

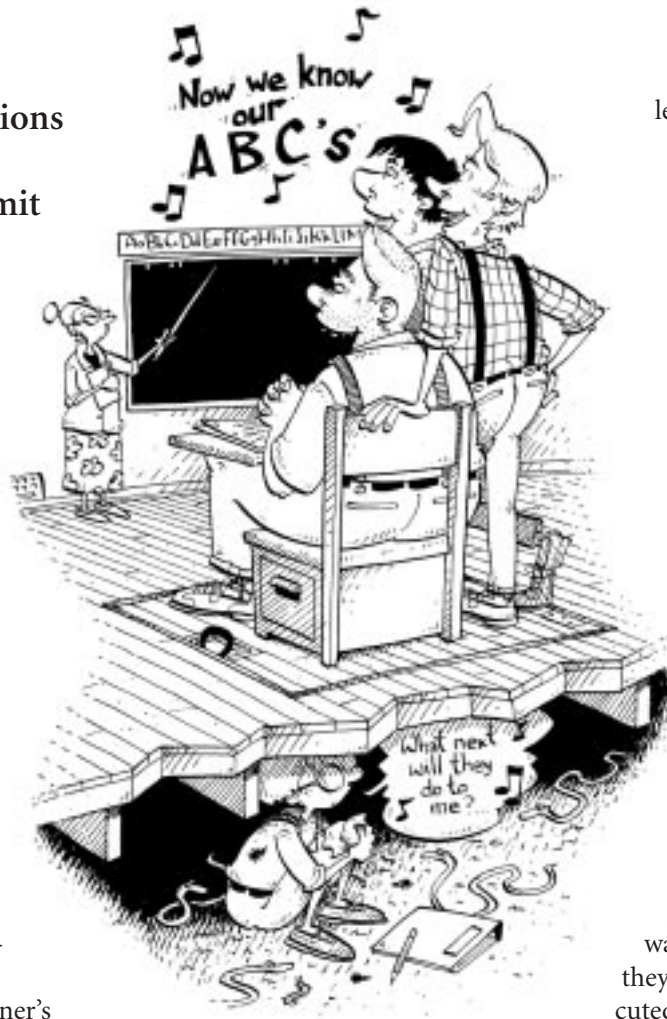
The Educational Golden Age

BY FRED STENSON

Educational institutions are much maligned nowadays, and I admit their processes are mysterious.

The jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none principle seems to rule. We'll give you a dab of this, a splotch of that, and, before you grasp any of it, let's move on. Another theory that seems to obtain is: if we're not nice to them, they'll leave. Which is a good theory, except that its interpreters often regard memorization as the worst kind of meanness. When my children leave the orbit of education and confront the harsh world, say, the driver's education manual upon which their vehicle operation learner's permit test will be based, and they are told to memorize it, they think the registry people are joking. Like, the whole thing?

But if this appears to be the beginning of a rant against the current education system, it is not. Whenever I am in the presence of such a diatribe, and they are plentiful, I hear an underlying implication (if not the outright statement) that things used to be better, that there was an educational golden age at one time from which we Canadians were cruelly



torn by a new age tribe of cult theorists and glazed-eyed groupies. Under the guise of providing more freedom to children and letting them learn at their own speed using their own preferred mode of learning based on their own learning style, the new education cult proceeded to ruin our poor babies for any serious future endeavour.

And I have to say the learning mode thing really is suspect. Given the choice of whether to be a visual

learner or a verbal one, the clever kids will always proclaim themselves visual, knowing it means more films (whereas saying you are a verbal learner could only lead to more bloody reading and writing). Then the teachers go back to the staff room and tell each other that McLuhan was right: television has altered the cosmos. All our kids are visual learners. No, no, folks, what kids are is smart and instinctively lazy, as kids have been since the dawn of time.

Now, let's talk about the golden age. Mine began in a one-room school where poor Mrs. Waltbauer taught about 40 kids in six grades.

Some of the Grade 6s were growing beards. They didn't want to go to town school, where they thought they would be persecuted for being rural, so they opted for repeated failure of Grade 6. In case they ever did have to go to town, they wanted to be ready, so they practised being mean on the small children, including me. Well I remember the threat of being peed on by the entire Grade 6 class should I "tell." "Tell what?" I wondered, then opted for total silence as the only certain safety. Being the only Grade One for some curious demographic reason, I stood at a side blackboard doing multiplication tables for three years. I am still excellent at these and

harangue my children for not knowing theirs to perfection. What else did I learn? How to read after a fashion, but not how to spell. I learned that a winter mitt is not sufficient protection of the fingers while playing goal. I learned too that when the Grade 6s promise not to raise the puck, in order to induce you to play goal, they are lying.

When teacher went to the teacher-age at lunchtime, probably to weep, various kinds of fun would begin. Sometimes the big kids would put boxing gloves on the little kids and laugh their heads off while the little fellas (me included again) quickly removed all the skin from each other's noses and began to cry. Then there was mumblety-peg, a knife game where the loser had to dig a match stick out of a box of dirt using only his face. In the spring the big boys would go into the incredibly dirty crawl space under the school to fetch out garter snakes with which to

torment the girls. Alternatively, they would find a little kid who looked afraid of snakes (me), stick him into the crawl space and block the door.

Then it was the end of the one-room school era (thank bloody goodness) and I was off to town school on a bus that, for the next nine years, lurched between our farm and Pincher Creek, smelling of pee and rotten lunches. How I remember each and every telephone pole, as I counted them in a state of utter and complete boredom. A lot of the education I did get in these years came when I finally confronted the bus-riding boredom problem by reading my way through the novels of the 20th century. Nowadays I see kids riding those yellow and black instruments of torture and I have great sympathy, that is, until I pull up behind one at a stop light, and several of the young scallywags stick their bare asses on the rear window above me.

In town school, I went from a class of one to a class of many, and it was better. There was much greater protection against the meanness of boys in upper grades. My performance magically improved.

But was it better education than my kids have received in their time? I'm not sure they are deprived by not having been taught by my Grade 9 teacher to pronounce words wrong in order to spell them right. All together now: "Car-bew-ret-or." Or the Parisian nun who taught us that Freemasons were in league with the devil, and once beat my friend Vernon with a belt until I'm fairly certain she had an orgasm. And why? Because he had a speech impediment. Did he go on to join the Oxford debating team? No, he did not.

There were also a few good teachers, just as there are now. What makes a good teacher? A good person. A witty person. Smart people interested in what they teach. And pretty young women and men with whom the children can fall in love in an academically improving way. That brings my sermon to an end. Until they print more of these kind of people, or pay enough to lure them from other professions, education will not improve, and may decline.

As for the poor maligned kids, who are described as so many troglodytes, heading for the schoolyard each day with their knives and guns for gang warfare akin to a Quentin Tarantino movie, give me a break. I ask my son, do kids fight in the schoolyard at your high school? The answer is no and he regards it as a dumb question. There are maybe one or two fights per year, he says, and I believe him. When I tell him that there were fights virtually every day at lunch back in the golden age of my schooling, and that's why my front teeth aren't real, he and my daughter are appalled. And so am I.

Fred Stenson was nominated for this year's Giller Prize for his novel *The Trade*.