



How to Read Fiction: A Letter from Howard Pease to a Fan

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terial, he may suggest Jane Austen in the same unit. For one still reading the sentimental romance, a book like *Jalna* would be a step up a literary scale. That is, the primary focus in teaching literature should be always on the human experience being communicated to boys and girls and the significance of that experience for life and its values today. But within that pattern the other concerns give direction to guiding the reading of the students so that the potential richness of literature is there.

By thinking of literature as multidimensional, we can see more clearly our functions as teachers of literature and apportion time to various aspects of the program. It directs our attention to a long-range view of what reading should accomplish in the lives of young people—not in a six-week unit, not even in a year's time, but certainly in a six-year program. Instead of evaluating a student's growth in terms of the number of

books he has read, the number of technical terms he has in his vocabulary, the number of titles he can give from a particular writer, we can look at a cumulative reading list and ask the following kinds of questions: Has the student grown in terms of the literary merit of materials he has selected for reading? Has he picked a variety of literary forms to read? Has the student had experiences with many kinds of people living many kinds of lives? Has he read about periods of time other than his own? Has he lived vicariously with peoples in all parts of the world? Has he experienced the lives of people of different economic levels? Has he read about people of varied vocations?

Such questioning gives meaning to the work in literature. It provides the student with the concrete objectives for which he is shooting in his reading. And it gives valid justification to students and parents who question the literature program of the high school.

How To Read Fiction¹

A Letter from Howard Pease to a Fan

DEAR PAT:

You write that you have read every book of mine except two—quite a record. Yet I wonder if you really read those books.

If you happened to review one for your English teacher at school, you no doubt wrote something about the characters, the story plot, the humor if any, the prose style and all those other obvious elements of fiction. But did you scratch through the surface of the story to discover what the author had to say? Did

you find the theme of each book, and did you then ask yourself how it applied to you? If you didn't do this, you failed to read those books.

Let me hasten to point out that not every book contains more than the story with its surface elements. "Escape fiction" doesn't. This is the type of fiction you find in the big popular magazines. While reading these stories we escape from our own seemingly humdrum world into the more satisfying world of unreality. These stories are as light and frothy as ice cream sodas, and about as nourishing. They are never realistic.

¹ Adapted from the *Bulletin of the School Library Association of California* for May, 1952.

They never make the reader think. However, the writer's first task is to entertain, to give delight, and these short stories and serials are often bright dreams in a troubled world.

At least half of our young people's books are of this type—pure escape. They are lollipops artificially colored and flavored. In plot they run like this:

Our youthful hero, poor but honest and hard working, is presented with a colt apparently worthless. Of course the average reader, familiar with the routine, knows better; the colt is an ugly duckling. Under tender care this colt grows into a magnificent thoroughbred! Now our hero sees his chance. With the help of a friend, a "character" at a nearby racing stable, he trains his horse for the turf. Here we have suspense—the ever-present danger in the dark of night from other trainers who are jealous. Valiantly our hero triumphs over all these villains. In the exciting last chapter, our ugly duckling wins the race and our deserving hero receives the Grand Prize of fifty thousand dollars.

This, Pat, is not reality. These aren't real people and this isn't real life. This is wish fulfillment which acts as an escape mechanism. It is the dream world of the neurotic where facts are never faced; indeed, facts are something to run away from. In other words, this is an escape story. Such a book in itself doesn't do any harm. When truly entertaining it is valuable in getting the slow reader to come back like *Oliver Twist* and ask for more. It is only a continual diet of such books that may be harmful. For these books give a distorted view of life; they keep the reader in an unreal world.

I've written escape fiction myself. *Jungle River* and *Hurricane Weather* are just stories. If either one has anything to say I have been unable to find it. In

state industrial schools, where most of the delinquent boys are neurotics, so nervous and ill-adjusted that they cannot face the world, such books are eagerly read; and it is only the few boys who are well along the road to mental health who can bear to read anything else. So we need, you see, all kinds of books for all kinds of readers. Still, if you are to become a reader of our better novels instead of a reader only of our popular magazines with their romantic serials and murder tales, you must learn while young how to read.

