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Education in Literature

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Introduction

For the past twenty-plus years I have been engaged in educational activities: developing learning materials and supervising educational research projects. In my opinion, the goal of educational research is not only to obtain the answers to specific research questions, but also to obtain *insight* into the process of teaching and learning, insight that will be useful to teachers, students and people who develop learning materials. Educational insight can also be obtained through reflection on one's own experience, but people who write their reflections usually had few difficulties at school.

I wish to present a third source of educational insight: novels. Clearly, this source is anecdotal and results from reflection, but consider the writers: they are high-respected and successful authors who can portray characters with depth and passion. Most novels are, of course, partially autobiographic, so they do describe to a high degree of veracity the authors' reflections on their own education. This genre enables me to express opinions that are not backed by formal research, but that are perhaps more convincing than opinions based merely on my own reflection.

Technical note: I am reading or re-reading these books on my Kindle, so quotes appear without page references.

Here is the list of the books that write about:

- I start with Issac Asimov's novella *Profession*, because it enables me to sound off on the trends and fads of educational technology.
- If you only read one book in my list, please look at Hermann Hesse's *Unterm Rad*. I am using the translation by Michael Roloff entitled *Beneath the Wheel*. There is another translation by Walter J. Strachan called *The Prodigy*. Hesse won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946 and this early semi-autobiographical novel provides insight into the soul of a talented boy subjected to overwhelming pressure to succeed in a highly formalized educational system.
- Still in Germany, another favorite book of mine: Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The same techniques used to instill critical thinking and liberal education can also be used to indoctrinate. Kantorek encourages his students to enlist and fight in World War I; there is some comic relief when he himself is called up.
- Since many of us are academics, it is instructive to read an unvarnished portrayal of the life of a university faculty member. John Williams, who was himself a professor of English and creative writing, tells the story of William *Stoner*, a farm boy who rather unintentionally drifts into a similar career, but who is eventually ground into dust by the poisonous academic environment.
- Taha Hussein's autobiographical *Al-Ayyam*, *The Days*, is one of the most famous works of Arabic literature. Hussein became blind at an early age; nevertheless, he successfully studied for PhD degrees in Egypt and France and then worked as a professor and a journalist, and as the minister of education. With the increased emphasis on accessibility, his work can provide insight to parents and teachers of the educational requirements of disabled students.
- Next to India. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* tells the stories of an indigent student attempting to achieve higher education, though Maneck, the student, is only one of the four main characters eking out a living. His story is relevant in an age of extremely high tuition fees that discourage students from poor families from attended university.
- Remaining in India, Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* explores the relation of culture to education. The book also contains horrifying details of what can happen in a boarding school.
- Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* addresses the topic of diversity through the tragedy of a professor caught up in a scandal of political correctness in a particularly ironic way.

Cramming it in bit by bit

As a kid I read some science fiction, but I lost interest in science fiction in favor of history and historical novels. While science fiction is *plausible* to use the word popularized by *The Mythbusters*, what really happened in the past is totally *implausible* and therefore more interesting.

It is hardly necessary to introduce Isaac Asimov (1920-1992). One of his early works is *Profession*, first published in 1957 and appearing in the anthology *Nine Tomorrows*.

Thousands of years from now the educational system is fully technological. No more classrooms, teachers or books. At age eight, on Reading Day, children are "taped" and suddenly know how to read. At age eighteen, on Education Day, they are analyzed and the most appropriate profession is determined for each one. They are then "taped" and instantly

become fully qualified for their professions. Everyone wears a badge "Registered cashier" or "Registered computer programmer." At a competition called the Olympics (for reasons long forgotten), representatives from galaxies all over the universe host competitions whose winners are offered plum positions on other worlds.

The central character of the story is George Platen who is told that the makeup of his brain makes it impossible to tape him for any profession. He is institutionalized where his mentor Omani gently tries to lift George out of his depression and to convince him to study from books. George is not impressed:

> "What good does it do you to read the book?" ...
>
> "Call it the satisfaction of curiosity," he said. "I understand a little of it today, perhaps a little more tomorrow. That's a victory in a way."

There now ensues an adventure which I won't summarize so as not to spoil the story. George eventually comes to realize that:

> Tapes are actually bad. They teach too much; they're too painless. A man who learns that way doesn't know how to learn any other way. He's frozen into whatever position he's been taped. Now if a person weren't given tapes but were forced to learn by hand, so to speak, from the start; why, then he'd get the habit of learning, and continue to learn.

Students must actually attend schools:

> Omani said, "This is a classroom." ... "You mean they're cramming it in bit by bit." "That's right. This is the way everyone did it in ancient times."

There are several concepts here worth contemplating: They teach too much; they're too painless. ... he'd get into the habit of learning, and continue to learn. ... I understand a little of it today, perhaps a little more tomorrow. ... cramming it in bit by bit.

Can learning be painless? Probably not. There is one exception, of course, learning one's native language. While time consuming, children don't seem to "suffer" during the process. However, those of us who have attempted to learn additional languages as adults know that the process is very painful, requiring hard work and a willingness to overcome deep frustration. I seriously doubt that we can learn anything useful about learning in general from the painless process of children attaining fluency in their native languages.

What about other subjects? Failure to become fluent in one's native language is extremely rare, but failure to learn other subjects is common, and even successful learning depends on the individual and the subject being learned. Whether or not test scores measure anything useful is controversial, but it cannot be controversial that scores vary from very low to very high, so clearly some people are learning (or whatever) more than others.

Too often one hears of an impending revolution in education brought about by technology. I have worked on educational technology myself and we have found that it is helpful in many ways, but it will certainly not make learning painless like Asimov's tapes. Let us examine two cases to see if there is an alternative to "cramming it in bit by bit."

I have attempted to learn many languages. Grammar is more or less bounded, though for a non-native speaker some aspects can be daunting. But overall, I did not find it too difficult to

get a feel for the grammar of several languages. The problem is to develop an adequate vocabulary of words and idioms, and to be able to understand and to *generate* sentences. To be able to actually use a language you have to have at your command at least two thousands words. This can be extremely difficult, especially in languages where you have to memorize more than just the word itself, such as the three genders in German and the irregular plurals in Arabic.

Clearly, technology has a role to play. Not only do we have electronic dictionaries, which are far easier to use than paper dictionaries, but the dictionaries can be linked to texts. On my Kindle, a long touch of a word instantly brings up the translation. Even automatic translation is helpful. While Google Translate often returns atrocious translations, it can help by suggesting sentence structure and alternate meanings of words.

But does technology offer an alternative to cramming it in bit by bit? Of course not. It is extremely frustrating to encounter a word you looked up yesterday and have already forgotten. Reading may not be too difficult, because you can often remember words in context, but to be able to generate meaningful sentences in speech or writing requires that the grammar and vocabulary be internalized and that it can be fetched instantly on demand. Will this every be painless? Can we be taped to fluency in a foreign language? Hardly.

Learning mathematics or computer programming will also never be painless. Recently, I volunteered to help secondary school mathematics students. I found it challenging to solve problems in topics I hadn't seen in fifty years, and I quickly experienced many of the same frustrations that secondary school students encounter. While motion problems, sequences and derivatives aren't too hard because there are straightforward ways to approach them, proving theorems in Euclidean geometry is another story. I would stare at a blank piece of paper, an experience well known by students of programming who stare at a blank computer screen. Where to start?

There is an official list of about one hundred theorems that students are allowed to use on their matriculation examinations without proving them, although the list itself may not be used during the examinations. Aside from the fact that memorizing stuff is no longer important now that everything is available by googling, the list provides no help in locating the theorems that will help solve a particular problem.

Can technology provide a royal road to geometry? Again, I doubt it. Proving theorems is a difficult intellectual task and one can only become proficient by constant and painful practice.

Our students are allowed to use calculators in their exams. More than once I found myself pushing a student's calculator aside and asking him to look at the unit circle when working on a problem in trigonometry or to try to solve a quadratic equation by factoring. The use of the calculator makes it difficult to obtain insight into the structure of the problem and the solution.

Both in mathematics and programming, a major issue is debugging. Since I don't have college admission on the line, I was frequently careless with my calculations and had to carefully review them when the results were suspicious. Can technology help? Well, yes, if students can use a general-purpose computer with software for computer algebra during exams. But as long as we are asking students to compute derivatives and integrals without such software, I don't see technology has making much difference.

The situation is somewhat different in programming: since the entire process is carried out by the computer, the computer can help with debugging. An ongoing field of research tries to make compiler error messages more understandable and more likely to assist in locating bugs.

Strangely, the popular language Python generates the truly helpful message "invalid syntax"! Still, success in debugging, like success in proving theorems, is a skill that comes from long experience. As Omani said: "I understand a little of it today, perhaps a little more tomorrow."

> [George] he'd get the habit of learning, and continue to learn.

I am very sympathetic to this. Learning is almost like a profession and you get better at it with experience. It has become a cliche, but learning to learn really is becoming more important with the easy availability of facts online and the need to rapidly change careers or at least to change focus of one's career.

In learning mathematics, perhaps the most important habit of learning is the realization that it is difficult:

> Why should he have to read and reread a passage, then stare at a mathematical relationship and not understand it at once?

It helps to compare different explanations and the internet certainly helps with this. All mathematicians, but few students, realize the importance of getting your unconscious to work on a problem. Students need to be coached that success in learning mathematics requires persistence and they need to be informed of the importance of taking breaks to let the unconscious mind work.

