

Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Progressive Education Reform, and *Understood Betsy*

As a child, I loved novels of schools done well and schools done badly. The progressive school in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Men*, the cruel headmistress in the upscale boarding school in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, the hypocrisy of the school supervisor in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, all made me cry, although for different reasons. But my favorite was Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Understood Betsy*, in which a nervous, pale, always frightened child moves from the city to small-town Vermont and, over the course of a year, becomes strong, confident, empathetic, and self-reliant. Maybe because I was a rather nervous child myself, one who consistently did very poorly in school, I loved Betsy's new school, which gave her mastery over course material, friends and community, and plenty of time outside of school to learn how to make butter and read aloud and play with farm animals. Betsy was becoming fully herself at nine years old, while I was quaking whenever the phone rang, worried that it was my teacher calling home to talk about my failures. (And I was right about that every few weeks.)

As an adult, interested in progressive reforms and now an educator myself, I had heard that *Understood Betsy* was Fisher's didactic presentation of Montessori pedagogies, in the same way that Louisa May Alcott showcased the pedagogical ideas of her father, Bronson Alcott, in *Little Men*. Interested, I read the novel again (thanks to a friend who had heard me talk about the book and who bought me a copy when the University Press of New England's re-released it in 1999) ... and I didn't really see the Montessori connection, to be honest. But I was delighted to be reunited with the novel, which I've now reread at least

every other year in the past 18 years, always crying in the same spots. (Obviously I'm a weepy sort of reader.)

Having now read some of Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and other educational reformers this summer, I see what the problem is: Scholars have taken two facts – that Fisher wrote a couple of books about Montessori schooling and that there is an unusual school in *Understood Betsy* – and have sloppily put those facts together to decide that the novel must obviously be a fictional presentation of Montessori methodology. And since, after all, it's just a children's novel, they haven't worried much about whether this pigeonholing is particularly accurate. Turns out, it's not.

As I'll argue in this essay, Fisher was indeed an admirer of Montessori education, even calling it “a new religion which we are called upon to help bring into the world,”¹ but she felt free to revise and expand on it and to join it together with other educational theories that she also found compelling. (Similar things have happened to many religions.) As with many woman writers, Fisher has been neglected by critics, who tend to diminish her work by dismissing it as middle-brow, didactic, and – horror of horrors! – popular. In this essay, I focus on one novel and one window on that novel – *Understood Betsy* through the lens of progressive education reform – but Fisher is owed a debt of attention from the wider audience of readers, reformers, and writers.²

¹ Fisher, *Montessori for Parents* viii.

² Interestingly, Fisher is in the news again this summer, although not in the way she or I would like. The Vermont Board of Libraries is debating whether to drop her name from the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award, established in 1957 and awarded annually to a newly published book by a vote of Vermont schoolchildren. Fisher has been accused of connection to the eugenics movement in the state, which resulted in the voluntary sterilization of at least 250 “feeble-minded” citizens of the state between 1933 and 1960. Fisher, who was quite a Vermont booster, was involved in the Vermont Commission on Country Life (VCCL), especially the Committee on Tradition and Ideals, which emphasized

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was an interested observer of and then participant in education from youth due to her father, James Hulme Canfield.³ He was a professor of political economy and sociology at the University of Kansas when she was born; he then became chancellor at the University of Nebraska (where a teenaged Dorothy became friends with Willa Cather, who was a student there), followed by becoming president of the Ohio State University, where Dorothy graduated in 1909; finally, taking a break from administration, he became a librarian at Columbia University. She thus grew up in an academic household, one that included summers at her father's relatives' house in Vermont and ongoing conversations about questions of education. She wrote to Middlebury College president Paul D. Moody in 1923, for example, weighing in in favor of co-education and

tourism and second-home-ownership in Vermont. Another subcommittee of the VCCL, however, was charged with ensuring that Vermont "stock" was not being degraded. Fisher joined the VCCL executive committee in 1932, a year after the state legislature approved the sterilization law. There has been heated debate this spring and summer over whether there is a "smoking gun" connecting Fisher to explicit eugenics ideals. The Library Board was supposed to announce its recommendation to State Librarian Scott Murphy on July 11 but then delayed that announcement until October 10. (Madigan, "Questions Raised"; Walsh, "Vermont Considers"; Madigan, "Board of Libraries delays"; Walsh, "Library Board Delays.")