It's easy as well as fascinating to steer your course in a direction that leads to a deeper insight into books. You must explore behind the story.

Since modern writers do not tack on an explanation, as did Aesop in his fable about the fox and the grapes, you must learn how to hunt, how to dig. You might begin your search by studying a popular song such as "Bali Hái," from *South Pacific*, which says that most people live on a lonely island lost in the middle of a foggy sea, and most people long for another island—Bali Hái! Don't take this literally, Pat. This is figurative language. You might say in your own words that the song's idea, or theme, is "Greener pastures over the fence," or "Beyond the horizon is a lovelier place to live." In this idea you'll find what we call a universal truth. It is true of you and of me and of every other person, because all of us at times wish we were in some other place—over the fences that surround us. It is this element in the song that gives it such a wide appeal and makes it stand out from other popular songs, most of which are limited to a Sioux City Sue.

Next you might move on to a simple story, a fairy tale known to all of us, say "Snow White and the Seven

Dwarfs." Here the meaning is not to be found in the words but in the story's action. How do you extract the meaning from that action? Now a short story or a novel, like any work of art, may have different meanings for different people. Not always can you say the author meant exactly this or exactly that. Each individual will find his own meaning. For him, that will be the true meaning.

What do I myself think lies behind the story of Snow White? To me the lovely heroine represents beauty, and the story's action means that beauty in any form does not die. It is kept alive by those (in this case by the seven dwarfs) who realize its worth, who appreciate it. And the dwarfs are proved right. Snow White lives again. Here is a universal truth. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"—a Grecian urn by an unknown craftsman, a mural by Da Vinci, a painting by Van Gogh, a poem by Keats. A work of art lives on after the artist himself has died. Even a great thought, an idea, comes down to us through the years. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is more alive today than it was when first spoken. Such things produced by the spirit of man are immortal.

Pick up a volume of Hans Christian Andersen and read "The Red Shoes." The little red shoes are always dancing. To me they represent, or symbolize, a quality. To me they are a symbol of vanity or the frivolous life. And to me the theme of the story is: Vanity leads to sorrow, and getting rid of vanity leads to peace and happiness. Next read "The Nightingale" and then figure out for yourself what the live nightingale, with her lovely songs, stands for; and what the mechanical nightingale, with its one music-box song, stands for. Both are symbols. There is a meaning, a universal truth, in these little tales, and

that's one reason why they last through the years.

I hope this explanation does not seem far-fetched to you. For this is the stuff of art and literature. Our best writers, whom I want you to read some day—Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Kafka, Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald—can be read, and must be read, on more than one level. (But don't hurry to read these authors; wait until you are older and ready, because they are not always easy reading.) The short stories and novels of these distinguished writers not only have themes of universal significance, they are also filled with implication and symbolism; that is, they contain under the-surface meanings. Hemingway's famous and best short story, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," is a case in point. Such stories have depths that are to be sounded (fully understood) only at a second or perhaps a third reading. Not quite knowing why, the reader is lured back to them again and again.

It is not only our top-drawer authors who possess this under-the-surface element in their fiction. Our better novelists often do. And any writer, if he really knows his craft, makes the attempt to include it.

Certainly it should not be difficult to peer into the twilit depths of a story for young people. Such a book need not be literature, but it may be, I hope, a stepping stone to the reading of literature. Let me look at a few books I happen to know best—my own. (Get ready now, Pat; you say you've read all but two!) Out of my eighteen books, two may be classed as escape fiction. Four more have themes that do not say very much. The other twelve, just as interesting as stories, I trust, possess some under-the-surface elements. Not that

these twelve books are so very deep. My point is that if students, such as you, are later to read and understand and enjoy to the fullest our best writers, now is the time to learn how to read.

