



School for Ever!

Article Author:

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Robert Leeson writes a mid-term report on the school story.

Robert Leeson, no mean contributor to the genre himself, writes a mid-term report on the school story.

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The school story lives. Three anthologies hot off the press lie on my desk plus new series and even a new-ish book about Jennings!

Yet the genre was pronounced brain-dead 50 years ago. When George Orwell made his celebrated attack on Frank Richards' **Greyfriars** in **Horizon** magazine (1940) he was thrashing a corpse.

So, what has happened? What Frankenstein, what energy pulsing through the electrodes, brought it back to life?

Well, one has to say, with due respect to Anthony Buckeridge ('Please Sir, Happy 80th Birthday, Sir') we are not talking about resurrection. We are talking about a transformation so complete that for clarity one must speak of the *old* school story and the *new*.

School stories are not unique to Britain. You find them in **The Arabian Nights**. But the old school story is peculiar to this country, based on that peculiar institution, the fee-paying boarding school.

Ours is no totalitarian society. But this was a totalitarian genre. You could have tragic, high-dramatic, comic, farcical stories, provided they were set in boarding school, Mummy and Daddy paid for it, and boys were kept away from girls.

Such was the conformity that normally intelligent critics would review school stories, even banal ones, 'sui generis', which is Latin for 'I know it's rubbish but it makes me feel at home.'

Apart from one-off tales, we begin in the 1850s with **Tom Brown's Schooldays**, by Thomas Hughes (hearty rectitude) and **Eric, or Little by Little**, by Dean Farrar (passionate goodness). Unlike Charles Dickens's account of Dotheboys Hall in **Nicholas Nickleby** (thank you, Bernard Ashley, for including this in your **Puffin Book of School Stories** to be published in September, 0 670 83737 7, £8.50), these two tales, though they dealt with corruption, were not intended to expose it, but rather to proclaim the reforming virtues of the boarding school to combat it.

'**Tom Brown**' and '**Eric**' were all about the shaping effects of school-days on a boy's character. But they could not constitute a genre in themselves. That came about through the tremendous growth of boys', and girls', story magazines from the 1870s onwards, which continued in full flood until television arrived in the 1950s.

Books may explore ideas, themes, settings. But to blend all these into a genre you need weekly, monthly journals whose appetite for serials causes the elements of the story to be established, popularised then turned out in endless permutation.

Boy's Own Paper, Girl's Own Paper (1880s) **Chums, Captain** (turn of the century) **Gem** and **Magnet** (early 1900s) **School Friend, Schoolgirls Own, Hotspur** et al (between the wars) fostered the school tale, kept it going at high pitch and eventually ran it into the ground.

On **Boy's Own Paper** it was Talbot Baines Reed (Liberal Dissenter, day school boy, typographer) with **Fifth Form at St Dominics** and other rattling good yarns, who deployed the basic elements of the genre - new boy problems, rival gangs, hero worship, stolen exam papers, gambling debts, unfair suspicions, bad redeemed by good, friend/enemy saved from drowning.

The embarrassment of cliché might have proved fatal, but Reed had the saving grace of humour. He even jokingly listed the public school types. Thirty years later in his 'Mike' stories, P G Wodehouse picked up the wheeze: 'Are you the Bully, the Pride of the School or the Boy who takes to drink... ?'

Hughes and Farrar wrote for people like them (and sons). Reed gave the school story popularity among thousands who would never go to boarding school. Wodehouse and (more brutally) Kipling brought a knowing, cynical touch at variance with the lofty code - 'play the game'.

With Greyfriars (**Magnet**) and St Jims (**Gem**) the genre was set for self parody and flight from reality. With them the serials resemble a TV sit-com, where endless repetition, even idiocy, is accepted if the characters please - 'sui generis' as the critics say.