This applies to everyone, even to Albert Einstein:

> Years later Albert recalled that he had gone to see [Michele, pronounced Mi-'ke-leh] Besso one fine spring day and laid out the entire problem, the schism between mechanics and Lorentzian electrodynamics, that he had been vainly struggling with for the last year. They talked for hours, rehashing every aspect of the dilemma. At the end of the day, Albert announced that he was giving up the entire quest.
>
> That night everything changed. The next day Albert went back to Michele's house and without even greeting him blurted, "Thank you. I've completely solved the problem."
>
> From: Dennis Overbye, *Einstein in Love: A Scientific Romance*, Penguin (2000), p. 135.

So the next time that a student says: "What do you want from me? I'm not Einstein!" tell him that even Einstein had to work hard, became frustrated, wanted to give up, but found the strength to persevere.

Educational technology can facilitate learning, but it requires a lot of experimentation and research to determine exactly what can be accomplished, and how to get the most out of technology with a reasonable effort on the part of the teachers and students. Claims of a revolution in education are as credible as Asimov's "taping" and ultimately of little value, as George Platen eventually discovered. Learning will always be painful, students will always have to cram it in bit by bit, and it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to make this clear and to provide encouragement and support.

Why do you think you have vacations?

Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946. He was born in the southern German state of Württemberg and lived in Switzerland for much of his life. He traveled in the east and was influenced by Buddhism. I first novel of Hesse that I read was *Steppenwulf*, the story of a recluse who is drawn out of his shell by mysterious characters.

In 1906 Hesse published *Unterm Rad*, which was based on his time as a student at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Maulbronn Abbey, a monastery that was converted into a Protestant school after the Reformation. Maulbronn is now a World Heritage Site. There are two translations of *Unterm Rad* into English, one by Michael Roloff, *Beneath the Wheel* (the one I quote from), and the other by W.J. Strachan, *The Prodigy*.

The protagonist of the story is Hans Giebenrath a "gifted child." There was only one educational option available to a talented small-town boy:

> Thus his future was mapped out, for in all of Swabia there existed but one narrow path for talented boys---that is, unless their parents were wealthy. After passing the state examination, he could enter the theological academy at Maulbronn, then the seminary at Tübingen, and then go on to either the minister's pulpit or the scholar's lectern.

Hans is put under intense pressure from the adults in the town---his father, his teachers, the pastor, a clever shoemaker excepted---to study hard and succeed in the entrance examinations to Maulbronn. Hans is admitted, but finds it difficult to adapt to the atmosphere at the boarding school and to maintain his interest and dedication to academic studies. A series of tragic incidents causes Hans to suffer a breakdown. He returns to his hometown, to the extreme disappointment of those who nurtured him and who expected so much from him. For lack of a better option, Hans becomes an apprentice in a metal workshop, but he is clearly unsuited to manual labor and to the drunken sprees of the other apprentices. The ending is somewhat ambiguous and I won't spoil it.

The strongest impression I took away from the portrayal of Hans' schooling is the narrowness of the curriculum. It is almost entirely classical---Latin and Greek---with only a bit of mathematics. Although I was aware that classical education was the norm, the exclusion of other subjects was unexpected.

Additional private lessons are commonly offered to students who wish to improve their performance. In the case of Hans, his mentors wished to encourage his outstanding talents and volunteered to spend additional time with him. Hans had become their "project," and his success was to be the success of the school and the town:

> Every day, when Hans completed his classwork at four in the afternoon, he had an extra Greek lesson with the principal; at six, the pastor was so kind as to coach him in Latin and religion. Twice a week, after supper, he received an extra math lesson from the mathematics teacher.

I had expected that teaching of Latin and Greek would be justified under the myth that studying them would teach and encourage logical thinking. Here, this is the task of mathematics:

> In mathematics the main emphasis was on especially complicated solutions. Arriving at these solutions, the teacher insisted, was not as worthless for future courses of study as might appear, for they surpassed many of his main subjects in providing him with the basis for sober, cogent and successful reasoning.

I am always wary of claims that some particular subject, whether it be Latin, math or computer science, can develop "sober, cogent and successful reasoning." I think that Asimov was correct in characterizing education as "learning to learn," and the particular choice of subjects is not too important.

Poor Hans was subjected to excessive homework:

> The assignments that accumulated from lesson to lesson during the course of the day he was able to complete later in the evening, at home, in the kindly glow of his lamp. ... These calm labors ... usually were not completed before ten o'clock on Tuesdays and Saturdays, on other days not before eleven or twelve.

Hans suffered terribly from missing out on the outdoor activities he loved so much:

> He remembered how many hours, how many days and half days he had spent here, how often he had gone swimming or dived, rowed and fished here. Yes, fishing! He had almost forgotten what it was like to go fishing, and one year he had cried so bitterly when he'd been forbidden to, on account of the examination.

Today the opposite extreme is in fashion: no homework and few demands on students. I find this unrealistic. The few hours one spends in school, often in overcrowded classrooms, are hardly sufficient to achieve significant learning. It is not possible to learn a foreign language or mathematics or computer science without extensive practice. The challenge is to achieve a proper balance.

Nevertheless, Hans felt that there were compensations for his hard work: a feeling of superiority and the anticipation of a bright future:

> But he had also experienced those few hours more valuable than all lost boyhood joys, those few rare, dreamlike hours filled with the pride, intoxication and certainty of victory; hours during which he had dreamed himself beyond school and examinations into the elect circle of higher beings. He had been seized by a bold and marvelous premonition that he was really something special, superior to his fat-cheeked, good-natured companions on whom he would one day look down from distant heights.

This raises the dilemma of selecting the best education for gifted children. On the one hand, there is the urge to encourage them, to give them every possible advantage in a competitive world; on the other hand, there is the anxiety that they will be cut off from from the social world of school. Hans Giebenrath, naturally shy and withdrawn (we would call him a nerd or a geek), suffered immense loneliness and much of the book is devoted to his clumsy attempts at engaging first with other students at Maulbronn and later with the youth of the town.

Hans travels with his father to Stuttgart for the examination and both are in a state of high anxiety. Hans excels in the exam, placing second among all the candidates. One episode during the oral part of the exam is almost comical:

> At the end they asked him if he knew an irregularly formed aorist, but he didn't. "You can go now. There's the door, to your right." He got up, but at the door he remembered the aorist. He stopped. "Go ahead," they called to him. "Go ahead. Or aren't you feeling well?" "No, but the aorist just came back to me."

Just for fun, I looked it up. In Greek grammar, the aorist is "an unqualified past tense of a verb without reference to duration or completion of an action." I'm sure this knowledge will help you in the future.

The episode raises the question of how university entrance exams should be structured. There are those who claim that there should be no exams at all: let everyone in and see who succeeds. There is some merit to this position, because there are always anomalous cases of people who flunk entrance exams, but later succeed in their university education. However, I don't really see how entrance exams can be dispensed with.

First and foremost there are economic considerations: finding the facilities and instructors for large numbers of students, many of whom will fail. Since I am not now and never have been an administrator, I won't consider this aspect. The second reason is that many students are "wasting" a year that could be profitably spend elsewhere, perhaps studying in another framework or starting a business. This objection has merit but is surely patronizing: if a student wants to waste a year, we can offer counseling, but it is not our place to deny him a chance.

What really bothers me is that accepting students who have little chance of success will necessarily lower standards. You can't teach a class and refuse to answer and re-answer questions, and to review again and again material that the average student has already grasped. It can be difficult to refuse to bow to pressure to give simpler exams so that more students will pass. I have had this happen to me and it is enormously frustrating when many of the students are not up to performing at the level you expect. Therefore, I believe that entrance exams are a necessary evil, even if a few candidates will be unfairly turned away.

If we accept that entrance exams are needed, what type of exams are appropriate? This is, of course, a densely-laid minefield, and I don't know enough about it to properly discuss it. Should the exams be factual, asking students to recall obscure facts like the aorist tense? Should they more holistic, looking at students' overall achievements in secondary school? The current favorite is the psychometric exams, which have a reputation for being culturally unfair. I once heard a lecture from the people who develop the exams: they claim that the exams *successfully predict* academic achievement. This raises the question of the relevance and importance of academic achievement in one's future life, but I'll leave this issue, and get back to a jubilant Hans Giebenrath, returning home for the summer holidays, before starting school at Maulbronn.

Now comes the most heart-wrenching part of the story. Instead of letting the victorious Hans rest on his laurels and gather strength for the coming school year by hiking, fishing and swimming, well-meaning mentors push him even further:

> "The academic introduction into this new world," the pastor continued, "will of course rob it of some of its magic. The study of Hebrew may also make rather one-sided demands on you at first. If you like, we can make a small beginning during your vacation. ... You would have to spend an hour or two a day at most. But no more than that because, more than anything else, you should be able to enjoy the period of relaxation you so highly deserve. It's only a suggestion of course, the last thing I want to do is spoil your holiday."
>
> [The school principal:] "Now I wanted to suggest that you work a little in advance during the vacation. Of course, with moderation. I thought that one or two hours a day would be just about right.

Small beginning! With moderation! An hour or two a day at most! Studying Hebrew, Homer, New Testament Greek and math during the summer! Hans simply did not have the inner strength to resist these offers. Ambition had become infectious:

> For he was aware that in the academy he would have to be even more ambitious if he wanted to outstrip his new fellow students. Why did he want to surpass them actually? He didn't really know himself. For three years now he had been the object of special attention. The teachers, the pastor, his father and particularly the principal had egged and urged him on and had never let him catch his breath.

Hans spends endless hours engaged in study and is even proud of his accomplishments, as is his father. Ironically, only the devout shoemaker seems to have some common sense about him:

> "Nothing is wrong with learning but look at what thin arms you have. You really ought to put on a little weight. ... At your age one has to get lots of fresh air and exercise and have a good rest. Why do you think you have vacations? Certainly not to sit around your room and go on learning.