Take one of my simplest books, my fifth, *Secret Cargo*. On the surface this is an action and mystery story about a locked chest hidden in the hold of a ship. But there is also a hidden cargo that my hero, Larry, knows nothing about until the end of his adventures. When the lid of the wooden chest is raised, there is nothing of value inside. Then why is the book titled *Secret Cargo*? Because its theme, a belief I still hold to, is this: In all of us, in our unplumbed depths, there are certain hidden qualities, abilities, talents—call them what you will—which few of us ever discover and bring to light and put to use. So seldom do any of us ever reach the limits even of our own short range!

This, for what it is worth, is the theme I attempted to dramatize in this story. The secret cargo is in Larry himself. The brassbound chest, hidden in the ship, is a symbol. What do I mean by that? Well, a lion is a symbol of courage. The object used as a symbol represents something else, a quality, an idea of greater magnitude, something you cannot see or put your hands on. To use a symbol is one way of trying to give more depth, more meaning, to a story. *Now, Pat, stand on the first level but hold yourself ready to dive.* On the surface this book is the story of a locked chest hidden on a ship at sea. *Now dive to the second level!* The story is about the secret cargo that Larry discovers within himself, certain abilities he did not know he had until his adventures showed them to him. *Now plunge down to the third level and touch bottom.* The story is fundamentally about hidden cargoes to be found in all of us.

You see, I had hoped that a young reader like you, after finishing the story, would pause long enough to ask himself if he, like my hero, possessed any secret cargo. Think a minute. Dig deep down inside yourself, bring this cargo to light, put it to use! Did you do any of these things?

At last, Pat, we are beginning to read a book. We have found its theme. We have discovered the use of a symbol. We note that the surface story of the finding of the hidden chest on a ship at sea goes parallel with the deeper story of Larry's finding himself as a capable human being. We understand now what the author is saying between the lines. So we finally ask ourselves if there is a meaning here that touches us personally, and we linger over this question. . . .

Let's now take up my first book, *The Tattooed Man*, which has a more complicated theme and uses more than one symbol. The main thematic note is struck on page 1 in the very first paragraph: "On train and ferry he [Tod Moran] had been leaping gloriously through pages of high romance . . . and now, upon stepping out of the rose-tinted covers of his book he was momentarily startled, as though he had strayed into another world." In that one sentence is a wealth of meaning. The rose-tinted book under Tod's arm is a bit of escape fiction which is mentioned again and again in the story. It symbolizes (or represents) Tod's romantic dreams about life. Toward the end of *The Tattooed Man*, on page 263, Tod in disgust throws this novel through a porthole into the sea. That gesture signifies the end of Tod's romantic dreams. From now on he will face the real world; he will grow up. So here is the theme of my story: romantic illusions vs. reality; or, the tossing aside

of illusions and the acceptance of life as it is. This theme, I think, has universal significance. It should mean something to you and to every other young person who, like Tod Moran, is in the process of growing up.

As an example of secondary symbols, throw a thoughtful look at the last half of the chapter called "Sharks." Here the subsurface life of the ocean—the shark that chases Tod when he's swimming, the huge turtle with its protective shell, the little squids and the flying fish—is used, not merely to give background and excitement to the story, but also to interpret, to explain the life of the little world of his ship, the *Araby*. Each reader will find his own meaning, and for him that will be the true meaning. In other words, this whole scene should be read on more than one level.

For a moment let's glance at my second book, *The Jinx Ship*. It has superstition as its theme. The last chapters describe the burning and sinking of the steamer *Congo*. (Has the ship's name any significance?) There is a definite meaning behind that catastrophe at sea. Indeed, the story's theme demanded this ending. The burning ship sinks, and "the waters of the Gulf once more lay placid under the stars." Those are the very last words of the book—peace has come again to Tod Moran and to the other members of the crew. The author was saying between the lines: "This is what you, the reader, should do if you have any superstitious ideas—burn them, sink them, get rid of them."

