

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 21
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1985

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 21, no.4, December 1985, p.188-197

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Borstal Boy: *Structure and Meaning*

by RICHARD BROWN

STILL IN PRINT after over 25 years, *Borstal Boy* is well on its way to being regarded as a modern Irish classic, for the glory of its prose and its narrator's exuberant spirit. Yet following the spate of reviews which greeted its first appearance (1958), Brendan Behan's masterpiece has received little analysis compared with his best-known plays, *The Quare Fellow* (1956) and *The Hostage* (1958). Because its narrator is called "Brendan Behan" and its subject is obviously based on the author's imprisonment in English jails from 1939 to 1941, the work has most often been mined for biographical details, even though the author himself asserted it to be a novel rather than an autobiography.¹ Thematic and structural questions have gone begging. Several critics have recognized young Brendan's development as the "unmaking of a fanatic," in Steven Marcus's phrase, without also investigating the wider political and social implications of his progress.² Others have failed to see much thematic point in the relaxed and cheerful Part Three (which narrates Brendan's confinement in an English borstal institution, Hollesley Bay);³ similarly, the anticlimactic ending has seemed puzzling after the optimistic tone found earlier in the third part. Consequently the novel's long concluding section is widely regarded as further proof of Behan's inability to focus his writings, consistent with the heavy assistance he required from directors in mounting his plays, or the sad tales about preparing his rambling tape-recordings for book publication shortly before his death.

However, Behan labored on *Borstal Boy* for over 15 years. He published a short piece, "Borstal Day," as early as the year following his release, in June, 1942. From then until the novel's publication, he referred to it sporadically in letters and revised it painstakingly.⁴ If the finished work—especially in Part Three—contains slack passages, it is nevertheless Behan's most self-consciously crafted writing. I wish to propose that

1. Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970; Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 144.

2. Steven Marcus, "Tom Brown in Quod," *Partisan Review*, XXVI, 2 (Spring 1959), 335-44. Colbert Kearney, *The Writings of Brendan Behan* (New York: St. Martins, 1977), p. 92, anticipates my argument by noticing that the character's reactions to his environment evolve over the course of the book, though like other critics, Kearney essentially reads the novel as a character study.

3. Ted E. Boyle, *Brendan Behan* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 118.

4. O'Connor, pp. 143-47; Colin MacInnes, "The Writings of Brendan Behan," *The London Magazine*, II, 5 (August 1962), 53-61; Corey Phelps, "Borstal Revisited," *I Carb S*, II (Winter-Spring 1975), 39-60.

its nearly utopian third part and its melancholy, anti-climactic ending are actually well-shaped to conclude a surprisingly mature political argument, which is reflected in the process of the narrator's growing up.

Before turning to the novel's structure and broader political implications, however, it is worth considering why readers have so often failed to mark them. The reason lies both in the enormously vital and attractive personality of the protagonist, a young would-be I.R.A. bomber, and in Behan's strategy for realizing him by immersing us in his point of view.⁵ The novel's opening sentences overwhelm us with this narrator's energy, his raucous mimicry, his instinct for focusing on conflict:

Friday, in the evening, the landlady shouted up the stairs:

"Oh God, oh Jesus, oh Sacred Heart. Boy, there's two gentlemen to see you."

I knew by the screeches of her that these gentlemen were not calling to enquire after my health, or to know if I'd had a good trip. I grabbed my suitcase, containing Pot. Chlor, Sulph Ac, gelignite, detonators, electrical and ignition, and the rest of my Sinn Fein conjuror's outfit, and carried it to the window. Then the gentlemen arrived.

A young one, with a blonde, Herrenvolk head and a B.B.C. accent shouted, "I say, greb him, the bestud." (3)⁶

Brendan's voice is so compelling that it might easily be regarded as the novel's *raison d'être*, despite obvious limitations: its inability to express complicated abstract thoughts or to articulate complex psychological states fully.