As girls' education followed boys', so did their stories. L T Meade and Evelyn Everett Green shadowed Reed and Harold Avery et al. By featuring the 'pickle' or engagingly naughty girl they helped on the genre in the same direction. The fictional school was converted from one you ran away from to one you wished you could go to.

In the 1900s, Angela Brazil, Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Elinor Brent Dyer and Enid Blyton put their stamp on the girls' school yarn and kept it alive when the boys' story flagged.

The girls' story had a bad press until Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig (**You're a Brick, Angela!**) rescued it from the condescending 'jolly hockeysticks' label. They reveal incidentally that most of the magazine stories came from male writers!

In addition to the fun and freedom in exotic locations offered the pre-war boy reader (like myself), girls' stories offered the reader vigour in action often denied in real life and a bigger range of female characters than conventional children's fiction.

So the school story (four per cent of kids - 99 per cent of stories) gained an audience which outgrew the setting. By popularity's paradox ('give 'em what they like') it grew more conservative, stylised, ossified, while the fictional schoolkids never agreed. As Orwell wrote of Greyfriars: 'The year is 1910 or 1940, it is all the same.'

The contradiction between characters and audience in a genre can be exploited for escapist purposes. But the contradiction remains. In the end it undermines the genre itself.

But the school story did not die only of overwork. Why should a genre with high ideals end up an object of derision? Did later writers abandon the ethos? Or was the ethos itself flawed? Reed set it out: 'The strong fellow must look after the weak, the sharp must look after the duffer.'

The rise of the boarding school story coincided with the reform (1860s to 1880s) of the old public schools/grammar schools and the rise of the new 'private' school ('paying four per cent' as Stalky and Co put it).

The charitable foundations for poor scholars were clung on to while the scholars themselves were pushed out as 'totally unsuited to a classical education'. In their place came fee-payers. While the 'strong' kicked out the 'weak', the 'sharp' were busy altering the laws to sanctify the misuse of the charitable funds.

A common feature in the school story was to be the odd-one-out status of the day or scholarship pupil. Derided or victimised, or heroically winning acceptance, they were seen as exceptional in schools where they had been the rule. The term 'cad', used to describe the badly behaved, became a generic description for hostile townies outside the school. Down the peck order, behind day pupils and cads, came 'the remaining scum of the earth' as a Dutch correspondent satirically wrote in **Captain** magazine (1908).

The schools, as Isabel Quigly (**The Heirs of Tom Brown**) says were 'training grounds for sahibs' to rule the Empire (the second and world-wide act of robbery).

Harold Avery (the football pitch) and Henry Newbolt (the cricket pitch) saw the school's ethic leading inevitably to the desert/jungle battlefield. By 1917, Angela Brazil's 'Patriotic Schoolgirl' thought the entire Army was composed of ex-public schoolboys.

The contradiction between Newbolt's 'you cannot stand by while the weak are bullied by the strong' and an empire fostered by chicanery and held by force, could not be ignored. Surely it was not just over-repetition that led to Newbolt becoming sick of hearing 'There's a breathless hush...'

Kipling the intellectual imperialist knew imperial realities. In one poem written not long after leaving school he says:

'Two thousand pounds of education

Fall to a ten rupee jezail.'

But, in another poem, we hear that a hundred Burmese heads are the price of a white officer's life.

So Stalky and his friends don't want to talk about 'The School', 'The Empire'. They certainly don't want an outsider haranguing them about it. Feelings are best hidden. You don't run an Empire with your heart on your sleeve. The scene in **Stalky & Co** where bullies are tortured - in a good cause - is a classic end-and-means situation. Do what you have to, don't make speeches.

The genre is following the classic course - from assertion to assumption. But even the assertion was flawed from the start.

As the genre lost credibility, the counter-attack came. 'Sodden with imperial illusions,' said Orwell in 1940. But by the 1950s even the **Boy's Own Paper** letter columns were scathing in their denunciation of 'unreality' in the school serials. (Though they also said, in effect, bring back T B Reed!)

