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## Book Reviews

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## The Purple Decades: A Reader

By Tom Wolfe

Farrar Straus Giroux - \$17.50

In the opening chapter of *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe, widely regarded as the great sachem of the new estate, argues that the novel of social realism is dead, victim of the fragmentation of bourgeois society. By the 1960s, according to Wolfe, "the most serious, ambitious, and presumably, talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals." The abdication, Wolfe goes on to say, has left a gap in American letters huge enough "to drive an ungainly Reo rig like the *New York Journalism* through." Wolfe may be right when he predicts:

a hundred years from now when historians write about the 1960s in America . . . , they won't write about it as the decade of the war in Vietnam or of space exploration or of political assassinations . . . but as the decade when manners and morals, styles of living, attitudes towards the world changed the country more crucially than any political event . . .

If he is right -- and I believe he is -- then historians and anthropologists will find Tom Wolfe's new reader, *The Purple Decades*, a most fertile dig. In the twenty-one selections chosen from his nine major books of the last sixteen years, the reader gets an excellent sampling of the Wolfe canon.

For those of us who lived through the let-it-all-hang-out Sixties and the Me-Decades, an obsession with their contrast is almost irresistible. What could these two mini-epochs "in our time" possibly have in common to recommend this epithetical embrace? That Wolfe means it to be an allusion to the Mauve Decade, that favorite sobriquet for the decadent 1890s, seems unmistakable. Beyond the repeated references to women with "pre-Raphaelite hair," there is copious evidence of Wolfe's conviction that in the matters that mean the most -- to him, at least -- style and taste, the last two decades have been decadent.

Most of the fin de siècle attitudes are held up to ridicule in *The Purple Decades*. The disillusionment, the self-mocking cynicism,

the consciously artificial, the world weary lassitude, the insouciant urbanity, the slavish adherence to precious aesthetic ideologies, the narcissism -- all are targets of Wolfe's devastating wit. But where *mauve* suggests the soft, the delicate, the overwrought, the precious, even the effeminate, *purple* connotes all these in a more negative way, a more vulgar sense. And the factor that accounts for the difference is also unmistakable in Wolfe's reckoning: money and the way its distribution realigns social class. The decadence of the 1890s was essentially an aristocratic phenomenon, rising out of the ennui and effeteness of the privileged caste, but the new decadence of *The Purple Decades* is new-moneyed and vulgar.

Take the Sculls for example, "folk heroes of every social climber who ever hit New York." He made his money, a boodle of it, in operating New York's biggest fleet of taxicabs and managed through luck and raw smarts to corner the market on Pop Art: "In a blaze of publicity, they illuminated the secret route: *collecting wacked-out art*."

Not that Wolfe defends the exclusivity and inbreeding of the WASP New York art establishment. But when Wolfe allows the reader to make a contrast between its aesthetic values and those of the Sculls, there is little doubt where Wolfe's preferences lie. The great thing for the Sculls is being first, discovering an unknown, and by the ballsiest intimidation of people who should know better hyping him into the dubious status of Current Darling of the Haute Le Monde.

Similarly, Wolfe, in his essay on Baby Jane Holzer, describes the great lengths the Other Society has gone to legitimize itself:

But Baby Jane Holzer is a purer manifestation of Cafe Society's Girl of the Year. Her style of life has created her fame rock and roll, underground movies, decaying lofts, models, photographers, Living Pop Art, the twist, the frug, the mashed potatoes, stretch pants, pre-Raphaelite hair, Le Style Camp.

All of it has a common denominator. Once it was power that created the high style. But now high styles come from low places, from people who have no power, who slink away from it, in fact, who are themselves in the nether depths, in tainted "undergrounds." . . . Teen-agers, bohos, camp culturati, photographers -- they have won by default, because, after all, they do create styles . . .

All the conventional and legitimate cultural domains sewn up by the old-moneyed elite, the Other Society, lacking innovativeness itself, or too busy making money, or both, is forced to scour the landscape for the *outré*, the bizarre, the camp, the funky, and with money, chutzpah, and hype to elevate to High Style.