Indeed, Brendan's narrative focuses very largely on his sheer physical impressions: the food, the penetrating cold, the dash to empty his chamber pot at Walton Prison in Part One, or his delight at working under the sun in Part Three. His generalizations about people, politics or religion — though abundant — are fueled by his emotions over immediate experiences, and slip by quickly as new feelings succeed them. Even a major climax, such as his first interview with the Catholic priest in Part One, which results in Brendan's excommunication and brings him close to bitter tears (64–67), floats past on the narrative stream, as a "screw" (prison guard) brings him the comforting news that he's entitled to two library books per week. This fateful interview with the priest will be recalled later at specific points — at Christmas in Walton Prison, during Easter week at Feltham Prison in Part Two, and in religious episodes at the borstal in Part Three. Each time, Brendan insists that his attitude toward the church has been permanently changed by it. But for all its importance, the incident does not form a continuous element in his consciousness; long stretches pass when he appears to forget it completely. As Brendan's relationship with the church illustrates, then, our immediate experience of the novel's structure is as a series of discrete episodes or sequences, which

5. In early drafts Behan seems to have adopted a more adult and knowledgeable tone. Kearney, p. 92, refutes Phelps and Boyle, pp. 103–04, in arguing for the superior characterization made possible by the simpler language of the final version.

6. Page numbers follow the American edition (New York: Knopf, 1959; rpt. Boston: David R. Godine, 1982).

follow one another in a diary-like, thematically discontinuous order.⁷ Because the narrator is not deeply reflective, he seems to register these experiences as repetitious, rather than as cumulative and progressive.

Nevertheless young Brendan does occasionally hint that some process of discovery and enrichment is unfolding in him. Near the end of Part One, he thinks over his new friendships with his English "chinas" (mates) and finds that he "should prefer to be with boys from English cities than with my own countrymen and comrades from Ireland's hills and glens" (118). But typically, he quickly passes on to his next immediate thought, without drawing any conclusions about patriotism or politics from this insight. The novel's most sweeping declaration that Brendan's character has changed occurs when the sergeant who arrested him at the beginning returns to pronounce, "They've made a fine man of you, Brendan," at the end of Part Three (363); but we are left to decide for ourselves specifically how he has matured, since Brendan responds only by avoiding the issue with characteristic sly humor: "Well, I had to admit, except for my late differences with them, I'd been well looked after."

Although Behan's creation of such an ingratiating and yet conceptually limited narrator can hardly be called a "mistake" (his personality is, after all, the novel's chief pleasure), still as most readers have totally identified this narrator with the author, they have erred by concluding that the novel contains no avenue of meaning other than his voice. Hence they have overlooked the book's structure of elaborate narrative parallels and tonal modulations, through which most changes in Brendan's character and the development of Behan's political thought are actually expressed. Behan directs us to perceive these patterns by fairly strong signals: he divides the novel into three conspicuous parts, each describing Brendan's life at a different prison. These parts closely resemble one another in their types of incidents and character relationships, and the topics they address. It is as if Behan writes the same story of Brendan's imprisonment three times, but alters the atmosphere, personalities and the likelihood of continued social conflict or resolution. Thus we are invited to discover Brendan's progress not so much through a gradual evolution from first page to last, but through three sharply distinct stages; and we may infer the novel's positive political values by measuring Brendan's joyous experience of work and social life at Hollesley Bay against his antithetical past, represented by Part One in Walton Prison. The shorter Part Two, describing Brendan's wait at moderate Feltham Prison before being sent on to the borstal, serves as a transition between these extremes.

Thus to complain that Part Three lacks tensions comparable to those found earlier in the novel is to overlook the point of Behan's tripartite structure: tensions do relax at Hollesley Bay, thereby creating a social

7. Peter René Gerdes, *The Major Works of Brendan Behan*, European University Papers, Series 14, Vol. 10 (Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1973), 131, notices the episodic, noncumulative quality of the narration.

ideal which makes Brendan's growth into manhood possible. The borstal's precarious ideal also contrasts with the anti-climactic final pages of the novel, however, when the institution declines under its new governor, and Brendan returns to Ireland and its confusions—suggesting the difficulty of applying Hollesley Bay's standard to the world at large.

