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When Boys Will be Buys

John Hersey's new novel, *The Child Buyer* (Knopf), finds no cause for universal rejoicing in this country's growing interest in the nurture of high intelligence. A satirical comedy, in which unfolds a bud of horror, the novel pushes one aspect of this interest to its ultimate conclusion. A child buyer, Mr. Wissey Jones, comes to a small New England town to attempt to purchase for his corporation a ten-year-old boy, Barry Rudd, who gives promise of transcendent scientific ability. The purchase is to be part of the corporation's far-sighted efforts in behalf of national defense. The story is told in the form of testimony before a State Senate committee investigating the purchase, and this enables Hersey to get in some licks at the conduct of government hearings. In fact, many facets of present-day America, from TV to JD, come under scrutiny, but the focus of the attack is the education, and place in society, we accord the gifted.

That segment of America which is coming to regard intelligence as a national resource is only part of Hersey's grievance. The novel also has its quota of professional educators of the personal-adjustment philosophy, and examines what they have to say about Barry. In modern educational theory, as in those quotations that occasionally serve to fill out *The New Yorker's* columns, the straight doctrine is often its own satire. Only a punch line is needed. To the educationists, Barry Rudd, as a gifted child, falls into the same category as the mentally retarded and physically handicapped. He is exceptional, but modern theory has it that any child is exceptional who is not centrally located on the normal distribution curve. To miss the mark is to miss the mark, whether to the right or the left. A few persons, as Hersey's State specialist in deviants points out, are even exceptional twice over, like Lord Byron, who was both gifted and clubfooted.

Although the educationists regard Barry as exceptional, they do not believe he should be singled out for special attention. That would be undemocratic. His place is in the classroom with other future citizens of the same age. Wissey Jones, on the other hand, wants to give Barry special treatment, also in the name of democracy—its defense. But he does not see Barry as a person either, only as a piece of valuable property. And once in the hands of the corporation, Barry will be treated as property not only economically but physically as well. He will be engineered in such a way, including major surgical attention, that his innate abilities will be able to function unhampered by doubts or distractions. This kind of special preparation, of course, is expensive, but as testimony before the committee brings out, the facility where the work is done is classified as an institution of higher learning—Hack Sawyer University, named after the company's president—so that the program is tax-deductible.

Barry is not at the university yet, however. It is first necessary to get the consent of his parents and also of his teachers, a few of whom are sufficiently independent to regard the boy as exceptional in the old-fashioned sense. But Wissey Jones is something of a genius himself, at least in public relations, in persuading people to accept a point of view. For some of the opposition to the scheme, persuasion consists simply in presenting attractive but unusable gifts, like a matched set of lightweight luggage for a man with no occasion to travel. For others, making the reward fit the crime is more complex, and requires a little experimentation. Barry's consent also proves necessary, and the final note of horror hinges on Jones' efforts to get it. The book is funny, it is grim. It is a kind of antidote to that poison in our thinking which treats scientific activity—and persons—as components in a system geared to larger ends.—J.T.