
willow tree house. No stupid
things to look at or watch,
just me and my dog, Tutu.
My son and kids sixty miles*

*away, they don't care about
me and I don't care about
them. Only thing I worry
about is me and Tutu. Every-
body goes their own ways,
Tutu. My son don't ever
come to see me, only when
he wants something. Yeah,
Tutu, he only comes when he
wants something. Me and
you and our willow lived
here forty years and ain't no-
body gonna take us away
from each other. Nobody.*

The piece moved all of us and the group began to congratulate Michelle. I was struck by the mood evoked by the writing. The dog here, loved as a pet, has obviously taken on a larger meaning, become a substitute for human love. The mood is Jamie's mood, pain protected by a kind of defiant melancholy, both the depth and thinness of which is illuminated by the repetition of "he only comes when he wants something," the statement: "ain't nobody gonna take us away from each other," and the solitary resonance of the paragraph's last "nobody." Brutal experiences kept alive by language which reveals both the ache and a stubbornness to go on living, to re-affirm life by sharing what love there is: the piece is an almost perfect blues song.

At some point I mentioned that the paragraph was a monologue, and a discussion of that led us to dialogue, a term we'd talked about earlier in the year. I suggested that they might try their hands at writ-

ing one of each. The following week we read and talked about them. The monologues proved to be more successful. Dialogue, I think, is difficult to write well under the best of circumstances, and I, in explaining how speech can be an integral part of characterization, had suggested they eliminate "he said," and "she said." This meant that we would know when one character ceased to speak and the other began only by paragraphing, and I mapped examples on the board. To avoid confusion the writer would have to make each character's voice distinctive. This could be done by rhythm, by the length of time one character spoke as compared to the other, by the use of ellipsis to indicate habitual pauses, by one character's repetition of a particular word or phrase, or by a question and answer pattern. It was a tough assignment and a little too much for them to handle. (Sometimes it's a little too much for me to handle!) But I think the experience was a worthwhile one, and we will try it again.

I found it interesting the degree to which the tone of Michelle's piece had influenced the rest of the group. All of the monologues I received strove more or less successfully to reproduce the tone rendered by hers. I share three monologues with you:

Oh, baby, we were meant for one another. I can tell from the glow in your eyes you love me and I love you. It's only once in a lifetime that a

person can get lucky like I did and meet with you. Well, baby, it's time to say goodbye. In my heart I'll keep you all the time and I hope you do the same thing in yours. Bye, baby. If in the future we meet again it would be a second chance. Never will there be a replacement for your hot, loving, tender body. I'll wait for you till then. Bye. And it's worth waiting for, baby, believe me. "Smack."

Luis

Today we sit together and watch the big, lonely, dishonest world. The people look sad, Possum, but me and you are living happily together. Yes, sir, those people have ugly, mean, fierce and chaotic faces, but ours are just plain, beautiful, dignified. Boy, Possum, you should have been here when the world was young. Yup, it was a beautiful sight to see but now it's nothing, pure garbage. There's cursing, fighting, killing. It's a shame. God forbid. Well, he's helping us out and praise him be. Possum, you're a dog, but I love you so.

Theresa

As I sit in this lonely room, I wonder what they will do next. They turned my heat off, took my money. That man even took my wedding

ring. I got no hope. I'd better pay up. Or they'll take my welfare check. I need it.

Jocelyn

Early in the term I gave my little speech about the worth and function of fiction, during which I address the rhetorical question: "Why read fiction?" Well, I read fiction for a number of reasons, not the least of which is entertainment. But I also know that I make certain demands on the form and whether or not these demands are met serves to determine the book I will remember, recommend to a student or a friend, or the book that I will simply forget. Articulation of these demands necessarily limits them in an unsatisfactory way, suggests a process of judgment the narrowness of which I do not mean to imply. With this reservation in mind then, I expect fiction to illuminate and confirm my beliefs and perceptions, or to contradict them, or to suggest possibilities I had not known existed. It might do all three, but it must at least do one.

Although it is gratifying that the sixth graders I am working with have grasped the terminology of fiction, recognize it in the stories they read, and demonstrate that knowledge in their own writing, for me the most exciting and valuable experience has been witnessing their responses to the fiction they have read. They don't know about traditions and critical academic assessments, and they re-

spond to fiction in one of the primary ways I think it is meant to be responded to—with gut feelings.

