TEXT THREE

**TO SIR, WITH LOVE**

By E.R.Braithwaite

The Guianan diplomatist Eustace Braithwaite was born in 1912 in British Gui­ana. He flew with the R.A.F. ' during the war years. After the war colouj prejudice precluded him from obtaining the kind of job for which his scientific qualifica­tions fitted him. From 1950—1957 he worked as a school-teacher. In the sixties he was a Permanent Representative of Guiana to the UN. In 1959 Braithwaite won the Ainsfield Wolff Literary Award for *To Sir, with Love,* a book about his experiences as a teacher in a school in London's East End. The other books that came from his pen are *A Kind of Homecoming* (1961), Paid *Servant* (1962), *A Choice of Straws* (1965), *Reluctant Neighbours* (1972).

*Chapter 8 (Extract)*

Each Friday morning the whole school spent the pre-recess pe­riod in writing their Weekly Review. This was one of the old Man's2 pet schemes: and one about which he would brook no interference. Each child would review the events of his school week in his own words, in his own way; he was free to comment, to criticise, to agree or disagree, with any person, subject or method, as long as it

was in some way associated with the school. No one and nothing was sacred, from the Headmaster down, and the child, moreover, was safe from any form of reprisal.

"Look at it this way," Mr. Florian said. "It is of advantage to both pupils and teacher. If a child wants to write about something which matters to him, he will take some pains to set it down as carefully and with as much detail as possible; that must in some way improve his written English in terms of spelling, construction and style. Week by week we are able, through his review, to follow and observe his progress in such things. As for the teachers, we soon get a pretty good idea what the children think of us and whether or not we are getting close to them... You will discover that these children are reasonably fair, even when they comment on us. If we are careless about our clothing, manners or person they will soon notice it, and it would be pointless to be angry with them for pointing such things out. Finally, from the reviews, the sensible teacher will observe the trend of individual and collective interests and plan his work accordingly."

On the first Friday of my association with the class I was anxious to discover what sort of figure I cut in front of them, and what kind of comment they would make about me. I read through some of the reviews at lunch-time, and must admit to a mixture of relief and dis­appointment at discovering that, apart from mentioning that they had a new "blackie" teacher, very little attention was given to me ... It occurred to me that they probably imagined I would be as transient as my many predecessors, and therefore saw no point in wasting either time or effort in writing about me. But if I had made so little impression on them, it must be my own fault, I decided. It was up to me to find some way to get through to them.

Thereafter I tried very hard to be a successful teacher with my class, but somehow, as day followed day in painful procession, I re­alized that I was not making the grade. I bought and read books on the psychology of teaching in an effort to discover some way of providing the children with the sort of intellectual challenge to which they would respond, but the suggested methods somehow did not meet my particular need, and just did not work. It was as if I were trying to reach the children through a thick pane of glass, so remote and uninterested they seemed.

Looking back, I realize that in fact I passed through three phases in my relationship with them. The first was the silent treatment, and during that time, for my first few weeks, they would

do any task I set them without question or protest, but equally without interest or enthusiasm; and if their interest was not required for the task in front of them would sit and stare at me with the same careful patient attention a birdwatcher devotes to the rare feathered visitor...

I took great pains with the planning of my lessons, using illus­trations from the familiar things of their own background... I creat­ed various problems within the domestic framework, and tried to encourage their participation, but it was as though there were a conspiracy of indifference, and my attempts at informality fell pitifully flat.

Gradually they moved on to the second and more annoying phase of their campaign, the "noisy" treatment. It is true to say that all of them did not actively join in this but those who did not were obviously in some sympathy with those who did. During a lesson, especially one in which it was necessary for me to read or speak to them, someone would lift the lid of a desk and then let it fall with a loud bang; the culprit would merely sit and look at me with wide innocent eyes as if it were an accident.

They knew as well as I did that there was nothing I could do about it, and I bore it with as much show of aplomb as I could man­age. One or two such interruptions during a lesson were usually enough to destroy its planned continuity... So I felt angry and frus­trated when they rudely interrupted that which was being done purely for their own benefit.

One morning I was reading to them some simple poetry. Just when I thought I had inveigled them into active interest one of the girls, Monica Page, let the top of the desk fall; the noise seemed to reverberate in every part of my being and I felt a sudden burning anger. I looked at her for some moments before daring to open my mouth; she returned my gaze, then casually remarked to the class at large: "The bleeding 3 thing won't stay up." It was all rather de­liberate, the noisy interruption and the crude remark, and it her­alded the third stage of their conduct. From then on the words "bloody" or "bleeding" were hardly ever absent from any remark they made to one another especially in the classroom. They would call out to each other on any silly pretext and refer to the "bleed­ing" this or that, and always in a voice loud enough for my ears. One day during an arithmetic period I played right into their hands. I was so overcome by anger and disgust that I completely lost my temper ... I went upstairs and sat in the library, the only

place where I could be alone for a little while. I felt sick at heart, because it seemed that this latest act, above all others, was intend­ed to display their utter disrespect for me. They seemed to have no sense of decency, these children; everything they said or did was coloured by an ugly viciousness, as if their minds were forever rooting after filth. "Why, oh why," I asked myself, "did they be­have like that? What was wrong with them?"