

Education

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The best years of your life? Fiction spread by people, whose view of school is clouded by the years or who've found themselves in even worse situations. Maybe for some it was good - a chance to be top that they haven't achieved again, Captain of the team or the school psychopath, acclaim that disappeared at 16.

For me school was bad, mostly boring, forced to mix (as little as possible in my case) with people you hated and feared. Failing the 11-plus was the worst, when everyone assumed you'd go to the Grammar School like your Dad did. "You don't want to go to the High School, they're all yobs there" and then suddenly you're in it.

I felt stupid and inferior for much of the time, being in the first sets was no consolation, I just felt like the worst in the class. The only exceptions were English and R.E. which I found interesting in part. Coming from a church primary school I'd had lots of experience picturing the life of Christ, and I found reading easy and pleasurable. The only suffering I found in those classes was being read to at an unbearably slow pace, although it was conducive to day dreams. Mostly I imagined being the sole survivor of nuclear war or a great flood.

I felt it was an experience in alienation, I made no real friends in secondary school, I got along with my 'class mates' when I had to but saw none of them out of school. My time out of school was spent with two friends from primary school who shared my taste for escape in comics, films and playing God over an ant's nest.

The best thing attending school did for me was confirming my belief that I didn't want to be part of the conventional system. At age 15 I was attracted to the handful of punks in the school, feeling they would sympathise, a unity created by being different from the mass and presenting a visual appearance to show it. I tried too hard to become part of that group but was never really accepted, and even became, for a short time, the target for 'hate mail' from some of them. I found that attack devastating as it added to my negative feelings about myself and my sense of aloneness.

I passed my 'O' levels with C grades and the minimum of effort, joining the 6th form after as it seemed the easiest path. By then I had perfected avoiding the crowds which I found so oppressive. I would arrive at school at 5 past 9 so most of the kids would already be in class and I'd leave early whenever I could, disappearing for large periods of time after registering in the morning.

For some strange reason I was made a Prefect and Social Secretary of the 6th form. I managed to avoid doing one prefect duty, there was no way I wanted to walk 'round the school at lunchtime shouting at kids. I enjoyed being Social Secretary though, booking parties in a local night club that turned a blind eye to the fact that we were all under 18, the snag for me was I didn't enjoy the party once I was there.

The actual educational contents mostly escape me now. A Maths teacher that was too clever and failed to understand why others couldn't grasp the subject; an Economics teacher who could easily be diverted into talking about anything but Economics. English teachers who seemed to decide I was awkward and argumentative in order to irritate them.

A continuing horror in my school week was the Games lessons. As one of the slowest and least physically fit kids in the school I found them humiliating and they were made worse by sadistic and stupid Games teachers who seemed to take great pleasure in embarrassing kids. I used most of my ingenuity to skive the lesson. Dentists' and doctors' appointments always coincided with the lesson and my Dad would leave the date off any excuse note so they could be recycled if they weren't collected.

Hiding from age 5 to 18, avoiding pupils and teachers, an initial need to appear average replaced by a desire to be different. Not super smart or dumb, my education showed me just what I didn't want and maybe I should be grateful for that.

something even odder. When the water was drained away, they just lay there, as if saying: 'Oh God, not again!' And they would prefer to die rather than go off looking for water.

Rubinstein and Best were baffled by this behaviour, and one of them came up with the extraordinary suggestion that maybe the worms were bored because they had learned too easily. The other said: 'Don't be stupid - how can they be bored when they've got no brains?' However, they decided to devise an experiment to test this hypothesis. What they did was to take a new lot of planaria, and to use two tubes. One of the tubes was made of rough plastic inside, and the other was smooth - so the worms could tell the differences with their stomachs. In the rough plastic tube, the water was down the lighted alley-way, and in the smooth plastic tube, the water was down the dark alley-way. They then transferred the planaria from one tube to the other between experiments. This 'double ambiguity' principle was far more hard to master, and only about one third of the planaria succeeded - as compared to about 90% of the previous lot. But that third never regressed. The experiment could be repeated a thousand times, and still they made straight for the water as soon as the tap drained the tube. In other words, they had got bored because they had learned too easily. The result is that the learning had not got through to the 'subconscious' mind of the worm, where it sticks.

The basic principle seems to be obvious. Real education is something into which you put your total attention and enthusiasm.

I suspect this is what W.H. Auden meant when he told a friend of mine, Hugh Heckstall Smith, that the aim of education was 'to induce as much neurosis as the pupil can stand without cracking'.