The theme of default runs through most of Wolfe's criticism of the decadent state of modern art and culture. As strong as his distaste is for the spurious cultural values of the new movers and shakers, their perverse veneration of the ugly, their kitsch-for-kitsch-sake aesthetics, his highest indignation is reserved for the abdicators, the ones who should know better. In the selections from *The Painted Word* and *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Wolfe vents his spleen most unequivocally. Where the tone of the Baby Jane Holzer piece might be described as bemused, the tone of these excerpts is high pique against people who ought to know better. Artists should not sell out for quick and glitzy notoriety and

Robert Ward



"Pair of Sox" Truro

## Book Reviews Continued

certainly, Yale, Wolfe's alma mater, should be unsulliable. He describes the Fallen Artist as one with "... an eye cocked to see if anyone in *le monde* was watching. *Have they noticed me yet?*" He describes in equally caustic tones Yale's capitulation to the Bauhaus architectural juggernaut in allowing an architect whose only qualification was canonical loyalty to design a library edition that "could scarcely have been distinguished from a Woolco discount store in a shopping center."

**L**ike most great wits, Wolfe is at his best when he is on the attack. His *betes noire* are so deserving of his ridicule and so effectively done up that in remembering all his books one has read over the years there is a temptation to dismiss him as a rather peevish sort. But, for all his personal style, what some would call his dandyism, and the razzle-dazzle of his journalistic style, there is much in *The Purple Decades* that reveals Wolfe to be a good deal more than a mean nay-sayer. His admiration for the courage of the astronauts and fighter pilots (and their wives) is unalloyed, a courage made all the more remarkable because it is never talked about. There's the respect for a Junior Johnson, who doesn't forget his roots, who builds his palatial new house in the same hollow he was born in, and who still takes the whiskey run for his father. And even a healthy American respect for those who can out-smart the government, certainly for the moonshiners outwitting the revenuers, but even for the mau-mauers beating down the bureaucrats. There's the faith in Yankee ingenuity, in gadgetry and technology, and always in genuine skill and hard work. (The descriptions of Yeager and the carrier-based fighter pilots are unexcelled.) He admires Frank Lloyd Wright for his "totally American architecture, arising from the American terrain and the spirit of the Middle West," and for his bold refusal to capitulate to the Le Corbusier coup. He obviously likes people to act their age, but he admires independence more, as we see in his description of the senior citizen caravans of silver Airstreams striking out on their own. And he likes deunkers and ego-deflaters, like himself, even when they come in the unlikely form of the raucous inmates in a women's prison who call out names and seductive compliments to the pedestrian dudes and macho bikers on the busy street below -- on the chance that they will hit a name right and cause a head to turn, a sucker, and scream with riotous and contemptuous laughter. All this, *The Purple Decades* reminds us of and sets our memories right, both about Wolfe and those two tempestuous decades.

Clifford Wood  
Professor of English

# To Happy Harold My Used Car Dealer

By Joseph DeRocco  
Professor of English

Your lot must be a happy lot, Harold.  
Your floodlights blaze at night with a candlepower  
that hurts the eyes and throws a glory  
on the turning maples out on Bedford Road.

All those brilliant spinning plastic discs  
and looping lines of wind-blown pennants  
warped in the dark and marvelous mirrors  
of your well-waxed Fords and Pontiacs  
make me happy, Harold, and make me wish you well.