So far, these three books of mine have what I call my "inner" themes. These I always prefer, because for me it is more interesting to get inside a character with a personal problem and then attempt to show the reader how he ticks. And in these books, too, I am sure the reader

gets closer to this main character. But I have also written books with "outer" themes; you might better call them social themes.

One of these is *Foghorns*. It has labor as its theme, union labor. Even the title has its implication. (What?) The story revolves around the problem of employer vs. employee, and I tried to show fairly both sides of this controversy as it related to the San Francisco water front. When finished with the book, the young reader would have, I hoped, a realization that this was not a simple question with one side all wrong and the other side all right. I hoped that the reader would be a more understanding person when he looked at labor trouble in his own home town. How about you, Pat? Did you transfer what I had to say about the San Francisco water front to conditions nearer to your home? If you didn't, you failed to get anything out of the book except the story.

More complicated versions of this same type of story—complicated because they combine the technical advantages of the inner theme with an outer one—are my *Heart of Danger* with its theme of anti-Semitism, and *The Dark Adventure* with its theme of juvenile delinquency. These two books, I believe, are the most important books I've written, if you liked them, they should serve for you as stepping stones to the modern psychological novel, in which the important thing is not what happens "outside" to a character but what happens inside the mind of that character.

Finally let me mention two of my favorite books.² Both come from my California background, which dates to

² Out of my eighteen books in print I have five favorites, five that really please me. These are *The Tattooed Man*, *Heart of Danger*, *Long Wharf*, *Thunderbolt House*, and *The Dark Adventure*.

gold-rush days; indeed, both stories grew out of my family history. *Long Wharf*, a historical tale, has "Courage in the face of defeat" as its theme. It gives the reader, I trust, an authentic picture of San Francisco in that riotous year 1850. The Mrs. Howard of the story is my maternal grandmother who, in order to support herself and children, ran a pioneer hotel while my grandfather, a gay and optimistic young fellow, was off in the hills staking out another gold mine, which as usual never quite panned out. In the story I transplanted her hotel from the Mother Lode mining district to the San Francisco water front, combining it with a hotel that had existed there a decade before, on a ship tied to a dock.

A companion book to *Long Wharf*, and my own favorite of all my books, is *Thunderbolt House*. It is a "period piece" set in the San Francisco of 1905-6. If I tell you how it came to be written, you may get some idea of how a writer goes to work.

The germ of the idea came from an incident of my boyhood days when my father was unexpectedly informed by a midwest lawyer that his Aunt Mary, recently dead, had named him in her will as one of her heirs. The amount of the inheritance was not stated. His aunt, Mary Pease Bissell, had always been wealthy, extremely wealthy. True, Aunt Mary had children of her own. Still. . . . How much had she left my father? Five hundred dollars? Five thousand? It was six weeks before we learned that my father had inherited only a few shares of stock in the family business, the manufacturing of carpet-sweepers. Thus our life went on without change.

Years later, in recalling the incident, I asked myself what might have happened if Aunt Mary had left us a small fortune. Would we have used the money

wisely? Would we have been more successful, and happier? I doubted it. More likely we would have lost our heads as badly as did certain friends of ours when they received an unexpected inheritance of several hundred thousand. I remembered, too, that Aunt Mary's death had occurred about the time of the San Francisco earthquake and fire. Instantly an idea took fire in my brain. I said to myself: There you have a story! Take the idea of a normal family overwhelmed by sudden wealth and combine it with that great San Francisco catastrophe. At once I made notes which went into my card catalogue for future use. Half a dozen years later I started work on the book and spent sixteen fascinating months on the research and the writing. (I work in my office from six to eight hours a day, six days a week.)

Within two years after publication, *Thunderbolt House* had been judged by most readers to be one of my best books, and its sales had soared over the first two years' sales of any of my other books. Aunt Mary, in more ways than one, had left me an inheritance for which I continue, year after year, to be grateful.

