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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on an approach to solving the problems of youth in the seventies. The point is made that the wide range of choices available to young people today are the result of scientific and technological advances and require the making of value judgments. Since the number of alternatives will increase, it is recommended that today's students be equipped to make these judgments and choices by by being taught the kind of intellectual discipline that will enable them to learn and to accept changing circumstances. As this discipline is acquired through exposure to literature and as there are many books on the market today unavailable to youth, it is proposed that a Youth Review Board be established to pass on some of the literature that is currently restricted from their reading lists. (CK)

Carolyn W. Carmichael

# Modern Realistic Fiction - Shocking to Whom?

Change - is it surrounding us or are we a part of it? Are we ignoring the pressures that are upon our young people or acknowledging their existence, thereby choosing reading material/or writing for the youth of 1970 - not when we were struggling with adolescence. This is not denying the fact that some of the problems in reaching adulthood are the same regardless of the calendar year, but the headlines today are screaming more complexities to our youth than they did in our generation.

These complexities are a reality basically because of two factors - science and technology. The developments in these fields over the past twenty-years have had a phenomenal impact on our society. Individuals and governments must now make choices which heretofore were non-existent. These choices inevitably reflect a value judgment. Value acquisition is a continuous one from birth to the grave, with values being adopted

through example and expectation; the process most often is an unconscious one based on what an individual sees and hears.[1]

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[1]Thomas Gladwin, Basic Human Values for Childhood Education, ed. by Bess Goodykoontz (Washington, D. C.: Association for Childhood Education International. 1963) p. 51

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Those of us who in any way have a responsibility of what reading materials are presented to our youth today cannot ignore the discussions and recommendations of the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English held August, 1966 at Dartmouth College. Many aspects of the teaching of English were discussed, debated and "thrashed out." Among these was a discussion on the question of what literature should be taught, for what purposes and how. James Miller suggested that:

> teachers of literature should select books embodying diverse visions of life and beliefs about values, and then question, discuss, and explore them with the students; this would lead to an awareness of moral complexity, ambiguity and paradox.[2]

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[2]Herbert J. Muller, The Uses of English (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 93.

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There was no objection to this conclusion, only an awareness of the fact that the public does not cherish complexity or ambiguity.

Herbert J. Muller is disposed to introducing this whole issue of diverse, conflicting values quite explicitly, meeting it head-on. Dr. Muller states that, in general, the seminar dwelt on what most needs to be said today.

> It was seeking development of the individuality that is threatened by the pressures to conformity in mass education. It was concerned with aesthetic values that do not seem like a real human need in a commercialized industrial society where a vast deal of tawdriness, drabness, and ugliness is accepted as natural and normal.
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> This is not the time or place for an essay on what modern technology is doing to people, as well as for them; but the study of literature as recommended by the seminar might give a better idea why a people with by far the highest standard of living in all history is not clearly the happiest people on earth.[3]

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[3] Ibid, p. 93-94.

These same thoughts are substantiated as fact, based on recent research as commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation and written by Charles E. Silberman in the book entitled Crisis in the Classroom. As Mr. Silberman points out:

> Students need to learn far more than the basic skills. For children who may still be in the labor force in the year 2030, nothing could be more wildly impractical than an education designed to prepare them for specific vocations or professions or to facilitate their adjustment to the world as it is. To be "practical," an education should prepare them for work that does not yet exist and whose nature cannot even be imagined. This can only be done by teaching them how to learn, by giving them the kind of intellectual discipline that will enable them to apply man's accumulated wisdom to new problems as they arise - the kind of wisdom that will enable them to recognize new problems as they arise.[4]

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[4]William K. Stevens, "Study Calls Public Schools Oppressive and Joyless," The New York Times, September 20, 1970, p. 70.

