

BOOK REVIEW

The Hummingbird Brigade

By David L. Condit. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Amador Press

Reviewed by **Craig Waggoner**, Waukesha Memorial Hospital

In this book *THE HUMMINGBIRD BRIGADE*, David L. Condit defines the significance of meaningful relationships and finds that such relationships are necessary for survival in a world that exploits both children and adults, especially adults who are able to maintain a fresh, child-like attitude toward the world. As the Clinical Director of a residential treatment program in Taos, New Mexico, he is aware that many children in such programs suffer from social and economic injustices; and as a former Child Care Worker himself, he knows the kind of commitment and self-sacrifice that's needed to be an effective Child Care Worker. In the story, children and people who care for children are seen as having values that reflect a "humanist" outlook. They are compassionate, kind, generous and nurturing, whereas adults, caught up in their world of money and power, are portrayed as being insensitive, using children to meet their own needs, no matter how unthinking, primitive or neurotic those needs might be.

He told me in a recent interview, "In a society that has too many heroes who are undeserving of adulation by children or adolescents, I would like more people to look towards child care as a field that's worthy of the best. It was important to me that Child Care Workers be portrayed as well-rounded characters, not one-sided. They are basically benevolent people, well-intended and very decent who are struggling hard to make the right decisions and doing the best they can to help others."

Carol, the Child Care Worker in the book, takes a special interest in Paul, one of the residents in the shelter where she is employed, and provides him with the emotional support he needs to grow and mature. It is ironic that she makes a major contribution to his particular treatment program by simply noting that he is ready to move into a foster home setting. However, this too is in keeping with Condit's philosophy of child care work. "One of the things that was most frustrating to me, in terms of a Child Care Worker, was not being involved or consulted in the decision-making process. There are so many hours in which there can be so much communication that is productive that transpires

between the worker and the child. There is no reason why what's said between them can't be as important as what's said in a therapist's office."

Also, in keeping with Condit's views, Paul benefits from Carol's concern for him.

"It's terribly important that children are not removed from abusive situations and put into abusive institutions where their self-worth, rather than being actuated for them so that they can see they have value, is shunted to the side by categorization. It's wrong to take away someone's personhood by making them into a label and nothing else."

Paul uses the two friendships he develops with Carol and with a minister, Eli Applewhite, after he leaves the institution and goes out into the world. There he finds that truth is largely a matter of self-interest with politicians leading the way in manipulating and distorting reality. As a result, it is children who are exploited to serve adult wishes and goals. In this context, the Vietnam War is used to represent the ultimate form of exploitation. Paul and his girlfriend, Jonquil, are forced to flee to Canada. However, in a scene that is indicative of Condit's deep understanding of human nature and behavior, they decide that Canada isn't for them and return to the United States where they again must confront a system that serves adult interests.

But it is in the description of the enigma and pain of death that the book reaches the heights of inspiring literature. Three of the four main characters are affected by the deaths of people with whom they've formed close relationships. Paul loses a person he regards as dear to him as a sister; Jonquil loses her first lover; and in the minister's case, it is his daughter who dies. All of them are forced to find meaning in the senseless finality of death and resolve their conflicting emotions.

"They don't decide to make others suffer because they have suffered. They don't cry into their soup. They use their suffering to become more compassionate people and to empathize with others," Condit told me.

Indeed, from losing ones who are close to them, his characters learn the importance of love. It is this love that they share for and with each other that enables them to continue to live in a positive and productive manner. The book itself is a loud affirmation of life, in spite of all its travails and setbacks, and confirms that the basic, instinctual drive of Man is not to live but to thrive, as these characters do.

As with all good fiction, Condit draws his characters and situations from real life. He describes a time when he found his six-year-old daughter dancing in their backyard soon after his wife (and her mother) had died. When he asked her what she was doing, she responded, "I'm

doing a dance to God. If I do a really nice dance, maybe he'll bring Mommy back." It is that kind of beauty and courage that Condit finds in all of the children he has worked with and known. It is that kind of energy and sense of wonder he gives to the main characters in his book.

It should be noted that the book has a very strong style. Condit has been a writer since winning a writing contest in the fifth grade. (It is interesting to note that his winning story concerned a dream, indicating an early preference for the unconscious and the hidden workings of nature, something that is continued in this book.) "Over the years, I've done a lot more writing of poetry than prose," he told me. "My use of metaphors and things that are more common in poetry are apparent in the book. In some ways, I felt a part of each character and each character was a part of me and had a right to their own voice." His attempts to give each character their own voice are sometimes startling and other times disconcerting but never are they boring.

He thinks this interest in giving to language new phrases and new images is a gift that many young people have and use frequently. He recalled seeing a poem written by a child that could easily summarize one of the themes of his book. It is: "Heaven sent; this God forsaken planet is." Confusion, contradiction, disguised hope and ultimate triumph and exhilaration: This book is for people who will always remain in touch with the child in their heart.

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