

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### Alternative Tales from School

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The desire to believe in essential childhood goodness has preoccupied writers ever since Rousseau's revolutionary novel *Émile* appeared in 1762. Some British authors followed on with this theme in their own novels while others rejected it, creating characters and situations suggesting a view closer to existing notions of Original Sin. A few, like Charles Dickens, had it both ways, with saintly naturally well-spoken *Oliver Twist* sharing the same space as that unrepentantly villainous cockney the Artful Dodger.

Continuing debates about childhood innocence surfaced with new force under the influence of Freud. His analysis of the different stages that children go through and the disasters that can follow when these are mishandled encouraged some parents and teachers to back away from previous more punitive attitudes. By no longer surrounding the young with the various inhibitions of old it was hoped that they in turn would go on to enjoy a largely contented, guilt-free childhood. A cluster of newly established Progressive Schools took this notion particularly to heart, insisting that pupils once granted true freedom of self-expression could always be trusted to choose the right educational and social path for themselves when allowed,

along with others, to make their own choices.

Faced by such a tempting scenario for satire, scornful critics were not slow to move in, including various novelists. The lazy stereotypes and forced humour found in their fictional descriptions of progressive education could be very irritating to those, like myself, who had attended such establishments and knew them, both for good and ill, from first-hand experience.

G.D.H. and Margaret Cole's *Scandal at School* (1935) is a case in point. One of the married couple's many detective stories, it is set in the imaginary Free School of Santley House. This is ruled over by unattractive and widely despised Milton Cromwell Spink, a middle-aged vegetarian, faith healer and dedicated nudist. One woman staff member always has to wear trousers every day as part of the school's reforming public image. Only one teacher's riotous but popular science lessons are sympathetically described. The Coles also add a number of anti-Semitic comments to a plot that revolves around the murder of a bright but malicious fifteen-year-old Jewish girl pupil. She is generally loathed by everyone, along with the authors, with her own father comparatively cheerful about her demise. This is a puzzlingly illiberal

story from two long-standing and influential socialists.

Fiona Sinclair's *Most Unnatural Murder* (1965) is another heavy-handed satire about progressive education linked to the detective story format. St. Durfel's School in Cornwall is headed by Oscar Saville, who hopes that his new teacher has not "suffered the maiming restrictions of an orthodox schooling." If this is the case, "You'll find no repressive inhibitions weigh us down here." Communal meals are regularly interrupted by food throwing and pupils are generally unbearable. The author took her own life in 1961, and this novel was subsequently found in her papers. It would be good to acknowledge it as a posthumous triumph, but sadly it is not.

Julian Symons provides a more tempered view in *The Paper Chase* (1956). Its "cherubic" vegetarian headmaster Mr Pont has a firm belief that when it comes to meeting pupils' problems "The answer is love, it can never be punishment." Drawing the line at pupils smoking and drinking, he insists that their freedom still remains the rule whenever possible. There have however to be limitations. "Speaking personally, I have no objection to any kind of youthful sex play. But we must be practical. I may not approve of the laws of this country, but I have to abide by them. There are limits to what the law will allow." But little more is heard from him once a murder plot takes over, sorely stretching belief the more absurd it gets. The school finally closes and the ever-unworldly Mr Pont wanders off to start another educational experiment suggested to him if only he can raise enough capital for what he fails to realise is an obvious case of fraud.

Malcolm Adams's *Welcome Stranger* (1942) sticks to satire without involving any murders. An Evelyn Waugh-type dropout from Oxford University is appointed science master at Point School after his predecessor was blown up by pupils. On arrival he is tripped by a dirty small boy who then kicks him, saying as he does "You're not allowed to do anything to us. It's a free school." The headmaster Mr Bennett spends his holidays on international tours advocating birth control and sleeping with any member of his audience after his lecture who will have him. At the school a child falls twenty feet from a window with no-one taking any notice and goats are given a wash in the bathroom. Unreadably facetious, this novel sets out to confirm every ignorant prejudice held about progressive schools.

So too does Monica Dickens's *Flowers on the Grass* (1949). Normally an acute novelist with a sharp eye for detail, the one chapter here detailing her footloose hero Daniel's brief time at the co-educational community Rosemount is depressingly disappointing. Pupils assure the adolescent new girl Pamela, attending there against her will, that her "subconscious is atrophied." When Daniel tries to teach art, he is told by his class that "You mustn't repress us." Pupils see their splashy and unformed pictures as "The expression of our inner selves." In all my years at a progressive school I never once heard any pupil or teacher talk in such self-consciously explicit terms. If they had, they would have been jeered out of court. Meanwhile the Morris-dancing homeopathic middle-aged headmaster Peter finally makes a sexual pass at Pamela, who then runs away with Daniel whom she now openly adores. These days his own

motivation might also be questioned at this point.