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To recognize new problems. To give them wisdom needed for new situations. Isn't what James Miller

suggested an answer to this need in our educational reform today? . . . "books embodying diverse visions of life and beliefs about values, and then question, discuss, and explore them with the students." The vital thing to remember here seems to be that we are saying expose not to impose. Expose our young people to different value systems, different philosophies of life - don't impose these new thoughts on them, and on the other hand, we must refrain from imposing our own value system on our students if we reject the value system under discussion. The problem seems to be in the fact that many of us fail when it comes to the latter part of Miller's suggestion . . . "to question, discuss and explore." How can we prepare our youth for a future with unknown situations, if we cannot adequately discuss with them current problems, even though perhaps personally distasteful to us?

Oh how quickly some reviewers treated with shock and cold aloofness John Donovan's book,

I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip.[5] Known

[5]John Donovan, I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

to some as Donovan, the new "despoiler of the purity of puberty", many wondered how such an extremist could have become executive secretary of the Children's Book Council. One wonders what these same reviewers would have done with Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and Jane Eyre. Surely these books would be rated "X" for in all cases the characters were subjected to a weird array of perverts, sadists and eccentrics.

From many different sources do we find the plea for realism in writing for children. Emily Neville states her convictions that an author:

> must not preach, must not make the reader's decision for him, must not indulge in the fallacy that all nice people do good things and that all evil things are done by bad people. The author's job is to throw sharp light on how some real people act in a particular time and place.[6]

[6]Emily Neville, "Social Values in Children's Literature," Library Quarterly, Vol.37, No.1 (January, 1967), p. 46.

Susan Hinton, who at 17 wrote The Outsiders,[7]

[7] S. E. Hinton, The Outsiders (New York: The Viking Press, 1967).

states:

> Teen-agers know a lot today. Not just things out of a textbook, but about living. They know their parents aren't superhuman, they know that justice doesn't always win out, and that sometimes the bad guys win. They know that persons in high places aren't safe from corruption, that some men have their price, and that some people sell out. Writers needn't be afraid that they will shock their teen-age audience. But give them something to hang onto. Show that some people don't sell out, and that everyone can't be bought. Do it realistically. Earn respect by giving it.[8]

[8] Susan Hinton, "Teen-Agers Are for Real," The New York Times Book Review, August 27, 1967, p. 29.

John Rowe Townsend, the British author and critic of books for children suggests ideally that in seeking to develop topics that are highly interesting to

adolescents, publishers find novelists who are teen-agers themselves. He continues by stating:

> Teen-age novelists are rare, and those who are around either are not very good or have their eyes on higher things than the juvenile list. So in come the established writers, sturdily applying themselves to new tasks, doing their homework, getting around, talking to their young friends, crossing out "he kissed her gently on the lips" and substituting "his hands explored her body": trying to get with it, trying, trying--and trying they certainly can be.9

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9John Rowe Townsend, "It Takes More than Pot and the Pill," The New York Times Book Review, November 9, 1969, p. 2.

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Perhaps it is because of the lack of teen-age authors that causes Robert Coles to contend that children's books fall short of the demands made upon them in these changing times. Whether or not one agrees with his observations, he states:

> I don't see why the large number of children's books I read or look at continue to be so stubbornly condescending to children, so naive about what children do in fact know, and want to know, and in less time than we think, get to know. Nor can I understand why in the name of childhood, a time when curiosity and open-mindedness and awe and anger and shrewdness and guile and kindness are most visible, most concrete books must be written over and over again without a blessed trace of believable feeling or complexity.[10]

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[10] Robert Coles, "Growing Up," The New York Times Book Review, May 5, 1968, p. 45.

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Nat Hentoff, by his own admission, confessed that his book, Jazz Country[11] was a diluted version of the

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[11] Nat Hentoff, Jazz Country (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

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realities of teen-age existence. Convicted by this admission, he goes on to explain:

> I began to read what other writers in the field were doing and agreed with the young critics that little of relevance is being written about what it is to be young now. There are occasional works of fiction about the past, about other countries, about the riddling truths in fantasy which do attract and hold some young readers; but the challenge is to make contact with the sizable number of the young who seldom read anything for pleasure because they are not in it.[12]

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[12]Nat Hentoff, "Fiction for Teen-Agers," Wilson Library Bulletin, Vol.43, No.3 (November, 1968), p. 261.