The boundless ambition of Hans' mentors and of Hans himself has driven away all common sense.

A large section of the book is devoted to Hans' stay at Maulbronn. He encountered what I call the *Einstein complex* that affects everyone attending an elite university: after being at or near the top of your class in secondary school, you enter a class where everyone is like that and you might turn out to be (heaven forbid) average. Shy and retiring, Hans struggles to find friends, and his academic achievements become linked with his social life:

> The more intimate and happier Hans became with his friend, the more alienated he became from school. ... The teachers watched in horror as their model student turned into a problem child and succumbed to the bad influence of the dubious Heilner.

Hesse raises the question of whether teachers have sufficient self-confidence to deal with genius:

> Teachers dread nothing so much as unusual characteristics in precocious boys during the initial stages of their adolescence. ... A schoolmaster will prefer to have a couple of dumbheads in his class than a single genius, and if you regard it objectively, he is of course right. His task is not to produce extravagant intellects but good Latinists, arithmeticians and sober decent folk.

This is a difficult problem that many teachers face: what to do with the extraordinarily gifted student. I don't presume to offer advice here. I just want to warn against an inflation of "giftedness," and the creation of more tragic Hans Giebenraths. Most gifted children will do well in school with a bit of extra challenge. It is only at the extreme that special provisions must be made.

Like Hesse, eventually Hans was forced to leave Maulbronn. His failure reduces his status in town to nothingness. Hesse hurls out his anger:

> All these conscientious guides of youth---from the headmaster to Father Giebenrath, professors and tutors---regarded Hans as an impediment in their path, a recalcitrant and listless something which had to be compelled to move. ... Nor did it occur to any of them that a fragile creature had been reduced to this state by virtue of school and the barbaric ambition of his father and his grammar-school teacher. Why was he forced to work until late at night during the most sensitive and precarious period of his life? Why purposely alienated from his friends in grammar school? Why deprived of needed rest and forbidden to go fishing? Why instilled with a shabby ambition? Why had they not even granted him his well-deserved vacation after the examination?

Unfortunately, the lost opportunities of youth could not be recovered:

> During these weeks Hans realized for the first time that he had had no friends during his last two years in grammar school. Some of his former companions had left town altogether, and others, he noticed, had become apprentices. With none of them did he have anything in common, there was nothing he wanted from any of them, and none of them bothered with him.

What happens to young people who flunk the bar exam or leave college? Probably, they just drift into some occupation, perhaps even an unsuitable one:

> When they had finished supper and Hans wanted to get up, his father in his curt manner said: "Would you like to become a mechanic, Hans, or a clerk?"

Hans looks up an old school-friend August who has become a senior apprentice in a metalworking shop:

> "That's a problem, all right ... because you're not what I would call a muscle-man.

His ambitions were shattered:

> Whenever he passed the school house, the principal's house or the math teacher's, Flaig's workshop or the vicarage, he felt quite wretched. So much effort, so much pride and ambition and hope and dreaming---and all for nothing. All of it only so that now, later than any of his former schoolmates and ridiculed by all, he could become the junior apprentice in a mechanic's workshop.

Needless to say, Hans is not destined for success as a mechanic. The master is clear from the beginning as to what is expected:

> "... And while you're working don't pay attention to anything but your instructions. An apprentice doesn't need to have ideas of his own."

Hans is destroyed again by manual labor. Feel free to skip the following quote, as it might lead you to guess the ending, but it pithily sums up the book. Flaig, the shoemaker, was the only one who really understand what happened:

> "There you see a couple of gentlemen," he said softly, "who helped to put him where he is now." "What?" Giebenrath exclaimed and gave the

> shoemaker a dubious, frightened look. "But, my God, how?" "Take it easy, neighbor. I just meant the schoolmasters."

Beneath the Wheel is a touching portrayal of what happens when kids are crushed under the weight of excessive expectations. Today, we are probably at the other extreme: trepidation at the necessity of telling a kid that he made a mistake and excusing it as "alternative conceptions," which are now called "alternative facts."

If it had not been for you he would have lived just that much longer

Im Westen nichts Neues translated something incorrectly as *All Quiet on the Western Front* is surely one of the most famous books ever written. Two successful films were based on the book, one in 1930 and one in 1979.

All Quiet on the Western Front (1928) was written by Erich Maria Remarque, the pen name of Erich Paul Remark (1898-1970), based upon his experience as a soldier in the German Army in World War I. Like many of the famous novels and memoirs of WWI, it was published after a decade had passed since the end of the war. Remarque prefaces the book with a short paragraph:

> This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.

Remarque wrote two additional novels expressing the disillusionment of the veterans: *The Road Back* and *Three Comrades*. They are both excellent although much less famous. Needless to say, the Nazis were far from pleased by these books and Remarque lived most of the rest of his life in Switzerland, near Lugano (like Hermann Hesse).

The novel is narrated by Paul Bäumer. It is written as a sequence of surreal situations with little to connect them, except that the soldiers in the unit are killed off one by one. The first pages set the tone: after suffering almost 50% casualties, the unit is relieved and returns to a rest area, pleasantly surprised that the quartermaster was not informed of the casualties and requisitioned enough food for the entire unit.

The two main themes are the futility of war and the estrangement of the soldiers from the civilians. When Paul goes on leave to visit his sick mother and his sister, he is so disgusted by the jingoism of the townspeople that he cuts his leave short.

The figure of Kantorek the schoolmaster sheds light on indoctrination disguised as education. Kantorek preached patriotism and duty, browbeating his students, the "Iron Youth," into enlisting:

> During drill-time Kantorek gave us long lectures until the whole of our class went, under his shepherding, to the District Commandant and volunteered. I can see him now, as he used to glare at us through his spectacles and say in a moving voice: "Won't you join up, Comrades?"

Only one boy, Joseph Behm, initially refused, but was eventually persuaded to enlist. Not surprisingly, Behm was one of the first to fall. This is used by Remarque to express his bitterness about educators who don't practice what they preach:

> Naturally we couldn't blame Kantorek for this. Where would the world be if one brought every man to book? There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that they were acting for the best---in a way that cost them nothing. ... And that is why they let us down so badly.

Later in the war Kantorek is called up and falls into the hands of Mittelstaedt, a former student who becomes his commanding officer:

> 'Hullo Mittelstaedt, how are you?' --- I look at him and say: 'Territorial Kantorek, business is business and schnapps is schnapps, you ought to know that well enough. Stand to attention when you speak to a superior officer.' You should have seen his face! A cross between a dud and a pickled cucumber.

Kantorek tries to get special treatment by offering Mittelstaedt help in an exam, but Kantorek's sins come back to haunt him:

> 'Territorial Kantorek, two years ago you preached us into enlisting; and among us there was one, Joseph Behm, who didn't want to enlist. He was killed three months before he would have been called up in the ordinary way. If it had not been for you he would have lived just that much longer.

Remarque milks the situation for all it is worth:

> Mittelstaedt stops in front of him: "Territorial Kantorek, do you call those buttons polished? You seem as though you can never learn. Inadequate, Kantorek, quite inadequate---"
>
> It makes me bubble with glee. In school Kantorek used to chasten Mittelstaedt with exactly the same expression---" Inadequate, Mittelstaedt, quite inadequate."

Aside from the obvious revenge taken on Kantorek by forcing him to undertake difficult drill, I particularly like the way that Mittelstaedt rubs it in by throwing Kantorek's verbal abuse and platitudes back at him. Educators must always take into account that some of their students will show up in positions of authority, but beyond the obvious self-interest, educators should always treat students with respect. Some people take this to mean that students should never have to encounter failure (it's not a mistake, it's an alternative conception). I prefer to interpret this to mean that the mistake and the student should not be conflated. There is no need to tell students that they are "quite inadequate"; it is sufficient to say "you made a mistake."

You're going to be a teacher

The experience of students in school appears frequently in literature, because most novels are semi-autobiographical, and one's school years leave a deep impression, for better or for worse. The lives of teachers are less well-documented. Now I turn from poor little Hans Giebenrath, the student, to poor little William Stoner, the professor.

John E. Williams (1922-1994) was raised on a farm in Texas, obtained a PhD in English literature in 1954, and taught English and creative writing at the University of Denver from 1955 to 1985. His historical novel *Augustus* won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1973.

Williams published his novel *Stoner* in 1965. In a New York Times review (17 June 2007), Morris Dikstein writes:

> John Williams's "Stoner" is something rarer than a great novel---it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away.

I agree.

William Stoner (1891-1956), like the author, grew up on a farm. Utterly impoverished, he entered the University of Missouri to study agriculture in the hope of eventually improving conditions on his father's farm, which he would some day inherit. He was drawn to the study of English, eventually obtaining a PhD and staying on as a member of the faculty. His career is summed up in one of the first sentences of the novel:

> He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses.

Here I focus on Stoner's academic career. There are poignant descriptions of his relationships with the women in his life: his wife Edith, his daughter Grace and his lover Katherine. Since these are not relevant to educational issues, I'll leave Stoner's private life to the reader.

As a first-generation college student, Stoner had no idea what to expect, but his work was acceptable:

> He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm---thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress. At the end of his first year his grade average was slightly below a B; he was pleased that it was no lower and not concerned that it was no higher.

Stoner's transition from agriculture to English is rather extreme and it is interesting to follow its course:

> After the first few weeks he had little difficulty with the science courses; ... The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way; ... and he began vaguely to see that his growing knowledge of them might be useful when he returned to his father's farm. But the required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.