The systematic opposition between Parts One and Three will become clear by remembering particular episodes and topics which Behan advances and then reverses. In Part One, Brendan's contact with English prison authority is a discovery of cruelty and sadism (100): the "screws" strike him as Germanic, "cruel and foul-spoken, but always precise and orderly"—though he discovers too the unexpected kindly exception (93). But he concludes that these English are "bigger and crueler bastards than I had taken them for," and he wishes for a truce with them, at least for the duration of his confinement (121–22). In the transitional Part Two, however, the "screws" influence their inmates more by explanation than by threats of violence; the doctor and lady social worker seem reasonable and sympathetic; the governor sounds almost hospitable in his welcoming interview. In Part Three, this movement is completed, for a virtually perfect system of authority presides, run by a governor whom his affectionate boys call "the Squire." The "screws" converse with their charges almost as equals; and when Brendan plays rough against a "screw" on the rugby field, the mild disapproval of the guard's remark, "Surprised at you, Paddy," provides more instructive discipline than a beating might have done (348). The youths' relationship with authority resembles that in an English public school, with house leaders, organized games and festivals.⁸ One inmate, a graduate of Harrow, finds this borstal the superior place: "'E says the grub's better" (212); and when the borstal team plays rugby against nearby colleges, Brendan is shocked to discover that the college boys play dirty, smuggle cigarettes against their rules, and swear just as much as the borstal boys (348).

In Part One at Walton, nearly every activity is oppressively supervised, from the prisoners' silent, single-file walks in the yard to their mailbag sewing and cell cleaning. Life unfolds in a narrow, chilly solitude. Routine activities such as enjoying a smoke, excreting or masturbating become subjects for devious planning, as they are impinged on by the guards' prying or arbitrary rules. Each inmate is thrown on his own resources for spiritual and emotional survival, aided by only a few treats such as his allotment of library books. But in Part Three, the boys' life is almost entirely social and even clubbish; they sleep in dormitories and work in crews, and they form deep and sometimes tacitly sexual pairings. Their personalities develop through meaningful jobs, reading, playing games and discussing their pasts. Even cigarettes—Lady Nicotine, the boys' goddess (223)—are now abundantly available, given as prizes for

8. Marcus, p. 338.

work and in competitions. While spring came quiet and gray to Walton, a challenge for Brendan's irrepressible optimism (125), later at Hollesley Bay the seasons pass beautifully during the boys' outdoor work. Brendan and his fellows suffered arbitrary persecutions in Walton: no matter how he straightened his cell, the "screw" might disapprove; no matter how well he sewed mailbags, they could be rejected. But at the borstal the single instance of arbitrary authority is a guard's refusal (for supposed health reasons) to allow Chewlips to wear socks in bed—a problem the youth solves, comically, by leaving an extra pair of socks prominently spread on the floor when he sleeps (218).

Many of the oppositions between Parts One and Three are quite explicitly drawn. When Brendan himself fails to refer to Walton for contrast during the third part, such a device as placement within the part can underscore the relationship. The interviews with the governors of each institution come early in each section, for instance, and provide introductions to the sort of authority he will encounter there. Or we may notice the recurrence of certain dramatic events from one part to the next. In each one Brendan has a fight, which he half-welcomes as a chance to gain a reputation so that others won't attack him (80, 120, 254–56). At Walton he jumps on James after repeated insults, and afterward he takes pleasure in James's bandages and sulking humility. But Brendan's problem isn't entirely solved by his victory, for now he must sit in a corner and position himself carefully when walking in single file, to avoid attack by James's friend, Dale. In Part Two Brendan rushes into a fight without thinking when his "china," Charlie, is threatened; but this time he is quickly beaten by a former prizefighter, who helps him wash up and cheerfully gives him advice. Fighting here at Feltham Prison is not so necessary as at Walton, and can be resolved by friendship. In Part Three, he is attacked by another scrappy Irishman. Brendan quickly wins, but his opponent soon comes over to apologize, and Brendan's friends salute his victory good-humoredly. But it becomes clear that at the borstal there is little use in establishing a reputation for "bundling," since his scrap is regarded as characteristic of the Irish rather than as typical Hollesley Bay behavior.