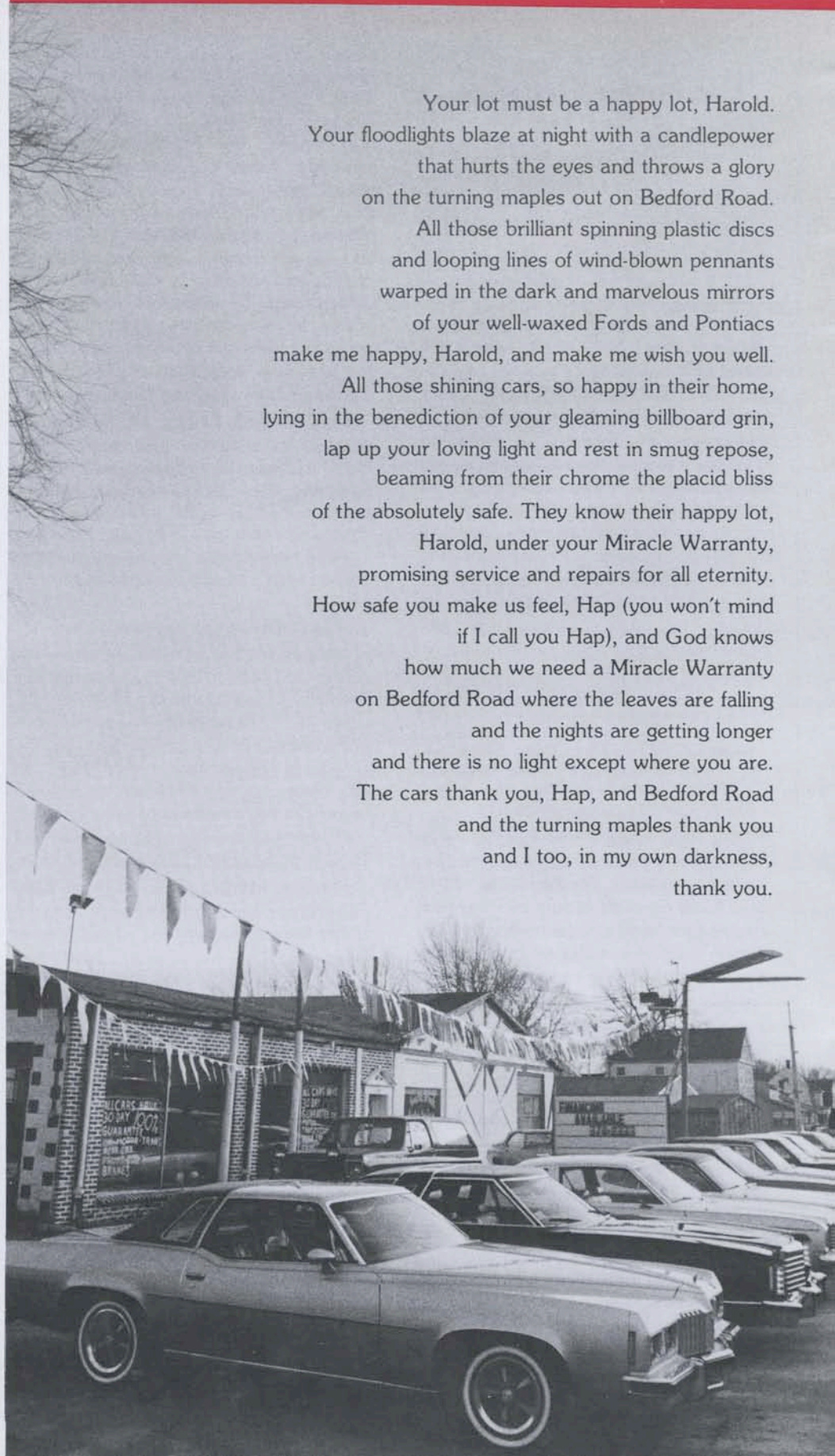
All those shining cars, so happy in their home,  
lying in the benediction of your gleaming billboard grin,  
lap up your loving light and rest in smug repose,  
beaming from their chrome the placid bliss  
of the absolutely safe. They know their happy lot,

Harold, under your Miracle Warranty,  
promising service and repairs for all eternity.

How safe you make us feel, Hap (you won't mind  
if I call you Hap), and God knows

how much we need a Miracle Warranty  
on Bedford Road where the leaves are falling  
and the nights are getting longer  
and there is no light except where you are.

The cars thank you, Hap, and Bedford Road  
and the turning maples thank you  
and I too, in my own darkness,  
thank you.



## Late Innings: A Baseball Companion

By Roger Angell  
Simon & Schuster, \$17.50

**A**rnold Portocorarraro! Testing, Testing. If Arnold jogs a memory cell then you qualify as an "A" student of baseball ready to be charmed by the gracefully written *Late Innings*. If he or his 1955 Kansas City Athletics' teammates Elmo Valo and Gus Zernial fail to inspire recollections among any reader who has reached middle life, then your position is out in left field. Which is simply to say that Roger Angell writes exclusively for fans as in the word *fanatics*.

Even the contemporary fan without historical baseball loyalties rooted back into the 1950s and 1960s can be satisfied by the detailed observations of this astute expert offering lasting impressions of major league pennant races spanning five seasons from 1977-1981. Sometimes, however, the onslaught of facts and figures will overwhelm all but the most insatiable buffs. Though judiciously edited and updated, this volume, a composite of articles appearing originally in *The New Yorker*, has stale overtones because it is chronologically removed from the immediacy of the events. Games won and lost, triples and strikeouts, base stealing and double plays would have been easier to absorb and savor in their original unit doses.

If this is not a book for everyone, it is most especially one for Red Sox aficionados. Fittingly, the book jacket with its panoramic scene of Fenway Park captures the essence of the author's professional team loyalty. Though Angell flirts with the National League Mets, he remains first and foremost a Bosox devotee.

