



IN DEFENCE OF PROSE: Actors Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch and Brock Peters as Tom Robinson in the film adaptation of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962

## GCSE plans a sad day for literature lovers

**T**HE world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless." French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood that as human beings we often are what we imagine.

With lockdown forcing most of us to remain in our homes, bar the odd supermarket trip, and with fewer opportunities to meet people, we've spent months living with little stimulation.

If it hadn't been for novels and poetry, I'm not sure I could have coped with being apart from my family for months on end. One of the books I re-read in April was Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* – the same text I studied for GCSE English literature.

I've much to thank my English teachers for. The novel left me not just with a love of literature but a love of Hardy. I've forgotten everything I ever learnt about physics but can remember the role of fate in *The Woodlanders* very clearly. If only Grace Melbury's father hadn't given his family notions. If only Marty South hadn't cut off her hair. If only Giles Winterborne had stayed inside during that storm.

News that the study of English literature prose could be dropped as part of efforts to streamline GCSEs this year left me feeling sad for the thousands of pupils who may never experience the joy that close reading of literature can bring. Although I studied English for my degree, it was the lessons taught at GCSE that were most useful. Hardy's clear-eyed vision of human nature seemed a little gloomy to a 16-year-old but really he couldn't have been more right.

A friend once told me of a man she knew who had left his wife and children and moved to the Netherlands to set up home with a woman he met on the internet – crucially on a site that his wife had paid for him to join as a birthday

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present. If that doesn't sound like a latter-day version of a Hardy novel then I don't know what does. Hardy knew that all our actions, whether they are made in good faith or bad, have consequences. When I've gone wrong in life, it's usually because I didn't pay close enough attention to the lessons that literature has taught me. There's huge pressure on pupils and teachers to salvage GCSE studies after an appalling 2020. And it does seem unfair to expect students to complete the full syllabus when many had to learn at home for months. But how wise was it to launch a consultation just as children were returning to school? The last few months have been hugely stressful for families. Every week seemed to bring more

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uncertainty about school opening hours and how children would actually be educated – at school, home, or a mixture of both?; should children need masks or not?; not to mention the utter mess of GCSE and A-level assessment.

As someone who experienced the Conservative Party's obsession with tinkering with the school curriculum in the 1990s (to what end?), it was the lack of clarity that proved most disruptive. Children are incredibly resilient and adaptable. Most are wiser than adults frequently give them credit for. The present curriculum allows GCSE pupils to study texts including *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Animal Farm*. All three novels have something to say about violence, power and cruelty. Another text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is probably the best-known and most widely-read novel about race in America. What better time for teenagers to read it than now?

All novels on the syllabus have something to teach us, whether those revelations are big or small. My mum, herself an English teacher, bought me Roddy Doyle's book *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* when it was first published. Still a child myself then, I loved its beautiful observations about human nature, especially the 'auntie' who brought a packet of Clarimco Iced Caramels and made the children divide the white and pink ones evenly, even though they tasted the same. Every time I buy a bag of caramels, that line comes to mind. I've huge sympathy for teachers, pupils and parents. But by cutting out key content we do our children a disservice. Surely the real issue isn't the syllabus but the frequently changing, and often confusing, nature of assessment. It's been a hugely difficult year. Let's not make it any harder for children who, as novels teach us, are always at the mercy of adults.

## ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 2 1920

### 'Spotters' Drive Evictions

FROM the Old Lodge Road to Crumlin Road in Belfast, there was a well-organised gang of what have come to be known as 'spotters' at work during yesterday. They were obviously under the direction of a tall, respectably-dressed young man. This individual had evidently possessed himself of all the necessary details for the locating of Catholic houses.

The trio stood on the Crumlin Road at Eglinton Street and the leader consulted a book. It was evident that he had the Catholic residents specially marked for, having given his instructions, the crowds were organised and went to each house as instructed conveying the order to 'Clear Out' or be 'burned out'. The inhabitants thus warned lost no time in making arrangements for a speeding 'splitting'.

At Bedeque Street there was an invasion from the Crumlin Road end and furniture belonging to Catholic householders was thrown into the street and set on fire. The military arrived but their presence was unheeded until the officer in charge gave the order to 'fire' at which the crowd ran in all directions.

### Campaign against Catholic Licensed Trade

WRITING from Belfast for the [Liberal] *Daily News*, Mr Hugh Martin notes: 'All but a very few of the business premises of Belfast Catholics, except those in the heart of the city or in the Catholic strongholds, have now been destroyed. The total number of serious conflagrations during the past six days now stands at 180. Practically all of this damage has been done to the property of Catholics...

'In the old days the business of spirit grocery was one of the very few that Catholics were allowed to carry on. Hence the trade was up until a week ago, very largely in their hands. It is today on the point of extinction. Catholics are, however, still fighting with the fury of desperation. Although it is impossible to save their shops, they are making a stand in their homes.'

### Unionist Military Force to be Launched

THE *Times* special correspondent [in Ireland] writes: 'I understand that the private meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council will be addressed by Sir James Craig on behalf of the government. It will discuss an offer from the government that the Ulster Volunteers should be... used as a force for maintaining order in Ulster... Moderate men said they could hardly believe that the government would take so dangerous a step as to arm the Ulster Volunteers... Open civil war could scarcely be avoided.'

As the British government backed Craig's plan for a UVF-based sectarian Special Constabulary, northern nationalist fears can be easily imagined. At Westminster Joe Devlin accused Lloyd George of 'arming pogromists'.

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