Book Reviews

The Child Buyer. A novel in the form of hearings before the Standing Committee on Education, Welfare, and Public Morality of a certain state Senate, investigating the conspiracy of Mr. Wissey Jones, with others, to purchase a male child. John Hersey. Knopf, New York, 1960. 257 pp. $4.

John Hersey has an infallible ability to put his finger on the rawest spots in contemporary society, as he did with his discussions of the Warsaw ghetto and Hiroshima. This book, based on more than a decade of interest in gifted children and participation in local and national deliberations on education, brings into sharp and shocking conjunction two salient aspects of our present attitudes: our willingness to treat people as things—"the human component in systems design"—and our interest in the gifted child—whom otherwise a democratic society would prefer to ignore—as a defense need. Three decades ago, in Aldous Huxley's "The Young Archimedes," the child, lonely after he had been "bought" from his peasant family, commits sorrowful suicide; and Wells's "Invisible Man" performed experiments on himself, defying society on his own behalf. In this 1960 version we are pictured as having come much further. A large defense plant, significantly and inappropriately charged with planning for human beings, sends out scouts to purchase, by whatever morally corrupt means, those very exceptional children who lie outside the normal range of high general intelligence. The buyer explains that the child will first be scientifically treated so that all memory of his previous identity is lost; and later, after he has been "programmed," his sensory inputs will be cut off; and he will become indeed just a human component in a vast computing machine. Here a nightmare fantasy of science fiction, well represented, for example, by Pohl and Kornbluth's *Wolfbane* (1959), invades the field of literature, doubtless safely, since the public have been steadily anesthetized by accounts of experimental brainwashing and sensory deprivation experiments and of observations made on human beings which violate their privacy and their human dignity. The child himself, one of those strange chunky, waistless, peering children who turn up rarely as "infant prodigies," is allowed a mockery of the democratic privilege of choice. Hounded and betrayed by parents and teachers and the elected representatives of the people, he "elects" surrender—with no less desperation than the blue-eyed little mathematician of Huxley's story—not to the simplicity of death, but to the absolute violation of his beautiful scientific mind. Coming as he does from a poor and disorganized home, there is no place for him in a school system which is dominated by ideas of adjustment and normality, or in a society which indulges a cheap sense of virtue by helping the handicapped, but takes an insensate delight in punishing the gifted even when they are needed for national defense. Perhaps the most horrible touch is the betrayal by the one teacher who has genuine scientific curiosity and is able to appreciate the child's great ability, but who has come up the hard way and learned to value success even more, so that she sees the boy as bright enough to beat the system into which he is being sold.

A Moral Problem

The book should be read by everyone interested in science, in education, and in our deteriorating ethical sensitivity. It raises one further very important problem about the nature of this particular type of child genius, who is described so accurately that anyone who has known one will recognize him at once. Such children have proportionately large heads, are somewhat obese, often myopic. They combine extraordinary intellectual abilities with a kind of frightening ruthless clarity, and while their mental performance equals and often surpasses that of superior adults, there is a childlike quality about their human relationships; pure curiosity or pure ethical concern seems to occur uncomplicated by the type of learning which most human beings experience at puberty. It is not only their "giftedness" but also their detachment and their use of intellectual superiority as the only defensive weapon available to them—for their over-all motor coordination is poor—that make them, at best, objects of indifference and distaste, and, at worst, of persecution.

Research is urgently needed so that we may identify and protect these children, some of whom go to pieces in their late teens. We need to know whether their peculiar and characteristic somatic traits are indicative of some difference in growth rate and nutrition —aggravated when they come from poor environments—and whether they represent some discrepancy between maturation of the brain and the reproductive system, possibly characteristic of some earlier evolutionary form, which now gives them a strange advantage over their more slowly maturing fellows. We need to know what is the relationship of this group to another familiar type of mathematical genius, the tall ectomorphic child who matures very late and may retain an adolescent somatotype until middle age, displaying, in contrast to the squarish precocious child, an extreme prolongation of maturation. These children also suffer at the hands of their schoolmates.

The presence of geniuses so far outside the normal range probably decreases the performance of the superior child whose physique is closer to the average. For their own sake and for the sake of the others, these genius children should be sought for, identified, and placed in special contexts where their minds can develop at their own pace. Norbert Wiener's *Ex-prodigy* tells the story of one extremely gifted child whose father was willing and able to teach him. For the child without such parents, the whole community of learning should provide nurture and protection.

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