

Depressed by the printing press

Modern books embarrassing, repetitive

The conventional wisdom has it that reading is somehow better than television. Reading is seen as a demanding but rewarding type of mental exercise while television is regarded as nothing more than mind cancer.



BRENDAN GUY

This viewpoint is a highly idealized view of literature that is sadly out of date in the modern world. The fact is modern American literature has become as shallow and as the worst television programming.

To be fair, the decline and fall of American literature can largely be blamed on television (and popular culture as a whole).

The last 25 years have seen the publishing industry come under heavy attack due to the proliferation of television, movies, popular music and the Internet.

Facing a society that had entertainment options other than reading, the various publishing companies desperately sought a new weapon to store their fading profits.

Their solution to this problem of disappearing demand was Dilbertesque in its ingenuity: They decided to raise the price of books.

With books now more expensive and so many more distractions being readily available, the only way to guarantee book sales was to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The publishing companies soon zeroed in on what people wanted and gave it to them — again and again and again.

Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, John Grisham and Stephen King would be called upon to write the same book every year. Self-help books, celebrity autobiographies and Imbecile's Guides to Living would cover the aisles of every bookstore.

Today, it appears new paperback books are merely given a shelf life of about a month and receive little advertising support. Even established authors find themselves under immense pressure to yield enormous profits or be shelved and forgotten.

Most publishing companies are content to fall back upon their reliable blockbuster authors whose

books are familiar to the American people and will sell on name recognition, regardless of quality.

In other words, the publishing companies are behaving just like the movie and television industries.

American literature has clearly been dumbed down. The same industry that once produced the works of such giants as Samuel Clemens, J.D. Salinger and John Steinbeck is now reduced to trying to provide intellectual enlightenment through Deepak Chopra and the collected poems of Jewel. In and of itself there is nothing wrong with this — the publishing companies can hardly be blamed for doing what is necessary to insure their own survival.

And while their mass-produced books are not particularly enlightening or thought-provoking, they are usually entertaining which is what the public seems to want (even if this is the same mentality that leads to movies like *Armageddon* and television like "Friends" getting made).

At any rate, if people are actually willing to buy these books, they deserve what they get. What makes this situation so annoying is not that literature has been taken over by mediocrity, but that so many people continue to deny that this has happened.

Instead, these people hold an artificial reverence for modern literature, giving authors like Danielle Steel and Robert Ludlum the respect that was earned by authors like William Shakespeare and Leo Tolstoy.

Even today there are people who will actually claim they would rather read the worst book ever written than watch the best television show.

If those people watched more television maybe they would realize that the "Simpsons" is more creative, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" has a more riveting plot and "Dawson's Creek" will do more to build your vocabulary than almost any book currently in print.

Perhaps literature once deserved to be respected above all other forms of art and entertainment, but these days it is just another business.

Enjoy it for what it is but do not expect more from it than from any other form of popular culture.

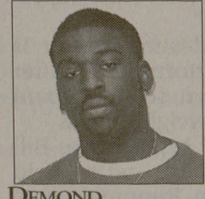
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GABRIEL RUENES/THE BATTALION

Paying addicts to get sterilized good way to reduce crack babies

Congratulations, it is a three-pound, six-ounce baby with underdeveloped vital organs." While doctor or nurse would announce baby's birth in this exact way, a sad scenario gets played out everyday across this nation when a substance-exposed baby is born.



DEMOND REID

According to the Department of Health, there have been approximately 800,000 substance-exposed infants born every year since 1995, and less than 20 percent of those babies go home with their mother. The other 80 percent have petitions filed against the mother and are placed in foster care.

Statistics like this have caused the debate over how to stop the increasing number of drug-addicted babies in this country to sprout faster than a marijuana plant saturated with Miracle-Gro.

Big Brother has tried to combat this problem of drug-addicted babies by attacking the source, namely the drug trade. This is a nice try. The U.S. Government's war on drugs has been a bigger flop than

Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*. Acknowledging the government's inability to do anything about the problem, Barbara Harris proposed a radical yet very good idea. Harris started the organization Children Requiring A Caring Community (C.R.A.C.K.), which offers drug addicts money to get sterilized. Given enough time, this organization will prove to be the magical sword that slays the beast of drug-exposed infants.

This concept of paying drug addicts \$200 to get sterilized is surprisingly good because it hinges on the simple fact that drug addicts need money. The state of California has been offering free tubal ligations to drug addicts for quite a while, but when an addict is living crack pipe to crack pipe that offer means very little. Two hundred dollars to non-addicts means the equivalent of 40 grams of happiness to a crack head.

The cost for taking care of abandoned drug babies falls onto the American taxpayer. Abandoned drug babies are coined "million dollar" babies because the medical cost for one leap frog across the million dollar line.

According to C.R.A.C.K. the typical drug addict has seven children. Now if the decision is between

\$7 million (a million dollars per baby) absorbed by the American taxpayer and a \$200 nip and tuck, somebody call Dr. Cut 'em Up and tell him to sharpen his scalpel. That choice is not exactly a Catch-22, now is it? The situation is like deciding to spend \$5 on Janet Jackson's CD or \$50 on Latoya's.

Up to present, C.R.A.C.K. has had 37 paid sterilization clients. If it is assumed that each one of those clients was at risk to have just one baby, then C.R.A.C.K. has saved the taxpayers \$37 million.

Thirty-seven million. That is almost enough money for a special prosecutor to hound a president out of office for getting a little "congressional service" in the Oval Office.

