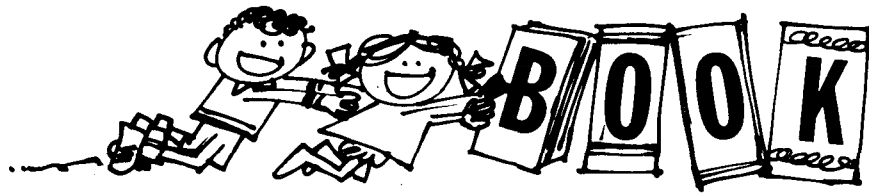


Book Review Editor Ruth Stewart



**From Margaret Batt
L.A.C.S.T., M.A.A.S.H.
Malvern**

By what right does J.M. Houston (clearly marked at the top of her Book Review as B.A., Dip. Soc. Stud.) question the integrity of Ms Rosemary Crossley (whose B.A. and Dip. Ed. are nowhere acknowledged) and the very existence of Miss Anne McDonald as a thinking, feeling human being?

As a book reviewer she has every right to say that she finds a book hard to believe—after all, many people find fact less credible than fiction—but neither as a book reviewer nor in any other capacity (least of all her professional capacity) does she have the right to make such a series of inaccurate statements as appear in the last issue of “Australian Child and Family Welfare”. Does the Year of the Disabled mean so little that severely-handicapped people must be the butt of every doubting Tom, Dick and Harry?

If J.M. Houston found the book hard to believe she could have asked to meet Miss McDonald and see for herself if the passage of two years had produced any change. Perhaps she lacked the courage to try to talk to someone with a communication handicap? She would not be alone in this. Alternatively, she could have discussed Miss McDonald’s progress with one or all of the professionals currently working with her. Her doctor, physiotherapist, or myself, her speech therapist, would all have been quite prepared to seek Miss McDonald’s permission to share our knowledge.

This week I did ask Miss McDonald’s permission to discuss her history in order to write this letter. Her permission was given with a clear “yes” response, independently of Ms Crossley.

It should not be necessary to make that last statement and I resent being put in the position of having to do so. It is now, after all, two and a half years since

Miss McDonald’s friends satisfied Mr Justice Jenkinson that she was able to communicate with them and to make her own decision to leave the hospital. It is two years since she satisfied Senior Master Jacobs and Mr Justice Murphy of her ability to control her own affairs. Since those two Court cases Miss McDonald has led an increasingly busy and satisfying life. She sits comfortably upright in a wheelchair instead of slumped in a beanbag. She receives regular physiotherapy and speech therapy and shows an extremely intelligent understanding of the aims of treatment and a mature co-operation which has led to extraordinary progress. Her communication board goes everywhere with her. It is used whenever she indicates her wish for it, which is many times a day, and by several of her friends as well as by Ms Crossley. Communication has become part of her life, and all of us who are in contact with her are now able to recognise, through her concisely-expressed opinions and comments, a sensitive concern for others, a keen intelligence and a delightful sense of humour. She has co-authored a book about her own life. Last year she studied computer science at 5th form level—her own choice as she delights in mathematics—and this year she chose Matriculation English. This week she sat the H.S.C. English examination with the strictest possible supervision; it took her seven and a half hours of concentrated effort. Let us give the disabled credit for courage and achievement when it is so clearly due.

The reviewer shows a serious lack of understanding of language development. Karel and Berta Bobath have stated “In the more intelligent (cerebral palsied) child the motor deficit by itself does not seem to affect the acquisition of internalised speech and speech comprehension even in cases of dysarthria”. If the nurses spoke a mixture of Yugoslav and English, of course Anne could have learned

“Yuggish”. If the TV was frequently turned on, of course she could have learned about the names and duties of politicians—and a great deal more besides. Ms Crossley gave her a means of expression; the acquisition of knowledge had begun years before.

Nowhere in the review does its author’s appalling inaccuracy show as clearly as in paragraphs 17 and 18 where she discusses the examination by Senior Master Jacobs, of the Supreme Court. The review reads:

“As described in the book the second court case to determine Anne’s rights to manage her own affairs produced no further evidence. Once Anne is said to have spelt some letters of the word ‘string’ which she had been asked when Ms Crossley was not present, but as her hand covers several letters at once and as S, T and R are close together this could be explained by chance. Perhaps the questioner glanced at the string. Why did Anne not spell the other words which she was asked to spell?”