Those of us who share this affliction will appreciate references to "psychic scars" and endless bracing "for another summer of Euripidean despair." There is the temptation to pray for release from such self-inflicted mental torture, particularly after reading Angell's interview with Bill Lee, who by then had been railroaded out of Beantown on the Montreal Express. It is easy to envision a scene where the colorful southpaw nonconformist responds to an Angell query by empathizing with Red Sox

rooters for their loyalty, but declares that they are " 'a little crazy.' " This is the "Spaceman" talking -- enough is enough! Nevertheless, the years of loyalty hold us as our prison bars, and the sentence must last.

Angell constantly connects us with the baseball past prior to his coverage of the years beginning with 1977 and in the process unlocks our own subjective memories of the Yawkey era. It is a story of warriors with Green Monster batting strokes, cement feet, and astronomical E.R.A.s. We are the loyalists whose first name association with the surname Nixon will forever remain Willard, the Yankee killer who once delighted all Yankee haters. We are the loyalists who endured the obese and rednecked Pinky Higgins and remember when he was placed on the injury shelf after pulling a hamstring while waddling toward home plate with his lineup card.

**O**ne must acknowledge comforting highlights such as the incomparably beauty of Teddy Baseball's magical swing. Sadly, such singular excellence and individual competence cannot obscure consistent team failure. In one of his premier essays the author accounts in heart-rendering detail the recent near exception -- the 1978 Red Sox play-off game. Victory would have provided entrance into the rarified atmosphere of the World Series with a strong squad capable of reversing the outcome of their two most recent October Classic appearances in 1946 and 1967. The obstacle to be overcome was those damn Yankees, and our hope was at least balanced by the gut-wrenching conviction that the Bronx Bombers were predestined to somehow fashion a victory. They did so, Bucky Dent style.

Being shrouded in Bosox sorrow never diminishes Angell's appreciation of baseball as it is played by teams at all levels. But he is deeply troubled by the professional version

of the sport. Throughout the book he peppers major league management with charges of selfishly raping a good game, carefully exempting the innovative, caring exceptions like Bill Veeck. Angell wastes no tears on "owners" who rue the passing of "ole Marster" reserve clause days and is miffed that his sporting public, in an unusual rejection of youth culture, accepts employer propaganda which insists that exorbitant and extortionate salary demands by their pampered youth must be capped or franchises will be bankrupt.

Attendance figures reflecting growth, TV revenue, and augmented team sale value are cited to disprove this assertion, and Angell harps upon management's refusal, even while searching for sympathy during the strike of 1981, to fortify its position by welcoming public scrutiny of financial ledgers. Angell duly notes the irony of the owners, linked only by a weak league cartel structure, asking purportedly greedy and immature players to agree to a severe modification of free agency status. This becomes management's only solution to protect themselves against cannibalizing individuals from within their owner ranks who tempt by enormous financial inducement to convince talented performers to jump teams. Fans can be grateful that baseball has this protective guardian Angell exposing such sham.

**B**y 1981 Angell was sickened of the almighty dollar employer-employee imbroglio, and bemoans the sound of silence when innocent fans are deprived of their summer joy. In his anger he ever-so-briefly experiences self-doubt, pondering over whether a half century of spectating has been misspent, whether the juvenile devotion which is shared by countless others like him has been cynically exploited by the professional system. Always resilient,



"Bayside Abstract #2"

he purges concerns about the business aspects of major league baseball and finds solace by reflecting upon spring training symbolized by the eternal picture of the wizened coach studying the serves of the aspiring rookie hurler and by simply watching as skilled athletes perform. Selfish moguls and millionaire players aside, he again knows why he so loves the game.

Purist instincts ultimately lead him away from the "Biggies" with their new sports complexes featuring slick artificial turf which in truth seems best designed not for baseball but to facilitate plopping an eight ball into a side pocket, conjuring up visions of Minnesota Fats rather than the Minnesota Twins. This traditionalist (never reactionary) spectator then experiences fulfillment at Yale field and finds his verdant, or perhaps sun-bleached, pastures by following the circuit of the semi-pro Burlington A's as recounted in an unmatched concluding episode which focuses upon the romance between friends Ron Gable and Linda Kittrell. Linda supportively encourages Ron who is pitching for the Burlington team a decade beyond his college playing days. Now Ron wistfully dreams of what might have been had he not aborted his promising collegiate pitching career because the jock image had seemed so irrelevant during the days of Kent State. Angell travels from New York City to Vermont and spends memorable nights sharing in this comeback trail saga. Though he is the intruder no one is hurt by this love triangle which has baseball as its object of common affection.

