

# Now gods, stand up for dunces!

(with apologies to W. Shakespeare)

This, I thought, somewhat peevishly and completely unrealistically, is what I could have done with when I was at school. And, ideally, it should have been available beforehand, so that all my teachers could have read and absorbed it, in expectation of me joining their classes. The French author Daniel Pennac, who was a teacher before turning to novel-writing, has written a book about education that is an education in itself. Part memoir, part manifesto and wholly engaging, *School Blues* cuts through the Babel of voices that, daily, passes for discussion about “education”, with the persuasive force of a virtuosic trumpet fanfare.

One of his prime motives for writing the book, he told me, had been “Fear”. Or to be exact, the need to help eliminate the fear he himself experienced as a student, when *Every evening, I would head home with school snapping at my heels*. Which brings us to his most striking qualification for writing the book, the fact that, at school he’d been, quite simply, a dunce: cancre, in French, derived from its primary meaning, “crab” (*The dunce ... moves slowly and sideways, far behind the students ahead of him ...*).

The sort of dunce who spent an entire year learning the letter A. The sort of dunce who was allergic to capital letters. “The trouble with capitals was that they were filled with meaning,” he told me. They reared up, forbiddingly. As with foreign languages, *I couldn’t shake off the idea that what was being said was too clever for me*. And so, like all dunces, he took refuge – *I’m a no-hoper, I’ll never make it, there’s no point even trying, I don’t stand a chance* – behind a wall constructed by himself.

To dunces, school resembles a members-only club from which they bar themselves. The trouble is that when you don’t think you belong anywhere, you become your own audience – in isolation, at the mercy of what Pennac calls *illusory thinking*. What the dunce needs, to bring out the exceptional gifts that wait deep inside their duncedom, is inspiration, motivation and the care and solid structure of good teaching. Perhaps, he declares, *this is what teaching is all about: dispensing with illusory thinking, ensuring that each lesson is a wake-up call*.

He got his own wake-up call when he was a struggling fourteen-year-old. An elderly teacher, alert to the boy’s storytelling talents (usually confined to elaborate excuses for not doing his homework), absolved him from essay-writing and commissioned a novel instead, at the rate of a chapter a week. During the course of the work, which he set about enthusiastically, he woke up to the fact that he now existed academically, as an individual with a path to follow, and as someone who kept going to the end. He was on the way to becoming, an important word in the Pennac lexicon.



When we met in the London office of his UK publishers – Daniel Pennac, his wife Minne, Sarah Ardizzone, the book’s superb translator, who acted as the two-way interpreter, and me – we sat round a small circular table, a serendipitous reflection of the democratic stance of *School Blues*. For the book ignores any gap between writer and reader, assuming, on the contrary, that everyone – student, teacher, parent, reader – is in this together. A relationship that is, without question, as

Pennac said, “Indissoluble”.

A number of factors in the book contribute to its achieving this genuine all-embracing togetherness. One is the personal slant of the narrative. Another is the plain fact that this is a book about education written by someone who is always conscious that before he became a teacher (and, by all accounts, a brilliant one) he was a *bog standard dunce*. Rarely can a treatise on education have had such a wide-ranging pedigree.

Yet another factor is the sheer power and flourish of the writing. As a successful novelist, writing for adults and children, Pennac said he wanted to infuse the book with “novelistic rhythms”. As a result, *School Blues* is an exciting literary venture, as bracing and as invigorating as an ocean voyage, and blessedly free from flotsam and jetsam such as jargon. Hugely enjoyable, humane and humorous, like his earlier *The Rights of the Reader* it should be read widely and taken to heart (although he would balk at the imperative).

Conversing with Daniel Pennac was very like reading him, a similar generous out-pouring of shrewdly-considered thoughts, bobbing in each others’ wake. A tall man, with a shock of floppy hair, and owlish glasses more dashing than pedantic, he underscores what he says with a retinue of empathic gestures. He spoke about falling in love (an episode he describes in the book: another step along the road to becoming), something that, in the circumstances, might have caused an Englishman to mutter and shuffle his feet. Daniel, however, was all whirling arms and radiance.

*School Blues* is so candid, so sympathetic, so all-embracing, it can woo readers into revealing their personal educational shortfalls. I made due confession of my own duncedom (maths especially) to the company around the table, and admitted that I’d bombed in the 11-plus. Daniel reached across and took my hand, in solidarity rather than commiseration. And in recognition that for us, at least, what was past was past.

Chris Stephenson



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