If I were joining in the discussion (and I may indeed write a letter to Librarian Murphy), I would point to Fisher's 1946 statement that biologists have made clear "that the genes through which biological human inheritance is transmitted come together in such wildly profuse variety that their combinations are governed, apparently, as solely by chance as is the combination of grains of sand in any handful one picks up from a seaside beach. ... In other words, each human being is, at birth, a mass of complex potentialities, unpredictable in any individual instance." Such is not the language of a eugenicist. Fisher, *American Portraits* 19.

³ Ida H. Washington's *Dorothy Canfield Fisher* is the standard biography of the author; the only other biography, *The Lady from Vermont*, is by Elizabeth Yates. Mark J. Madigan has also published an excellent selection of Fisher's letters, *Keeping Fires Night and Day*, which includes a chronology of Fisher's life (xvii-xx).

noting, "I am of course familiar with all that can be said on both sides of the question, having been brought up on the discussion of it all my life."⁴

She also had the experience of European education, spending a year in French schools while her artist mother, Flavia A. Camp Canfield, studied in Paris; later, Dorothy studied French at the Sorbonne in her mid-20s. She earned a Ph.D. in French literature from Columbia University in 1904 but turned down a job offer to be an assistant professor at Western Reserve University in Cleveland because she wanted to stay closer to her parents. Instead, she accepted an administrative position at the experimental Horace Mann School in New York, seeing first-hand what progressive education looked like day to day.

In 1906, she co-wrote a textbook, *Elementary Composition*, with George R. Carpenter, a rhetoric professor at Columbia University, but thereafter turned her writerly attention to fiction and nonfiction. She married fellow writer John Fisher in 1907, and the couple moved to her family's house in Arlington, Vermont, where she had spent summers and which she had inherited. Although she moved away from working in schools and publishing textbooks herself, her education work continued for the rest of her life, including her service on the Vermont State Board of Education (she was the first woman ever appointed to the board), her promotion of and expertise in adult education, her powerful role on the board of selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club (where she served as the only woman for 25 years), and her work on the boards of trustees of Goddard College and Howard University.

A significant highlight in that long history of interest and growing expertise in education is Fisher's 1911 trip to Rome, where she met with Dr. Maria Montessori and

⁴ May 31, 1923, letter to Moody, in Madigan, Mark, 105.

observed the children in Montessori's Casa dei Bambini. She was traveling to Europe with her husband and their infant daughter and agreed to do a favor for publisher William Morrow, who was going to shortly be publishing a translation from the Italian of Maria Montessori's book on her educational theories and methods; Morrow asked Fisher to call on Montessori to discuss one of the chapters in the book.⁵ Fisher was profoundly affected and impressed by what she saw and made several visits to the school; upon her return to the States, she frequently found herself answering questions from interested parents about the Montessori method, such that she wrote first one book and then another on the subject: *A Montessori Mother* (1912; reprinted in 1965 as *Montessori for Parents*) and *A Montessori Manual for Teachers and Parents* (1913).

Fisher did not, as is often erroneously claimed, introduce Montessori to the United States. In fact, *McClure's Magazine* in May 1911 published a long cover story on Montessori, calling her "an educational wonder-worker." By October of that year, *McClure's* had received so many letters from readers that it announced a forthcoming series of articles, beginning in December 1911, that would answer readers' questions about the Montessori method. Moreover, the first Montessori school in the United States opened in Tarrytown, New York in October 1911, and an English translation of Montessori's own book, *The Montessori Method*, appeared in 1912.⁶ It is certainly probable, however, that Fisher's greater literary popularity than that of travel writer Josephine Tozier, who wrote the initial *McClure's* articles, helped popularize the Montessori movement more than the magazine had done.

⁵ Yates 105.

⁶ Tozier, "An Educational Wonder-Worker"; "Information about the Montessori Method"; Tozier, "Montessori Schools in Rome"; Willcott 157-59. See Gutek and Gutek.

And what was this movement, this pedagogy? In Fisher's description, Dr. Montessori's pedagogy rests on "recognition of the fact that no human being is educated by anyone else. He must do it himself or it is never done."⁷ Montessori focused her work on very young children, under six years old, using what Tozier called "the rediscovery of the ten fingers" through a set of didactic objects used by the children in specific ways to develop their senses. The children stack blocks from largest to smallest, or place cylinders of varying widths or heights in the appropriate-sized hole, or feel the difference between rough and smooth, or practice buttoning or tying or other fine motor skills. The children are almost entirely self-motivated and -directed, and both Tozier and Fisher commented particularly on the need for adults to prevent themselves "from rushing to the aid of a child who appears to be embarrassed and puzzled in one of his little employments. Their tendency is to say, 'Poor little mite!' and help him out; thereby depriving the child at once of the joy and the education of overcoming an obstacle."⁸ Fisher similarly notes that "The Montessori apparatus – the whole Montessori idea – is meant to furnish appropriate obstacles for children of three and four, and five and six years old."⁹

Fisher was explicit with her American audience that Dr. Montessori's ideas were still in development and that they themselves must be willing to experiment with the methodology and to observe their own children in the process. For example, she notes that "Nature Study is one of the subjects which (owing to conditions in Rome) Dr. Montessori has not yet fully elaborated, so that whatever is done now in that direction by American mothers, using her principles with young children, must be largely the result of their own

⁷ Fisher, *The Montessori Manual* 19-20.

