

SEDUCTION OF THE IGNORANT

*Remarks delivered at "A Celebration of
Literacy" on international Literacy Day,
8 September 1990 at the Trade and
Convention Centre, Vancouver*

Paul Simon once said that " . . . the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls . . . " I have myself recently seen the future writ large upon my own sidewalk.

Due to the recent construction of four megaboxes bracketing my own home in Point Grey, the sidewalk became so damaged as to require repair. The freshly poured cement naturally attracted *graffitisti* with popsicle sticks, determined to immortalize themselves. How few real opportunities there are these days for a writer to have his or her work literally graven in stone! Inevitably, one of these was an ardent young swain who wished to proclaim his undying love to the ages. His chilling masterpiece of . . . er . . . concrete poetry is located right at the foot of my walkway, where I must look at it every time I leave my home. It consists of a large heart, within which are inscribed the words:

TOOD + JANEY

Now, I don't know about you, but I decline to believe that even in this day and age, any set of parents elected to name their son "Tood." I am therefore forced to conclude that *young Todd is unable to spell his own goddam name* . . . despite having reached an age sufficiently advanced for him to find young Janey intriguing. As I make my living from literacy, I find this sign of the times demoralizing.

George Neavoll, an editor of the *Wichita Eagle & Beacon*, recently complained to Ann Landers that he could nearly always tell the age bracket of a correspondent by counting the errors in spelling, grammar and construction: the more there were, the younger the writer. We all know what he meant—our presence here today proves it. There is no point in my preaching to the converted. We are all, I hope, terrified at the growing prospect of a nation of illiterate voters attempting to make responsible decisions about complex and urgent issues of science and technology, issues whose cardinal points simply cannot be condensed into a ten-second sound bite.

He who cannot read, cannot reason. And we know that the trend is in that direction.

It is tempting to blame it all on the educational system. I am informed, to my horror, that the British Columbia school system is phasing in a policy discarding letter grades until Grade 11, in favor of vague assessments of a child's "intellectual and social growth." That is to say, no objective measure of their success or failure as teachers will even be attempted for the first decade of a child's education—so it certainly sounds as if *they* suspect it is all their fault. But for all of the English teachers in North America to have developed massive incompetence suddenly, simultaneously and at a constant rate would be a coincidence which beggars the imagination. The answer is too easy, and the only solution it suggests—shoot all the

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John D. MacDonald, in an essay he wrote for the Library of Congress just before his death, "Reading for Survival,"

put his finger on the problem: the complex code-system we call literacy—indeed, the very neural wiring that allows it—has existed for only the latest few heartbeats in the long history of human evolution. In competing with television and cinema and video games, books are competing with a

system of information acquisition that predates them by several million years. Literacy is a very hard skill to acquire, and once acquired it brings endless heartache—for the more you read, the more you learn of life's intimidating complexity and confusion. But anyone who can learn to grunt is bright enough to watch TV . . . which teaches that life is simple, and happy endings come to

those whose hearts are in the right place. If one picture is worth a thousand words, how much more valuable are the thousand changing pictures that go by at 20 frames per second to make up 50 seconds of a Walt Disney cartoon?

Literacy made its greatest inroads when it was the best escape possible from a world defined by the narrow parameters of a family farm or a small village, the only opening onto a larger and more interesting world. But the "mind's eye" has only been evolving for thousands of years, whereas the body's eye has been perfected for millions of them. The mind's eye can show you things that no Hollywood special effects department can simulate—but only at

the cost of years of effort spent learning to decode ink stains on paper. Writing still remains the unchallenged best way—indeed, nearly the only way except for mathematics—to express a

complicated thought . . . and it seems clear that this is precisely one of its *disadvantages* from the consumers' point of view. Plainly, recent generations of humans have begun to declare, voting with their eyes, that literacy is not worth the bother.

And things are about to get worse. A new technology called "virtual reality" is on the horizon, in which special goggles show you a three-dimensional holographic computer simulation of . . . whatever you choose . . . which you can

manipulate using special gloves that let you "reach into" the simulation and "touch" imaginary objects. I submit that no book, however interesting, can compete for a child's attention.

