

Editorial

"IT WAS THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING, and the beautiful melody of the blue jay's song broke the stillness of the morning."

"Okay, what's wrong with that sentence?" asked Miss Bodnar, our ninth-grade English teacher. The sentence was one she had selected from the short stories we had handed in the previous week.

None of us saw anything wrong with the sentence. We knew that short stories should have Description in them (though we didn't know why) and this surely was Description. We of course didn't recognize the sentence's triteness, but this was not the problem Miss Bodnar had in mind. Her criticism was that the call of a blue jay actually sounds like the screeching of a rusty hinge. "To avoid mistakes like that," she advised, "write what you know about."

This is, of course, Rule 1 of Fiction, but we didn't like the idea. Even though we were all enormously wrapped up in our own adolescent lives, we thought that fiction should take you away from the everyday. (The story I had written for this assignment was about the struggle to survive of an aviator whose plane had crashed in Greenland.)

Well, there, writ quite small, was my first introduction to one of the central dilemmas of fiction. We're not interested in the ordinary, and we don't know enough about the extraordinary to write about it. Successful fiction either makes the ordinary interesting, or the extraordinary believable. Either way, it's a good trick.

A good example of the first sort of good trick is the story by Thea E. Smith in this issue. Its setting is not Greenland, but a milieu very much like mine (and, probably, yours). Its concerns are very familiar ones to many of us. But reading it is a voyage of discovery anyway. "Ruth's Problem" is a chapter in Smith's novel *She Let Herself Go*, for which Smith has just begun to seek a publisher. The novel deserves publication.

“Scar,” by Lawrence Mathews, on the other hand, takes us away, to a police station in which the clearly disordered protagonist is being questioned about a murder. The story gives us the thrill of a peek into the bizarre; but at the same time, it rings true. We can hope, anyway, that Mathews is breaking Rule 1, and that he doesn’t have too intimate a familiarity with what he’s writing about.

Either way, of course, it’s still *fiction*: it’s an exercise in the imagination, saying what must be true-to-life, in some sense, but what is not true. And when one writes in a work of fiction “I’m gonna blow up the school!” that’s not at all the same thing as writing that in a letter to the principal. These distinctions are not terribly difficult ones, but they apparently have escaped some people involved in recent events widely publicised in Canada. A sixteen-year-old boy, assigned to write a monologue for his drama class, produced a work entitled “Twisted” in which a boy who was severely bullied and harassed by his schoolmates responds at last by detonating packages of dynamite in the school cafeteria at lunchtime. This is “writing what you know about” insofar as the author appears to have been the victim of bullying at school himself; but the bombing was purely imaginary. The boy read his monologue in class; shortly afterwards, the police did a thorough search of his house (including his mother’s underwear drawer), and turned up nothing related—no explosives or armaments—just a copy of his monologue on the family computer. But he was arrested, charged with uttering death threats, and held in jail for thirty-two days (including Christmas) until he was allowed release on \$10,000 bail. He now awaits trial.

It’s not clear that these are all the details of the case. There has been some speculation that there might have been some other, more serious, activities for which he was charged. In Canada, the Young Offenders Act prohibits releasing his name or other details of the case. But, based on what is known, there has been a massive outraged reaction here. The boy, it appears, was arrested for committing fiction.

It seems that some people involved here don’t really understand the idea of fiction. Radio interviews with a school and a police official involved gave a hint that their literary sensibilities might not be very highly tuned: they both talked *Officialese*, the

dialect in which, for example, to report that you and your partner saw somebody driving a car, you say “The other officer and myself observed an individual operating a vehicle.” It’s the language for the pompous and the officious, for the linguistically insensitive and the not-very-bright.

Publication of “Twisted” is illegal because of the information gag I spoke of, but I would have liked to have printed it, for political reasons. I have no idea about its literary merits, though we do have a quote from the kid which may hint at his literary style. When asked by a reporter about his reaction to all the attention his case had brought, he replied, “I’m like, wow.”

Another attack on literary freedom—further from home, but more relevant to this issue of the *Review*—was the jailing of the Nigerian poet and civil rights activist Ogaga Ifowodo. According to a news release from PEN, the writers’ organization, Ifowodo was arrested on his return to Nigeria from the 1997 Commonwealth Summit in Edinburgh, where he and other activists criticised the Nigerian government. Held in solitary confinement without charge for over six months, he was released and granted amnesty after PEN gave his case wide publicity. I’m pleased that we’re publishing one of his poems: “You Are Chic Now, Che.”

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