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A stinging condemnation of what has been and is being written for children comes from Julius Lester.

> Perhaps one of these days, children's books will be concerned not only with fantasy and fairies, with nonsense and animals, but with ghettos, slums, wars and drunks lying on sidewalks. As long as they don't we train our children to be victims of the social environment which impinges on their consciousness every day. We make them emotional and spiritual amputees. They see the pain and feel it themselves

quite often, yet we tell them that it does not exist, that they're too young to understand, that they shouldn't worry about it. In a world in which a child can be dead from an overdose of heroin at age 12, Snow White is not only inadequate, it is in danger of being vulgar.

Of course, the real world is so horrible that we, as adults, do all that we can to avoid being involved in it to any significant degree. We have simply gone from Cindrella to "Valley of the Dolls," from Disney's version of "Alice" to "The Flying Nun."

Maybe when we realize that children are not as frightened of reality as we are, the books we write and publish will concern themselves more and more with not only what the reality is and how one survives in it, but, how one can begin to change it. Ultimately, that is what we must be concerned with if there is to be an American society and a world a century from now.[13]

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[13]Julius Lester, "The Kind of Books We Give Children: Whose Nonsense?" Publishers' Weekly, Vol.197, No.8 (February 23, 1970), p. 88.

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Fortunately there are many books on the market today that answer Mr. Lester's plea - books that deal with life as it truly is. These books are being published with increasing frankness, but is this frankness too shocking to those of us who are responsible for reviewing and/or ordering children's books?

Let's just mention a few books that deal with the ever existing identity crisis on the part of the adolescent.

Were Jeremy's problems in I'm Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down[14] too complex for us to put it

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[14]Nat Hentoff, I'm Really Dragged But Nothing Gets Me Down (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

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on our library shelves? Is the confusion expressed in this book and the generation conflict too intense to expose to our youth today?

Perhaps we joined in the widely accepted applause and ordered The Outsiders. Fine. But was there ample

time for discussion and exploration of ideas that related to the personal identity crisis that many of its readers may currently be experiencing?

I'll be the last to claim complete comprehension of all of Paul Zindel's writings. However, it appears that My Darling, My Hamburger[15] treats the

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[15]Paul Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

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effects of teen-age intimacy with a solution that is often used by adults as well as teen-agers with the resulting physiological as well as the psychological complications. Are we composed enough to discuss abortion as well as the generation conflict with our readers? Surely with recent legislative action abortion has reached the mass media with such force that all but the total non-reader or non-television viewer would be aware of the impact of the abortion laws in our society. Teen-age pregnancy is not a new theme, but we have varied solutions to conception and the resulting child in modern realistic fiction books available today.

I am not proposing a Carte Blanche for all books published. Indeed we all know too well the literary restrictions as well as the financial restrictions on that thought. I am proposing a method of getting reactions from young people on books written for them. These reactions are intended for increased adult perception into the thinking of young people.

Would it be feasible for us to establish a Youth Review Board? This Board would have on it a selection of young people from across the country that would represent a cross-section of our youth culture today. It would be vital that we do not have a board that would merely reflect what we as adults already believe. These board members would review books designed for young adults and these reviews would be published for adult consumption. The right to publish differing opinions should be upheld at all times. I am not suggesting we eliminate adult reviews - I am suggesting we augment adult reviews with reviews from young people.

Not claiming to exhaust the list, I have managed to locate five libraries from various geographical sections of our country which distribute Teenage Reviewing Publications. These have been placed on your bibliography which has been passed out. I would be grateful for knowledge of any other sources of which you may have knowledge.

These Teenage Reviewing Publications are one means of reaching a peer group with reviews about books that may interest them. The thought occurs to me - how many of us who are adults ordering books for young people have sought out the reactions to these books by young people? Indeed I would like to personally discuss Zindel's I Never Loved Your Mind[16] with

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[16]Paul Zindel, I Never Loved Your Mind (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

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teen-agers not only from Newark but Atlanta also. Again, I am aware of my inability for complete comprehension of Zindel's writings, but I have learned through limited discussion with teen-agers that

Zindel has exposed in this book many situations which are real to young people and often difficult to handle by them.

