

# Early To Bed Or Late With The Serials?

## THE LISTENING HABITS OF CHILDREN

THERE was a brief but animated discussion in the House of Representatives recently when the Government member for Lyttelton (T. H. McCombs) asked the Minister of Broadcasting if steps could be taken to ensure that serials presented early in the evening would be such as might reasonably be listened to by children.



MANY people, Mr. McCombs said, in the House, objected to children being allowed to listen to serials dealing with the lives of gangsters. He had turned on the radio at home, and the first thing he heard was a woman screaming that she was being knocked about by somebody. He had received a letter from a woman who said that children dropped their homework immediately to listen to serials, and when they returned from a tale of crime and gangsters they were full of nerves and could not settle down to work again. He believed that the broadcasting service weeded out the imported serials and selected the best.

C. G. E. Harker (National, Waipawa) said the time of the evening selected for the broadcasting of what were in many instances unsavoury programmes was very bad. On the other hand, there were some parents who wanted serials of that type put on earlier in the evening—those parents apparently needed protection against themselves. He considered that a good deal of the increase in crime of a gangster nature arose from unsuitable serials and unsuitable films.

C. Carr (Government, Timaru), who suggested that we could not afford to be too squeamish over these matters, asked members to recall the delight with which they read "penny dreadfuls" and stories of adventure in their young days.

The Minister of Broadcasting (Mr. Jones) pointed out that Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* was not printed for 20 years because it was thought to be demoralising. Every generation heard the cry that the youth of that day was deteriorating. "Penny dreadfuls," films, and now broadcasting had all been blamed in turn. He could assure the House that the object of the broadcasting service was to provide programmes of general appeal. He did not think that the programmes put over by advertisers would demoralise children, and if the licence figures were examined they would show an increasing desire to listen. The way in which the present generation had stood up to one of the greatest fights in history showed they were not deteriorating.

THIS was not a new complaint, but it seemed worth following up. The trouble, of course, is that although certain serials are considered to be undesirable by some authorities, there are many other authorities from the days of Plato to the present time who hold a very different opinion. Many authorities on the education of children maintain that such presentations have a valuable cathartic influence upon the emotional nature of the child by releasing the unhealthy repressions which develop in him due to the restricted and unadventurous character of his school and home life.

This vicarious experience which the child goes through in listening to fictitious stories involving violence has an educational value which is recognised by the schools and colleges of the world. *Macbeth*, for example, though it was under suspicion (as the Minister pointed out, for so many years) is now a school text-book. Yet it embraces treason, more than half-a-dozen murders (including the murder of children by professional thugs), the employment of witchcraft, the appearance of ghosts and visions, the sleep-walking of a woman suffering from a tragic neurosis, all within two hours, and the play ends by the gory head of a king being borne in triumph on the top of a pole.

Certainly not many modern serials can be compared with *Macbeth* as literary productions, but *Macbeth* was regarded in Shakespeare's day as a stage thriller, and not as literature; and if the civic authorities of London had had their way, none of Shakespeare's plays would ever have been produced!

So the question almost is: Should a mother ostrich educate her offspring by forcibly burying its head in the sand?

TO discover what others think on the subject, we made inquiries from a few persons, whose opinions may be expected to carry some weight.

### Training College Lecturer

WHEN asked his opinion, a training college lecturer replied: "Serials, like the movies, tend to fix and strengthen the behaviour patterns and types of attitudes which already exist among those who listen most frequently. And so the maladjusted and unhappy child will become more maladjusted and unhappy by continued listening. It's like the toothache—*aspirin* will give you temporary relief, but the effect soon wears off, and the pain returns."

"Do you think serials have any effect on child delinquency?"

"Not a bad effect. Some children may pick up new methods of crime, but they'll be the ones who are already maladjusted and disposed to it. Serials probably prevent a certain amount of delinquency by providing an interest and keeping children listening in the home who might be otherwise wandering round the streets. But they do have a

decided influence on children's attitudes and tend to develop a habit of depending on sensations, and so encourage emotional precocity.

"Reading about gangsters is different from listening to gangster serials. The radio provides extra stimuli for arousing the emotions, and that easy 'tipping off' of emotions is apt to be harmful.

"It is true to say that the things that most entertain a child most educate him, therefore, these films and serials and comic papers will be powerful educative influences, developing his view of life and human nature and society.

"The serial is an example of the standardising of taste at a level much below that which adults and children are capable of reaching. The commercial aspect comes in there, too. The writer is aiming at the largest possible audience, and gets that by aiming his material at the mental age of 12 to 14. The result is mass production of fairy tales for everybody: on the receiving end is a vast audience of mental and emotional juveniles of all ages.

"In a survey of about 4000 post-primary school children, we discovered that, on the whole, girls listen much more than boys, and that, at that time the favourite serial among boys and girls was *Dad and Dave*, which was listened to by one child in every five. On *His Majesty's Service* was second with one in every six, and *Phantom Drummer* third with one in 11. Nineteen per cent of the children were listening to no serials, 40 per cent to one or two, and 41 per cent to three or four. One girl was listening to 14 at once, and quite a few to more than 10. The third and fourth forms listened mostly, and the numbers decreased in the upper classes."

"Would you suggest that the serials should be put on after the children's bedtime?"

"Well, there's always the problem that the children will want to stay up to listen, though it is the parents' responsibility to fix a reasonable bedtime, serial or no serial. But it is important for children to be in a comfortable frame of mind when they go to bed, and the only solution that I can see is to discard the melodramatic and highly exciting serials altogether."

### City Missioner

A CITY MISSIONER whom we approached was not at all disturbed by the influence of serials.

"It seems to me that there will always be people who must pick on the younger generation and cry out about how they have deteriorated. When I was a youngster, it was always the bad films that took the rap. But I noticed, even then, that the people who had the most to say about the harmful effect of films on

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