Colbert Kearney complains that this last fight tells us "nothing new about Behan" and fails "to live up to the standard set by the assault on James in Walton Jail" for dramatic conflict;⁹ but like many episodes in Part Three, the main issue is no longer Brendan's character (already well-established). Behan is now drawing together his social, and ultimately political, interpretations of the three prisons, about which I'll be more specific below. Only if we insist that the novel should focus exclusively on autobiographical self-portraiture throughout Part Three will we be inclined to complain (with Marcus) that it "intimates a failure of inwardness."¹⁰

9. Kearney, p. 148, n. 14.

10. Marcus, p. 344.

A similar sense of deliberate contrast marks Brendan's two efforts at authorship, which lead to climactic incidents in Parts One and Three. The provocative pro-Irish speech he delivers at his trial in Part One meets with a kind of success, as he reads in the judge's outrage (133). But in Part Three he enters the essay contest announced for the Eisteddfod holiday and wins, to his mates' cheers, for a paper on Dublin (262). As frequently happens in the third part, his patriotism is turned from a provocation into a source of communally respected pride. Just so, his Irish songs are a private comfort at Walton, but at Feltham Prison and then at Hollesley Bay, singing is a group activity at which Brendan excels, and he performs his defiant Irish lyrics to crowds of laughing, appreciative Englishmen.

Concerning religion, the parallels among the three parts modulate more subtly than on any other subject. Brendan's excommunication in Part One is consistent with the rest of his treatment at Walton, isolating him and throwing him back on his own resources. But his religious bitterness is qualified, in Part Two, by the Easter week services he attends, presided over by an emotional Italian priest. Brendan registers his friend Chewlips' identification with Jesus, betrayed by an informer of the sort all the boys are familiar with, as a comic version of true religious response (174); and when the priest unexpectedly leads the boys around the chapel to the stations of the cross, they smoke, read papers and pick each others' pockets amid the confusion (177-78). Yet Brendan describes the priest's delight on Easter morning through a single beautiful sentence that manages to combine mockery with an appreciation of genuine religious fervor: "On Easter Sunday the little priest skipped round the altar like a spring lamb and gave a triumphant sermon in gleaming white and gold vestments and the sun shining through the window on him" (187). This long Easter week episode is mainly funny, but it expresses Brendan's ambivalent religious situation well. Meanwhile, he nourishes his own faith in opposite surroundings, by reading a prayerbook in the loo; and when he does so, the recollection of the little Italian priest's "comic diamond eyes and his moans" crosses Brendan's mind as a tantalizing image of the church (187).

In Part Three Behan strives to resolve the religious conflict mechanically by having Brendan return physically to the church: he helps to paint the ceiling of the borstal's Anglican chapel and serves at the Catholic Mass, despite his excommunication, in honor of the church's historic role in comforting his countrymen (322). Yet these gestures are insufficient to overcome the character's alienation from organized religion—he still insists that the church has nothing to do with "mercy or pity or love"—and his own religious instinct has begun to seem slightly ludicrous to him, as it wells up spontaneously during a solitary walk on a fine morning (304).

Brendan's conflict with the church lies outside the ability of the borstal authorities to resolve, and is finally accepted as a permanent part of his dilemma as an Irishman. But in other fields, as we've seen, resolution itself becomes a major fact in his borstal experience. Responding to this

happy condition, he no longer stiffens in resistance, but polishes his Irish social skills—the cunning wink, the cheerful blarney, the two-facedness that allows him to negotiate peace between enemies: “I laughed down at Joe but put on a disapproving look when I turned to Tom on the plank” (300). Some readers distrust this behavior as being too oily and duplicitous,¹¹ but I suspect their reaction arises from stereotypes about Irishmen (or knowledge of Behan’s own later behavior) which they project onto the novel. Among the unsubtle borstal boys, Brendan’s blather is depicted as immensely successful; Behan’s point is that such social skills have not been encouraged among these youths before, so they are hungry for the bonding and humane delights secured through Brendan’s charisma.

The perfections achieved at Hollesley Bay are imaged by certain passages in Part Three that can only be called idyllic. Some of these involve a sensuous delight in nature, and inspire a rush of Behan’s marvellous prose: Brendan’s discovery of a golden apple in the earth as he works through the orchard (223), or the fruit-picking season when every boy eats his fill (332), or the summer Sundays when Brendan and his crew swim and laze naked in the sun (319). The inmates themselves are conscious of this edenic quality: during one perfect summer evening, a boy jokes that “you don’t get weather like this on the outside” (271). These nature idylls are prepared for by Brendan’s reflecting on his Dublin-bred father, who couldn’t stand more than a single day of gardening, and his grandmother’s remark that “our family’s land was all in window-boxes” (219). For his work assignment at the borstal, therefore, Brendan applies to become a painter—the Behan family trade at home—as soon as he can get off the “Garden Party” crew; but gradually the delights of nature become apparent to him as an explicit contrast to the confinement and ugliness of Walton and Dublin (303–04).