Thunderbolt House is the very opposite of the material-success story in which the hero wins the Grand Prize of fifty thousand dollars. In Chapter One several members of the Allen family receive an inheritance from an uncle, and under the impact of this sudden wealth their family life goes to pieces. The great earthquake and fire of April, 1906, leave them at the end of the story as moderately situated as they were at the beginning. The theme is this: Wealth does not necessarily bring happiness.

Behind the adventure and mystery, behind the danger and excitement of the earthquake and fire, is the true meaning of the story. It is a study in human val-

ues, material vs. spiritual. The Allens learn the difference between false values, fleeting values, basic values. At the end they hold tight once more to the old enduring values, good at all times.

Let me explain more fully what I mean by these values. For instance, few of us admire a youth who says he wants to be a doctor because a doctor makes a lot of money. Such a youth is basing his choice of a career on material values only—money and the things money will buy. On the other hand our admiration goes out to the young man who is vitally interested in medicine and who wants to help his fellow men. Now, if you were sick and in need of a doctor, Pat, which young man would you call in? The first one? No, rightly you would question his ability. More likely you would send for the second young doctor.

So, curiously enough, it is this second young man who is traveling the road to success, and in more ways than one. He is gaining material success—money and the things money will buy. He is getting real satisfaction and happiness out of his chosen profession, because he is helping the people about him, people who like and admire him. He is earning for himself an important place in his own community.

And what of the first young man, who wanted to be a doctor because a doctor makes a lot of money? Alas, he is not making much money. He is getting little satisfaction out of his work. He is anything but happy. Both in a material and in a spiritual way he is a failure.

The enduring values are those spiritual values which have come down to us through the ages because our forefathers found them good. There is nothing haywire about them. They make sense. They are workable. Now, Pat, what is your own scale of values? Do the material

values come first with you, or do they take a secondary place? Are you riding for a fall, or are you heading for a life of satisfaction?

Thunderbolt House, therefore, is a study in human values. It is an attempt to show in dramatic form that our basic values, the ones as good today as they were a hundred years ago—yes, as good today as they were nineteen hundred years ago—are the values that count; they are the only ones upon which you can build the good life, the happy life. As in all of my books, without exception, there is no material gain at the end. There is as usual, however, what I consider of much more importance—a spiritual or an intellectual gain.

Throughout most of the chapters of *Thunderbolt House* there is a large tapestry, supposedly a rare and priceless Gobelin, which hangs from the balcony in the hall of the old Judson mansion. In the final chapter this is used as a tent by the family, all of whom are refugees from the spreading fire. How many readers understand that this tapestry is also a symbol? Did you? A clue to this should be found in the fact that the very last sentence of the book is about the Gobelin. If you as a reader will remind yourself that this tapestry is a fake Gobelin, not worth a tenth of its cost, you may more readily discover what it stands for.

Have I analyzed enough of my books to suggest a few points about reading? Some of my observations, I suspect, are over your head. But I won't apologize. I like to make a young person like you stretch a bit over new words and new ideas. And I want to help you prepare yourself to be a reader of adult fiction.

Most of our modern literary short stories and literary novels are written in what craftsmen call an elliptical style.

That is, the author omits; he does not state but suggests; and he uses symbols. Henry James' golden bowl is not merely a golden bowl; it also symbolizes the relationship between the two main characters of a story; and when that golden bowl is broken, that relationship is broken. If you as a reader do not apprehend this, you will not understand the most important incident in Edith Wharton's little masterpiece *Ethan Frome*. Neither will you fully understand a recent Book-of-the-Month Club novel about a teen-ager, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which the last chapter is pure symbolism.

