

Spotlight on Trouble

Reading Books for the Adult Semi-literate

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"WELL, I STARTED TO READ IT. It was no good—it was about animals and a girl and a boy. It was proper daft and I would not read it. I felt like throwing it across the room. I just sat down and looked at it."

Joe's sentiments are echoed by many semi-literate youths. Only the easy "baby books" of the seven- and eight-year-old are accessible to them because their reading skills have never developed beyond that stage. There they are, teenagers, earning respectable wages, feeling independent and grown up, yet embarrassed and frustrated by the lack of a technical skill which is taken for granted by everyone about them. Some of them go to some length to camouflage their illiteracy and avoid, with great dexterity, situations in which they could be found out. It has been argued that the first delinquent acts themselves are often an attempt to distract attention from their weakness and general illiteracy by over-emphasising those aspects which make the weakling appear strong, tough and ruthless in the eyes of his contemporaries. In other words, they show the well-known psychological defence mechanism of over-com-

pensating for feelings of inferiority. Indeed, the teaching of reading to the illiterate and semi-literate may have a therapeutic effect on the youth who feels isolated and out of things because of his feelings of inferiority arising from his poor reading skills.

The great effort put into teaching reading bears witness to the importance attached to this achievement. The more utilitarian aspect, reading for information and pleasure, is, in many cases, even less important than the need to overcome the illiterate's belief that he is second rate, not as good as others and an object of derision because he cannot read.

His feelings of despondency and, indeed, his ambivalent attitude towards the task of learning to read, are not eased when faced with the reading matter of the seven- and eight-year-old. This only helps to bring home the unpalatable realisation that he is, in this respect, in the company of babes. We could hardly do better, in making sure that the reading task is tackled with a minimum of enthusiasm and interest, than by providing reading matter completely

remote from his own sphere of experience and regarded by him as "showing him up." It is true that some do not mind, but others do—a lot.

Inadequacy in reading and inadequacy in social competence are often closely linked. A careful investigation of the illiterate's 'social knowledge' opens up a stupefying vista of a vast desert of ignorance with many small islands of little bits of knowledge. The level of intelligence has something to do with the barrenness of this vista, but it should not be held entirely responsible for the situation. Somehow many of these socially incompetent youths have lost their bearings in course of growing up. They have not learnt to weave incidental information into a pattern of general knowledge and what they know is of little use to them.

Thus we find often a bewildering situation. There are bits and pieces of knowledge, isolated and with no visible connection to each other. There is also extensive lack of knowledge in areas least expected and, moreover, carefully hidden from the prying eye. There is no doubt that this ignorance of social 'know how' must make life into an obstacle race, where even the smallest and apparently most insignificant hurdle will lead to unnecessary and humiliating downfalls.

Since the inadequate reader and the socially incompetent youth is so often one and the same person,

it appears that remedial work on both aspects could be usefully combined. Some of the social incompetence (by no means all, or even most) can be traced directly to lack of knowledge. If some of this knowledge could be "picked up" by reading about it, it could help in removing some of the many friction points which make life, at times, so difficult for the incompetent. Since few of these inadequate youths have either the desire or the stamina to read for information only, social knowledge must be put into the form of pleasurable fiction reading *within the range* of their limited reading skill.

This process of acquiring useful incidental information by way of fiction will not, of course, work by itself and the teacher is needed to guide and clarify and, most important of all, to think *with* the inadequate youth, but not to think *for* him. It is obvious also that the work of the teacher and tutor who deals with the adult inadequate person is eased if suitable tools are available. There is a dearth of relevant material because little educational attention has been devoted to this particular group after they have left school.

The series of reading books under the general title *Spotlight on Trouble** is intended to provide a tool which helps to improve the

* *Spotlight on Trouble*, (Methuen & Co., 1964) 2s. 6d. each.