The moments of natural perfection are matched by moments when the boys’ social lives take on an equally idyllic quality. As Brendan enlarges his circle beyond the usual bonding of two “chinas” into a circle of four, then five, then six intimate friends, the boys show moments of rare consideration and pride in their relationship. Often toward the end of Part Three, natural and social perfections briefly merge:

Tom saw us off like the compère in a very successful revue, . . . Charlie and Chewlips gave him his ration out of the fifty snout [cigarettes] each they got, which delighted him, because everyone at the door saw him getting them and Charlie said, “538 Jones couldn’t come up, he’s in a P.T. class but we got his here,” and Tom nodded and we all shouted good night to everyone at the door, and “good night, Tom,” to him, and I never saw a man so proud, as he smiled all over his face and said, “Good night, Paddy, Charlie, Joe, Jock, and don’t smoke 538’s snout ration on him.”

Going back down the road I could see the moon, wild and hiding itself, behind an odd cloud, out over the mad grey sea, beyond the half-drenched marshes. (352)

11. Marcus, pp. 343–44, and Brian Moore in the *New York Times*, quoted by O’Connor, p. 210.

Ironically, the only place in Part One where Brendan finds such pure contentment is in the library books he receives, especially in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*, a novel about the ludicrously unreachable comforts of the English middle class, like "scaloped oysters, potted lobsters, jelly," which Brendan tries to enjoy while the rabid I.R.A. man, Callan, shouts defiance at the English "screws" from his nearby cell (129-30).

I have mentioned that critics seldom discover any social or political significance in *Borstal Boy*. Indeed, one of its best readers, Steven Marcus, is drawn into the narrator's non-evaluative stance so deeply that he concludes Behan has "virtually no impulse to construe his experience as essentially symbolic of modern life."¹² In addition to being diverted by Behan's captivating narrator, readers may also have been thrown off guard by the surprising way this narrator discovers some good in the English character and one English institution; in other words, the novel may appear unpolitical because it is not political in the way we anticipate. But any prison novel is broadly political in that it describes the workings of a starkly authoritarian society which contrasts with the less ordered world outside. Behan not only describes what makes a prison succeed or fail as a social institution, he also compares his three prisons with society at large, as it is suggested through references to the Irish-English struggle, the World War II background, and Brendan's return to Dublin at the end of Part Three. Walton Prison is repressive, isolating, combative, irrational; but the world outside is equally violent, having created Brendan the would-be I.R.A. bomber among its other misfits, who begins his imprisonment by trying to live up to the traditional standard of Irish patriot-martyrs. Even in Part One he quickly discovers the horrors of such heroism:

They [the "screws"] could easily kill you. Say you cut up rough. It had happened before. Who would give a fish's tit about you over here?

At home it would be all right if you were there to get the credit for it. Give us back the mangled corpse of our martyr. Drums muffled, pipes draped, slow march. When but a lad of sixteen years a felon's cap he wore, God rest you, Frankie Doherty, Ireland's cross you proudly bore. But the mangling would have to be gone through first. (15)

Consequently the Irishman Callan, who urges Brendan to shout slogans in his cell on the eve of two I.R.A. men's executions, appears to him as a fanatic.¹³ And he finds the young I.R.A. man who confronts him in Part Two a stiff, inhuman fellow compared with his new English mates. But Brendan feels the shock of the outside world's cruelty most when, at the end of Part Three, he learns that his best "china," Charlie (who has already returned to the British navy), has been killed in a military operation off Gibraltar. Against this background, the Hollesley Bay borstal represents a unique, precious opportunity for peace and brotherhood.