There are a number of other highlights ranging from interviews with some of the game's most articulate players to an appreciation of the sterling character of Wilver Stargell to a discussion of a naked truth issue, namely, women reporters' rights to postgame clubhouse access, to his rejection of the better-than-thou Steve Garvey Dodger types and preference for the street-smart 1978 Yankees led by a controversial slugger whose October heroics placed us in another "Jacksonian era." Perhaps his most poignant passages stem from self-analysis about his relationship with pitching greats Bob Gibson and particularly Smokey Joe Wood. While soliciting information from Wood about his major league playing career circa 1912, Angell is struck by the realization that this octogenarian has been similarly badgered over the course of two generations until the "last juice and sweetness must have been squeezed out of these ancient games years ago." Angell has disappointed himself, for he knows that he has become the typical fan, thoughtlessly

embracing and smothering sports heroes, denying their privacy, and presumptively assuming the right to insist that they respond openly and with warmth to every public demand. And thus he shares the guilt of owner arrogance so easily condemned in others.

By Philip T. Silvia, Jr.  
Department of History

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## High School Achievement

By

James S. Coleman  
Thomas Hoffer  
Sally Kilgore  
Basic Books, \$20.75

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American public schools have been under attack by increasing numbers of individuals and special interest groups. Their charges, however, have been far from homogeneous and are often contradictory. Nevertheless, because of the volume of such criticism one is left with the distinct impression that our public schools are failing. In *High School Achievement* James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, while not proclaiming public high schools a complete failure, do argue that compared to private high schools they do not succeed nearly as well. The book represents their attempt to substantiate this claim, to identify the causes of the comparative failure, and to append their proposals to an already well-developed list of remedies for improvement.

Proper understanding and evaluation of *High School Achievement* requires that it be put in historical perspective. During the 1960s and 1970s shifting public policy had set a goal of high academic achievement for all students regardless of race or socio-economic background. It was clear that because of the manner of funding public schools less affluent students for the most part attended schools that lacked the resources found in the schools of wealthier communities. And given the high correlation of Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities with poverty levels, the issue assumed significant racial overtones. Both the cause of and the solution to the seemingly associated problems of low academic achievement and lack of later economic success appeared fairly obvious. Employing a rather simplistic, linear reasoning, policy makers maintained that

failure to succeed economically was caused by low academic achievement which in turn was caused by inadequate educational resources.

It was in this context that the first Coleman Report appeared in 1966. With that influential study, entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report*, Coleman stunned many educators, politicians, and others by maintaining a position quite different from the prevailing one. Relying on a rather large and impressive data base, he argued that physical resources were not very important in determining academic achievement. Rather, he argued, the causes of low achievement were to be found primarily in the students backgrounds -- particularly in their family life and socio-economic class. These conclusions led many to make the unwarranted generalization that "Schools don't make a difference."

But schools do, or at least can make a difference. Following the first Coleman Report, other researchers began to identify a set of factors that differentiate good public schools from poor ones. In study after study the evidence indicated five basic factors affecting student academic achievement: (1) strong academic leadership by the school principal; (2) a high degree of discipline; (3) emphasis on the basics; (4) high teacher expectations for academic achievement, regardless of the students' backgrounds; and (5) consistent testing of students to assess achievement. However, virtually all of these studies focused on the elementary school level.

Now in *High School Achievement*, Coleman and his co-authors attempt to establish a position that develops the conclusions of the first Coleman Report and confirms for the high school level the conclusions of the elementary school researchers. The argument of *High School Achievement* is based on a 1980 sample of 1015 public and private high schools and includes data on 28,465 seniors and 30,263 sophomores. It essentially involves a comparison of public and private high school students in terms of their levels of academic achievement in reading, mathematics, and vocabulary. The study is sufficiently sophisticated and complex that a careful reading is required to sort out the various contingencies and qualifications that are attached to its many conclusions.

Nevertheless, some of the more interesting general conclusions are the following: private high school students demonstrate significantly higher academic

achievement than do their public school counterparts; and importantly, the achievement gap gradually increases from the sophomore to the senior year so that private school students are approximately two grade levels ahead of public school students at the time of graduation. Moreover, Catholic high schools are much more effective in significantly increasing the achievement levels of minority students than are either public schools or non-Catholic private schools.

