

FOUR-LETTER PHONIES (Originally published April 1971)

Last month we read Norman Mailer's long essay, "The Prisoner of Sex," in the March issue of *Harper's Magazine*. The editor, in a gushing introduction, extols Mailer as a writer and feels so "proud and grateful to be the publisher" that he is happy to devote almost the entire issue to the article. Supposedly an analysis and dissection of the new women's emancipation, as well as a reply to attacks on him by some of the Women's Lib viragoes, it really turned out to be a loving defense of Henry Miller's earlier pornography and an exercise in the use of four-letter words—a proclivity in which Mailer revels. He seems to write with one hand dipping from a pot of excrement, the other fondling his testicles and, apparently, enjoys every minute of it.

He recalled to us a childhood experience in prurience. It was in the very early Twenties, so we could not have been younger than 4 or older than 6 at the time. We had just learned our first four-letter word—a popular one these days that can be found on college campus protest signs or on most pages of upper-level literary magazines like *Atlantic Monthly*, *Saturday Review* or *Harper's*. Impressed with our new sophistication, we wrote it in large chalk letters across the front steps of our house. This, in short order, was discovered by our mother, who took a dim view of our literary effort. Accordingly, 1) we were made to scrub it out with a wet rag; 2) were led into the house by firm maternal fingers applied in vice-like fashion to our right ear; 3) taken to the bathroom where our mouth was washed out with pure Castile soap; 4) led by the same aching ear, deposited in the front bedroom shoe and clothes closet and locked in. After a suitable interval, when our screams and tantrums had subsided to chastened whimpers, we were allowed to emerge and given a stern lecture.

Now this is the kind of childhood trauma that makes psychology majors and Freudian disciples tremble deliciously and causes psychoanalysts to cluck reprovingly into their beards. Although we can't be entirely certain our psyche wasn't permanently scarred by such painful episodes (it happened more than once for a number of different provocations), we're not aware of having nurtured any festering psychic grievances over the years. In fact, we've remembered this particular incident often, not so much in shame or resentment, but more in admiration of our precocious intelligence and early familiarity with the seamier levels of vocabulary.

By the time we were 7, we knew every four-letter word in existence and a few more combinations that the newly liberated authors and their inarticulate youthful admirers have yet to discover. But by that time, too, we had learned the lesson of the closet and were wise enough to use them only under optimal conditions and flaunt them only in situations where no retaliatory measures might follow. Our basic education in gutter language proved a great help to us in communication during the war years when we walked with the dog-faced infantry and later bunked among the common, British, enlisted

men who, according to the late George Orwell, speak the most vulgar tongue known to man.

In the proper context, and within the right circles, there is nothing more natural or expressive than a well-chosen four-letter word. But the modern preoccupation with low speech and pornography that seems to have afflicted many of the avant-garde intellectual phonies who masquerade as writers and editors smacks not only of commercial sensationalism and faddism but of a reversion to pip-squeak boyish bravado. They write as if they've never developed beyond the stage of constant tumescence, snotty noses and pimples and actually seem to relish the beauty of permanent adolescent acne. In any event, we look upon Mailer's prose and all of modern writing's earthy descent into hog-wallow vulgarity as—you should pardon the expression—a lot of bullshit.

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