As often happens a charismatic teacher can be decisive:

> [A]lways on the threshold of his awareness waited the figure of Archer Sloane, and his dry voice, and his contemptuously offhand words about some passage from Beowulf, or some couplet of Chaucer's.

The transition happened almost unintentionally, as seen in the following quotes from one of the most moving passages in the book:

> [Sloane:] "And what are your plans now?" Stoner was silent. This was something he had not thought about, had not wanted to think about. He said at last, with a touch of resentment, "I don't know. I haven't given it much thought." Sloane said, "Are you looking forward to the day when you emerge

> from these cloistered walls into what some call the world?" Stoner grinned through his embarrassment. "No, sir."
>
> If you could maintain yourself for a year or so beyond graduation, you could, I'm sure, successfully complete the work for your Master of Arts; after which you would probably be able to teach while you worked toward your doctorate. If that sort of thing would interest you at all."
>
> Stoner drew back. "What do you mean?" he asked and heard something like fear in his voice. ... "But don't you know, Mr. Stoner?" Sloane asked. "Don't you understand about yourself yet? You're going to be a teacher."
>
> Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask, "Are you sure?" "I'm sure," Sloane said softly. "How can you tell? How can you be sure?" "It's love, Mr. Stoner," Sloane said cheerfully. "You are in love. It's as simple as that."

Once upon a time, kids knew that they wanted to be firemen or policemen, or that they were destined to take over the family store. Although juvenile plans did not necessarily pan out, most young people left high school knowing what they wanted to be. There was also a widespread expectation of lifetime employment at a single company. Nowadays, students are warned that they can expect to change careers frequently. The result seems to be that they find it difficult to decide what they want to be when they grow up, and that leads to deferring (sometimes indefinitely) plans to study a specific subject.

My advice would be to study *something*, even if you later change your mind. Recalling Asimov, learn to learn. Except for a few professions like medicine, the subject of your degree is not necessarily a requirement for engaging in a profession. I studied mathematics and never regretted it, because there is hardly a field which has not undergone formalization in mathematics, and it is relatively easy to move from one field to another.

Let us now turn to Stoner's academic career. He found teaching exhilarating:

> Though he was to teach only the fundamentals of grammar and composition to a group of unselected freshmen, he looked forward to his task with enthusiasm and with a strong sense of its significance.
>
> He planned the course during the week before the opening of the autumn semester, and saw the kinds of possibility that one sees as one struggles with the materials and subjects of an endeavor; he felt the logic of grammar, and he thought he perceived how it spread out from itself, permeating the language and supporting human thought. In the simple compositional exercises he made for his students he saw the potentialities of prose and its beauties, and he looked forward to animating his students with the sense of what he perceived.

Not surprisingly, the students didn't see it that way. I suppose we all face the disappointment of discovering that students are not as excited about our subject as we are. Stoner soldiered on and even let his enthusiasm overtake him; to his surprise, it was contagious and students began to take the course seriously:

> Now and then he became so caught by his enthusiasm that he stuttered, gesticulated, and ignored the lecture notes that usually guided his talks. At first he was disturbed by his outbursts, as if he presumed too familiarly upon

> his subject, and he apologized to his students; but when they began coming up to him after class, and when in their papers they began to show hints of imagination and the revelation of a tentative love, he was encouraged to do what he had never been taught to do.

Even more surprising was his popularity as a teacher:

> To his surprise he began to enjoy a modest popularity as a teacher; he had to turn away students who wanted to get into his graduate seminar on the Latin Tradition and Renaissance Literature, and his undergraduate survey classes were always filled. Several graduate students asked him to direct their theses, and several more asked him to be on their thesis committees.

It was too good to be true.

I often think that academic politics is so poisonous because there is so little at stake. It is not like a parliamentary government, where the ministers from coalition partners hate each others guts, but still have to work together. John Williams was well aware of this: "Except in scale, the machinations for power are about the same in a university as in the Roman Empire." [Quoted in the introduction by Daniel Mendelsohn to Williams' novel *Augustus*.]

Stoner's complacency and contentment with his lot unraveled when he insisted on academic integrity. He flunked an incompetent graduate student:

> "Mr. Walker, I dislike having to flunk a graduate student. ..."
>
> Walker said, "What am I to understand then, sir? What may I expect from this course?" Stoner laughed shortly. "Mr. Walker, you amaze me. You will, of course, receive an F." ... "I seriously question whether you have a place in a graduate program."

I suppose we all encounter similar situations. I was once asked to evaluate a thesis proposal. In my opinion, the proposed project was not research and therefore not appropriate for a graduate thesis. I was promptly told by the student's supervisor that I didn't understand what research is! I let it go, but Stoner couldn't. Unfortunately, the student's supervisor was Hollis Lomax, the department head.

> Lomax nodded. "Well, let me warn you, Professor Stoner, I do not intend to let the matter drop here. You have made---you have implied certain accusations here today---you have shown a prejudice that---that---"

Although Gordon Finch, the dean, was Stoner's friend, he capitulated:

> "Well, it's Lomax. He's the new head. It's finished, settled. The suggestion came from upstairs, but I ought to tell you that I went along with it."

Finch knew that Stoner was in for trouble:

> "Somehow Lomax has got his finger in the president's nose, and he leads him around like a cut bull. So it may be even rougher than you think."

Fortunately, Stoner had tenure, but he was powerless against the revenge of the department head:

> Without surprise Stoner discovered that for each of the two semesters that made up the academic year he had been assigned three classes of freshman composition and one sophomore survey course; his upper-class Readings in Medieval Literature and his graduate seminar had been dropped from the program.
>
> His schedule that fall was particularly bad. His four classes of freshman composition were spaced at widely separated hours six days a week. During all his years as chairman, Lomax had not once failed to give Stoner a teaching schedule that even the newest instructor would have accepted with bad grace.

Throughout the book, Stoner seems to be wafted by changing winds with little initiative of his own. I suppose that it is hard to give up a tenured position to seek greener pastures. Only twice did Stoner rebel against his fate. The first was when he entered into a love affair (his marriage was a failure from the very beginning). The second was a totally brilliant maneuver that got him excused from teaching introductory courses. Heaven forbid, he introduced a pedagogical innovation:

> "I intend in this course to take a different approach to the subject, an approach which will necessitate your buying two new texts."

Of course there is nothing harder than to overcome the inertia of an educational institution:

> "Yes," Ehrhardt said. "Actually, I think I understand what you're trying to do---shock them a bit, shake them up, try a new approach, get them to thinking. Right?" Stoner nodded gravely. ... "No one has more sympathy than I for experimentation, for---but perhaps sometimes, out of the very best motives, we go too far."

It is ironic that universities, which one expects to be pioneers in innovation, are often excessively resistant to change.

Stoner thrived in the aftermath of World War II:

> The years immediately following the end of the Second World War were the best years of his teaching; and they were in some ways the happiest years of his life. Veterans of that war descended upon the campus and transformed it, bringing to it a quality of life it had not had before, an intensity and turbulence that amounted to a transformation. He worked harder than he had ever worked; the students, strange in their maturity, were intensely serious and contemptuous of triviality. Innocent of fashion or custom, they came to their studies as Stoner had dreamed that a student might---as if those studies were life itself and not specific means to specific ends.

Perhaps, goal-oriented education uninterrupted by other life experiences cannot produce quality students.

I will let you read the tragic ending of the book, but before leaving, let me bring a passage from near the beginning of the book, where Stoner is talking with two fellow graduate students, David Masters and Gordon Finch (later the dean). Masters is expressing quite a skeptical opinion of the value of a university and its professors:

> "Have you gentlemen ever considered the question of the true nature of the University? Mr. Stoner? Mr. Finch?"
>
> "It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear."
>
> We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it; and that's a triumph of natural virtue, or pretty damn close to it."

I must admit to a degree of skepticism myself, especially when it comes to departments of education. We propose advanced theoretical frameworks, develop innovative pedagogical techniques and tools, and carry out research projects that point to ways of improving learning. But every day we read in the paper how our schools are failing. Probably it's not our fault, but a bit of humility wouldn't hurt when we insist on the importance of our occupation.

Humility and skepticism rarely win out to arrogance and unbridled self-confidence. John Williams arranged for David Masters to be punished for his heresy: Masters enlisted in the army in World War I and was killed at Chateau Thierry.

These young men were extremely critical of the books and methods of teaching

Taha Hussein (1889-1973) grew up in a village in Upper Egypt. He became blind at age three due to incompetent medical treatment. His elementary education was rather limited, mostly memorizing the Quran. At a relatively young age, he joined his brother at Al Azhar in Cairo, the foremost institution for the study of Islamic law and and theology, Arabic grammar, and classical literature. Within a couple of years, he became disenchanted with his studies when he discovered modern literature and began to attend the newly-established Egyptian University. He received a PhD in literature, one of the first doctoral degrees granted by the university. He later studied in France and obtained a second PhD. He married a French woman and returned to Egypt in 1919. Taha Hussein worked as a professor, a journalist and as Minister of Education. He published dozens of books and was frequently nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Hussein published three autobiographical books: *An Egyptian Childhood* (1932) relates his early years in the village. The second book *The Stream of Days* (1939) describes his life as a student at Al Azhar until his disillusionment. Shortly before his death in 1973, a third volume, *A Passage to France*, was published. I read a collection of all three books called: *The Days: His Autobiography in Three Parts*. Note that the titles of the individual volumes are those given by the individual translators of the three volumes.

An Egyptian Childhood

The most intense impression that one gets from the books is that no one knew how to nurture a handicapped child. Today we have experts in education for every type of handicap, to say nothing of technological aids. Young Taha was simply left to himself:

> Now this abstention of his from play led him to become fond of one kind of diversion, and that was listening to stories and legends. His great delight was to listen to the songs of the bard or the conversation of his father with other men or of his mother with other women, and so he acquired the art of listening.

