

# GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE

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### BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS

#### **BOOK TO DEVELOP THE SENSIBILITY AND IMAGINATION OF GIFTED STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS:**

#### **THE SEEKERS: THE STORY OF MAN'S CONTINUING QUEST TO UNDERSTAND HIS WORLD BY DANIEL J. BOORSTIN. (1998). NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE.**

In less than 300 pages, Boorstin has compressed the major concepts and ideas of the great Seekers of understanding and knowledge from Old Testament times to the twentieth century. His goal is to show that seeking is “. . . a story without end, as we continue to explore our humanity in the eternal Why. And we see how we have come from seeking meaning to finding meaning in the seeking.” (A Personal Note to the Reader, p. xiii). Because of Boorstin's arrangement of the major seekers of world history into a stimulating and well-organized narrative, this book can serve as the primary resource for studies of Western history and civilizations, the history of ideas, and the history of religion and philosophy. It is a resource that should help gifted students to understand the ideas of and questions asked by brilliant thinkers and philosophers throughout history.

Boorstin's two previous books in this series have concentrated on **The Discoverers** (1983) and **The Creators** (1992). All of the historical periods included in his current book have meaning for modern society because of the fundamental questions posed by Seekers during the last three thousand years about nature, religion, and human destiny. The author covers three periods in the history of mankind's search for meaning and knowledge as delineated by three main sections or “Books”: (1) the Era of Prophets and Philosophers seeking answers through religion or the use of reason; (2) Communal Seeking based on observation and experience related to one's community; and (3) the Age of Social Sciences concerned with studying the forces that determine history. Each section is divided into parts that describe the works of particular seekers, and the historical and cultural factors that influenced their ideas. As an example, Book One (**An Ancient Heritage**) contains three parts: Part I discusses the Old Testament Prophets, Part II concentrates on the philosophies of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and Part III is a historical discussion of the contributions of Christian thinkers to Western civilization. Boorstin discusses in Part I how Moses and the Ten Commandments emphasized the Hebrew belief in free-will and making proper choices. Beginning about 800 B.C., the words of the Old Testament Prophets were broadcast beyond their immediate community to all people by Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel. In the Book of Job, the faith espoused by the Prophets is put to the test through an ordinary man who loses his prosperity, family and health. Job's travails lead to eternal questions concerning human suffering, the nature of evil and God's influence on human events. Part I ends with a discussion of how other religions have approached the problem of suffering and evil through unquestioning belief in a higher being (Muslims) and *karma* (Hindus and Buddhists).

Book Two, the **Communal Search**, discusses individuals who explained the world through observation, experience, analysis, criticism and experimentation. Some of these seekers were Homer (lived between 850 and 750 B.C.) who provided an expansion of the world through myths and heroic adventure as described in the **Iliad** and **Odyssey**, Herodotus (c. 484-c. 429 B.C.) who was the Father of History, Thucydides (c. 460-c. 400 B.C.) who was the creator of political science, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who analyzed the “Idols” or illusions of knowledge and developed the scientific method based on systematic observation and inference, and Descartes (1596-1650) who wrote about the method of proper reasoning. Boorstin also includes insightful discussions of the ideas and lives of other Seekers: Virgil (70-19 B.C.), Sir Thomas More (1477-1535), Machiavelli (1469-1527), John Locke (1632-1704), Voltaire (1694-1778), Rousseau (1712-1778), Thomas Jefferson (1742-1826), and G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). Through their ideas, writings and actions, all of these seekers had profound influences on their era and Western society.

In Book Three, **Paths To The Future**, Boorstin explores the ideas and lives of Seekers who invented the science of history, and in doing so, stirred doubts about religion. Such individuals as Condorcet (1743-1794) stressed the continued progress of society through education, science and liberty, while Karl Marx (1818-1883) developed the method of “Dialectical Materialism” which predicted the march of industrial nations from capitalism to communism. Two other Seekers in Book Three, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), studied history through the contributions of great people. The final section of Book Three (Part VIII – A World In Process: The Meaning In The Seeking) examines the lives and philosophies of André Malraux (1901-1976), Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955). It is very appropriate for Boorstin to end his book with a discussion of these Seekers since he has devoted his life to writing about the history of our nation and the world based on their main precepts – social justice, the power of human consciousness to transcend ignorance and the relentless search for meaning. As seekers of their own meanings, gifted students will find this book to be an inspirational source of knowledge and enlightenment.