⁸ Tozier, "An Educational Wonder-Worker," 6, 8.

⁹ Fisher, *The Montessori Manual* 107.

initiative.”¹⁰ Fisher concludes *A Montessori Mother* by inviting Americans to “collaborate in our small way with the scientific founder of the Montessori method, and can help her to go on with her system (discovered before its completion) by assimilating profoundly her master-idea, and applying it in directions which she has not yet had time finally and carefully to explore, such as its application to the dramatic and aesthetic instincts of children.”¹¹ Fisher herself wrote two further nonfiction books, *Mothers and Children* (1914) and *Self-Reliance* (1916), that build on Montessori ideas, not least because of the development of her own children, Sarah (born 1909) and James (1913).

However, Fisher grievously misjudged Montessori, who decidedly did not want any “collaborators” in her method. Indeed, Montessori disavowed Fisher’s manuals, going so far as to write a letter to the *Educational Times Supplement* of London saying, “I have taken the pains to prepare myself a handbook to fulfill exactly the task which Mrs. D. Canfield Fisher’s book has the pretension of fulfilling. I should be very glad if you would give me the opportunity of saying that I have not deputed – and do not propose to depute – to others the work of a practical popular explanation of my method, as I have taken great pains to do this myself. I hope my system will not be held responsible for any want of success that may arise out of the use of other books than my own in connection with the Montessori apparatus.”¹² (It was exactly this tension over whether innovation was necessary, possible, or verboten that later caused the “great Montessori schism” between the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI), the “orthodox” branch that does not innovate, and the American Montessori Society, which does. The United States patent office has ruled that

¹⁰ Fisher, *The Montessori Manual* 103.

¹¹ Fisher, *Montessori for Parents* 238.

¹² Quoted in Gutek and Gutek 63.

“Montessori” is a generic term that can’t be patented, so both branches must share the term despite their differences.¹³⁾

I haven’t found a response from Fisher to Montessori’s reaction to her work, but in 1916 she wrote dismissively to a friend about “the usual fervent American reaction to any stimulant ... this is the way they ‘took up’ the blue glass craze, and ping-pong and the Montessori system.”¹⁴ Moreover, although Montessori was Italian, Fisher saw something in Montessori’s theories that was deeply resonant with America’s past and that didn’t need the doctor’s theories to appreciate: “Now, whenever frontier conditions exist, people generally are forced to learn to employ their senses under the usual modern conditions of specialized labor performed almost entirely away from the home; and though for most of us the old-fashioned conditions of farm-life so ideal for children, the free roaming of field and wood, the care and responsibility for animals, the knowledge of plant-life, the intimate acquaintance with the beauties of the seasons, the enforced self-dependence in crises, are impossibly out of reach, we can give our children some of the benefits to be had from them by analyzing them and seeing exactly which are the elements in them so tonic and invigorating to child-life, and by adapting them to our own changed conditions.”¹⁵ In this sentiment, she echoes the ideas of John Dewey, who argues that “No number of object-lessons, got up as object-lessons for the sake of giving information, can afford even the

¹³ Chertoff.

¹⁴ Fisher to Sarah Cleghorn, September 5, 1917, in Madigan, Mark, 72. The “blue-glass craze” was the pseudoscientific practice of chromotherapy, which purported to cure illnesses with colored light. (Madigan, Mark, 73)

¹⁵ Fisher, *Montessori for Parents* 110.

shadow of a substitute for acquaintance with the plants and animals of the farm and garden acquired through actual living among them and caring for them.”¹⁶