What then can we do about the decline of literacy?

The educational system can do very little more than they are already

doing—though I would suggest that they might give some passing thought to offering students something other than the most inexpressibly dull examples of the past millenium's worth of writing. You will not wean teenagers from *America's Funniest Home Videos* with the Bronte sisters.

Government can do even less. I have

given up trying to get people to believe this—indeed, three times this year I have heard or seen it introduced as a "joke" by others—but ten years ago while I was in New York City researching a novel, I saw with my own eyes, swear to God, a U.S. government subway advertisement which read, and I quote, "ILLITERATE? WRITE FOR HELP!" ... giving a box number to which one could write for a free pamphlet on how to learn to read. Your tax dollars at rest. This may be about the best we can expect from government, which has long been a last refuge for the terminally illiterate and innumerate.

We as a society can do little—because "we as a society" is a very rare

lifeform, with over fifty million legs and no brain. Society does not make decisions; individuals make them, and the sum—rather, the product—of those decisions is what we, in hindsight, call society.

We as individuals, however, can do at least some useful work as volunteer guerillas, one on one.

It will do no good merely to sing the praises of literacy to our children. We have done so all our lives, as our parents did before us, and it is not working any more . .

. . not working well enough, at any rate. We must be more devious than that: we must *con* our children into reading.

I can offer two stratagems in this

regard. The first was devised by my mother, and used upon me; the second my wife Jeanne and I developed and field-tested on our daughter, who turns sixteen in October of 1990.

My mother's scheme was, I think, superior to my own, in that it required diabolical cleverness and fundamental dishonesty; it was however time- and

labor-intensive. She would begin reading me a comic book—then, just as we had reached the point where the Lone Ranger was hanging by his fingertips from the cliff, buffalo stampede approaching, angry native peoples below . . . Mom would suddenly remember that she had to go sew the dishes, or vacuum the cat, or whatever—

and leave me alone with the comic book.

I *had* to know how the story came out. There were pictures to assist me. Most of the words were ones I had just heard read aloud; I could go back and refer to them, again with visual aids. By the age of five, thanks to my mother's policy of well-timed neglect, I had taught myself to read sufficiently well that one day she presented me with a library card and sent me to the library with instructions to bring home a book. The librarian, God bless her, gave me a copy of Robert A. Heinlein's novel for children, *Rocket Ship Galileo* . . . and from that day on there was never any serious danger that I would be forced to work for a living. Heinlein wrote stories so intrinsically

interesting that it was worth the trouble to stop and look up the odd word I didn't know. By age six I was tested as reading at college Junior level.

The problem is that you cannot simply hand the child the comic book: you must read 80% of it to them, and *stop* reading with pinpoint timing. In this day and age, society has decided it can no longer afford the luxury of a full-time in-house child rearer in each family (opting instead to chase a chimera called "low-cost high-quality day care"), and with the best of intentions, you may not have that much time or energy to devote to the task of seducing your child.

In that case I recommend the system devised by my wife and myself. From

the day our daughter was old enough to have a defined "bedtime," we made it our firm policy that bedtime was bedtime, no excuses or exceptions . . . unless she were reading, in which case she could stay up as late as she pleased. The most precious gift any child can attain is a few minutes' awareness past bedtime. She went for the bait like a hungry trout, and throughout her elementary school career was invariably chosen as The Narrator in school plays because of her fluency in reading.

Doubtless there are other schemes, and I urge you to give a little time to finding or inventing them. But one thing I promise you all: if you leave the problem to government, or the edu-

cational system, or a mythical animal called society—to anyone but yourself—you will effectively be surrendering the battle, and giving your children over into the hands of Geraldo Rivera. As Robert Heinlein said in 1960, in his immortal *Stranger in a Strange Land*, "Thou art God — and c a n n o t d e c l i n e the nomination." Your only options are to do a good job, or not.

And the consequences of a bad job will make the Dark Ages look good... .