This under-the-surface element is also to be found in many of the European movies shown in this country and, now and then—alas, only now and then—in an American movie. If you saw the Oscar-winning *All about Eve* you must have been aware that the movie's ending was—well, different. Strangely enough, a new character was apparently introduced at the very end. The camera turned away from Bette Davis and Celeste Holm and focused upon a teen-aged girl who, standing before a panel of mirrors with a lovely evening gown held up before her, saw her own glittering reflection over and over again in those mirrors. Without a word being spoken, the whole meaning of the story was summed up in that symbolic final scene. For if you looked closely you saw not only the teen-ager's image in those mirrors but your own and mine, too, as well as the image of everyone else in the audience. That glittering dress was a symbol that hit you with terrific impact. The movie, in its own technical way, was getting under the surface of the story, aiming its camera at you and at me, speaking directly to you and to me. That is art.

When you bring this knowledge of

method to the movies that you see and to the books you read, you gain a new understanding of your own life and a new understanding of the lives of the people about you. Not only have you learned how to get under the surface of a story; you have learned at the same time something much more vital—how to get under the surface of life!

Let me summarize:

I hope now that you will be able to spot a lollipop, an escape story. A good one, based upon some measure of reality, has its place even though it is just a story and has nothing to say. Enjoy such a book. It can be as refreshing as a shower on a hot summer day. It is only the cheaper ones that I question. And those which overemphasize material gain in the last chapter give such a distorted view of life that a diet of such books may act as an obstacle to your maturing into a sensible adult.

Remember that in popular songs you can discover the difference between a "Sioux City Sue" and a "Bali Hái." Remember that a fairy tale may have, behind its action, a meaning, a universal truth.

It is this element in some of our young people's books that make them stepping stones to the reading of literature. So learn now how to read them. Remember that behind the action, the characters, the prose style and all those other obvious elements of fiction, lies the true worth of a book—its meaning.

You should (1) find the theme of a story and be able to express it in your own words, the fewer the better. (2) Be alert and look for symbols, and if there are some, decide what they stand for. (3) Pick out the human values presented by the author and label them

either as spiritual or as material values; then, according to your own way of thinking, rate them as to their importance. (4) Finally—and don't forget this!—ponder over all these under-the-surface elements and ask yourself how they apply to you personally.

Yet how many readers, old or young,

do this? Do you, Pat, truly read a book?
Do you hunt for its secret cargo?

Cordially yours,

HOWARD PEASE

To:

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Living English

GEORGIA E. CLIFTON¹

IF ENGLISH teachers are to follow the principles set forth by the Experience Curriculum, they will keep their instruction close to life in the teaching of English communication. They will do away with unnatural situations and formal units in narration, description, exposition, and argument, changing to such activities as sharing personal experience which lead to a greater socialization of the program in English.

The vocational English classes in the Capitol Hill Senior High School are attempting to map out their course by teacher-pupil planning. Part of the day the students are at work in the vocational classes of mechanics, radio, carpentry, cosmetology, commercial art; the other time they spend in such classes as mathematics, English, and history. In English, especially, a subject which they have always dreaded, the students have expressed a desire to learn that English which is, as they say, "necessary to help them get jobs."

Just what this "necessary English" must be has been part of their work to help plan.

The class is conducted as much as possible in an informal manner, allowing

the students to work in groups on their projects. Studying about their vocations is the main topic of interest, of course, but the students have discovered that there are other phases of interest that are necessary for a well-rounded life as a useful citizen.

Since there are different groups of trades within one section of an English class, the students decided that it would be better to divide into groups for planning. Each group of students of radio, carpentry, cosmetology, cooking, etc., were aware of the need to understand and use the vocabulary of their trades; also they felt that they would like to know something of the values, background, and financial gains of their vocations. Some films on "Finding Your Life's Work," "Finding the Right Job," and "Our Vocabulary of Business" were shown. Group discussions centered around such questions as: "What did we find out in these films that we need to make a study of?" "How can we learn more about our trades?" In order to learn more about their trades, they saw the necessity of reading books in the library.

After reading about their vocations, the group made up such questions about their trades as: *Agriculture*—"How well

¹ Capitol Hill Senior High School, Oklahoma City.