Certainly by the time that Fisher wrote *Understood Betsy* – that novel that so many scholars see simply as a fictional depiction of Montessori methodology – she was casting her net for progressive education much wider than simply Montessori’s work, and she was, in particular, Fisher was deeply impressed by John Dewey. She wrote admiring profiles of him both in 1946 and in 1953, although I haven’t yet found any direct connection between Dewey and Fisher earlier; however, they were two of the most famous Vermonters in the country, not to mention both well-known nationally, and they must have been aware of each other’s work. For example, John Dewey published an article on freedom of thought during wartime in *The New Republic* on September 1, 1917; the next week, the magazine ran a review of Fisher’s *Understood Betsy*.¹⁷ Fisher claims a regional connection with Dewey, crediting Vermont culture with giving him his ideas about pedagogy, particularly about student freedom within the classroom: “Much of what everybody around John Dewey took for granted during his Vermont youth was approved in theory by those he found outside of Vermont. But in practice it was often decried, derided and greatly feared.” Moreover, “Much of what he saw taken for granted after he left Vermont” – especially the absolute authority granted to teachers – “was as horrifying to him as it was astonishing.” Fisher finds such educational authority un-American, teaching what is essentially “the doctrine of the divine right of kings” to children.¹⁸ Dewey’s emphasis on manual as well as intellectual work was in part an attempt to eliminate any achievement gap between rich

¹⁶ Dewey, “The School and Society” 298.

¹⁷ Fisher, “John Dewey,” in *American Portraits*; Fisher, “John Dewey,” in *Vermont Tradition*; Dewey, “Conscription of Thought”; “A Child in Arcadia.”

¹⁸ Fisher, “John Dewey,” *Vermont Tradition* 374.

and poor, which Fisher again credits in part to his being a Vermonter rather than “one who had grown up in the social assumption that well-to-do people have minds only, and the lower-income group have hands only.”¹⁹ Fisher’s Vermont boosterism apparently does not conceive of class prejudice as possible in her beloved state.

Moreover, the historical moment in which Fisher wrote her novel is not simply the interest in Montessori’s work to the United States (which was already dimming by that time²⁰) but also World War I. Fisher’s husband was a Quaker who in 1916 decided to go to France to drive an ambulance. Fisher remained in the United States with the couple’s two children until she finished preparations of *Understood Betsy* for publication, at which point the family reunited outside of Paris. The fact that Europe was in chaos no doubt led Fisher to reflect longingly on an apparently simpler, more peaceful past, at the same time that she was arguing for a pedagogy that recognizes the individuality of each child.

Readers at the time did not particularly associate *Understood Betsy* with Montessori theories but rather with this harkening for a purer American past. For example, the reviewer for *The New Republic* was clearly familiar with Fisher’s work on Montessori but mentioned it only to illustrate the criticism that, since the publication of the earlier education books, Fisher has “grown troublingly wistful, and doubtful about cities.” The review mentions “little red school-houses” and highlights “the probably universal desire to have the children grow up healthy and self-reliant” but sees this desire as rooted in a return to rural life rather than Montessori educational reform. Indeed, the review, titled “A

¹⁹ Fisher, “John Dewey,” *Vermont Tradition* 377.

²⁰ One reason often given for the quick, if temporary, demise of interest in Montessori education in America is the scathing review that William Kirkpatrick, reformer John Dewey’s former student, wrote in 1914, arguing that Maria Montessori’s methods were exactly what progressive reformers had been doing since the 1880s. See Thayer-Bacon; Willcott.

Child in Arcadia,” finds Fisher “always extraordinarily likable” but sees the novel as unfortunately nostalgic “for pioneer conditions” and unrealistic.²¹

These “pioneer conditions” are about the protagonist’s country school life and farm home life, which work together in harmony to give a meaningful existence to a child diminished by modernization and urbanization. *Understood Betsy*, serialized in 1916 in *St. Nicholas* and then published in book form in 1917,²² is the story of nine-year-old Elizabeth Ann, an orphan who has been raised by her Aunt Frances and Frances’s mother, Aunt Harriet. When elderly Harriet becomes ill, presumably with tuberculosis, and must go to a warm climate for her lungs, the little girl is sent to stay with the Putneys, Vermont relatives whom Harriet and Frances have always castigated as “a stiff-necked, cold-hearted, undemonstrative, and hard set of New Englanders.” The Putneys’ worst crime against humanity is that they give children chores while not proffering the type of sentimental over-identification with a child that Frances prefers; it is no wonder that Harriet refers to the Putneys’ emphasis on capable, independent children as “starving ... the child-heart” (3).

Fisher’s narrative voice assumes that the reader lives an urban life like the one Elizabeth Anne does before moving to Vermont: “a medium-sized city in a medium-sized state in the middle of this country; ... you know all about it because it was probably very much like the place you live in yourself” (1). That urban environment features noise, crowds, limited fresh air, and for the young girl, a comprehensive district school, a “big brick school building ... [that] was four stories high, and when all the classes were in session there were six hundred children under that one roof. You can imagine, perhaps, the noise there was on the playground just before school!” (7). Aunt Frances also gives her

²¹ “A Child in Arcadia.”