By age nine he had learned the Quran by heart, an accomplishment that was highly esteemed, although it mattered little in practice:

> As for the Quran he had learnt its contents by heart and derived no benefit from what he had learnt.

Unfortunately, Taha rested on his laurels, forgot what he memorized and was caught out by his father one day:

> Then he asked him to recite 'The Sura of the Poets'. [A sura is a chapter of the Quran.] This request fell on him by like a thunderbolt. ... His father prompted him ... but in spite of that he could not proceed at all. ... Our friend [Taha Hussein refers to himself in the third person] stood ashamed while the perspiration poured forth.

This led to a scandal with the school teacher who was blamed. Taha quickly memorized the Quran again.

Like Hesse's Hans Giebenrath, preparing Taha for Al Azhar became a "project." His brother brought him a textbook on Arabic grammar, but at such as young age he found it hard going. Taha's ambition surfaced and got him into hot water with the teachers and like Hans he became estranged from his fellows:

> Those incidents which took place from time to time, when the sheikh examined the lad, were not enough for him, nor the successive calamities which arose from the lad's keenness on learning the Alfiyya and other texts, which made the lad troublesome and rude, so that he exalted himself above his fellows and his master, imagining for himself a place among the ulema and disobeying the orders of the 'Arif.

An "inspector of agricultural roads" from Cairo showed up at the village and became another one of those taking Taha on as a "project":

> I should like to devote an hour to him every day, in which I would make him recite the version of Hafs and teach him the elements of the art, thus giving him a sound preparation for Al Azhar.

At age thirteen, having clearly exhausted the educational resources of his village, Taha Hussein went to Al Azhar under the care of an elder brother. Again we see the dilemma of a gifted child for whom the system has nothing more to offer sent to an educational environment which is possibly unsuited for him. Taha's blindness only exacerbated the situation, as described in the second volume.

The Stream of Days

The Stream of Days is the most famous of Taha Hussein's autobiographical works and the most relevant for education.

Taha fell in naturally with the academic environment:

> He felt the conviction of being in his own country, amongst his own people, and lost all sense of isolation, all sadness. His soul blossomed forth, and with every fibre of his being he yearned to discover ... well, what? Something he

> was a stranger to, though he loved it and felt irresistibly drawn towards it---knowledge.

Taha showed perseverance far beyond his years:

> The boy's admiration for this lecture especially grew deeper every day as he listened to his brother and his brother's friends studying their lesson beforehand. ... As he listened the boy used to burn with longing to grow six or seven years older, so that he might be able to understand it, to solve its riddles and ambiguities, to be master of the whole subject as those distinguished young men were, and to dispute with the teachers about it as they did. But for the present he was compelled to listen without understanding.

Very soon his natural ability surfaced:

> This problem he understood at once and was able to argue about. Thus he came at last to feel that he had begun to taste the water of the boundless ocean of knowledge.

Even more than in his village, Taha was severely troubled by his blindness. While his brother gave him a corner of his room to sleep in and took him to and from Al Azhar, he did not see himself as responsible for Taha's well-being:

> What tortured the boy was solitude; blank, unending solitude. He stayed still in his corner from before the middle of the afternoon, at which time his brother left him and went off to one of his friends' rooms elsewhere in the building.

In my opinion, the responsibility for this situation rested not only on the insensitivity of the brother and his friends, but on Taha himself. One cannot expect the "normal" world to always be able to divine the needs of a handicapped person and Taha was too shy or too afraid to make them known. He even refrained for asking for tea when the others made forgot to pour him some.

The introduction to *The Stream of Days* by the translator Hilary Wayment presents an overview of the turmoil at Al Azhar when Hussein began his studies in 1903. The curriculum consisted entirely of sterile repetition and memorization of classical works on Islam and the Arabic language, somewhat like the situation at Maulbronn with its limited curriculum of classical works in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Muhammad Abdu, called the *Imam* in the book, made attempts at modernization, which brought him into conflict with conservative teachers. Hussein was fully allied with the students who supported the Imam's reforms:

> These young men were extremely critical of the books and methods of teaching used at the Azhar. In this they followed the opinions of the Imam, who when they attended his lectures or visited him at his house used to give them the titles of valuable books on grammar, rhetoric, theology, and even literature. These books, despite their importance, were disdained by the sheikhs [the title used for the teachers at Al Azhar], because they had never read them; perhaps too their repugnance was increased by the very fact of the Imam's approval.

Again, we see the arrogance of students who are more capable or at least those who appear more capable than their colleagues. They lack a sense of *noblesse oblige*:

> In this way they came to be surrounded by an aura of distinction and acquired the reputation of being outstanding students who were assured of a brilliant future. Naturally enough their company was eagerly sought after by less gifted students who hoped to gain advantages from the connection. ... It was no doubt the vanity of adolescence which led them to take advantage of their privileged position and to admit these parasites of learning to their company. But they never forgave them their stupidity.

When Hussein appears for his examination, he is bitterly hurt when one of the examiners identifies him with his blindness:

> However, as soon as he came face to face with the examiners his fear suddenly left him and gave place to the bitterest distress. Something happened then which he was never to forget. He had been waiting for the two examiners to finish with the student before him when suddenly he heard one of them call him in words which fell cruelly on his ears and seared his heart with anguish: "You next, blind boy." It would never have occurred to him that these words were addressed to himself if it had not been for his brother, who without saying a word seized him none too gently by the hand and led him in front of the examiners. He had been used to great consideration on this point from his family, who avoided mentioning the affliction in his presence. He appreciated this delicacy on their part, though he never forgot his blindness and was always brooding upon it.

It goes without saying that the examiner is displayed crass insensitivity, but I think that Hussein overreacted. When "normal" people encounter someone with a handicap, they often don't know how to act and the person with the handicap has to take the initiative, explaining what is needed. Sometimes it can be something trivial like facing the students during a lecture so a deaf person can read lips or refraining from using color alone to distinguish entities on slides.

Hussein quickly became an adept pupil, even disputing excessively with one of the teachers who put an end to arguments by saying:

> "God shall judge between us ... on the Day of Resurrection."

Yet this teacher was astute enough to recognize and encourage Hussein's talent:

> He said it in a voice full of annoyance and disgust, yet rich with a genuine sympathy. Another sign of this was that when the lecture was over, and the boy went up to kiss his hand, as students used regularly to do, he put his other hand on the boy's shoulder and said in a quiet, affectionate voice: "Work hard and God will bless you."

It is amazing how important a little encouragement can mean so much:

> These words of encouragement sent the boy back home with a light heart.

But Hussein repaid this with arrogance:

> They did not challenge his explanations and would listen to no one but him. The effect of this was to inflate his pride still further and convince him that he was well on the way to becoming a sheikh.

Teachers should not think that their incompetence will not be noticed:

> The students, young and old alike, never stopped jeering at the stupidity of their teachers and their proneness to ridiculous mistakes both in comprehension and in reading. The result of this was that our friend acquired a poor opinion of both sheikhs and students in general.

Students sometimes think that all the knowledge they need should be spoon-fed by their teachers or through technology, similar to Asimov's tapes. This ignores the importance of self-study:

> [T]he boy had spent a whole year in acquiring practically nothing new in the way of learning, except by his own reading or by listening to the senior students in the tenement as they went through their books or debated points together.

Following his first year at Al Azhar, Hussein, like many young students including Hans Giebenrath, felt himself trapped by the narrow possibilities that the future held:

> When he came back to the Azhar the next year his sense of frustration returned and his conscience pricked him. How was he to plan his life? He couldn't stay in the country [his home village], for what would he do there? Yet there seemed no sense in staying in Cairo and attending lectures like these.

The next part of the book portrays Hussein's transition from a student at the religious Al Azhar to a student at the secular Egyptian University (now called Cairo University). The transition was gradual:

> In fact the boy's attendance at literary lectures did not turn him away all at once from the Azharite sciences. He thought himself capable of reconciling in his own mind these two departments of knowledge.

Recall that Stoner began his transition from agriculture to English when he took one course. Such a transition is necessarily gradual, but eventually a clean break usually occurs, and so it did with Hussein in his transition from religious to secular learning:

> I know of nothing in the world which can exert so strong an influence for freedom, especially on the young, as literature, ...

In fact, a break from one tradition to another can cause a complete rejection of the previous one:

> The young man became more and more disgusted with the Azhar, where he was committed to a life he loathed and cut off from all that he longed for.

A recurrent issue with young people breaking from a religious tradition is their reluctance to tell their families and disappoint them. Even Stoner found it hard to tell his parents that he had left his agricultural studies for English. Hussein was no different:

> Nor did he reveal this final decision to his father for fear that he might feel hurt or disappointed.

A Passage to France

Eventually, Taha Hussein left Al Azhar, studied for his doctorate at the Egyptian University and set his sights on continuing his study in Europe. This is the subject of the third autobiographical book, *A Passage to France*, which was published shortly before his death. Some of it is not interesting, because he writes at length about bureaucratic matters, in particular, obtaining funding for his studies in France. Nevertheless, it re-iterates the issues that appeared in the previous volumes.

Hussein looked back upon his years at Al-Azhar as boring and useless. He also complained about the impoverishment of students:

> They had come to accept it quiescently, accustoming themselves to it, in the firm conviction that wealth and comfort and ample living were no part of the student's fate, and that poverty was, in fact, the proper condition of earnest effort and diligent achievement.
>
> It was a life of unrelieved repetition, with never a new thing, from the time the study year began until it was over.