C.R.A.C.K. has taken the concept of the rights of the unborn to the next logical step. They are advocating the rights of the unconceived. Every zygote should be given the right not to be conceived inside of a mother who will get them hooked on drugs in the womb. Face it, on the Grand Old Birth Defect Preference List being born addicted to crack ranks right below being born with only three fingers and right above being born with a foot growing out of your neck.

As with any simple solution to a complex prob-

lem, C.R.A.C.K.'s approach has been met with some opposition. A main contention against the organization's method is the finality of it.

The opponents of C.R.A.C.K. believe the individual may one day turn their life around and should not be enticed to make long-term decisions while they are under the influence of the drug, since getting mixed up in drugs was just a "bad decision" they made.

No. Smoking crack is not a bad decision. Wearing a paisley shirt with plaid pants is a bad decision. Insulting Mike Tyson's mother to his face is a bad decision. Smoking crack is insane. If a person decides to sell their reproductive rights for a \$200 signing bonus, they do not deserve any playing time for the parental all-star team. In fact, they should not even be allowed to watch the game.

C.R.A.C.K.'s solution is a better alternative to the game Uncle Sam wants drug addicts to play. Granted, drug addicts have rolled doubles for the third time, but rather than sending them directly to jail, C.R.A.C.K. allows them to pass Go, collect \$200 and find a crack house somewhere on Baltic Ave.

Demond Reid is a sophomore marketing major.

American school systems need major changes

Sweeping educational reforms are long overdue in America. Our culture and level of technology have made the current educational system obsolete and have led to many criticisms of the system.



LUKE SAUGIER

One of the major criticisms about the American educational system is that it does not adequately prepare students for real life. This would be an easy problem to solve if "real life" were the same for all people; unfortunately it is not. The "real life" future students need to be prepared for is the difficulty of college courses.

However, for the 70 percent of Americans who end their formal education at high school, real life includes the need to learn a trade that will support them and enable them to retire comfortably.

At best, it is difficult for one school to accomplish the task of preparing both groups for the world, and the deteriorating social and physical environment of many high schools makes it truly impossible.

According to The Center For Education Reform, American students rank in the bottom 10 percent of 21 industrial nations in mathematics and science; 25 percent of all 12th graders scored below what is considered basic adequacy in the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress test.

The first step towards reforming America's schools is to establish a national educational

standard for material to be learned by the end of the eighth-grade year. This way, all students would be taught the same material and could be ranked fairly. A test would be given to determine whether students have mastered the material.

Upon passing the national test, students would be finished with their required schooling. Any student who fails the test would be required to attend special education classes until he or she could pass the test or was found to be incapable of passing.

Students who pass the test would have three options. First, they could end their education and immediately enter the work force, which would be discouraged by the same kind of "Stay In School" campaigns in use today.

Another option would be to attend a vocational school, which would cover the basic subjects now covered in high schools. The vocational schools would also help students choose the trade they would like to work in after graduation and teach them the skills necessary for that trade.

A third option would be to take another test that would be significantly harder than the eighth-grade graduation test. Upon passing this test, students would be allowed to enroll in a college preparatory school.

Currently, according to The Center For Education Reform, one-quarter of all mathematics courses at public universities are remedial courses. The prep schools would cover more advanced material than is offered in most modern high schools in order to prepare students for a college education and allow them

to enter college without the need for the amount of remedial courses that is common today.

Other areas of the school system would be affected as well. Attendance would be optional at the vocational and prep schools to make it clear to students that they are in class of their own freewill for the sole purpose of learning.

All schools would be on a full-year system, under which students would have four, three-week breaks throughout the year. This would eliminate the "startup" and "shutdown" time that now exists before and after summer break.

Some things would be the same; all high schools, junior high schools and elementary schools would be free and people of any age could attend any school.

However, under this new system, education would be seen as a privilege, not a right. Discipline would be rigid and violent or illegal behavior would result in permanent expulsion.

Through this system, America would continue to produce world-class leaders, scientists and artists. Perhaps equally importantly, it would continue to allow young people to explore their interests.

Yes, this new system would not be fair to everyone. It would, however, be unfair to fewer people than the system in use today since it would not try to fit every student into the same educational mold.

Luke Saugier is a sophomore petroleum engineering major.

MAIL CALL

Students respond to abortion debate

In response to Christina Barrow's Feb. 1 opinion column.

Knitting needles, Q-tips, Drano douches, drinking plant poison, coat hangers...all methods of illegal abortions. The fate of the woman who uses these methods is much worse when the procedure and much too often is death.

Due to the Hyde amendment (which denies women federal Medicaid funding for abortions), parental consent laws, mandatory waiting periods and lack of clinics performing abortions (84 percent of all counties offer no abortion services) illegal abortions will occur.

Is your friend, your girlfriend, your sister going to end up dead or physically scarred because she could not afford the time or money involved in a legal abortion? She's less likely to because of organizations like Planned Parenthood.

Jennifer Woodson
Class of '01

In response to Manisha Parekh's Feb. 1 opinion column.

It is horrible that a few "pro-life" supporters made the wrong decision and resorted to killing,

but it is important to point out that all pro-choice people support killing.

If abortion had been illegal, I am sure that one-third of our generation would not have been wiped out.

It is not appropriate to place the responsibility of another woman's pregnancy on the shoulders of those who care about the children.

The majority of pro-life supporters are marked by compassion and seek to preserve life. I know many mature pro-lifers who would provide a good home for an unwanted baby of any race, rather than having them burnt or mangled.

Sara Gauthier
Class of '01

The Battalion encourages letters to the editor. Letters must be 300 words or less and include the author's name, class and phone number.

The opinion editor reserves the right to edit letters for length, style, and accuracy. Letters may be submitted in person at 013 Reed McDonald with a valid student ID. Letters may also be mailed to:

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