²² Rahn 52.

niece additional learning opportunities outside of school, because “after school and on Saturdays ... there were lessons, all kinds of lessons – piano lessons of course [because Aunt Francis is a piano teacher], and nature-study lessons out of an excellent book Aunt Frances had bought, and painting lessons, and sewing lessons, and even a little French, although Aunt Frances was not very sure about her pronunciation” (8).

Moreover, Aunt Frances herself pursues the education she imagines she needs to be a good mother. Fisher makes fun of the emphasis on “scientific motherhood” prevalent in the early 20th century, in which mothers were encouraged to turn to authorities – often physicians – for advice about how to raise their children.²³ Aunt Frances, in trying to be the best mother she can be to the baby, “re-read one book after another which told her how to bring up children. She joined a Mother’s Club which met once a week. She took a correspondence course from a school in Chicago which taught mother-craft by mail” (3). (There is also some self-mockery here from Fisher, who of course had written two child-rearing manuals herself by that point.) And yet Aunt Frances is so nervous and clingy that little Elizabeth Ann is an anxious, fearful, dependent, passive, “white, trembling child” by the time she is nine years old (18).

That weak, scared child is thrust by her great-aunt Harriet’s illness into a new world that is not entirely – or indeed at all – focused on protecting her from everything. She rides the train from New York City up to Vermont alone, after a relative has taken her to the east coast and put her on the right train, charging the conductor to make sure she gets off at the correct stop; she is so frightened by the time she arrives that she can’t walk, and the conductor has to physically carry her off the train.

²³ Apple, esp. 33.

And it is in this first moment in Hillsboro, Vermont, that her progressive education begins. Her Uncle Henry wraps her in a cape to keep her warm, sets her down in the front seat of the lumber wagon with him, and begins the journey to the Putney farm, without asking her “a great many times how you had ‘stood the trip” (19), which she has always assumed was an intrinsic feature of all travel; in this new world, strange experiences are not considered inevitably jarring to delicate nerves, largely because nerves are not considered inevitably delicate. Elizabeth Ann starts to work herself into a nervous fit, imagining herself falling out of the wagon and being crushed by the wheels, but it turns out that such flights of hysterical imagination require a sympathetic audience; Uncle Henry, instead of intuiting her self-created terror and asking to “hear all about it,” asks her to take over the reins so that he can do some “figgering” with paper and pencil (19). He gives her rudimentary instructions – “You pull on the left-hand rein to make ‘em go to the left and t’other way for t’other way, though ‘tain’t likely we’ll meet any teams” (19) – and then leaves her to it while he gets on with his math. Elizabeth Anne has “instant absorbed interest” in the project at hand, not because she’s pleased to be asked but because she wants to make excuses about why she can’t do it, but Uncle Henry is paying her no attention at all. She is distracted from her distress because the horses start walking to the left side, and she “hastily decided which was her right hand (she had never been forced to know it so quickly before) and pulled on that rein. The horses turned their hanging heads a little, and, miraculously, there they were in the middle of the road again” (20). In other words, the little girl is having an object lesson with self-correcting didactic materials, just as Montessori recommends. The fact that she has had no choice in the matter, that driving has been thrust upon her, is not what Montessori recommends, but young Elizabeth Anne

has spent nine years having her curiosity dulled by fear and anxiety; there is no new knowledge that she will pursue on her own at this point. The stakes are also higher here than Montessori would recommend; in her flustered forgetfulness about which is her right and left hand, she then pulls on the wrong rein, and the wagon comes close to tipping into a ditch. Indeed, Fisher is here treading in the footsteps of John Dewey rather than Montessori, for the former argues (in Fisher's own words) that one role of education is "to provide for [the child] opportunities (real ones, no pretense, since all pretense is poison) to join helpfully and creatively in the work of his community."²⁴

She soon has an epiphany – what the narrative voice refers to as “her brain, waking up” as she has her very first “whole thought of her very own” (21) – when she realizes that she doesn’t actually need to remember which hand is right and which is left, as long as she pulls the rein in the direction that she wants the horses to go. In a didactic moment, the narrator explains that “At home, Aunt Frances had always known exactly what she was doing, and had helped her over the hard places before she even knew they were there; and at school her teachers had been carefully trained to think faster than the scholars. Someone had always been explaining things to Elizabeth Ann so carefully that she had never found out a single thing for herself before. This was a very small discovery, but it was her own. Elizabeth Ann was as excited about it as a mother bird over the first egg that hatches” (21). She throws herself into this driving project, using her new-found understanding and concentrating as she has never done before: “Now for what seemed to her a long, long time she drove, drove so hard she could think of nothing else. She guided the horses around stones, she cheered them through freezing mud puddles of melted snow, she kept them in

²⁴ Fisher, “John Dewey,” *Vermont Tradition* 377.

the anxiously exact middle of the road” (22-23). And she does this all with no external praise; the reward is simply that they eventually arrive at Putney farm thanks to her driving.