**ADDITIONAL BOOKS FOR THE MUSICALLY GIFTED (Continued from previous issue, Vol. 8, No. 1)**

1. **JOHANNES BRAHMS: A BIOGRAPHY BY JAN SWAFFORD. ALFRED A. KNOPF, NY, 1997.** --This comprehensive biography unifies the great composer's personal life with his musical accomplishments. Brahms's piano teacher, Eduard Marxsen, said of his famous pupil: "When I started teaching him composition, he exhibited a rare acuteness of mind which enchanted me, and, insignificant though his first attempts at original creation turned out to be, I was bound to recognize in them an intelligence which convinced me that an exceptional, great, and peculiarly profound talent was dormant in him. . . ." (p. 25). It is important for gifted students to understand the early development of such geniuses as Brahms and to read about the individuals who influenced their growth as musicians and artists. Swafford provides this type of information within the context of 19th century German musical culture.

2. **MUSIC, THE BRAIN AND ECSTASY: HOW MUSIC CAPTURES OUR IMAGINATION BY ROBERT JOURDAIN. AVON BOOKS, NY, 1997.** -- Through his chapters on Sound, Tone, Melody, Harmony, Rhythm, Composition, Performance, Listening, Understanding and Ecstasy, Jourdain has provided a clear summary of how sound waves are converted by the inner ear and brain into complex musical passages. The book is a resource for learning about the physiological and psychological processes that underlie such diverse occurrences as the song of a yellow warbler, Pavarotti's laments and Tchaikovsky's musical explorations into human emotions.

## **THORNTON WILDER (1897-1975): GENIUS OF THE AMERICAN STAGE**

**BY MICHAEL E. WALTERS**

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"There is possibly not a night in any year when 'Our Town' is not being played somewhere in the Western world, often in a dozen towns at once, with the audience in each feeling that it was written especially for them. . . ." Malcolm Cowley. *Saturday Review of Literature*, October 6, 1956.

". . . the most neglected author of a brilliant generation." Malcolm Cowley. *The New York Times Book Review*, December 21, 1975.

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway are icons of literary success for the generation that established itself in the 1920's. However, Thornton Wilder is not so well known as a literary celebrity, although he was the only individual to receive Pulitzer prizes in both fiction and drama. (He was the recipient of three Pulitzer prizes in literature.) The first was for the novel, **The Bridge of San Luis Rey** (1927), the second was for the drama, **Our Town** (1938), and the third was for another drama, **The Skin of Our Teeth** (1942). **Our Town** is considered to be a classic of the American theater, and it was also a successful movie. The writing was not the only significant aspect of **Our Town**. The presentation of the play was unique as expressed through the poetic prose of the spoken word, the lighting, stage props, and the creation and conjunction of mood and theme. This play is celebrated as a masterpiece of the American theater on a worldwide basis. When **Our Town** was first performed, radio drama was an important element of American culture that allowed the human voice to evoke a depth and range of emotions and thought. The manner in which the dialogue is presented in this play was greatly influenced by radio.

Thornton Wilder spent part of his childhood in China where his father was a diplomat serving in Hong Kong and Shanghai. It is interesting to consider that several other important American writers grew up in China. These were Henry Luce, the founder of Time and Life magazines; the Pulitzer and Nobel prize winner, Pearl Buck (**The Good Earth**, 1931); and the Pulitzer prize winner, John Hersey (**Hiroshima**, 1946). His fellow classmates at Yale were Henry Luce, Robert M. Hutchins (the famous American educator from the University of Chicago), and Stephen Vincent Benét who won a Pulitzer prize for the poetic drama, **John Brown's Body** (1928).

Wilder's giftedness had a unique application during World War II. Despite the fact that he was beyond the military draft age, he volunteered for the Army Air Corps where he worked on strategic planning for the military campaigns in North Africa and Italy. One of his special traits as a gifted individual was his intellectual and creative tenacity. In 1938 he wrote an unsuccessful play for Broadway called **The Merchant of Yonkers**. Eighteen years later, he revised the play as **The Matchmaker** (1954). This play became the highly successful musical and movie, **Hello Dolly** (1963), which is considered one of the triumphs of the American musical theater and cinema. It was a vehicle of artistic expression for such outstanding actresses and singers as Carol Channing, Pearl Bailey and Barbara Streisand.

The following statement by Wilder describes one of the important traits related to the sensibility of gifted individuals: "Maturity means accepting crisis as the normal state of humanity and enjoying it – being inspired by it." (From **Conversations with Thornton Wilder**, Jackson R. Bryer (Editor), 1992, University Press of Mississippi, p. xv).