Other writers take a more thoughtful line, not entirely giving up the idea that more freedom for pupils could indeed sometimes lead to good results. The art critic Alan Clutton-Brock, who had extensive connections to the Bloomsbury set, certainly had problems with progressive schools. His description of Scrope House in his novel *Murder at Liberty Hall* (1941) is anything but flattering. As one main character puts it, "If we insisted on the right to bring up children as though they were going to live in a utopia of liberalism, we should be so encumbered that we could not fight at all." This view would have had particular resonance in the year the novel was published.

Headmaster Edgeworth is portrayed as another figure of laboured fun, choosing prospective pupils on the basis of their possessing "Thoroughly interesting neuroses, such as a total incapacity for any kind of washing, and a high IQ." But there are other moments of greater sympathy, when for example the pupils' General Council, which meets every week and is attended by all, rules that two girls can play in the first ever school cricket match. Towards the end shocked pupils, some of whom are Jewish refugees, are told by one of their teachers about the weird initiation rites and restrictive unofficial rules encountered during one of his own public school days. So their life at Scrope House, although run by "so many men of rather weak good will," does not in comparison seem to be quite so bad after all.

Gerald Bullett's *Judgement in Suspense* (1946) for a change features the progressive school headmaster as modern

hero. Forty-seven year old widower Heywood, at ease in London's clubland and with a public school background, heads Conington Manor. This is a co-educational boarding school set in the countryside whose aim is to "Work with the child's natural curiosity instead of against it." He gently discourages pupils from addressing him as "Sir," and believes that "The first thing to do is to see that a child is healthy and happy." Many schools, progressive or otherwise, have made similar claims, but Heywood goes on to add an important qualification: "The learning, the acquisition of knowledge, is important but incidental."

The rest of this fine novel involves his growing relationship with the estranged mother of Stuart, one of his pupils. Concerned that the nine-year-old boy remains desperately unhappy, Heywood puts himself at professional risk trying to find solutions. As a result Stuart finally begins to enjoy his time at school, where children help each other out and staff remain united in friendliness towards them. Describing himself as a liberal socialist, Bullett makes a good case for progressive education at least in its milder aspects.

So too does Reginald Turnor in *Bring Them up Alive* (1938). Young John Luttrell is forced by his guardian to leave his pleasant co-educational progressive school for a strict traditional boarding alternative. But he gets his own back by organising a successful Soviet-style strike against the school's prefects and their powers to administer physical punishment at will. The headmaster is forced to concede and even the prefects by the end seem relieved to be stripped of some of their former arbitrary authority.

A couple of novelists worked in progressive schools themselves. Peter

Vansittart was my English teacher at Burgess Hill School, Hampstead, where he taught for 25 years. His novel *Broken Canes* (1950), one of the many he wrote that found more favour with critics than with the public, is set in a progressive school. An eccentric but magnetic figure in the classroom, he puts none of his talents or experience into a story about a school that could never have existed peopled by staff who are lazy caricatures and pupils who specialise only in unlikely one-liners.

This may be because Burgess Hill School itself was never really the stuff of satire. Until its final shambolic days after it had re-located to the country, it was an essentially amiable establishment, short on educational dogma but successful in maintaining a positive atmosphere for all concerned. Lessons were compulsory but games were not, there was no religion and a weekly school meeting involving staff and pupils passed the time largely ineffectually. There were some difficult pupils and at least two who were seriously dysfunctional. But the poorly paid teachers, who were only there because they liked children, managed to cope while the rest of us passed a happy enough time free from the bullying, in the classroom or outside, that could at that time be such a feature in more orthodox schools. Numbers of my fellow pupils went on to higher education, although often returning to traditional schools when it came to preparing for exams.

Running a school where teachers known by their Christian names were friendly to all pupils may seem unremarkable enough today. But in the 1950s this type of atmosphere in the classroom was still comparatively rare and challenging, not least to novelists brought

up in stricter schools themselves and looking for easy laughs when anyone tried something different. But by following a middle way my own Burgess Hill School was never going to make educational headlines, which is perhaps why Peter Vansittart was found himself writing about an imaginary school of much greater eccentricities.

Elizabeth Jenkins, a more successful writer, taught at King Alfred's, also in Hampstead. Our neighbouring progressive school, it is still running successfully today while my own closed in 1961. Jenkins's *Young Enthusiasts* (1947) is more autobiography than novel, describing in some detail her own English lessons, where she was clearly an inspiring and knowledgeable presence. She complains about bad hand-writing and spelling, with lessons elsewhere on Lake Dwellers and Tree Dwellers taking precedence, as she sees it, over learning to distinguish a noun from a verb. She also suffers from the noise that inevitably follows on those times when "Bursting and screaming out of the big door, the smaller children all ran like lunatics."