Upon her arrival at the farm, she is promptly renamed “Betsy” with no fanfare, and the new name will signify not only her new surroundings but also the new child-rearing philosophy with which she’ll be treated. The novel refers to her by both names for five more chapters before Betsy has finally matured into her new name. Elizabeth Ann was always carefully awakened by her Aunt Frances, who supervised her dressing and did her hair; Betsy, on the other hand, is left to lie in bed until she decides to get up and dress herself and do her own hair. Elizabeth Ann never had a chore, which were the purview of servants; Betsy is asked to help with one meal a day, and the instructions she is given are brief and include advice to add sugar to apple sauce “till it tastes right” (78), requiring her to experiment with differing levels of sweetener and to make independent decisions. Elizabeth Ann’s appetite was carefully monitored and discussed at the dinner table; Betsy is allowed to bypass the baked beans for dinner and eat three helpings of the apple sauce that she made herself. Elizabeth Ann was carefully walked back and forth to school twice a day by Aunt Frances, who commiserated over every test and perceived slight by the teacher; Betsy, on the other hand, is sent by herself to walk to school after lunch on her first day in Vermont.

The school in Hillsboro is a one-room schoolhouse, so small that Betsy is walking right past it when the teacher, Miss Benton, runs out to get her. The desks are in rows – no Montessori throw rugs and tiny tables here – and carved up with the initials of generations

of students. There are only twelve students in the entire school, however, ranging from five through presumably the upper elementary school grades.

One project of that initial afternoon is to get Betsy sorted out in terms of her academic achievement and the level of appropriate challenge. Betsy's experience of being 3A – the highest level of third grade in her previous school – is that she will be bored much of the time, except for when she is lost in math class. Her experience in reading lessons, for example, had been that all 40 students in her 3A class sat with their book opened to the same passage; the teacher went around the room, calling on each child in turn to read a line, “until your turn came to stand up and read your sentence or two, which by that time sounded just like nonsense because you'd read it over so many times to yourself before your chance came. And often you didn't even have a chance to do that, because the teacher didn't have time to get around to you at all, and you closed your book and put it in your desk without having opened your mouth” (57-58). Betsy loves to read, but that has nothing to do with the tedium of reading class. But in her new one-room schoolhouse, sitting with the teacher and just two other students, each student reads a full page, and when the level of the passage is obviously very low for Betsy, her teacher hands her the 7th-grade reader instead. The selection is John Greenleaf Whittier's “Barbara Frietchie,” and Betsy reads it so well that the entire class stops their work to listen; she is afraid that the other students will laugh at her, but instead they are eager to hear what happens in the poem.

Betsy sadly tells her teacher that she can't be allowed to read in the 7th-grade reader because her math skills are so weak, but it turns out that her new teacher meets each student at his or her level in each field of study. Betsy winds up in 2nd-grade math, which confuses her terribly – how can she be in 7th-grade reading and 3rd-grade spelling and 2nd-

grade math? – although the teacher tells her, “*You aren’t any grade at all, no matter where you are in school. You’re just yourself, aren’t you? What difference does it make what grade you’re in? And what’s the use of your reading little baby things too easy for you just because you don’t know your multiplication table?*” (64-65). Betsy can only reply, “Well, for goodness’ *sakes!*,” not entirely sure herself why she is so confused by this new system, but the narrative voice steps in to clarify the problem Betsy is facing: “The matter was that never before had she knows what she was doing in school. She had always thought she was there to pass from one grade to another, and she was ever so startled to get a glimpse of the fact that she was there to learn how to read and write and cipher and generally use her mind, so she could take care of herself when she came to be grown up” (65).