Several times Ms Crossley stated that Anne can now move her arm without support, but she does not ask her to spell words or even indicate a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response before witnesses. Neither does she alter the alphabet board so that it would require less practice, less ambiguous movement.”

a b c d e f

g h i j k l

m n o p q r

s t u v w x y z

Set out above is the communication board as used by Miss McDonald at the time of this examination. The letters were arranged on a magnetic chalkboard approximately 50cm by 35cm.

When using the board, “erase” is indicated by moving the hand off the board to the right and “end” by moving



the hand off the board at the bottom. Each letter is called and confirmed (or erased, corrected and called again) before going on to the next. S and T could not, therefore, have been produced together. It will be seen that S and T are at one end of the board and R at the other, so could not have been touched together. A proper reading of the book shows not several, but two only, words were given. They were "string" and "quince" and the words alone were given—the piece of string at which the questioner is supposed to have glanced being a figment of Ms Houston's imagination. Miss McDonald spelt the first nine letters of these two words correctly to the point when "t" was called for "n", these being adjacent on the board. Perhaps she chose the "t" quite deliberately as she had already gone way beyond the slightest possibility of chance. (For those mathematically and objectively-inclined, taking "x" as the number of letters correctly indicated in order, the chance of the message thus far spelled being produced accidentally is 26 to the (x-1), i.e. 26 multiplied by itself 8 times.) Incidentally, as the Master had asked everyone to leave the room during this message-passing Ms Crossley was alone with Ms McDonald and there was no-one present to eye-point or in any other way give a clue.

Of this test, Master Jacobs states on page 4 of his Report:

"Finally, she completed the test with a sufficiently correct answer to satisfy everyone that the answer had to be her own answer and not that of Miss Crossley, who could not have known what it was."

Regarding the second of these inaccurate paragraphs of the review, careful reading of the book reveals that Miss McDonald was required by the Master (who was in charge of the examination, after all)

1) to converse with him before witnesses using her "yes" and "no" responses and

2) to move her arm without support in order to do a part of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

In this regard the Master's Report on page 6 states:

"Miss McDonald was required to point to the square on her board which in her opinion contained the number corresponding to what in her opinion was the appropriate picture in the book to describe that word. She was able to do this without anyone supporting her arm, because the squares on her board were so large that there could be no mistaking which one was being pointed to. Accordingly she has the unaided ability to express opinions. Of 75 pictures illustrating increasingly sophisticated words (e.g. 'ingenious' and 'jurisprudence') she answered 68 correctly."

and, on page 4,

"She indicated, by use of her tongue, that she understood what I was saying."

I suggest that Ms Houston might have done well both to read "Annie's Coming Out" objectively, and to supplement her knowledge by reading the Master's Report before making the totally erroneous statement that this hearing produced "no further evidence".

There is a further statement that Ms Crossley does not attempt to alter the alphabet board so that it requires less precise, less ambiguous movement. This is quite untrue. There are three possible ways to make the use of communication boards more precise. One can:

1) Spread the letters further apart. This would have moved the outer letters beyond Anne's range of movement.

2) Use a two-point-per-letter system, such as a grid or a colour-coded grouping of letters. This doubles the time and effort needed to produce the message and is also subject to ambiguity in that only a capable receiver can remember whether he is watching for the first or second point.

3) Provide the communicating person with physiotherapy and proper seating and positioning to enable her to point more precisely.

We have chosen the third method with great success. Miss McDonald, Ms Crossley and I have also, of course, tried a variety of other arrangements of letters over the last two and a half years, but still find the old board, with slight modification, the quickest and most effective. With Anne's physical progress it has, however, developed from a cumbersome magnetic board to a foolscap-sized card stuck to the dining-room table or folded into a handbag, and it now includes a few short-cuts such as "U" for "you", "C" for "see", "Y" for "why", etc. Also "O" has been moved to the end of its line to separate it from the other vowels for greater clarity.

The review states of Anne McDonald, "She does not seem to realise the importance of proving that she is not retarded." Such proof should never again be demanded. It is not expected of anyone else; it is not important; and has already been given in full.

Anne McDonald, although physically handicapped, is not a mentally retarded child. Nor is she a frog to be callously dissected on a scientist's bench. She is an intelligent, sensitive, adult citizen with a right to respect and courtesy. Ms Houston owes her, and Ms Crossley, a profound apology.

BOOKS RECEIVED

These books will be reviewed in this and coming issues.

Forward, S. and Buck, C. *Betrayal of innocence: incest and its devastation*. Penguin, 1980.

Parizeau, A. *Parenting and delinquent youth*. Lexington Books, 1980.

Pincus, Lily. *Death and the Family*. Faber, 1974.

Poulsson, M. and Spearritt, P. *Sydney: a social and political atlas*. George Allen & Unwin, 1981.