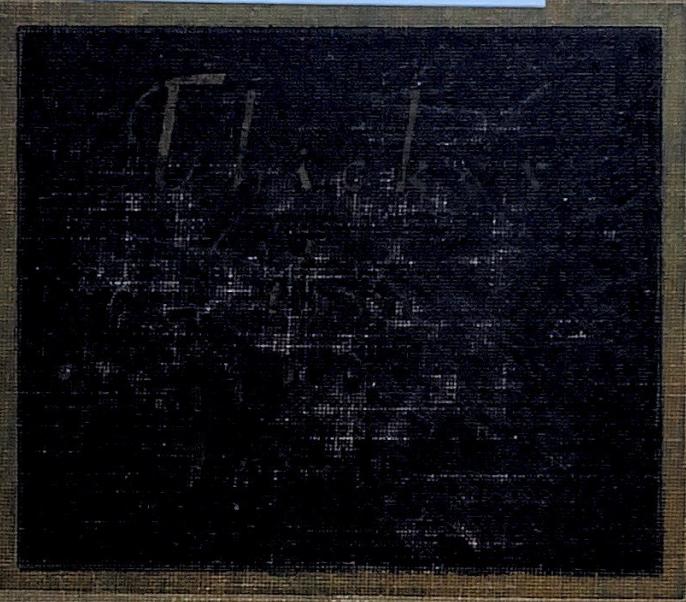


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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS

THICKER THAN WATER

Stories of Family Life

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PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Alice V. KELIHER, *Chairman*

EDNA ALBERS

WILLARD W. BEATTY

EARL S. GOUDAY

LEO HUBERMAN

WALTER C. LANGER

LORINE PRUETTE

LOUISE M. ROSENBLATT

W. ROBERT WUNSCH

Collaborators

GLADYS C. SCHWESINGER

BERNHARD J. STERN

KATHERINE W. TAYLOR

Edited by W. ROBERT WUNSCH

and

EDNA ALBERS

For the

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS



New York
D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED

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1939



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PREFACE

THE Commission on Human Relations has been charged with the responsibility of helping people with the urgent problems of personal and social living today. As one of its activities, the Commission is offering to students, teachers, parents, club and study groups, a series of books which deal with questions of human relations in our society.

This book, *Thicker than Water*, presents selected short stories dealing with typical problems of family members. Another Commission publication, *Literature as Exploration*,¹ by Louise M. Rosenblatt, explores fully and deeply the opportunities and problems involved in the use of literary materials for developing understandings in human relations. It is urgent that those teachers and leaders who are going to use *Thicker than Water* should also use this book as a guide. Dr. Rosenblatt says:

If we only do justice to the potentialities inherent in literature itself, we can make a vital social contribution. As the student vicariously shares through literature the emotions and aspirations of other human beings, he can gain heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of others remote from him in temperament, in space, or in social environment; he can develop greater imaginative capacity to envisage the meaning of abstract laws or political and social theories for actual human lives. Such sensitivity and imagination are part of the indispensable equipment of the citizen of a democracy.

The initial plan for a series of books in human relations evolved from the conferences of the Hanover Group

¹ Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, A publication of the Commission on Human Relations (New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), pp. 325-326.

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called together by Lawrence K. Frank. This group included Lura Beam, John Dollard, Earl T. Engle, Mary Fisher, Willis Fisher, Hugh Hartshorne, Robert Lynd, Mark A. May, Margaret Mead, and James Plant. The outlines and source materials planned by these members of the Hanover Group were given to the Commission to serve as a starting point for its activities. For their generous release of original materials and for their continuing interest and assistance in the work of the Commission, we are deeply grateful.

The Commission and the author wish to thank the publishers and authors who gave permission to quote from their publications. Specific acknowledgments will be found in the footnotes.

ALICE V. KELIHER, *Chairman*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book, *Thicker than Water*, is a collection of short stories selected primarily for the contribution the authors have made in illuminating some aspects of family life and family member relationships. Their use, however, should not be confined to readers who are only concerned with study of family life as such. The stories are interesting and esthetically good, and can serve many purposes. They will be read, we think, for pleasure; they will be used, like other collections of short stories, by those whose main interest is in their literary quality. Their greatest value in their present context, however, will be in supplementing technical study of family life with the kind of experience literature offers.