There are, Coleman argues, two major factors affecting high school achievement and the concomitant differences between public and private high schools: the existing levels of discipline and academic demands. Both are significantly higher in private as opposed to most public schools and, in a sense, cause high achievement. It is not the private nature of the school *per se* that is significant, but the ability and willingness of the private school to include these factors.

Since these two factors appear to be the primary causes of high achievement, it is suggested that the remedy for the rather poor showing of most public high schools is to increase both the academic demands and the discipline levels of the schools. Public high schools must reverse the trend of the 1970s which included the development of student-defined curriculum, a de-emphasis of the traditional curriculum, liberalized grading, and the blurring of the distinction between discrimination on the basis of race and discrimination on the basis of performance. Such academic changes could be implemented fairly well by the schools themselves, assisted perhaps by colleges reaffirming traditional, more rigorous admissions standards. Improving discipline, however, is another matter. Full civil rights for students, state and federal policies and laws (such as Public Law 94-142 which reduces school discretion in coping with emotionally disturbed children), and family circumstances frequently militate against the introduction of sound disciplinary policies.

Already a controversial book, *High School Achievement* draws conclusions that should not be uncritically embraced or rejected by those who are predisposed to do so. The arguments are complex and require careful reading and analysis. But the effort should result in a clearer and more informed understanding of the factors affecting academic achievement at the high school level.

By Robert E. Fitzgibbons  
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## CULTURAL COMMENTARY

### Thinking About Education: French and American Primary Schools

By Barbara Apstein

Despite persistent reports of the "Americanization" of France, and the French success of American cultural exports as diverse as Jerry Lewis, fast food, E.T., and the Sony Walkman, France retains its distinctive traditions in many less visible but more significant ways. A six month sabbatical last spring gave our family a chance to compare French primary schools with our own, and in the process to examine some of our assumptions about the education of young children. About a week after our arrival in Boulogne-Billancourt, a middle-class suburb west of Paris, we enrolled our children, Daniel and Andrew, then aged 7 and 3, in the local public school.

What impressed us first was the school's serious and business-like atmosphere. The school building, situated in the middle of a city block, might have been mistaken for a large apartment house, were it not for the signs engraved above its three entrances: Ecole des Filles, Ecole des Garçons, Ecole Maternelle (Girls' School, Boys' School, Nursery School). These entrances, we soon discovered, are open between the hours of 8:15 and 8:45 a.m., at lunchtime, and finally at 4:00, when the children are dismissed. Otherwise they are locked and, as in a city apartment building, anyone who wants to be admitted has to ring for the concierge or superintendent. As Americans accustomed

to a building always open during school hours, a bright "Welcome" sign over the entrance and a general "Come in and get acquainted" atmosphere, we were somewhat taken aback.

The school's insistence on maintaining its privacy extended further. One of the projects I had planned was to spend one morning a week as an aide in Daniel's classroom. His

American teachers had always welcomed my offers of assistance. But the suggestion perplexed his teacher, Madame Rousseau, a cheerful young woman in her 20s, who clearly had never heard of such an idea before. She didn't see anything wrong with my offer to help, but would have to ask permission of the Principal, Madame Chaput. About a week later, I was informed of Madame Chaput's unequivocal "non": parents are permitted to visit, she said, on a special "Portes Ouvertes" (open house) day, which she had not yet organized (and as far as I know, never did). She further explained that if she let me visit a class, then everybody would want to, indicating with a flurry of arm waving the appalling chaos that was likely to ensue.

Although we resented these restrictions at first, after a few months we began to see that this insistence on privacy has a certain logic. Since school is considered to be a kind of business, what goes on in the classroom seems no more a matter for public scrutiny than what goes on in a doctor's examination room or an accountant's office. This businesslike atmosphere is reflected in the order and seriousness of the French classroom. Children don't get up and wander around or chatter with one another, as frequently happens in our American second grade classroom, and undoubtedly

far less time is wasted in reasoning with refractory youngsters.

Equally alien to the French is the American idea of the school as a center of community activity. The École Communale de la Ville de Boulogne-Billancourt has neither t-shirts, sweaters, nor bookbags emblazoned with its emblem: it hawks no bumper stickers and finances no school teams; it

#### exercices de lecture

