

BOOK REVIEW

Steve Horowitz

Parents' Day by Paul Goodman. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985. 271 pp.

DESPITE PAUL GOODMAN'S accomplishments as a writer and social critic, he has been best remembered as an educator. Yet Goodman had no great success as a teacher. He never could get along well with the bureaucracies of large institutions, and though he had many teaching jobs, they rarely lasted more than a year. Goodman's positions were not renewed, usually because of his homosexual activities.

Goodman's theories on education generally concerned children rather than college students. He was angry about the way the American school system functioned to reduce a child's individuality. Goodman was especially interested in questions about adolescent sexuality and school structure. The "most pressing issue in most of our homes," he wrote A.S. Neill of Summerhill fame back in the early 1950s, was "the witnessing or not-witnessing (and participation or censoring) of children in the first years of the sexual intercourse of the adults." Goodman believed that educators needed to help students with their sexual development. Ideas like this earned Goodman a reputation as a dangerous crank during the 1940s and 1950s.

Neill considered Goodman a theorist, rather than a pragmatist, when it came to education. But Goodman had taught at Manumit, a progressive school in upstate New York, back in 1943. Goodman was fired from this job, again because of his homosexual activities. *Parents' Day* is the story of Goodman's experience at Manumit. It is a work of autobiographical fiction, as Goodman exaggerates what happens as he struggles to gain perspective. The homosexual relationship between teacher and student is bluntly stated. Goodman wrote the book three years after the fact as part of his Reichian self-analysis. He tries to understand his behavior, rather than justify it.

Parents' Day could not find a publisher during the 1940s because of its explicit homo-erotic content. A friend printed up an edition of five hundred in 1951. It received only one review and has been unavailable for many years. Black Sparrow Press, which has been reissuing much of Goodman's self-published work, has recently made *Parents' Day* available to a wide audience for the first time.

The book is often hilariously funny. The seriousness of the memories and ideas discussed does not dampen the narrator's enthusiasm. His predicament (Why am I living/how do I get laid?) is only exacerbated by this constant self-questioning. He never finds any satisfactory answers, but after a while, just asking the questions brings him relief.

It's like that joke with which Woody Allen begins *Annie Hall*: two large middle-aged Jewish women are eating dinner at a popular Catskill resort hotel. One woman says to the other, "The food here is awful." To which the other responds: "Yes, and such small portions." Goodman knows he cannot resolve his mixed feeling about his tenure at Manumit. He acted on his sincere desires, yet he hurt other people. Still, Goodman isn't sure if he would act any differently if the situation reoccurred. He is introspective, but non-judgmental.

What Goodman learned from teaching at Manumit, and his reflections while writing this book, form the basis of his thought on young adult education. In *Parents' Day*, one can glimpse the human teacher inside the humanitarian educator with all his faults. As such, the book makes a powerful statement. Follow your impulses, Goodman says, but be prepared to suffer the consequences. That is the only moral choice one can make in this imperfect world.