There are other surprises in store for Betsy that day. One is that students take turn getting a pail of water from the pond for the rest of the class to drink, similar to the cooking and hospitality asks that Montessori students do for one another. The other, more startling, is that, once she has learned the spelling list she’s been assigned, faster than her fellow classmates, and settles herself in for the expected period of boredom, the teacher asks her to take five-year-old Molly into a corner and help her with her reading. Here is a perfect example of Montessori’s multi-age classrooms, and the experience is good for both children, just as the Italian doctor would have predicted. Betsy “had never had anything to do with children younger than herself, and she felt very pleased and important to have anybody look up to *her!* ... Elizabeth Ann correct[ed] Molly gently when she made a mistake, and wait[ed] patiently when she hesitated. She had so fresh in her mind her own suffering from quick, nervous corrections that she took the greatest pleasure in speaking quietly and not interrupting the little girl more than was necessary. It was fun to teach, *lots of fun!*”

(62). The time flies by, and Betsy is surprised when the teacher asks “thoughtfully, just as though Betsy were a grown-up person,” about her assessment of little Molly’s reading skills and whether she might be ready for the second reader (62).

Unlike Montessori, for whom the teacher’s primary role is to prepare the environment in which the toddlers will learn, Fisher argues that adults have an important role in modeling behaviors and providing direct instruction to students. Earlier, observing Montessori’s classes, Fisher had noted that “It was evident to her that the usual ‘class recitation’ and ‘class lessons’ were out of the question, since they could at the best, possibly fit the needs of only one child in the class. And yet it is obviously impossible, as the world is made up, to have a teacher for every child. There was only one way out – things must somehow be so organized and arranged that, for most of the time, the child can and shall teach himself.”²⁵ In the Hillsboro one-room schoolhouse, however, there are other options: students can teach each other (as in Betsy’s helping Molly with reading); class recitations and lessons can be done with very small groups of children, a class within the class; and sometimes, the teacher works one-on-one with a student, as happens with Betsy and math: “as soon as Miss Benton had seen the confusion of the little girl’s mind, the two had settled down to a serious struggle with that subject. Miss Benton had had Betsy recite all by herself, so she wouldn’t be flurried by the others; and to begin with had gone back, back, back to bedrock, to the things Betsy absolutely knew, to the 2 x 2’s and the 3 x 3’s. And then, very cautiously, a step at a time, they had advanced, stopping short whenever Betsy felt a beginning of that bewildered ‘guessing’ impulse which made her answer wildly at random”(123). This approach – teacher-centric but focused on one particular child –

²⁵ Fisher, *The Montessori Manual* 19.

works, and “She attacked a page of problems now with a zest and self-confidence which made her arithmetic lessons among the most interesting hours at school” (124).

Assessment in the school is ongoing and entirely formative, until the day “the Superintendent, the all-important, seldom-seen Superintendent, came to visit the school and the children were given some examination so he could see how they were getting on” (89-90). Betsy has been conditioned by her years at the big city school to fear examinations, which determine whether one can move onto the next grade at the end of the year, and she thus regresses to her old Elizabeth Ann self and suffers a whole slew of anxious symptoms: “Her mouth had gone dry and her knees had shaken and her elbows had felt as though they had no more bones in them than so much jelly, and her eyes had smarted, and, oh, what answers she had made! ... she had disgraced herself ten times over” (90). She seeks sympathy from her Cousin Ann as she had always done from Aunt Frances, only to discover that Frances always thought that examinations were rather fun: “Like taking a dare, don’t you know. Somebody stumps you to jump off the hitching post, and you do it to show ’em. I always used to think examinations were like that. Somebody stumps you to spell ‘pneumonia,’ and you do it to show ’em” (92). Betsy thinks that’s all very well for Ann, but she herself had gotten scared and made a lot of mistakes: “I spelled ‘doubt’ without any b and ‘separate’ with an e, and I said Iowa was bounded on the north by *Wisconsin*, and I ...” She is interrupted by Cousin Ann, who points out that “it doesn’t matter if you really know the right answers, does it? That’s the important thing” (92). However, “This was an idea which had never in all her life entered Betsy’s brain and she did not take it in now” (92-93), even when Cousin Ann points out that “Hemlock Mountain will stand right there just the same even if you did forget to put a b in ‘doubt’” (93).