The fiction of James Baldwin resounds with themes of racial conflict, sex, religion and identity, and it is with open conversations about all but one of these themes that much of our time has been filled. We found that in order to understand the role religion played in the life of one of Baldwin's characters, it was helpful to discuss the role religion played in our lives. This led to questions concerning the nature and existence of God, the devil, a shared confession of preoccupation with death, old age, the meanings of bad dreams, good and evil. It was at this point in the evolution of the group when I began to feel less "Leader" than participant, and I found myself talking about myself, my beliefs, doubts, fears, in ways that I had not done in a long time. I think that it was good for them to recognize that someone they see and respect as an adult (they think that I, at thirty-two, am ancient) still remembers or retains some of their preoccupations and has managed to survive to a ripe old age despite them. We talked about how we saw ourselves, who had influenced us, and what we believed in:

I believe in God. I believe in the ocean and trees. I believe God created this beautiful land we live in. I believe the earth was one giant piece and drifted away, and drifted away.

Jocelyn

I believe in God and everything he does. I believe in heaven, and in hell because that's what most people that are alive live in now.

And I believe in miracles and ghosts and the powers of my own mind.

Stephen

The range is breathtaking: mix-

tures of religion and mysticism, certainty and speculation, and yet a stubborn kind of rationalism and belief in the intellect.

Questions of sex and profanity posed a different problem, not resolved as easily by discussion as, say, the recognition that we'd all experienced the sensation of falling in a bad dream. Any mention of sex usually aroused a nervous chorus of group giggles, and references to sex and the body as somehow unclean. I remember that when I was in the sixth grade I had exactly the same reaction and I told them so. I said it in such a way as to indicate that I no longer felt that way. I didn't feel that I could be more specific than that. There were parents, not all of whom I had met, and who, I felt, deserved at the very least an opportunity for consultation. I didn't want something I'd said to be misconstrued as an invitation to sexual license. And frankly, I don't feel that well qualified; I don't know what I'm going to say to my own children when the time comes to dispense sexual advice. I have an image of myself as a hip parent delivering an eloquent, low keyed address which will equip my children with an ability to view sex as an activity one part reverential, one part ordinary, and one part out of sight. But I'll probably, like most everyone else I know, fumble through the encounter, lacing the air with equivocations. So I simply mentioned how we often touch brothers and sisters and friends and parents because we love them, and guided them toward a discussion of sexuality. Later, I suggested that sex wasn't at all "nasty," and if it was sometimes funny, maybe that was because sometimes it was fun.

It wasn't at all satisfactory and there was a sense in the room that for the first time since we'd been meeting, a topic had arisen which we did not openly discuss. It was not a particularly pleasant realization.

Profanity was easier to deal

with, led us into a discussion of language and the value that society arbitrarily assigns to words. We did not use profanity in certain situations because there would be social repercussions. This did not mean that we could not use it (sometimes, we discovered, profanity said precisely what we needed to say), only that we should be aware of the consequences. I suggested that if profanity were used in dialogue, as Baldwin occasionally used it, the author was attempting to reveal character, to be accurate about the person he or she had created. We agreed that people did curse, and to make clear the arbitrary nature of word values, we made up our own lists of curse words and shouted them at one another.

"Gut face!"

"Weird germ!"

"Horseradish!"

I do not mean to give the impression here that everything always went so well, that each Friday morning dawned on another miracle. We had our problems. Sometimes people hadn't read or finished reading the story that was scheduled for discussion. Sometimes they balked at the tedious process of re-writing. There were days when no one felt like doing much of anything except horsing around. I chafed when this happened, but consoled myself with the thought that perhaps these interludes were periods of digestion, and that, after all, they were children, even if I had become accustomed to relating to them as adults.

But for the most part it has been as I describe it. Fiction is the catalyst for the discoveries our group is making. Hemingway and Baldwin, I suspect, would be pleased if they could know what we are doing. I feel that I am part of a process which is resulting in the growth of us all. My sixth graders are acquiring information about fiction and themselves, and I, in relating to them, am looking at myself from another, revealing angle.

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This special issue of the *Newsletter* presents some of the experiences of writers working with film and video. These articles explore the connection between drama, as captured by these media, and the writing process with which we attempt to familiarize children. We hope to convey to the reader some sense of how film and video, major art forms of our time, can be used in the classroom to expand the understanding of arts in general.

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