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SPINSTER: A Novel

by Sylvia Ashton-Warner¹

Reviewed by Dorothy McCuskey

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(*Editor's Note:* The article by Martha Barrett Newell has dealt with the problem of creativity. This brief review of *Spinster* is relevant to the topic discussed by Miss Newell and may stimulate the interest of our readers in an outstanding example of creative writing.)

Sir Herbert Read: "Alive with passion and beauty; it has a poetic quality that reminds me of Emily Dickinson, so precisely does it register a special kind of experience."

Kathryn Hulme: "A rare book, so infinitely tender, with its wild little warrior children, deeply revealing of the creative spinster soul who wins their hearts. A whole new world opens up in these pages."

Lewis Gannett: "It creates a world of its own, dewey and fresh, with an accent of its own, and a passionate and unforgettable character who is at once all woman and inspired teacher. *Spinster* both delighted and disturbed me."

No review can recreate the spirit or the content of *Spinster*, but the attempt must be made, for how else will creative teachers of reading know to turn to the pages of a novel entitled *Spinster* for the account of creative teaching and a truly basic theory of teaching of reading? Anna Vorontosov, the spinster, is a New Zealand "infant mistress," teaching some seventy Maori children aged four to seven in a tin shack. Miss Vorontosov was not a model teacher—she burnt her plan book, couldn't or wouldn't keep records, and was understandably terrified of Inspectors. But—she loved and listened, washed and ironed, played Brahms and Grieg, combed matted heads for cooties, and carried little Hinewaka with the turned-in feet when they went on field trips. The children danced to her music, they painted at the

¹ Published by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1959. Also available in paperback: Bantam, F2228, 50c.

ten-child easel, they talked—how they talked—they listened to stories, but they edged toward the outdoors when reading time came.

Anna Vorontosov began by writing special books for them with Maori children as central characters, and she illustrated the books with little brown children like themselves. The children wrote in their notebooks. They wrote stories like

“I dreamt
about the ghost.
The ghost went
in our kitchen
and frightened
us. It had big
fat eyes. It had
white sheets.”

From the stories Anna Vorontosov began to reach for “the key.” Perhaps she really grasped it from Rangi:

“What are you frightened of, Rangi?” I ask as he sits in a knot of others.

“P’lice.”

“Why?”

“P’lice they takes me to gaol and cuts me up with a butcher-knife.”

I print these words on separate cards and give them to him. And Rangi, who lives on love and kisses and thrashings and fights and fear of the police and who took four months to learn ‘come,’ ‘look,’ ‘and,’ takes four minutes to learn:

butcher-knife	Daddy
gaol	Mummie
police	Rangi
sing	hake
cry	fight
kiss	

So I make a reading card for him: out of these words, which he reads at first sight, his first reading, and his face lights up with understanding. And from here he goes on to other reading, even the imported books. His mind is unlocked, some great fear is discharged, he understands at last and he can read.

From the key words came stories, and finally “books” written by the children themselves. The early part of the morning Miss Vorontosov began to see as “output” and later, after playtime, there was what she

called the “intake” and the words were checked again. It was true that there were some unlikely words lying about the room from the butcher-knife set through ghosts, along to spiders, ol’ Mummie and sky, but Anna Vorontosov had nothing to lose—except her rating, of course.

From the experimentation came theory:

I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents, destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since the words of the Key vocabulary are no less than captions of the dynamic life itself they course out through the creative channel, making their contributions to the drying up of the destructive one. From all of which I am constrained to call it creative reading and to teach it among the arts.

There are in the book three major threads—an existential account of Anna Vorontosov the woman and the teacher, an engaging account of the tempestuous Maori children, and this serious hypothesis about creativity and reading. This is not a book about creativity; it is a creative act.