12. Marcus, p. 341.

13. As Kearney observes, p. 109.

From the borstal's example, then, we may extrapolate social and political characteristics which Behan recommends as superior to those found in other prisons and in the world at large: the mixture of freedom with reasonable discipline, the elevation of proper role models, the atmosphere of encouragement and just praise, the development of teamwork and conversational skills, and the regulation of communal work in harmony with a natural environment. But we must also balance these qualities against the borstal's limitations. Behan himself remarked elsewhere that he might have been content to live at Hollesley Bay for the rest of his life, except that there were no girls. The borstal is also a place where the inmates wear short pants, "like a bleeding boy scout," suggesting (as Steven Marcus observes) that it constitutes a social ideal only for adolescents, who are able to take a sort of holiday pleasure in being treated more as boys than as the men they nearly are. Moreover, the borstal works because it is run by a uniquely gifted governor. When he is replaced near the end of Part Three, the atmosphere disintegrates. Brendan is even thrown into solitary confinement just before his release, so that the boys will not cheer him when he departs—a denial of the social spirit which the previous, exemplary governor had worked to build up. Brendan responds to this indignity by reviving his old skills as a screw-baiter, playing up to the applause of other imprisoned delinquents. So the anti-climactic final pages of the novel begin with a sense of decline as well as nostalgia. The feeling gathers that an irreplaceable society is breaking up, for which the myth of Ireland that sustained Brendan early in Part One will be no substitute.

In fact, Brendan's attitude toward Ireland becomes problematic in Part Three. From his slightest memories of childhood we can see how Dublin prepared him for a different manhood from the one proposed at Hollesley Bay: for instance, his family's combative mockery made him afraid to play group sports, though he thrives on them at the borstal. Though he remains patriotic throughout Part Three, this feeling is now balanced by new considerations. Characteristic is the episode in which he feigns a call of nature so he can hide in the toilet when "God Save the King" is to be sung. He would not stand up for the song, but he sees no reason to offend his "chinas" by his refusal. Brendan's patriotism is also modified, on a slightly more theoretical level, by his observations about the natural camaraderie of lower-class city boys—no matter what their country—as opposed to the failure of an upper-class English inmate, Ken Jones, to find his place in borstal society:

The other fellows might give me a rub about Ireland or about the bombing campaign. . . . But I was nearer to them than they would ever let Ken be. I had the same rearing as most of them, Dublin, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, London. All our mothers had all done the pawn—pledging on Monday, releasing on Saturday. We all knew the chip shop and the picture house and the fourpenny rush of a Saturday afternoon, and the summer swimming in the canal and being chased along the railway by the cops.

But Ken they would never accept. (227)

Brendan has difficulty reconciling this perception with the stricter socialist class-war theories advanced by his "work china," Tom Meadows (287). Still, he seems to take up a view of international class brotherhood which qualifies his earlier nationalism, without completely obliterating it. But what we know about Brendan's Dublin past suggests that this sort of balance has never been permitted him in Ireland, and will not be encouraged there when he returns. On the last page of the novel, he reencounters the two poles of his earlier Irish political experience as soon as he disembarks at Dun Laoghaire: he is greeted warmly (and in Irish) by the immigration officer, who is favorably impressed by his British deportation order, but then he must pass by an anti-I.R.A. detective, like the one whose information got him imprisoned two years earlier. While Brendan's own recent social experiences have led to more complicated attitudes, the ancient raw antagonisms in Ireland have gone unchanged, and will quite possibly reclaim him.

In *Borstal Boy* Behan expresses a remarkably open-minded view of Ireland and its political heritage. He dares to describe the negative effects of patriotism and his Dublin upbringing, the positive results of enlightened English authority as well as international class-consciousness, and the nearly utopian possibilities that exist for a society of young men under proper controls. But if the novel's political ideas appear to deny Brendan's Irishness, it is equally true that certain aspects of his personality, which Behan proudly identifies as Irish, are depicted as fitting him perfectly to appreciate and capitalize on the humane potential of the Hollesley Bay borstal. I have argued that this fascinating personality, rightly regarded as the novel's centerpiece, can be seen to mature step by step if we consider the social and political discoveries implicit in the novel's three-part structure. Indeed, my reading suggests that Behan is claiming significance for his protagonist not on charm alone, but because his curiosity, optimism and fairmindedness enable him to enact the book's political argument.

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