

Jesse Edward Johnson's new novel, *Yearbook*, summoned up my memories of when I was once upon a time a high school senior.

As a rebellious and perplexed seventeen-year-old lad, I challenged the autocratic authority of my father, challenged my high school's teachers, and challenged my high school's administrators.

While serving as president for two school organizations and serving as staff writer for the school's newspaper, I enhanced my rebellious narcissistic self-esteem by instigating high school pandemonium.

The words "self-esteem" and "pandemonium" were coined by the seventeenth-century poet John Milton.

*Yearbook*'s teenage narrator, Lester Smith, packs a pocket-sized paperback of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It seems to serve Lester as a handy user manual to help him challenge the high school's magisterial proctor, unwilling to allow Lester and his avant-garde yearbook-staff colleagues to design, create and publish a yearbook radically different from the high school's traditional yearbooks.

*Yearbook* also summoned up my memories of being an English teacher for teenage seniors in a small-town's high school. I chose as my own user manual the avant-garde 1969 book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner.

Most of all, Johnson's novel summons up my memories of teaching within a public school building on an island in the Puget Sound. The school's main building, a 12-sided polygon structure, was identical to Lester's island high school's main building:

The main building is a large dodecagon, with classrooms at the edges and our spacious library—also a dodecagon—at the center. As the result of this dubious design, the windows of the library look into the classrooms.

Within my classroom my favorite mission was to help my learners (all my students were learners) cope with crap they had to endure from autocratic parents, teachers, and the school's administrators. I encouraged my learners to read *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*.

The authors believe effective learners engage in problem-solving discussions in which the learners may say anything they wish to express. But before expressing their thoughts, they must first *restate* what the previous speaker had said, so as to get an

affirmation from the previous speaker that they actually heard what the previous speaker had indeed intended to communicate.

When learners did this and observed this, they discovered how to best project themselves into the perceptions of another person.

Have you ever heard of a student taking notes on remarks made by another student? Lester actively listens to his collegial classmates, responds to what he hears them say, and when he hears what he feels is just bullshit, he lets classmates and the teacher know.

During my first month of serving as my learners' English teacher, the school's loudspeaker blasted forth within each and all of the school's classrooms: "MISTER JOHNSON IMMEDIATELY REPORT TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE NOW."

My thoughts flooded back to when, as a rebellious high school senior, I was sometimes summoned to the magisterial principal's office to be punished for misbehavior. Such as the time when I instigated a student project involving gluing shelf paper onto the school's hallway walls; each strip of shelf paper reproducing the graffiti we had accumulated from the school's toilet stalls.

But this time, the high school principal was waving a book at me: *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*.

He opened the book to a page he had bookmarked. To the chapter titled "Crap Detecting." And he shouted, "How in God's name can you justify your students reading this?"

I asked him to sit and read a highlighted passage from the book:

An interviewer was trying to get Ernest Hemingway to identify the characteristics required for a person to be a "great writer." As the interviewer offered a list of various possibilities, Hemingway disparaged each in sequence.

Finally, frustrated, the interviewer asked, "Isn't there any one essential ingredient that you can identify?"

Hemingway replied, "Yes, there is. In order to be a great writer a person must have a built-in, shockproof crap detector."

"That, sir, is why that chapter is titled crap detecting. And that, sir, is why the lyrics of Paul Simon's song 'Kodachrome' begin with 'When I think back to all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder I can think at all.' "

When I think back to teaching in that island school's dodecagon building, I never envisioned how some 20 years later my younger brother Larry's son, Jesse Edward Johnson, would graduate from that very same island high school.

And 20 years after graduating, Jesse would give birth to a novel depicting the poetic precocious perceptions of a rebellious teenage protagonist: Lester, who, with help from his high school friends and a his school-teacher mentor, instigates battles with their high school's magisterial "proctor," battles that precipitated high school pandemonium and enhanced the perplexed teenager's self-esteem.

- Paul Edward Johnson