The thinking in Johnson's A Blues I Can Whistle[17]

[17] A. E. Johnson, A Blues I Can Whistle (New York: Four Winds Press, 1969).

is intense. Intense on life, death, and the need for both. Cody appears to be trying to solve all the inequities of living as he sees them. To live with Cody as he makes his analysis of living cannot help but cause the reader to analyze his own daily actions. As a college drop-out Cody's thoughts appear to reflect much of what is being discussed not only by the drop-out but by the currently enrolled student and any adult concerned with productive living.

The Peter Pan Bag[18] has evoked mixed reactions

[18] Lee Kingman, The Peter Pan Bag (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970).

from adult reviewers. Some of my middle class suburban teen-age friends express envy at Wendy's ability to "pull out" for a summer, while my Newark readers indicate Wendy only lived on the sidelines of what "dropping out" really is. The book elicited thought-provoking conversations with both groups of teen-agers in spite of their widely differing backgrounds.

In mentioning differing backgrounds we have to admit that books may appeal to readers with varied interests, interests resulting from many influences. Claude Brown's biography Manchild In The Promised Land[19] is a brutal portrait of life in Harlem. There

[19]Claude Brown, Manchild In The Promised Land (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

is no aura of glamour surrounding the brutality. The challenge to beat a life of ignorance, numbers, rackets, pot, dirt, congestion was made and it was accepted and

overcome. As Deborah Knight, age 17 of Eastern High School wrote in the April, 1970 issue You're The Critic[20]:

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[20](You're The Critic, April, 1970, p. 4, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland).

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> Let this book stand as a reminder to all that ignorance, poverty, and pot do exist; that they can be conquered. Remember that these oppressors are conquered only by those who want not to be conquered themselves.

The cry from the ghetto is heard in many forms, one of which is the off-Broadway hit, "The Me Nobody Knows". It is based on a collection of paragraphs and poems written by New York City slum children. The following is an excerpt from this play written by Frank Cleveland, age 17:

> Rejoice
>
> Rejoice children, little brother, he's dead.
>
> Why, that's the best thing that could have happen to him

'Member how dark he was why, he'd never've gotten

Further than high school.

He couldn't pass like you do Rodney... oh no!

So what, he was only two years old.

Now he's gone.

There's more food to go round.

Rats got to him in his crib and they had a feast

Now I can go back to school and groove

In the afternoon.

'Cause I don't have to babysit.

We don't have to pay no more doctor bills:

We can pay Mr. Charlie all the back rent

Maybe now he'll fix the falling plaster

And give us a brand new stove and a

Toilet bowl

Rejoice children, I'm so glad little

Brother is dead. 'Cause

He don't have to go through what we have.[21]

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[21] Life, September 4, 1970, p. 35.

The background of the author who writes affects the eventual results. Claude Brown wrote from experience and Manchild In The Promised Land reflects this closeness to the actual happenings. Frank Bonham interviewed social workers and the police for background material for Durango Street.[22]

[22]Frank Bonham, Durango Street (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1965).

One of the newer books written is Barbara Wersba's Run Softly, Go Fast.[23] What lies behind the

[23]Barbara Wersba, Run Softly, Go Fast (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

rebellion of a nineteen-year-old son? Is the hyprocrisy as observed by David Marks too real for us to discuss with our young people today? Is David's premise of growing up and becoming what you are without realizing it a valid one? Is the assumption that manhood is violence in this culture far removed from reality?

One of the basic rights and privileges which we as Americans can enjoy is freedom. We have freedom to create and the same freedom to reject. Freedom is not synonymous with vulgarity or obscenity; indeed it takes many forms. Sometimes, however, it appears that we exercise a form of freedom based on ignorance rather than knowledge. It would appear to me that some of our modern realistic fiction books do indeed cause us to blur the distinct line between freedom and vulgarity, and yet, on the other hand it would appear that books worthy of consideration are shocking to whom? Shocking to those of us who have had an underexposure to young adult thinking and an overexposure to adult opinion.