Even then, tuition was a problem:

> Each of us had ready the guinea we had perforce to pay for permission to attend the classes. It was an odd thing, in our eyes, that we had to buy learning with money, small though the sum might be.
>
> Paying that guinea was a hard business, but the hardship of doing so was simply a measure of how much we were in love with what it purchased.

Hussein discovered his love of writing and expected no renumeration:

> Throughout those first ten years during which I wrote in the newspapers, I wrote for the love of writing alone. I wrote because I wanted to write. I did not earn a single dirham, not one mil.

Still, he was extremely sensitive about his blindness, even when things worked out in the end as a result of help from his fellow students:

> One evening, I arrived in the company of my black chaperon. I showed my ticket when I got to the class. ... "You can go in," they said "but not this other fellow with you. He has no right to enter." I registered my dismay but the doorkeeper was adamant, totally disregarding my protests and my distress, as well as the expostulations of the students around. He did not see how I needed my chaperon to escort me safely into my seat, even if afterwards he went out again to await me outside at the conclusion of the class.

Hussein thrived in the atmosphere of secular learning:

> The University environment also afforded me a type of learning which itself generated a new temper of mind, not perpetually engrossed in grammar, fiqh, logic and tauhid, but ranging into a diversity of schools of thought in literature and history, all undreamed of on my part until then.

> So the first year of my life at the University went by, a feast of happiness unalloyed by any trouble or weariness.

Hussein began his study of French and fortunately found a teacher who took it upon himself to give him private lessons:

> That first time, however, I understood nothing. He wrote letters on the blackboard, pronouncing them and getting the students to pronounce them after him and to transcribe them at the same time from the board on to their own paper. Unable either to see or to write the letters, I remained completely silent. ...
>
> This pained me deeply, but I could not say anything. The students dispersed and when I was about to leave a hand was placed on my shoulder and a voice invited me to wait behind. It was the teacher himself who had intercepted me. When we were alone, he said: "There's no point in your attending these classes. But I realise how keen you are to learn the language, and I'ld [sic] like to help you.

Hussein eventually finished his doctorate:

> I duly submitted it and became the first Egyptian to be a successful candidate for the doctorate.
>
> That night I did not sleep: I was too overjoyed.

He planned to continue his studies in France but was delayed for many months by the outbreak of World War I. In France, Hussein encountered "writing and reading for the blind" (presumably, the Braille system), so that he would not be dependent on people reading to him:

> They met the response that since I was blind I ought to learn writing and reading for the blind, in order to be able to rely wholly on myself for the study I had in view.

But by then he was too accustomed to learning by hearing to derive much benefit:

> I quickly made a start at this writing system and soon became proficient. But I found no way of profiting by it when it came to class. The books I needed to read were not printed in this special form. Oftentimes even when it was feasible to have the book in this form, I at once found it extremely difficult to read and very uncongenial, too. I had become accustomed to acquiring knowledge through my ears, not through my fingers.

Just like in his brother's room in Cairo, Hussein was lonely:

> When night fell, they would all scatter and I would be left to myself, in stark loneliness with no one to aid me, sitting, a solitary in my room, with all kinds of thoughts running through my head, some pleasing, others gloomy, some that kindled hope and others dejection and despondency.

One of those whose read to him was a French woman, Suzanne Bresseau. He does not mention her by name in the book, using, instead, a charming epithet:

> At other times, however, my thoughts were for that sweet voice I had come to know with its friendly comforting quality, reading French sources and assuring me between whiles that she would be there in Paris to read aloud for me again and more than ever so.

Suzanne rescued him from loneliness:

> During my first year in Paris I never left the house except to go to the Sorbonne. It was like being a prisoner. ... I kept at home on holidays, sometimes staying by myself in my room the whole day, unless my sweet-voiced one came for an hour or so to sit with me.

Like many young people escaping from a narrow educational background (often a religious education), Hussein found university study difficult:

> My intellectual life, though, was no less complex and taxing than my economic situation. As soon as I embarked on historical and literary studies at the Sorbonne, I realised how ill-prepared I was for them. I was not absorbing and grasping them as I should. My long apprenticeship in the Azhar and the University had not equipped me for them.

Although such students can benefit from counseling and additional instruction, there is no alternative to hard work and perseverance:

> I applied myself even harder to French, setting myself a rigorous, taxing regimen of study, to the near exclusion of other studies, abandoning any participation in written assignments until I had perfected the necessary tool for such writing.

His connection with Suzanne deepened and they were married. A close personal relationship can be decisive in a student's success:

> It was all the influence of that dear one, her gentleness to me and my love of her. For these drew me out of my isolation and my mood of denial. She banished, with her graciousness and steady enterprise, those curtains and veils that had secreted me from life, from living people and from real things.

Hussein experienced great trepidation before his licentiate exam. Fortunately, he "lucked out" and the topic chosen at random for the exam was one on which he had deep knowledge:

> In my case, being blind, and having my wife accompanying me, it fell to her to pick up the fateful piece of paper. When she handed it to the professor, he looked at her with a kindly smile and said to me: "Jolly lucky you are to be accompanied by this young lady! Tell me about the Arab Empire in the days of the Ummayyads. I suspect you know more about it than I do." So off I went, oblivious of all else until the professor intervened, saying: "That will do. You have passed, first class."

Despite his handicap, due to unrelenting study, Hussein succeeded in all phases of the exam:

> The Committee withdrew to confer and after some minutes they returned and the chairman, the historian, announced that the College had approved my candidacy for the doctorate cum summa laude.

After submitting his thesis, Hussein returned to Egypt and became a professor, feeling prematurely aged by his experiences:

> When I returned from Europe and became a professor in the University, I was not yet thirty. But I believed that my many experiences, sweet and bitter, undergone during my sojourn in France, had made me older than my years, taken me on into the forties one might say.

Taha Hussein's life demonstrates many of the educational challenges that still face us today: (1) Finding the right educational framework, in particular, the difficulty of making a transition from a narrow religious education to a liberal, secular one. (2) The difficulties faced by handicapped students, their need for help, but on the other hand, their understanding that insensitivity of "normal" people often derives from ignorance and not malice. (3) There is no escape from hard work and perseverance, not for "ordinary" students, and certainly not for those who have been inadequately prepared by previous education.

Taha Hussein may have been extraordinary is his ability to succeed despite his handicap and background, but he can be an inspiration to all students.

They are the government, they can do anything they want

Rohinton Mistry (1952-) was born in Mumbai and emigrated to Canada at age 23. He is from a Parsi family like Dina, a central character in *A Fine Balance*, a novel published in 1995. The Parsis are a distinct community in India, descended from Persians and practicing the Zoroastrian religion. His books have received many prizes and he was twice a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize.

A Fine Balance is set in 1975 during political disturbances called *The Emergency* when Indira Ghandi was Prime Minister. The main characters are Dina, a widow who makes a living by renting a room to the student Maneck (the son of a school friend), and also as a subcontractor to a clothing company, employing two impoverished tailors, Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash. They are from an untouchable caste (now called Dalits or Scheduled Castes), originally leather workers but they escaped their pre-ordained destiny to become master tailors.

I highly recommend the book, although it is somewhat depressing. Ishtvar and Omprakash live hand-to-mouth, always searching for a place to live in a gigantic city. Unfortunately, whenever their situation becomes even a bit brighter, it eventually becomes worse, because they are at the mercy of endemic petty corruption and an oppressive political situation:

> "They are the government," said Ishvar. "They can do anything they want."

Here I concentrate on the story of Maneck who comes from a hill town, where his parents ran a small general store. At an early age, Maneck proved himself perfectly capable of running the store:

> The easygoing manner of the townspeople came naturally to Maneck, having been born and brought up here, and it delighted his father that he mixed so well with everyone.

Like many successful businessmen, Maneck's father wished the best education for his son and sent him to boarding school:

> The thought of leaving the hill-station "his entire universe" brought him to a state of panic.
>
> Mancek learned to tolerate boarding school but not to love it. He felt an ache of betrayal. Not one day passed without his remembering the house, his parents, the shop, the mountains.

I don't know whether education in boarding school is so widespread or whether kids who go to boarding school turn out to be excellent writers, but here is our third suffering student, after Hans Giebenrath and Taha Hussein, and we will meet a fourth in the next book.

Upon his return for a vacation, Maneck tried to convince his parents to take him out of the school, to no avail:

> "Boarding school is not forever," he said. "Remember, Mummy and I miss you more than you miss us. But what is the choice? You don"t want to be ignorant, unable to read or write, like these poor gaddi people who go through their whole lives cold and hungry, with a few sheep or goats, struggling to survive.

Of course, his father wanted him to continue the business, but was convinced by family friends, retired army officers, that Maneck should be allowed to improve his prospects by getting post-secondary education. His grades weren't very good, so he was limited to technical training. His parents and their friends steered him to "refrigeration and air-conditioning" on the assumption that technical skills in this field will be in great demand in India with its hot weather. Furthermore, Maneck and his father had bitter disputes about the future of the store, and it is well-known that family businesses rarely succeed for more than two or three generations.

Unfortunately, the options open to a poor student in a poor country were limited and Maneck was sent to live in a hostel at the school:

> The hostel had been a big disappointment when Avinash had arrived, filthy, with rats and cockroaches everywhere.

He made friends with Avinash who helped him navigate the disgusting living conditions and execrable food. As usual in the book, just as he learned to develop a routine that enabled him to exist, things became worse. Political unrest entered to campus:

> This business of endless agitation was tiresome.
>
> Everything disgusting about the hostel that Maneck had learned to live with began to nauseate him with a renewed vengeance.
>
> Threats and assaults became so commonplace, they might have been part of the university curriculum. The police were now a permanent presence, helping to maintain the new and sinister brand of law and order.
>
> He knew what he was going to do --- as soon as he felt warmer, he would get up and pack. In the morning he would take a taxi to the railway station and go home on the Frontier Mail.

