

On Ignorance

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (January 2025)



The Ignorant Fairy (Rene Magritte, 1950)

When I was an undergraduate over twenty years ago, I found myself facing a conundrum: even though I was an English major, the “general education requirements” involved a science course. I must shamefacedly admit to having regarded this as an inconvenience rather than as an opportunity to learn something. The English Department secretary was the oracle who could always be trusted to point the lazy man-of-letters-in-training toward the least demanding means of checking the relevant boxes.

"There's geology, of course," she suggested. "Rocks for jocks. There's geography for non-majors, and there's—"

She caught herself, as if teetering on the brink of some taboo.

"Forget it," she said.

"No, no. What were you about to say?"

"Well, there *is* something delivered jointly through Women's Studies and the College of Nursing."

"Oh?"

"But I never heard of an English major actually signing up for it. At least not a *man*, certainly."

(In those antediluvian times, we believed in the uncomplicated existence of two sexes.)

"And this mysterious class is called..." I prompted.

"The Biology of Women."

My dear *alma mater* was way ahead of its time; it would be decades before Christendom's most distinguished universities started teaching late-adolescents how to use a two-headed dildo or select the best wick for a Molotov cocktail. My college was proudly in the *avant-garde*, for the Biology of Women was essentially a Marxism-infused feminine hygiene class.

Half-demonic delight and imperturbable resolve must have waltzed across my face, for the secretary's brow instantly ramified into a network of What-have-I-done furrows. As a member of a race that survived Egyptian slavery, Babylonian exile, Roman occupation, expulsion from just about everywhere, the Spanish Inquisition, pogroms aplenty, Auschwitz, and (most recently) the barbarism of October 7, the Biology of Women

wasn't at all beyond my capacity for endurance. I was undaunted—indeed, undauntable.

“Where do I sign up?” I said.

The course, it turned out, was taught in a large lecture hall. The crowd filling the tiered seats comprised me, a trio of obviously homosexual men, and 150 women. The lessons were absurd, and often downright gross. We learned (for instance) that, since gynecology was inherently male and unpardonably white, it was the responsibility of black women everywhere to disenthral themselves from the Patriarchy, and to form “cells” of melanin-rich females willing (indeed, zealous) to administer pelvic exams to each other. Accordingly, we were shown an educational film in which monstrously obese black women, naked from the waist down, took turns entrusting their sub-equatorial parts to investigation, the whole business enlivened with giggles indicating that triumphant pride derived from having discovered (against all odds) new treasuries of independence and countercultural self-expression. It was like a deviant Tupperware party.

One gorgon lectured her sisters on the correct use of a speculum. Since her complexly enameled fingernails were so long, she had difficulty adjusting the screw by means of which the speculum's angle could be adjusted and fixed. After much fumbling, the device was able to make its unenviable voyage; when it was removed, the chrome was clotted and streaked by secretions resembling a long-forgotten Neufchâtel. Although none of the party could identify it, the women seemed unfazed.

(Much to my satisfaction, a few students retched audibly; the digestive system is often a better hogwash detector than the mind. The sound of a half-dozen women struggling not to puke reassured me that sanity still existed, if only in a vestigial form. I suspect that even today's most radical comrades would retch similarly if shown photographs of a transvestite's counterfeit genitals.)

The instructor intrigued me. She'd obviously received a decent education. Indeed, she'd received a generous dollop of the Western intellectual patrimony. Although she refused (on principle) to pass it on, she *had* it. After all, being countercultural requires familiarity with the culture to which you're counter.

But I find myself wondering about her students. For them, the Biology of Women didn't represent a counterculture, but rather, a culture—a culture animated by the final vapors of an old grievance. These students were to “the Patriarchy” what modern Jews are to Ramesses II: they derived part of their identity by training themselves to despise a blurry silhouette.