Book 1 *Trouble with the Landlady*
 Book 2 *Trouble at Work*
 Book 3 *Trouble with the Wages*
 Book 4 *Trouble on Saturday*

reading skill of the semi-literate and, at the same time, tells him something of the world around him. The little booklets are, in fact, *social readers*, guides and manuals to the everyday adult world, put into form of fiction and using the style and vocabulary which goes with the literature of children. Adult interest and children's level of technical competence provide a curious and unusual combination, designed for one purpose only; to help the inadequate adult dullard to achieve some degree of social competence and to make the task of reading more attractive by giving the whole matter an adult appearance.

It is not difficult to find the material for a series of reading books for the semi-literate adult. Each young man is a veritable treasure trove of unbelievable experiences in his encounters with the world around him. Once one is past the smoke screen of police proceedings and court appearances and able to get down to daily life routine, once we ask "how did you do this and that." it becomes clear that there is a rather bewildered bunch of young men whose social inadequacy is not always due to an unwillingness to conform, but rather to an unawareness of what is required, or an inability to do as is expected.

In many respects they are "strangers in their own country," ignorant of customs, manners, habits, currency and even language in the little world around them to

which they are expected to conform.

George, the hero, is one of thousands of young men who have to face life, ill equipped with the knowledge of many elementary and ordinary rules and practices. George is not very bright, in fact he could be called a simpleton. He is not much of a reader and he has great difficulties with money. He is unable to apply what little he has learnt at school and life is bewildering, disturbing, exasperating and often downright frightening to him. Sometimes he wants to run away from it, sometimes he wants to hit somebody, most often he simply wants to be left in peace. Yet he has to come to terms with the people around him, though he cannot really comprehend what they say and what they want.

George makes many foolish mistakes, which make him look silly and unsure of himself. No one ever bothered to explain the "know-how" of everyday life to him and he has not been able to find out for himself. He is, in fact, "a stranger in his own country."

George is a real person—and he could be produced as the human being who inspired the series and with him a host of other young men and women who have experienced similar failures and disappointments because it is generally taken for granted that everyday knowledge is "picked up" by incidental learning. All incidents in these little books are based on actual happenings and no imagination was required to invent them.

Let no one say this type of behaviour and thinking could not occur among people earning reasonable wages and standing on their own feet after having left school. It does happen—as anyone who has actually worked with these socially inadequate youths will readily agree.

George, ill equipped by nature and education to face “real life,” has his problems of conforming to standards of work and behaviour. His experience spotlights the troubles which, insignificant as they may appear to an outsider, throw him off his balance easily and may lead to further serious trouble.

Books for people with limited understanding and little experience have to be designed to satisfy a number of requirements. The opinions and experience of prospective readers give much assistance. Even the supposedly easy children's books present considerable difficulties to the reader with a subcultural background and a previous study of the semi-literate's criticisms* of his reading matter indicated the need to adhere strictly to some guiding principles to avoid confusion and loss of interest.

In consequence *Spotlight on Trouble* has attempted to:—

- (1) have as few characters as possible.
- (2) limit itself to *one* theme per book,
- (3) have the same main character throughout the books.
- (4) keep to the same background as much as possible.
- (5) use short sentences, much repetition and easy words.
- (6) accept the principle of “nearness in experience.”

No attempt has been made to grade the series and to proceed from the easy to the more difficult. It was thought more important to drive home the same lesson as often as practicable and reinforce the technical knowledge, as it were, available at present, rather than to aim at a higher level.

George and his adventures with the landlady, the foreman, the girls, the clerks behind the counter, appeal to different types of readers. At one end there is the sophisticated semi-literate who thinks George is a dope and follows George's fumbling around in life with a superior and amused mien. At the other end is the simpleton who understands George's misadventures only too well since he has had similar experiences. Whatever the degree of sophistication, George is a fellow they know of, the landlady and the foreman are people they have met. There is little doubt that most people like to hear about themselves, however humdrum their experiences may be. There is so much that is familiar and well-known about the “goings-on” in the George books that the link between reader and the hero is easily established. On the other hand, the detail in the story has been left as

* H. C. GUNZBURG, (1948), *The Private Silent Reading of Educationally Subnormal Boys*. The New Era, Vol.29/2
 H. C. GUNZBURG, (1948), *The Subnormal and his Reading Interests*. The Library Quarterly, Vol. 18/4.

vague as possible and each reader can project his own experiences into the framework of the George books. If people can learn from other people's mistakes—which is probably a very big IF in the case of the dullard—then the George readers should help considerably because George is *one of them*, as dull and as ignorant of the ways of the world as they themselves.