The rest was nostalgia and collectors' items. Though Billy Bunter, victim-triumphant, survived into the TV era when his tormentors were forgotten. And via radio, Anthony Buckeridge (1947) gave us the inimitable Jennings of Linbury Court Prep. But exceptions only proved the rule.

Blyton, Brent Dyer still sold. But of new input was there none. The critical 'Golden Age' of children's writing ((1950s, 60s) was conspicuous for the lack of school stories.

Yet life itself was changing. Post 1944, millions of working-class kids, for whom real secondary education after 14 had been as much a fantasy as Greyfriars, began to fill the upper schools. The day-school pupil *had* to rise above the Plimsoll Line of Literature.

In 1949, Geoffrey Trease, pioneer of the new historical novel, after a discussion with day school pupils, wrote his trail-blazing Bannermere School series. Teachers in the new school system, like Wallace Hildick, conscious of the fact that pupils could not 'see themselves' in the school story followed suit.

Progress was slow, publishers reluctant. I was told in the 1960s that 'they' (you know who) don't want to read stories about themselves and their lives. As one person (best unknown) told me, 'let's not rub their noses in it'.

The first signs of real change came in the 1970s, with more teacher-writers like Gene Kemp and Bernard Ashley. Ashley's message that pupil does not mean white, was later pushed home by Farrukh Dhondy.

Gene Kemp's **Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler**, 1977 (Puffin, 0 14 031135 1, £2.50), with its catch ending, was an interesting case. Its vigorous girl central character carried out her pranks not in a girls' school but in the much different setting of a co-ed.

At first critics were often grumpy. The new school story was dreary and didactic, artificial, not significant in literary terms. They failed to see that the new was at the assertion stage. The assumption was just around the corner.

Then in 1978-79 **Grange Hill** came. Suddenly most school pupils (and many teachers) were eating their tea glued to the TV screen, watching a saga about themselves. It was a literary and a political turning point. As writer of four original novels accompanying Phil Redmond's TV stories, I got the full flavour of the controversy in 100 meetings and interviews during 1980-81.

'So this is what Comprehensive Schools are really like?'

'The language! The violence!'

'You, sir, are alienating the child from the teacher, the child from the parent.'

What me, sir?

Significantly most hostile critics had never read nor watched **Grange Hill**. They did not have to. We were talking about a social phenomenon.

The bad language? There was none in the series. The BBC would not allow it. But to the hostile it was enough to hear the accents of the young actors. What were street children - who *must* use bad language - doing representing the *childin* our culture?

The first big change in the new school story was personnel. *All* kids were there, as in real life.

Comparing **Chalet Girls in Camp** and **Grange Hill Goes Wild** in her unpublished thesis, Valerie Milner contrasts the Chalet pupils and staff 'of a type... the same class, educational standards... attitude... and privileged outlook', with Grange Hill's 'mixture of race and class'. Both books she saw as strongly moral. But the Chalet School's cloistered virtues - ideals much admired by adults - contrast with the Grange Hill kids who are 'not the embodiment of a childhood innocence? but often stubborn and self-willed'. Like Chalet pupils, Grange Hillites come through, but 'not before they have a chance to reach a deeper understanding of human actions and motives...'

In the old story, sexes are segregated, town out of bounds to school. In the new, the expression 'all in' means what it says. And the same is true of the new literature (one must now say literature rather than genre) of the 1970s and 1980s. Just read the short stories of, say, George Layton, Jan Mark, Jean Ure, Pete Johnson, Berlie Doherty, Rex Varley, Anne Fine, Farrukh Dhondy. All human life really is there!

Within 'school' literature we get the romance, the fantasy. Pat Thomson's new collection **A Satchel of School Stories** (Doubleday, 0 385 40288 0, £8.99) is strong on the wildest fantasy. (As a card-carrying social realist, I've written three fantasy novels and a series set in school.) We have school detective series, stories about bullying. Tony Bradman's **Good Sports! A Bag of Sports Stories** (Doubleday, 0 385 402325 5, £8.99) is mostly school-set. Exotic locations - space schools. Exotic pupils - dragons, etc. You name it.

