

The Educated Reader and the Thriller

A GOOD many of our readers will probably recall having noticed, and having had their interest stimulated by two cable items from Australia several weeks ago—one a brief report of an attack on the thriller type of novel by W. J. Scott, of Wellington, at the international conference of the New Education Fellowship, and the other a reply to his criticism by the "Sydney Morning Herald." We have now secured from Mr. Scott the relevant portion of his address, given in Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide during the conference (which was held in the six Australian state capitals in September and October). It will be noticed that he dealt with some of his critics in the course of his remarks. In general, the speaker was discussing the surrender of the educated to the mass-producer of popular entertainment, and the recent tendency of such people to defend their taste, particularly their taste for the thriller.

THESE are the critical assumptions which I expect you all as educated people to accept:

1. The proper business of literature is and has always been to interpret man to man, to show human nature in action, to illuminate any and every aspect of experience by the power of the creative imagination, and by so doing to nourish the imagination and increase the understanding of the reader. The literature which does this is the only kind that can give him lasting satisfaction, the only kind to which he can return again and again.

2. This is the literature—such of it as is within the range of the boy's and the girl's understanding—that the teacher

has to teach; it is, therefore, the literature that he must himself read and enjoy at his adult level. The teacher has the personal responsibility of maintaining his own taste and enjoyment at the highest pitch possible to him as an adult, and the professional responsibility of developing in those he teaches the best taste and enjoyment possible to them.

3. In the branch of imaginative literature that we call fiction it is the story of men and women in action with its moving and accurate record of their character which is important. The quality of this story determines the quality of the whole book. It does not matter what additional information about this or that a novel may give us; if its

picture of human nature in action is distorted or defective, the quality cannot be good.

Now, the question at issue between those who attack and those who defend the thriller, including the brand known as the detective novel, is: What is the literary quality of the thriller as a type of literature? What is the quality of this thriller and of that as books. None of my critics made any serious attempt at a literary defence of the thriller. To say, as the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald and the editor of the Times Literary Supplement before him have said, that leading statesmen and scholars read thrillers unashamedly is not a literary defence, but merely an appeal to authority. It may indicate only that their taste has de-

teriorated. And to say, as the columnist in the Melbourne Herald did, that the fact that Waverley was the best-seller of 1814 and Tarzan of the Apes the best-seller of 1914 merely proves that taste changes and evades the relevant question: What is the quality of the taste?

"If I were forced to read either of these best-sellers now," stated the writer of this article, "I should choose Tarzan; for can anyone under 50 assert that best-seller Scott isn't often tedious today." Note the evasion of the question of whether the taste for Waverley is or is not a better thing than the taste for Tarzan of the Apes.

The Case of Lord Peter Wimsey

I have said that the proper business of literature is to interpret man to man, to show human nature in action, and so on. This is something that the detective-novel whether for educated or for uneducated readers is prevented by the conditions of its existence from doing. For the emphasis in this type of story must be on the kind of plot which keeps the reader guessing, springs dramatic surprises, and ties up the loose ends with a neatness unknown in ordinary life. To this main purpose all

(continued on next page)



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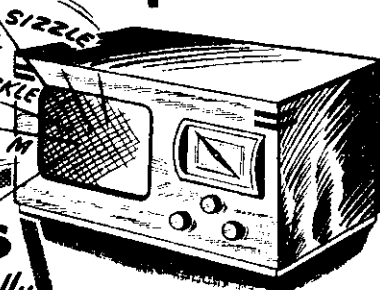


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