But there is much positive in her account too. Mrs Cortwright, the headteacher, comes over as warm and generous while also remarkably shrewd. In her school pupils often answer back, but not rudely, and older children were nearly always kind to younger ones. For Jenkins, the institutionalised bullying and acts of "sexual perversion" sometimes found in more orthodox schools has no place here. As for those who see potential danger in letting boys and girls grow up in comparative freedom, "Only experience would convince such people how unexciting the sexes can find each other

when they are fully occupied with a many-sided school life.”

Jenkins finally left teaching to return to a writing life far removed from the daily strain of having to prepare and then teach fresh and demanding lessons. In *Young Enthusiasts* she describes an experimental school far removed from any of the excesses found elsewhere in fiction. Pupils still study hard for exams and attend lessons regularly. What does it matter that some of them might also seem a bit odd? As she writes herself, “A cursory look at Eric, I always used to think, would arouse all the popular prejudices against co-education. His face was thin and extremely sensitive, framed with a thick, long waving mass of silky brown hair. I once heard a little boy say to him scornfully, ‘Why don’t you get your hair cut, sippy?’ Eric replied with complete sang froid ‘It suits me better this way.’”

Eric was also wearing crimson velvet trousers and preferred sandals to shoes. Such affronts to conventional clothing, together with a frequent failure to wash, form a constant criticism in novels set in progressive schools. Alan Clutton-Brock in *Murder at Liberty Hall* rues the way that the Scrope House Cricket Eleven appear “All differently dressed, only one or two in white trousers.” Dickin Moore, in his epistolary novel *The Maze of Schools* (1950) goes further. Set in Lovell Park, a school based on “extreme democratic principles and on pure Freudian psychology” the narrator Richard Dayrell has even worse cricketing problems. While the two masters playing in a match were both dressed in regulation white flannels, “The boys wore the most revolting-looking costumes; some were in their corduroys; some wore shorts (and no shirt) some were

in sandals; one was completely naked except for a bathing slip.”

This almost exactly describes the appearance of my own Burgess Hill School cricket eleven. Yet we still all enjoyed playing and in the weekends watched the great players of the day at Lords. The addition of white flannels would certainly have been nice, but as no-one possessed any, least of all our permanently impoverished school, the only way to get a game was to come as we were. I still love cricket to this day.

*Young Enthusiasts*, although not uncritical, finally makes a good case for Jenkins’s fictional school, an amalgam of St. Christopher’s, Letchworth, which she attended as a child and King Alfred’s where she taught for some years. Both establishments were at the more conventional end of progressive education and so easier to defend. They also enjoyed small classes, bright motivated pupils and supportive, informed parents. Whether state schools, often denied such luxuries, could ever aspire to offering the same freedoms remains a moot point.

There are other novels set in progressive schools written by former pupils. Patrick Raymond’s *Daniel and Esther* (1989) takes place in Dartington Hall, well known in its time until closing in unhappy circumstances in 1987. In this novel, set in the 1930s, aggressive and anti-social Daniel previously expelled from other schools is finally won over by Bill Curry, the real life head teacher at the time. Daniel also falls heavily for Esther, a Jewish pupil whose parents are in constant danger from the Nazis.

Dartington was in some quarters notorious for its encouragement of communal nude bathing. But as before, it is

suggested here that over-familiarity generally drove out actual sexual activity. Daniel certainly falls in love with Esther when he is fifteen and she is one year younger. But as the author puts it in an aside to his readers, "I should explain that, at Dartington, being 'in love' meant no more than a decision to go around together and sometimes to kiss. Lovers swapped over quite often." Where full-on sex was concerned boarding prep and public schools often seemed to have been far more active than anything happening in progressive boarding schools. But while homosexual activity, wished for or not, leaves little evidence behind mature boy-girl relations going the full course always run the risk of pregnancy. One such occurs in this novel though not to the main characters concerned. Advocating freedom in every area except the sexual was always a potential problem for co-educational boarding progressive schools, and one that critics were never slow to pounce on.

A. S. Neill's Summerhill, founded in 1929 and still going strong, was the progressive school which always caused the most controversy. In *Inspecting the Island—The Summerhill Novel* (2000) Hylda Sims, herself an approving ex-pupil, writes lovingly about the last year of the school when it was presided over by A. S. Neill. He appears here under the name Muir, still believing in the natural goodness of the child when free from adult compulsion.

In this story, Jasper Bignold, a visiting government school inspector, first attends a weekly school meeting. This is where pupils make the school rules while sitting in judgement and dispensing minor sanctions on those reported to have been in breach of a long list of already existing if often forgotten laws already agreed upon

before. Watching the children disperse afterwards to do their own thing instead of attending lessons, Bignold starts questioning why normal schools insist on teaching so much that is boring and pointless. Who really needs to know about the medieval open field system when it so much more fun putting up your own tent and generally mucking about with others?