As a parting shot the critics have complained that the new wants to banish the old, that boarders will be deprived of their corner in the story. But this is a revolution devoid of destruction. We have a variety of schools in Britain - always have had. Now we have the complete range of stories to go with it. Literature has caught up with life and not before time.

New and old share common elements, though. The most important is friendship. Sheila Ray says of Blyton's tales: 'They appeal to children at a time when the peer group are important and membership of a gang is most children's ideal.'

In the 1890s, Avery's Diggory and Rats 'fall into each other's arms', at Greyfriars, D'arcy and his chums do likewise, hooting with laughter. In Rob Child's **The Big Hit**, 1991 (Corgi, 0 552 526622, £2.25), Andrew and Chris 'danced off the pitch together, their arms clumsily locked around each other's shoulders'.

Other common features: a recent book of Pete Johnson's offered 'baiting masters, taking the mickey out of swots', as well as 'keeping up with your own and everyone else's love life'.

Brian Doyle writes of the 'death, disgrace, bullying, sin and tears' in **Tom Brown and Eric...**

Last year some third-years, wanting to help me, sent me this list of obligatory items for 'better school stories':

Rivalry over girl/boy friends, skiving, smoking in toilets, weird hairstyles, teachers beating up pupils, fights after school, glue, drugs, gas, sex, bitchy fights between girls, back chat with teachers, police, really big fights, children picked on, swearing at teachers, no school uniform, no games kit, love affairs, vandalism, school competitions, sponsored walks, friends helping each other, nowhere to go.

Human relations are constant: the humour, the pathos, the ongoing hysteria of children and adults penned up together most of the year, with the rest of the world eyeing them suspiciously.

As we said, we now deal with real people. Farrukh Dhondy's pupils are a million miles from Greyfriars' Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. But then the amiable Frank Richards thought 'foreigners *are* funny'. That won't do now, sir.

The ethos of the school has been brought back into synch with the real world. Buckeridge's Linbury Court, where staff and pupils never age, is sometimes held up as an example of the eternal appeal of the old story.

I will venture an alternative opinion. When Jennings and Darbishire first appeared in 1947, not only were they part of the sunset of the old but also the dawn of the new. For all their deliberately archaic jargon, their attitudes are not archaic. They do not regard the townsfolk as 'cads' and if you asked either of them, 'What is a "master race"?', they'd answer without batting an eyelid - 'Staff three-legged event on Founder's Day, sir.'

Plus c'est la meme chose, plus ca change!

Sources quoted:

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Reading and Righting, Robert Leeson, Collins (1985), o/p

The Heirs of Tom Brown, Isabel Quigly, Chatto & Windus (1982), o/p

Boys Will Be Boys, E S Turner, Penguin (1976), o/p

Thesis on 'Popular School Stories?', Valerie Milner, Leeds Polytechnic (1988)

Tom Brown's Schooldays, Collins, 0 00 693705 5, £2.25; Puffin, 014 035022 5, £2.99

Eric, or Little by Little, o/p

Chalet Girls in Camp, Collins, 0 00 691136 6, £2.25

Grange Hill Goes Wild, o/p

Jennings titles are published by Pan Macmillan.

Greyfriars titles are published by Quiller Press & Hawk Books. Facsimiles of original **Magnet** editions are published by Howard Baker.

Robert Leeson is the author of 42 books for children and young people. He also writes for radio, theatre and TV. His latest school book is **No Sleep for Hob Lane**, published by Hamish Hamilton as an `Antelope', 0 241 13180 4, £4.99. Inexplicably, his **Reading and Righting** (see above) is now unavailable? a case for reprinting, perhaps?

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