Ice Cream and Vinegar

Seventeen authors, several of them Harvardians, reread a book or a poem (or the *Sgt. Pepper* lyrics) that impressed them in their youths and write about how it—of course, they—have changed. *Rereadings* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $20) is edited by Anne Fadiman '74, Francis writer in residence at Yale and former editor of the *American Scholar.* In her introduction, she tells of reading to Henry, her eight-year-old son, C.S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy,* which she had loved 40 years before:

READING a favorite book to your child is one of the most pleasurable forms of rereading, provided the child's enthusiasm is equal to yours and thus gratifyingly validates your literary taste, your parental competence, and your own former self. Henry loved *The Horse and His Boy,* the tale of two children and two talking horses who gallop across an obstacle-fraught desert in hopes of averting the downfall of an imperiled kingdom that lies to the north. It's the most suspenseful of the Narnia books, and Henry, who was at that poignant age when parents are still welcome at bedtime but can glimpse their banishment on the horizon, begged me each night not to turn out the light just yet: how about another page, and then how about another paragraph, and then, come on, how about just one more *sentence*? There was only one problem with this idyllic picture. As I read the book to Henry, I was thinking to myself that C.S. Lewis, not to put too fine a point on it, was a racist and sexist pig.

....I remembered *The Horse and His Boy* only as a rollicking equestrian adventure, sort of like *Misty of Chincoteague* but with swordfights instead of Pony Penning Day. My jaw dropped when I realized that Aravis, its heroine, is acceptable to Lewis because she acts like a boy—she's interested in "bows and arrows and horses and dogs and swimming"—and even dresses like one, whereas the book's only girly girl, a devotee of "clothes and parties and gossip," is an object of contempt. Even more appalling was Lewis's treatment of the Calormenes, a brown-skinned people who wear turbans and carry scimitars. (Forty years ago, the crude near-homonym had slipped by me. This time around, I wondered briefly if Lewis was thinking only about climate—*calor* is Latin for *heat*—but decided that was unlikely. It's as if he'd named a Chinese character Mr. Yellow: it had to be on purpose.)....

It was difficult to read this kind of thing to Henry without comment: the words, after all, were coming to him in *my voice.* I held my tongue for the first hundred pages or so, but finally I blurted out, "Have you noticed that *The Horse and His Boy* isn't really fair to girls? And that all the bad guys have dark skin?"....

Henry shot me the sort of look he might have used had I dumped a pint of vinegar into a bowl of chocolate ice cream. And who could blame him? He didn't want to analyze, criticize, evaluate, or explicate the book. He didn't want to size it up or slow it down. He wanted exactly what I had wanted at eight: to find out if Shasta and Aravis would get to Archenland in time to warn King Lune that his castle was about to be attacked by evil Prince Rabadash and two hundred Calormene horsemen. "Mommy," he said fiercely, "can you just *read*?"

And there lay the essential differences between reading and rereading, acts that Henry and I were performing simultaneously. The former had more velocity; the latter had more depth. The former shut out the world in order to focus on the story; the latter dragged in the world in order to assess the story. The former was more fun; the latter was more cynical. But what was remarkable about the latter was that it *contained* the former: even while, as with the upper half of a set of bifocals, I saw the book through the complicating lens of adulthood, I also saw it through the memory of the first time I'd read it, when it had seemed as swift and pure as the Winding Arrow, the river that divides Calormen from Archenland.

powerful and domineering adults within their communities—a response to the pervasive "protection vacuum" that afflicts so many thousands of orphaned, displaced, or otherwise dispossessed children. AIDS complicates this picture: as elders able to mentor rootless youth are decimated, children attach themselves to adults capable of ordering their universe, however brutally.

Singer may thus be wrong to focus on a unitary "child soldier doctrine." He is right, however, to argue that several very specific developments have contributed to the growth of child soldiering as an effective global weapons platform today. The proliferation of small arms is critical—cheap, light, and simple weapons which are as child-friendly to use as they are deadly to encounter. Chillingly, he points out that in Sudan an AK-47 costs the same as a chicken, in northern Kenya the same as a goat. Small arms represent less than 2 percent of the cost of the global-arms trade, but are responsible for about 90 percent of contemporary war casualties. Recruiters measuring children to see whether they are tall and strong enough to carry arms have an ever-easier time finding qualifying candidates as the weapons get smaller and lighter.

This practical development dovetails with an equally crucial political factor: whatever the moral stigma of using child soldiers, the political and legal consequences are negligible. Recruiting child soldiers is no longer taboo. The Tamil Tigers, for example, have set up a computerized system for managing child recruitment and established a military unit consisting entirely of child orphans, yet the organization has been included in peace talks about the future of Sri Lanka without prior confirmation that it has ended its recruitment of children.

There is also the question of utility. Because of the terrifying milieus from which many child recruits are drawn and the brutal, brainwashing military induction techniques, children turn out to be devastatingly useful soldiers, "damn near as good as conscript-drafted Americans or Europeans in the use of NATO tactics," a retired Green Beret officer told Singer. Cheap, plentiful, and effective: it is hardly surprising that the numbers of child recruits appear to be rising.

EXPLAINING THE REASONS for child soldiering, however, is much easier than sug-