But what about those pupils bored by too much freedom and who want instead the challenge of good, interesting lessons? Or as Charlotte, another less impressed school inspector puts it, "Coercion has its benefits—you get things done because you have to. Freedom can be a bit vacant." This is a shrewd point. Muir replies that energy released by compulsion ultimately does nobody any good, but in truth not all pupils benefited from the Summerhill regime. My older brother, who attended it for a term aged nine, wrote pitiful letters home begging my parents to "take me away from this prisien." (sic) Home-sick, never taking a bath, sharing dormitories with pupils, sometimes with infectious illnesses, he could not wait to leave.

In Sims's novel Summerhill school comes over instead as a happy enough place, particularly for pupils who have failed to thrive at more orthodox schools. But earlier on Muir describes problems that arose in the past when groups of anti-social pupils used their new freedom in damagingly destructive ways. Any natural "goodness" seemed far from evident in such circumstances. Sims avoids this conundrum by ignoring it; perhaps such situations never occurred when she was a pupil. But it is an issue seized on by other writers, in particular Amanda Craig in *A Private Place* (1971).

In an Afterward to the reissue of her novel in 1991, Craig draws bitterly on her own bad experience at Bedales, a progressive co-educational boarding school in the Hampshire countryside still running today. This is portrayed here despite the usual author's disclaimers of the school as Knotshead, now set in Devon. It attracts the children only of those parents wealthy enough to afford its high fees. The original ideal here was of co-operation rather than competition between pupils under the friendly eyes of teachers known by their Christian names. But this optimistic agenda is hi-jacked by pupils who use the freedoms made available to them for their own often toxic agendas. Bullying, social snobbery, expressions of anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and prejudice against the disabled are all allowed to run unchecked, with the staff deluding themselves about what is really going on. Parents, glad to get frequently problem children off their hands, share in this state of denial.

Boys routinely dominate girls in this environment, demanding sex as of right. The unofficial but powerfully maintained pupil hierarchy ranges from Jet-Setters at the top to Rejects at the bottom, shunned by all except each other. Theft is also common along with drug abuse. The school's original founder in 1905 had believed that educational revolution would prove to be the answer to every problem by creating an ideal world where people would grow up without greed or hate. But the current headmaster finds himself joining those who had once been aggressively confident in their vision of education but who are now on the defensive. Faced by a growing tide of pessimism about the progress of the world in general, he sees his

attempt to offer a more hopeful model of the future within his own school failing before his eyes, with former ideals of untrammelled self-expression descending into mere selfishness.

In William Golding's dystopian novel *Lord of the Flies*, the speedy break-down of civilised relationships between the marooned children of the story could always be blamed on the absence of any adults there to take control. *A Private Place* suggests that the same thing can happen when those adults who are around refuse to believe that children largely left to their own devices can also sometimes turn dangerously destructive. Craig seems to be suggesting that for progressive education ever to succeed society itself must first change, handing down positive messages about freedom and co-operation to the young while trying to make sure these will always be taken seriously. Imaginary scenarios, where change comes first from children themselves—both in their own relationships and then in their positive impact on society when they become adult—no longer for her seem a viable option.

Could Craig's novel herald the end of the idealistic progressive school story at a time when successfully working models of the real thing are increasingly hard to find? As it is, most teachers are no longer willing or able to work at the much reduced salaries such schools could generally afford. Most of those anarchist, pacifist, generally anti-authoritarian parents of old who once made such a point of handing down their own ideals to their children are also no longer so evident. When they still exist many of them would now find it impossible to afford the higher fees that inevitably follow. But even when there is

enough money does anyone really still believe that total freedom always brings its own rewards? With pupils faced as never before with the enticements of drugs, alcohol and uncaring, promiscuous sex, do progressive schools and their remaining advocates still remain hopeful that “naturally good” pupils can withstand such risks?

Whatever the answer to such questions it remains true that many of the ideals of progressive education, whether celebrated or mocked by various authors past and present, have to some extent become absorbed in today’s more relaxed, pupil-friendly school environments. Boarding schools run on orthodox lines have also recently come in for increased criticism from former pupils who suffered

while they were there but felt unable to talk to their parents about it. It is interesting that those critics of progressive schools, in fiction or otherwise, always turned a blind eye towards any of the excesses now known to have existed in more orthodox establishments.

Traditional settings may well once again be in the ascendant in stories featuring schools, taking the lead from those affectionate descriptions of Harry Potter’s generally positive time boarding at stuffy old Hogwarts. But I hope more counter-voices in fiction are still to come, stimulating debate by looking once again at different models of education whether as critics, advocates or somewhere in between.

### **Author Details**

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