The readers are best used as reading matter in a small group as the basis for discussion. They provide opportunities for private silent reading (comparatively limited vocabulary) and the questions at the end of each chapter should be used fully to explore the reader's understanding of spoken language. Much use has been made of colloquial English and slang phrases which are not usually found in school books and they in themselves help to give the books an adult appearance. Experience has shown that many of the frictions and difficulties which the dullard experiences in life are due to inadequate understanding of the spoken language. It will be useful to take the opportunities offered by the "adult style" of the George readers to check on the understanding of the language in general. Many surprises are in store for those who accept the glib and facile talk as reflecting an understanding of the words actually used.

Spotlight on Trouble is, in a way, a pioneering enterprise. The series has been tried in preliminary work and has been found satisfactory. Yet, offering it to a wider

public of a more heterogeneous composition raises new problems and new requirements. So far, *Spotlight on Trouble* shows male predominance because, first of all, the social ignorance of men is generally a more pressing problem and, secondly, because women do not mind reading about the men's work and experiences, but men mind reading about women's household troubles. Yet there is no reason why, in future books, George should not meet Jean who has problems of her own in shopping and housekeeping. They will probably get married one day and it is just as well to prepare them in time for what is in store for them. There is much need for such easy textbooks on life and it will depend entirely on the reception of these first four little booklets whether George and Jean will meet one day.* In the meantime one must congratulate the publishers who have ventured forth with these books which have a very uncertain and unpredictable future, because they are designed for the "special education" of a comparatively small number of people.

In summary, the special features of the new series are:—

Simple vocabulary, repetition of words, short sentences.

Adult contents appealing to adult and adolescent readers.

* The Editor of the series *Spotlight on Trouble* will be pleased to consider for publication manuscripts which describe George, Jim and Jean's misadventures in life and other young people's misfortunes in the manner indicated by the first four booklets.

Narrow, but realistic experience range of everyday life.

"Civic Skills" are the main theme of the series.

Inclusion of 3R subjects: telling the time, money sums etc.

No building up or grading of books. Designed to give maximum practice on one reading level.

Can be used individually, or for group reading.

Comprehension questions

Can easily be used by people not trained as teachers.

NOT Educational Supplementary readers. They do not arouse "school-resentment" so often found in the inadequate person.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

DR. JAMES B. McWHINNIE is consultant in Forensic Psychiatry in the Department of Psychological Medicine at the Southern General Hospital, Glasgow, and consultant psychiatrist at Borstal institutions for the Scottish Home and Health Department and at Approved Schools in the West of Scotland.

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DAN ROBERTSON joined the Prison Service in 1947, and is at present serving as a Principal Officer at H.M. Prison, Barlinnie, Glasgow.

He was granted two years leave of absence 1960/62 to read social science subjects at Ruskin College, Oxford, and read Criminology as a special subject under Dr. Nigel Walker, Reader of Criminology, Oxford University.

KATHLEEN J. SMITH joined the Prison Service as an Officer at Birmingham in 1956, and the following year became Assistant Governor at H.M.P. Holloway, from which post she resigned in 1960 because she "hoped to be able to do something towards prison reform outside the Service, while enjoying the privilege of country life, and the rigours of making a living as a small-holder."

DOUGLAS GIBSON, at present Deputy Director of the Central After-Care Association on secondment from the Prison Department, joined the Prison Service as Assistant Governor at The Verne in 1961 and served at Leyhill and Wakefield. He was Deputy Governor at Camp Hill until 1962 when he joined C.A.C.A. He is the founder of the Circle Trust, a club for lonely discharged offenders in the London area.

R. COOPER has been an assistant governor at Wandsworth since completing the 19th Staff Course.

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