To contrast technical study with the study of literature is perhaps unfair. The technician who presents a systematic and organized arrangement of facts in a field of knowledge, as in sociology, biology, and systematic psychology, makes his contribution in the analyses and hypotheses he presents. But the very nature of his study often demands that he single out aspects of human behavior for an artificially separated examination. The artist, on the other hand, sees life in slices that cut through such artificial parcels, and he portrays the complexities and vagaries always present when one looks clearly at the matrix of human behavior. Though the good technician does not wish us to, we are prone to adopt his systematic presentations of behavior and expect to order behavior in systematic sequences. The mother in "The Rainy Day, the Good Mother and the Brown Suit" illustrates the difficulty we all have in applying our sys-

tematic knowledge about human behavior to the complex forms in which it appears. Here was a mother who knew all the rules, who could tell you exactly what the book said about correct parental activities. But, to deal with her own necessarily unique and different children in an effective way, she had to go beyond her unimaginative and frightened application of official prescriptions, to a more fundamental understanding of herself and of her children—all unique persons with differing needs and goals for life.

The Commission hopes that its various presentations of technical knowledge plus these authors' insight will help somewhat to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior.¹ It is not too much to ask of educators, whatever their form of activity, to use every means at their disposal to increase insight, understanding, and sympathy between men.

The contribution of literature toward these ends can be great. The artist's awareness of the complexities of human personality, his understanding of human behavior, his presentation of the situations we actually find in life, can give us insight into problems that, in other contexts, remain abstract. The artist does not present artificially isolated strands of experience. He takes us with him into the very tangles of

¹The *Family: Past and Present*, edited by Bernhard J. Stern for the Commission on Human Relations (New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), is an invaluable source book with a combined presentation of various modes of treating information about family life. It should be used very effectively as background for the discussions of these stories. Another Commission book by Walter C. Langer on the psychology of human needs and human behavior, now in preparation, will be invaluable in the pursuit of psychological insights basic to the understanding of these characters. *Life and Growth* by Alice V. Keilher and *Do Adolescents Need Parents?* by Katherine W. Taylor, both Commission books published by D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938, should also be used in connection with the study of these stories. *Life and Growth*, written for young people, will help in the analysis of cultural pressures, and in the influence of one's own growth and development on behavior. *Do Adolescents Need Parents?* will serve as an effective combination with these stories in parent groups.

relationships, emotions, and motives with which we must deal in the solution of our daily human problems. He universalizes some of our most important interests and problems. In studying his characters we are, in essence, seeing ourselves, but without crude, painful, and perhaps harmful self-exposure. Our response is often primarily an emotional one, particularly in stories like these, where the artist has touched upon such an intimate concern as family life. Depending upon our own previous experience, interests, and desires, we identify ourselves with one or more of the characters and live vicariously the life the author depicts.

THE RÔLE OF THE LEADER

The artist, with his sensitivity, his perception, and his ability to communicate his thoughts and feelings to others, commands leaders who would guide others in understanding human behavior to study carefully what he has done; to know his medium, the story; and to try to be aware of the subtle meanings that lie behind his presentation. The least the artist can ask is that the leader be familiar with the stories.

Another important way in which the leader should share the writer's awareness is in recognizing the significance of the life history of the characters. Never does a human act spring from a vacuum. Much has preceded it; much will follow from it. This sensitivity to causes and probable outcomes is urgently needed in today's world—a world that seems increasingly to ignore causes and to give punishment, reprisals, hatred, and brutality precedence over understanding; a world that behaves as if today were the only significant moment in history. The leader should, therefore, use all techniques at his disposal to help build the capacity and the willingness to relate causes to outcomes.

A favorite colloquialism of young people, "How'd he

get that way?" is an excellent keynote for many a discussion. We are all too ready to pin labels on behavior, assuming that by name-calling we have really explained something. Suppose we call Libby in "Wife of the Hero" *spoiled*, or the mother in "It's an Old Story" *jealous*, or the son in "The Oratory Contest" *conceited*, or the mother in "Mother Knows Best" *possessive*. Are we in a better position to understand and to propose what could be done? No, we have simply named something without knowing why we called it that. These are only names for complexes of behavior all of which have histories; all can be studied only by an imaginative and sensitive reconstruction of the probable influences that led up to the moment of behavior depicted in the story.

The leader may ask his group to outline the probable experiences in the character's life, his probable relationships to others in his environment, the motives that have prompted his behavior, the sources of the values which are reflected in the goals he seeks. This may be done in open discussion. The leader may ask for written biographies or for short dramatic sketches portraying the earlier life of certain of the characters. This would be particularly valuable with a character like Mrs. Quail in "Mother Knows Best" because the first impulse is to assume erroneously that she is deliberately sacrificing her daughter for the satisfaction of her own desires, whereas the important thing is to find out what factors in her life made her that way, and what needs she was striving to fulfil.

The leader has equal responsibility for helping his group to predict possible outcomes from present situations. There is little positive value in understanding past causes unless we can use this knowledge to see today's causes as the background of future consequences. For only then do we alter the course of the future in the direction of a better life.

True we cannot be, and must not attempt to be in any deterministic way, seers and prophets; we cannot deny the complexity of behavior out of which the future is made. But we do know that the child, denied his brown suit by a tense mother who makes no effort to find out why he wants it, will probably show some form of irritation. We do know that the man, prevented from living what his neighbors call his "manly" rôle ("Man's Day") through the baffling economic restrictions imposed upon him, will probably be unable to accept his wife's success in the very field where he feels himself a failure.

