

BOOK REVIEW

Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of your Child

by Anthony Esolen

PROVEN methods of destroying imagination are, says Anthony Esolen, “get rid of truth and memory” and “never impart bare facts, but be vague.”

THE TEN WAYS

1. **Keep children indoors:** never let them learn self-reliance.
2. **Never leave them** to themselves, but waste their time in school and on buses to get there.
3. **Keep children away from machines,** their operators and from finding out and doing things.
4. **Get rid of Fairy Tales** [Esolen often quotes Tolkien in defence of fantasy].
5. **Disparage the Heroic and Patriotic,** and obedience to Commandments; replace them with cynicism.
6. **Cut all heroes down to size** with *the evil of flippancy and sniggering* [Esolen often quotes C.S. Lewis].
7. **Replace love with lust:** abolish manhood and duties.
8. **Unisex and flattening out any distinctions** between children; “herd them in thousands” to destroy imagination, friendship and solitude.
9. **Distract them by the Shallow, the Unreal** and the Kingdom of Noise, both sound and colour. Abolish the invincible power of silence and solitude.
10. **Deny the Transcendent:** confine the mind to a “room with a low ceiling” of atheism, that nothing exists but ‘matter’ and nothing has meaning.

ERUDITION

Esolen’s book is chockerblock with poetry, Chistian and pagan classics, ancient and modern literature, blended with an extraordinary range of practical knowledge from electricity to mathematics and machines — not bad for a lecturer in literature.

His rhetorical style is lively, but it really **needs the spoken word with vigorous delivery**, gesture and intonation to signal the satire and sarcasm. Thus at times his demolition of modern ‘politically correct’ outlooks is confusing, for **it is not always obvious whether he is affirming or denying something.**

Esolen’s presentation-by-opposites **lacks the clarity of St Thomas Aquinas** in whose *Summa Theologica* each *Questio* (The Topic) is divided into Articles which always open with a list of doubts: “It would seem not...” as if made by a Devil’s Advocate. Next comes the *Sed contra*, “But against (all that)”, with a quote from Scripture or some other authority or simple common sense. Then comes the *Respondeo dicendum*, “I reply to what has been said,” in which he presents the body (*corpus*) of his article), and quite without polemics. Finally he carefully answers each of the initial objections. All is crystal clear, and the attention is held by the dynamism of conflicting ideas — and the Devil does not like it.

A SICK SOCIETY

Esolen **denounces the dumbing down**, impoverishment, emaciation and flattening out of modern politics, entertainment and schooling — schooling in which the **trend is to omit basics**, with a claim they are too tedious, and seemingly without instant gratification — the impatience of original sin. He also denounces “the constant herding and bustling of children”, hence lack of relationships, and TV’s shortening of attention span.

The dust jacket blurb decries many hallmarks of modern childhood: “Playdates, soccer practice, day care, political correctness, drudgery without facts, TV, video games, constant supervision, endless distractions...”

UNISEX

He writes bitingly against the prevailing unisex: “Pretend from the outset that there are no distinctions of sex or none that matter for anything really important,” and never let boys be “left alone to enjoy boyhood as boys.”

Even **altar girls** are neatly rubbished: “Boys want to be part of a gang of their own kind, assisting a man at a man’s work.”

Other prevailing trends come in for condemnation with ripostes such as, “Creative writing promotes egotism”, while “Friendship exalts the imagination.” As for TV, “That excellent tool for isolation and indoor gaping...” and “**TV didn’t merely spend the time, it spoiled the time it didn’t spend.**”

He denounces this generation as the first who will spend most of their waking hours **indoors**. He favours outdoor activities with the sexes separate, so that boys and girls were kept apart for their own healthy development, intellectual and emotional.”

PARADOXES

He claims that real safety involves risks. He dismisses phony claims of ‘relevance’.

He says, “It used to be taken for granted that, in speaking to young people, one was speaking to a maturing human being, not to a brute with debased tastes, ill-governed appetites, no practical skills, no sense of high purpose or great art, and no yearning for the quest to find goodness and truth and beauty.”

He laments the “total control of all things by mass entertainment and mass media and mass education and mass politics” — thus upholding Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful*.

CHRISTIANITY

Perhaps lest he give offence, he does not treat the full Christian world-view, of “what we are here for and where we are going,” nor of the hindrances of the Devil and the diabolic strategies behind the present debacle.

He does not elaborate on **original sin** the way Tolkien does so well in *The Silmarillion*: “The lies of

Melchor, mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, power of terror and of hate, are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed, but continues to bear evil fruit even unto the latest days.”