Later that afternoon, the uselessness of examinations for determining real growth is driven home when Betsy must prove her problem-solving skills in a real-life, rather than created, situation. When she and little Molly walk back to the farm from the sap house, where Ann has been making maple syrup, they take a wrong turn and accidentally head up Hemlock Mountain rather than down it. Although dark is falling, Betsy is relatively calm, figuring that they can just turn around and go the other way, but then Molly takes one wrong step and falls into a deep pit, where a river-formed cave had collapsed long ago. Betsy's first thought is to run back to the farm and get help, but the five-year-old becomes hysterical at the thought of being left in the pit alone in the dark. Betsy pulls herself together and asks herself, "What would Cousin Ann do if she were here? She wouldn't cry. She would *think* of something" (101). So Betsy looks around, assessing her resources, and sees a huge pine tree limb with broken branch stubs. She realizes that could work as a ladder if she can get it into the hole. It takes using a stick as a lever for her to get the huge tree limb out of the snow, but she finally does so, maneuvers it to the pit, tells Molly to get under cover, and slides the limb into the pit. Molly quickly clambers up and gets high enough that Betsy can lie down flat, reach down her arms, and pull the child up. Just as the rescue is achieved, Cousin Ann arrives, looking for the children in the dark; the Putneys are not given to praise, but Ann says, "Well, now, that was quite a good idea for a little girl to have," which makes Betsy's heart "sing[] joyfully" (103). That night, as she curls up in bed, "she remembered, ever so faintly, as something of no importance, that she had failed in an examination that afternoon" (103). She has internalized the lesson that what really matters is what you know and what you can do with what you know, not what a Superintendent thinks of your spelling.

But is such education – individual attention; the practical hand in hand with the academic; an emphasis on real growth rather than progression through grades – available to most children in 1916? (or 1946? or now?) Is Fisher’s novel simply an “Arcadia,” as the *New Republic* reviewer found, a momentary escape from the dangers of modernity and World War I? Or is there something forward-looking as well as backward-looking in Fisher’s ideal of rural one-room schoolhouses and self-reliant farm families?

Thirty years later, looking back after a second world war (one in which Fisher lost her beloved son), Fisher hypothesized that “Those local free high schools twenty-five or thirty or forty years ago were certainly not better educational institutions in themselves than the expensive prep schools, as one might at first think. But the boys and girls who went to those small semi-rural high schools were saturated to the marrow of their bones by constant contact with the feeling of communal responsibility for understanding the workings of local institutions and for helping to keep them working.”²⁶ Is such a community feeling still possible in a world torn apart by multiple world wars, scattered by urbanization and relocation, and bereft of autonomy by industrialization? She notes, “If there are great psychological dangers to individual development for members of very large groups, and if, as seems inevitable, human groupings are going to get larger and larger in the future, what can those of us acutely concerned for the welfare of the younger generation do about it.”²⁷

Fisher acknowledges that this sounds somewhat “gloomy” but holds out hope that education will provide new roads forward: “Something of this kind seems to have been the guess of those educators who, up to a short time ago, were called progressive. What they

²⁶ Fisher, *American Portraits* 23.

²⁷ Fisher, *American Portraits* 28.

were really after was not so much a change in curriculum or discipline as to place the child and the adolescent in surroundings where, as a natural consequence of daily life, he has real, not make-believe, managerial power over the conduct of his affairs”²⁸ – the very thing that came naturally to Betsy, once she left the city.

Fisher concludes with an appreciation for the ongoing work of progressive educators in a world that seems darker than in those early days of the century when she was observing Montessori’s classes in Rome: “The enlightened modern schoolteacher is struggling so to arrange school life that boys and girls of the future may be able to profit by the prodigious material advantages of large-scale production and distribution without paying too high a price in terms of weakened individual self-dependence. He is frightened about the effect on the younger generation of the present. He is even more alarmed about the immediate future, when – as the most casual prophet can guess – human groups are going to be more army-like in size than ever before. The intelligent modern educator is doing his best to make classroom life provide for young Americans more of that strengthening experience of managing the conduct of their own lives that used to be provided by the human-sized groups of community life of the past. ... To this grandparent the good modern progressive school looks like one of the ways open into a vigorous human future.”²⁹

In a nation that is now even less “human-sized” in its groupings than Fisher could have anticipated sixty years ago, I would love for all educators – those who consider themselves “progressive” and those who consider themselves “traditional” – to read both Fisher’s essay and her now-most-famous novel, *Understood Betsy*. All teachers across the

²⁸ Fisher, *American Portraits* 28-29.

²⁹ Fisher, *American Portraits* 28-29.

spectrum would recognize that Betsy, who turns a confident ten at the end of the novel, is in every way a more vigorous child than the frightened, weak Elizabeth Ann of a year before. Could all of those educators talk to one another in a “human-sized” community, one that has, deep in the marrow of its bones, a “feeling of communal responsibility for understanding the workings of local institutions and for helping to keep them working.”³⁰ If Fisher could envision such institutions in 1916, and could make a call for such communities in 1946, could we heed her call in this day and age?

³⁰ Fisher, *American Portraits* 23.

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