As we can learn to predict possible future reactions by seeing their causes in the present, we can learn to improve man's relationships. To help develop this sense of the future with its roots in the present, the leader can encourage open discussion, can urge the continuation of the written biographies or the dramatic treatments into the future. In a story which deals with a moment of tension, as "The Red Hat," it might be wise to ask what is likely to happen in the next twenty-four hours as against happenings in the next few years. In a story such as "At Sundown" it would probably be more revealing to discuss possible developments in the boy's life in the following ten or twenty years.

To prevent a false note of determinism—the feeling that the future is already a formed bud in the past to unfold but not to change—it is important for the leader often to lead his group in a discussion of how the lives of the characters might change if certain basic causes were altered. This is what actually happens in our development. We change as our complex of self and environment changes; the optimistic thought is that we could control the direction of those changes far more than we now do if we made concerted effort to change some of the causes. Suppose the husband in "Man's Day" should get a job the next day; what effect on

both would that have? Or suppose, by some chance, they should be transported to a culture where the imperative for a man to support his wife is not as strong as in ours, or indeed where the wife is expected to support her husband;² what effect would that have? Suppose Elizabeth's mother in "One with Shakespeare" should realize that her daughter is gifted and begin to support her desire to write; what difference would that make? Suppose the community in "Fruit Tramp" had agreed that the transient families had to live and had found a way to pay their wages; how would that change the outcome?

All of this calls upon the leader for another dimension of awareness. He must realize the tremendous force of cultural values in the motivation of human behavior. We mentioned this in the possible explanation of the behavior of the husband in "The Red Hat." Our values inevitably are reflected in our motivations. The trouble is that we are so intimately tied up with the dominant values of our culture from the time of our infancy that it is hard to step away from them and see what they are; it is at times exceedingly difficult to change them. Why did the boy in "At Sundown" feel unclean after his sex experience, even though it was with a girl he dearly loved and deeply respected? Had he lived in Samoa he would not have felt so. Why did the teacher and principal in "Five Ripe Pears" consider the pears "evidence" of "stealing"? Had the pears been wild blackberries growing in an unclaimed field the teacher and principal would not have said they were stolen. Why did the story "Black on White" turn out as it did? Would the ending have been different in England? Why was the

² For studies of different cultures and the rôles the family members play *The Family: Past and Present* is quite valuable. For young people, *Life and Growth*, especially the chapter "When in Rome," has helpful material on the ways we get our values and how they may cause conflict in our lives.

mother in "One with Shakespeare" so concerned about her daughter's school marks; the family in "The Oratory Contest" about the oratory prize; the mother in "The Rainy Day" about being a "perfect" mother? Do not all of these forms of behavior bear an important relation to the things we in America are used to valuing and the things we attempt to discredit?

And this leads to the most delicate and probably the most disputed task of the leader, that of helping his group bring into focus the values by which they live—by which they inevitably judge the behavior of others. This kind of study can lead the group to be critical of the values under which its members are now operating. It is necessary for the leader, however, to guard against hurtful self-revelations or forms of verbal exhibitionism. He must be sensitive to these, and he should be able to divert them from open discussion to intimate care by experts. He can help them to see where present values could yield to more humane and workable ones. They may find that their judgments have been based on oversimplified or perhaps erroneous beliefs, possibly upon deep-seated prejudices, or that they have been in the habit of looking at behavior in narrowly moralistic settings. Therefore, the leader may find it necessary to help the group to analyze why they responded as they did to certain characters and situations; what their response implies in terms of values, in terms of an honest search for causes; what it means for other relationships in life where similar situations might occur.

The possible gains from using literature in this way are many. The literary experience helps us develop the kind of imagination most needed in our intimate human relations. It dramatizes for us the meaning of cultural pressures in shaping behavior. At the same time, it shows us the diversity

and complexity of human behavior in our own heterogeneous society and in other cultures. Literature broadens our conception of humanly possible ways to think and act and feel; we live with our imaginations through numerous patterns of relationship, many of them quite different from our accustomed ways. Especially in youth we are disturbed about our normality, and we measure it largely in terms of the narrow range of behavior we think acceptable. Literature can provide release and reassurance here. It may, as well, help us to see ourselves more objectively as we identify with characters and analyze the roots and the outcomes of their behavior. Best of all, literature increases our ability to understand the needs and problems of other people, and we may begin, thus, to realize that for each of us life is a two-way relationship; as people, forces, and things change us, we in turn become the agents of change for others. The joy of it is that we are on the threshold of knowing enough to make those changes come out for the better.

A.V.K.
E.A.
W.R.W.

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