Maneck finally confessed to his parents:

> He wrote that so far he had not been truthful with them, and was sorry, but he had wanted to spare them the worry: "The hostel is such a horrible place, I cannot stay here anymore. Not only is it dirty and stinking, which I can tolerate, but the people are disgusting.

Maneck's mother wrote to Dina, asking if Maneck could be a boarder. Dina, a widow trying to maintain her independence and not become a ward of her brother, agreed. Initially, Maneck wasn't too impressed with the conditions, but they were certainly better than the hostel:

> Not much better than the college hostel, he thought. And yet, he was looking forward to it. Anything would do, after what had happened there.
>
> "But you didn't like the hostel?" "No, it's a very rowdy place. Impossible to study."

Coincidentally, he moved in the same day when Ishtvar and Omprakash came to Dina looking for work as tailors. Much to Dina's disgust, Maneck became friendly with the pair, though eventually Dina came around and invited them to be part of the household.

As the school year ended, Maneck was faced with a dilemma: give into his homesickness and return with a one-year technician's certificate, or continue studying for a three-year degree. Unfortunately, as a result of the poor conditions at the hostel, followed by Maneck's adventures with the tailors, he neglected his studies:

> "I finally heard from my college. Sorry to write that my marks were not very good. They have refused me admission to the degree programme, so I will have to be satisfied with my one-year certificate."

Clearly, the social, psychological and economic environment heavily influences academic achievement. Maneck returned home, where a friend of his parents, a retired army general, arranged a job for him in Dubai.

The epilogue of the book is set in 1984. Maneck returned home for the first time in eight years for the funeral of his father. He was completely out of touch with the situation in India, and arrived three days after the prime minister Indira Ghandi was assassinated in revenge for sending troops to attack Sikh militants at their holiest site, the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Maneck visits his village for the funeral, and sees no choice but to return to his empty live in Dubai. He looks up his old friends --- Avinash's relatives, Dina, Ishtvar and Omprakash --- but they all suffered tragedies, as does Maneck. Student life is hardly carefree.

When had education ever harmed anyone

Tiger Hills takes place in Coorg, a district in Karnataka in southwest India, now called Kodagu. It is the home of the Kodava people (also anglicized to Coorg), who have their own culture and speak a distinct Dravidian language. The author, Sarita Mandanna, is from Coorg and now lives in Toronto. She has an MBA and worked as an investment banker before writing *Tiger Hills*.

Tiger Hills is quite different from *A Fine Balance*. It takes place in the years 1878-1936 and Coorg is a pleasant forested hill country, unlike the stifling modern mega-city of *A Fine Balance*. Instead of the impoverished tailors Ishtvar and Omprakash, the characters in the novel are relatively prosperous: many are landowners, sometimes becoming quite well off

growing coffee. Nevertheless, the misery and tragedy even manages to outstrip the trials and tribulations that afflict the characters of *A Fine Balance* and *Under the Wheel*.

The novel follows a girl Devi and a boy Devanna, orphaned from his mother who was raised by her family. The other central characters are Machu, a renowned hunter, and two from the next generation, Appu and Nanju. (I'll refrain from giving their exact relationship to avoid a spoiler.) The novel is expansive and the portrayal of Coorg, its people and their lives is stunning, even lyrical. Here is one random quotation:

> Inseparable they had been, as children. Close as two seeds in a cardamom pod, that's what people said about them. He was the one she unfailingly depended upon, to remove the thorns from her soles, to set the world right again.

I will focus on Devanna's education, a relatively small part of novel, though critical for the plot. Devanna was enrolled by Pallada Nayak, the headman of the village where Devanna's relatives lived, in a school run by the German missionary Hermann Gundert. Pallada Nayak also agreed to enroll Devi in the school at his expense. Her family was divided:

> Thimmaya [Devi's father] was pleased. His angel would go to a fancy school, learn to speak English just like the white folk. He quickly gave his consent, but Muthavva [Devi's mother] was horrified. As it was, the girl was a handful, would he spoil her even more by sending her to that newfangled school? Who knew what devilry they would fill her head with? Would he have his only daughter forget their own ways?
>
> It was Tayi [Devi's grandmother] who brokered peace. When had education ever harmed anyone, she asked. Devi was fortunate to be given the chance to attend such an expensive school. 'It is the Lord's grace,' she said, 'that our child is getting this opportunity for a modern education. One must move with the times.' And what were they here for, the elders of the household? Was it not their responsibility to ensure that Devi grew up well versed in the Coorg traditions?

It is hard to overestimate the influence of family and community on the educational prospects of a young person. Stoner became the first in his family to attend university at the suggestion of his father. Hans Giebenrath was groomed by his father and community to attend Maulbronn. Maneck was sent to boarding school by his father and attended college at the urging of his parents' friends. Pallada Nayak's generosity was instrumental in enabling Devanna and Devi to attend a good school, highlighting the importance of financial aid in facilitating the education of those whose parents are not well off.

Tayi's observations are perspicacious: she clearly understands that schools cannot be held responsible for the entirety of a person's education. Many educational institutions see themselves as responsible for inculcating culture and religion. I agree with Tayi that parents and family the the ones primarily responsible for those areas and that schools should be responsible for "a modern education" to enable the child to "move with the times."

Devanna thrived, becoming the protege of Gundert:

> He mastered the alphabet, learning to read effortlessly, much to Devi's annoyance as she struggled syllable by syllable.

> He quickly grasped the labyrinthine principles of mathematics while the other children were still muddling through multiplication and division, able to solve sums almost quicker than the teachers could write them on the blackboard.

Devanna may have been the teachers' pet, but nobody doted on him more than Reverend Gundert, the head of the mission.

> Here, at last, was the student he had searched for.
>
> Here, his son.

Like Hans Giebenrath, Devanna was offered extra tutoring by Gundert, though he often felt discord between the two worlds.

> He often felt there were two parts to himself - Mission-Devanna and Coorg-Devanna.

When Devi's mother became ill, Gundert tried to save her with quinine, leading Devanna to want to become a doctor and strengthening Gundert's resolve to support Devanna's education:

> 'Quinine ... You see here? On this page, a cure for millions. All we need is for people to learn, to know how to use these drugs, to know all there is to know about modern medicine.'
>
> 'I want to learn,' Devanna said, his words tumbling over one another. 'Teach me how to make this quinine, teach me all the medicine you know. Please Reverend, I will do whatever you ask, I will study as hard as anyone can, but I have to learn. ,,, I will teach you all I know, I promise, and when you have surpassed me --- as you will --- use your knowledge for the betterment of your people.'

Gundert took it upon himself to facilitate Devanna's wish to learn medicine:

> Gundert had written to the dean of the Bangalore Medical College a month earlier.
>
> He was writing, he explained, on behalf of his star pupil, Kambeymada Devanna. The boy was gifted with uncommon intelligence and a diligence of spirit that routinely evaded men twice his age. ... The boy had sailed through the mission school with an exemplary academic record. It was clearly evident that he was ordained for larger things than a mere apprenticeship with the local government. 'Devanna is well suited to the medical profession,' wrote Gundert, 'indeed, in all my years in this country, never have I happened across anyone as suited as he to enter the portals of your esteemed institution.'

Dunleavy, the dean, readily agreed to accept Devanna, but proposed that he be sent to England to obtain a better education than that available in Bangalore. Gundert couldn't bear the thought of separation from Devanna and declined the offer on Devanna's behalf without telling him. Mandanna finishes the chapter on an ominous note:

> He finished the letter, read and reread it until he was satisfied, and then, innocent of the wheels he had set in motion, of the catastrophic consequences his actions would bring, Gundert turned out the lamp and went finally to bed.

Taha Hussein's loneliness, Maneck's disgust at the filthy hostel and Hans Giebenrath's social afflictions are nothing compared to the hazing (called "ragging" in southern Asia) that Devanna encountered:

> Why hadn't the Reverend warned him, Devanna wondered bitterly again. When he had done so much, why then had the Reverend omitted to prepare him for ragging?

He is singled out by Martin Thomas, an Anglo-Indian having difficulty coming to terms with his mixed race:

> Devanna had immediately realised it was best to keep his mouth shut and walk fast. Even so, Martin had spotted him with the unerring instinct of all bullies for the more vulnerable of the herd.
>
> Martin would never admit it, not even to himself, but there had been something about the tilt of Devanna's head, the quietness of his movements, that reminded Martin of himself. A privileged, refined, could-have-been version of himself.

Devanna suffers abuse of extreme brutality, leading to a meltdown. He left the college in a highly disturbed mental state:

> Devanna lay unmoving, his head buzzing unbearably, grief and humiliation grainy upon his tongue. He left for Coorg that same afternoon. It was the only thing that made sense to him any more.

Hans Giebenrath, too, left his school, but life in his town continued in its own gay path and only he suffered. Devanna's departure was the spark for "catastrophic consequences." Again we see that the psychological and social well-being of students is as important, if not more important, for effective learning than the physical conditions or the academic level.

I'll stop here to avoid spoilers, but I highly recommend that you read *Tiger Hills*.