FALSE PHILOSOPHIES

Then there are the “-isms” — feminism, environmentalism, also that modern individualism which claims a right to instant gratification, plus that exact opposite that lures to enslavement by a tightening grip of a central government on all aspects of life — and the sinister revelation of the coming dictatorship. Here he is redolent of Michael O’Brien novels of “the coming police-state in North America”. He speaks against the dictatorship of the thought-police, centralism, socialism, the elimination of anything between the Big Brother government with its bureaucracy and the individual, hence its hostility to the family and the Church, to the federation of states, to local government etc, and the rejection of subsidiarity balanced by solidarity, and the promotion of Godlessness and inhumanity of man to man, i.e. modern secular humanism.

In this, Esolen is reminiscent of C.S. Lewis in the introduction to *The Screwtape Letters* from the 1940s, where the Devil has just launched a new Master Plan so people will not think anymore.

MODERN SCHOOLING

He claims that modern schooling impoverishes real education because it **ignores or works against imagination and memory**. No wonder there is bitter opposition to Question & Answer catechisms — despite their use in serious things like advertising, to make you buy things you don’t need or don’t even want. Catechisms have statements which are ‘**clear, brief, and easily assimilated by all**’ (Blessed John Paul II in *The Christian Family in the Modern World* §39) — these are not hallmarks of modern education establishments.

He laments the destruction of the imagination, which means the destroying of imaginative thinking, and so the abolition of thinking altogether, because **you can’t think without imagination and memory**. It reminds this reviewer of Dorothy Sayers in her *The Lost Tools of Learning*, of which Laura Berquist makes so much in her wonderful book for homeschoolers, *Designing your own Classical Curriculum*.

He does not seem to make Tolkien’s distinction between imagination as **making mental images** and imagination as **thinking imaginatively with the images**. In practice, of course, they tend to stand or fall together.

BUSH BOYS FOR EVER!

It is consoling for this reviewer that time after time Esolen supports the background themes of *Bush Boys*, especially the success of an older style of upbringing. **He is never politically correct**. He upholds traditional adventure stories for boys in which the author gets rid of the adults on the first page — or very soon after. He would certainly agree with an upbringing that balances family life and family jobs with roaming the bush, or combining rigour in the classroom with

freedom in the playground.

Esolen upholds the advantages of children playing on their own and unsupervised. Indeed, he promotes *Bush Boys* books unwittingly, in which the characters are on their own in the wild bush. They have to co-operate with each other, obey their leader who is one of themselves, use what skills they have, and learn new ones, be inventive (perhaps covered by the modern term ‘problem solving’), avoid the Seven Deadly Dangers that lead to death in the bush, and have the deep satisfaction, without adverting to it, of real achievement, in which happiness is a byproduct.

GIRLS READING BOYS’ BOOKS

Here is an excerpt from the Editor’s Page, p. 857, of the 1929-1930 *The Boy’s Own Annual*:

A new girl reader wrote to me some time ago, to express her kind appreciation of the B.O.P. [*Boy’s Own Paper*], and in the course of her letter she said that so many girls are now among our readers that someone had suggested it ought to be re-named ‘The Boy’s and Girl’s Own Paper’. “That,” she said candidly, “I think would be a rotten idea!” and I cordially and completely agree with her. She thinks, moreover, that it would frighten off the boys: whether that is so or not, it would almost certainly frighten off the girls. The sort of girl who reads the B.O.P. reads it *because* it is a boy’s paper, and because she is interested in the sort of things in which boys are interested, and any attempt to provide a sort of milk-and-water “Boys and Girl’s Own Paper” would almost certainly please neither. Happily neither my correspondent nor any of our other readers need worry themselves, for the idea of changing the name of the B.O.P. has never even entered my head, and I hope to see it live and grow and flourish for many years to come under the title that has won it so much fame and affection for more than half a century.

In fact, the BOP began in 1879 and lasted till 1967.

See also the first paragraphs in **Appendix 3, “Camping for Boys”**, in *Bush Boys on the Move*:

The *Bush Boys* books are about boys. **Boys do not read books about girls**. Girls, however, revel in both. The contrast exemplifies the difference between the sexes. “God made them male and female”, to *complement* each other in marriage and with a family. **The sexes are not the same and are not interchangeable**. They are specializations, though overlapping. Thus the husband is usually the bread-winner, the wife the homemaker. And it really works.

An upbringing for complementarity involves activities for boys and girls together, and **some for boys and girls separately**.

This book [*Bush Boys on the Move*] suggests some activities for boys without girls...

CONCLUSION

I wholeheartedly recommend *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of your Child*.

Published 2010/2012 — 320 pp, available from Freedom Publishing 03 9816 0800 @ \$53.90.

Father James Tierney

P.S. Coming soon — a sequel to *New Boys in the Bush* called *New Boys go Bush Again*.