I'm on the mailing list of an “important” literary magazine; this morning, there arrived a note introducing me to their new crop of interns. Below each portrait was a biographical blurb. The interns were eager to list their favorite books. This eagerness puzzled me, since (aside from one student—the only male, by the way—who mentioned Hemingway), very few of the interns confessed to any interest in what used to be called “serious literature.” I was most shocked by the number of children's books that were mentioned: Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass*, Holly Black's *The Folk of the Air*, and—of course—the *Harry Potter* series. The appearance on the list of James Dasher's *The Maze Runner* is bad enough; it becomes even more embarrassing when taken in conjunction with the intern's parenthetical note, indicating that this book “was the first book he ever read through and finished on his own outside of school.”

Now, every committed reader can name that book which he first read voluntarily, and it's only natural to feel sentimental about it. But to list it as a *favorite*?—even after years of both formal and informal education? The “educators” who

subjected these young folks to such pedagogical malpractice were, like the professor skipping the Biology of Women, in possession of actual knowledge. They knew what they were withholding. These interns, however (who will likely end up teaching literature—God help us), don't even know what they're missing. Can our literary interns be blamed for believing that Shakespeare's First Folio is as outmoded as a phrenology textbook? Nobody feels guilty about not reading Johann Gaspar Spurzheim's 1833 [*Philosophical Catechism of the Natural Laws of Man*](#); if (as is popularly believed) Shakespeare was a narrowminded chauvinist writing narrowminded chauvinistic plays for audiences of narrowminded chauvinists, how can it possibly be shameful to admit to never having read him?

The Roman satirist Persius writes: "You will say: 'I have thrown off my bonds!' But a dog, after a struggle, may also break his leash; yet when he runs away, he drags a length of the chain behind him that still hangs round his neck.'" But that length of chain isn't unbreakable. Every day it drags across the ground, shedding metal, bit by microscopic bit, until it's all gone. What's left to the dog is a vague feeling of once having belonged to something bigger than itself—a broader context which accorded life a modicum of stability, meaning, and love. The lack of that last vestigial length of chain is essential; the dog can't focus on getting home, since it lacks all evidence that it ever had a home in the first place.

In [*The Theory of Education in the United States*](#), Albert J. Nock writes: "Any machine has some kind of theory behind it; and when you have a machine that has had every possible resource of mechanical ingenuity and care expended on it, and yet will not work satisfactorily, the situation at once suggests that something may be amiss with its theory. Perhaps its theory is all wrong, hopelessly wrong; the perpetual-motion devices that we occasionally hear of are instances of this. They are, let us say, mechanically perfect, and as far

as mechanics go, they should work perfectly, but they do not work; so we examine their theory, and we at once discover not only why they do not work but also why no machine of the kind can possibly work.”

But this presupposes the existence of someone qualified (in the most basic sense possible) to notice that the machine doesn’t work. Nobody quite remembers what a functioning machine looks like. How could you notice that, say, a broken computer is indeed broken, if you’ve only ever seen it used as a foot-rest?

I’d mentioned earlier that James Dasher’s *The Maze Runner* was cited by that editorial intern as her favorite book. Having never even heard of it, I turned computerward, and Google agreed to cough up the publisher’s official sales pitch. “When Thomas wakes up in the lift,” it says, “the only thing he can remember is his name. He’s surrounded by strangers—boys whose memories are also gone. Outside the towering stone walls that surround them is a limitless, ever-changing maze. It’s the only way out—and no one’s ever made it through alive.”

It sounds a little like postmodernity, no? An amnesiac falls in love with a book about amnesia; the book about having no memory is the only thing that our amnesiac can remember. Can you hear the squelch of feedback? The grim cycle is complete. As educational theorist Bernard Mehl put it in the early 1970s: “The sad part of the movement by young people to establish a counterculture comes when they recognize that a counterculture to a non-culture is a double non-culture.”[\[*\]](#)

We’re clearly in a terrible fix. Although I don’t know what form our salvation might take, the enemy is identifiable enough. Should you encounter a crew of waddling Hottentots brandishing specula, a sprint in the opposite direction might well be indicated.

[\[*\]](#) *Classic Educational Ideas: From Sumeria to America.*

Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972, p. 207.

[Table of Contents](#)

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