'Have to' is just gone out of the curriculum

Philip Roth (1933-) is an American novelist who has won many awards including the Pulizer Prize for Fiction. He was born and grew up in Newark, NJ, and much of his work portrays American Jewish life. *The Human Stain*, published in 2000, concerns Coleman Silk, a Jewish professor of classics at fictional Athena College in rural Massachusetts. The novel goes into great detail about the lives of the characters, but for my purposes I focus on the incident that caused Coleman to resign from his position. So far I have avoided spoilers, but the incident is so central to the plot that I have no choice but to reveal it. The incident comes quite early in the book and doesn't interfere with reading the rest of the novel, but if you want to encounter it on your own, stop reading here.

The Human Stain is narrated by Coleman's neighbor, Nathan Zuckerman, who is the notional author of the book. The setting is presented in the first sentence:

> It was in the summer of 1998 that my neighbor Coleman Silk--who, before retiring two years earlier, had been a classics professor at nearby Athena College for some twenty-odd years as well as serving for sixteen more as the dean of faculty--confided to me that, at the age of seventy-one, he was having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman who worked down at the college.

His affair is with Faunia Farley, a dirt-poor divorcee who has been battered and abused all her life and who is continuously threaten by her ex-husband. Although she is a central character, she is not central to the educational issues, aside from the scandal of a professor having an affair with a cleaning woman.

Coleman Silk was appointed dean and revitalized the college and its faculty:

> Coleman had taken an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college and, not without steamrolling, put an end to the place as a gentlemen's farm by aggressively encouraging the dead-wood among the faculty's old guard to seek early retirement, recruiting ambitious young assistant professors, and revolutionizing the curriculum.

During the initial weeks of a class, he would call the role in order to learn the names of the fourteen students. Two names were of students who had not attended the first six classes. Exasperated, Coleman asked:

> "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"

Clearly, he meant definition number 1 "ghost, specter." Unfortunately, the word is a derogatory term for black people. There is no way to describe the results but "the shit hit the fan":

> Later that day he was astonished to be called in by his successor, the new dean of faculty, to address the charge of racism brought against him by the two missing students, who turned out to be black, and who, though absent, had quickly learned of the locution in which he'd publicly raised the question of their absence.

In the natural course of things, Coleman would have apologized and perhaps be subject to some disciplinary proceeding, but he refused to do so. The shock was too much for Coleman's wife who died and he was reproached by son:

> "The college didn't do it. The blacks didn't do it. Your enemies didn't do it. You did it. You killed mother. The way you kill everything! Because you have to be right! Because you won't apologize, because every time you are a hundred percent right, now it's Mother who's dead! And it all could have been settled so easily--all of it settled in twenty-four hours if you knew how once in your life to apologize.

Coleman's relationship with the other faculty members was -- why are we not surprised -- poisonous. During his tenure as dean:

> Now, even ordinary deans, I am told, serving as they do in a no man's land between the faculty and the higher administration, invariably make enemies.

> But Coleman had been no ordinary dean, and who he got rid of and how he got rid of them, what he abolished and what he established, and how audaciously he performed his job into the teeth of tremendous resistance succeeded in more than merely slighting or offending a few odd ingrates and malcontents.

Now came payback time:

> A reaction against Dean Silk started to set in. How strong it was he had never entirely realized until he counted all the people, department by department, who seemed to be not at all displeased that the word the old dean had chosen to characterize his two seemingly nonexistent students was definable not only by the primary dictionary meaning that he maintained was obviously the one he'd intended but by the pejorative racial meaning that had sent his two black students to lodge their complaint.

Coleman eventually resigned from his position on the faculty and became obsessed with the treatment he received:

> Why should Coleman Silk resign? Nobody was going to fire him. Nobody would dare to fire him. They were doing what they were doing just because they could do it. Their intention was to hold my feet over the flames just a little while longer--why couldn't I have been patient and waited? By the next semester who would have remembered any of it? ... What the hell was I *quitting* for?"

Why *did* Coleman quit? It turns out that he was from a black family and had decided to "pass" as white and even as Jewish. The main theme of the book is how this decision, this rejection of his heritage, blighted the rest of his life:

> "Thrown out of a Norfolk whorehouse for being black, thrown out of Athena College for being white."

Expediency and grudges played a major role in the refusal of all the members of the faculty to stand up for Coleman:

> Educated people with Ph.D.s, people he had himself hired because he believed that they were capable of thinking reasonably and independently, had turned out to have no inclination to weigh the preposterous evidence against him and reach an appropriate conclusion.

Coleman Silk was especially incensed at the role played by two faculty members he had hired: Herb Keble, the first (and only) black member of the faculty, and Delphine Roux, a young French woman who had replaced him as chair of the department. Not only was Coleman a racist, but he was also a misogynist:

> His difficulties with Delphine Roux had begun the first semester he was back in the classroom, when one of his students who happened to be a favorite of Professor Roux's went to her, as department chair, to complain about the Euripides plays in Coleman's Greek tragedy course. One play was Hippolytus, the other Alcestis; the student, Elena Mitnick, found them "degrading to women." "So what shall I do to accommodate Miss Mitnick? Strike Euripides from my reading list?" "Not at all. Clearly everything depends on how you teach Euripides." ...

This is exactly the situation that William Stoner faced: the patronage of another faculty member for a student curtailed his academic freedom.

Interpersonal relationships played a major role in Coleman's troubles, in particular, Coleman's tendency to openly express his judgments of others:

> Despite herself, she could not escape from being intimidated by the man who, five years earlier, had reluctantly hired her fresh from the Yale graduate school and who, afterward, never denied regretting it, especially when the psychological numbskulls in his department settled on so deeply confused a young woman as their chair.

Identity also plays a major role that Coleman can't accept:

> "Miss Mitnick's misreading of those two plays," he was telling her, "is so grounded in narrow, parochial ideological concerns that it does not lend itself to correction." "Then you don't deny what she says--that you didn't try to help her." "A student who tells me that I speak to her in 'engendered language' is beyond being assisted by me."

Of course every generation sees the next generation as beyond saving:

> "Almost without exception ... our students are abysmally ignorant. They've been incredibly badly educated. Their lives are intellectually barren. They arrive knowing nothing and most of them leave knowing nothing. ..."

The incident with Elena Mitnick's "engendered language" was actually the backdrop upon which the racial incident played out:

> And then that very next semester when Tracy Cummings ran to Professor Roux, close to tears, barely able to speak, baffled at having learned that, behind her back, Professor Silk had employed a malicious racial epithet to characterize her to her classmates, Delphine decided that asking Coleman to her office to discuss the charge could only be a waste of time. Since she was sure that he would behave no more graciously than he had the last time a female student had complained ...

When "identity" becomes central, allegations are sufficient to convict:

> To hear the allegation is to believe it. No motive for the perpetrator is necessary, no logic or rationale is required. Only a label is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence. The label is the logic.

Towards the end of the book, Nathan Zuckerman has a conversation with Ernestine, Coleman's sister. Although just a school teacher without a Ph.D., Ernestine speaks with more common sense than many professors:

> So I told her about the spooks business, told her that whole story then, and when I was finished she shook her head and said, straight out, "I don't believe I've ever heard of anything more foolish being perpetrated by an institution of higher learning. It sounds to me more like a hotbed of ignorance. ... One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? What ever happened to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America? In

> my childhood, as in yours, ... [y]ou had to take a year of American history and a semester of economics--as, of course, you have to no longer: 'have to' is just gone out of the curriculum.

Ernestine becomes the voice of Roth, disgusted by the dismal state of education in American schools, in particular, his alma mater in New Jersey:

> All these colleges starting these remedial programs to teach kids what they should have learned in the ninth grade. In East Orange High they stopped long ago reading the old classics. They haven't even heard of Moby-Dick, much less read it.

Heaven forbid, Ernestine brings up personal responsibility:

> "What happened to Coleman with that word 'spooks' is all a part of the same enormous failure. In my parents' day and well into yours and mine, it used to be the person who fell short. Now it's the discipline. Reading the classics is too difficult, therefore it's the classics that are to blame. Today the student asserts his incapacity as a privilege. I can't learn it, so there is something wrong with it. And there is something especially wrong with the bad teacher who wants to teach it. ..."

Conclusion

I can summarize my impressions from reading these works by the famous epigram attributed to Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr: "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Although these novels take place at various periods over about 150 years and although they are set in diverse countries, the themes have a degree of uniformity.

A talented young student becomes a "project" for parents and teachers, often to the detriment of the well-being of the student. This should be a warning to those proposing special programs for gifted students: while they must be kept interested and engaged, not everyone needs to finish a doctorate as a high school student. Certainly, such programs should not come at the expense of swimming and fishing.

Boarding schools, in particular, seem to cause extensive trauma. Teachers and counselors must ensure that hazing remains within reasonable limits and that students are carefully monitored for conditions such as deep loneliness.

While universities and elite secondary schools claim to be meritocracies, economic considerations can be decisive for a student's success. The provision of adequate financial aid should be a top priority.

Finally, I would like to express my distaste for what I regard as excessive hype over the impending "revolution in education." Anyone who does not jump on the bandwagon is considered to be a primitive reactionary. Already sixty years ago, Isaac Asimov perceived that technology, in itself, is not a solution to problems with education. We see this in the zeal for MOOCs (massive open online courses). Purporting to make universities obsolete, they have been successful primarily for continuing education of educated and motivated professionals. While technology can help, there really is no alternative to cramming it in bit by bit.

I don't want to end with only negative conclusions. Just as one must learn by cramming it in bit by bit, progress in education can and will be made step-by-step. Dedicated and knowledgeable teachers really can make a difference in the lives of individual students, and new technologies and pedagogies can facilitate learning in specific contexts.

I would like to reiterate my recommendation to read these works. One can learn more about education from Isaac Asimov, Hermann Hesse and Taha Hussein than one can from many research projects.