

**SOCIETY**

they enter the stadium," wrote one Alexandrian, "it is as though they had found a cache of drugs."

Roman games differed in that slaves played and citizens watched. Clever politicians quickly learned to use chariot races and gladiatorial contests to curry popular favor; the Emperor Trajan, for instance, thrilled his subjects by pitting 10,000 beasts against the same number of gladiators. Often, though, the games were overshadowed by fierce feuding, drinking, courting, and rioting in the stands. Fans in Justinian's Constantinople burned down their wooden coliseum four times between 491 and 532 A.D.

Medieval spectators were far less unruly, perhaps because of the smaller scale of events and the narrower social gap between players and viewers. Tournaments of knights, beginning as wild and rough "mimic wars" in the 12th century, made few allowances for audiences. But as the melees were "tamed" into sport, stands and pavilions sprouted to accommodate lords and ladies, who themselves played a role in the pageantry. Lesser folk were usually well behaved.

Sports with few rules seem to inspire spectator violence, writes Guttman. As games become regulated, the mayhem in the stands subsides, too—so long as the spectators, like those at medieval tournaments, feel they are "tomorrow's participants." But when sports become so professionalized that the fans lack the experience—and the hope—of gaining the limelight, the rooters in the stands respond "less to the fine points . . . and more to the thrills . . . of physical violence."

### *Reading Is Boring?*

"Why Children Don't Like to Read" by  
Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan, in  
*The Atlantic Monthly* (Nov. 1981), P.O.  
Box 2547, Boulder, Colo. 80322.

Recent research has suggested that a student's success or failure during the rest of his education is pretty well set by the end of the third grade. Falling SAT scores and the declining literacy in U.S. high school and college classrooms must be traced in large part to the poor quality of early schooling. Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst at the University of Chicago, and Zelan, a child psychologist in Houston, blame the elementary textbooks that are used to teach reading.

Reading primers have deteriorated steadily. In the 1920s, primers contained, on average, 645 new words; many today contain fewer than 200. Yet most first-graders already know 4,000 words without benefit of book-learning. Books that consist of words chosen because they are short or easy—one widely circulating primer, for instance, uses "store man" in place of "salesman"—leave children feeling vaguely suspicious.

Publishers are not wholly to blame: School boards and superintendents, not children, buy textbooks. Consider one publisher's experience with an Illinois school system: His volume contained a story in which children bring home a balloon only to have a cat pounce on it and burst

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it. Outraged cat-lovers had the book withdrawn. The fruits of such education by consensus—"Nan had a pad. Nan had a tan pad. Dad ran. Dad ran to the pad."—are hardly the stuff of epics. Bored, children "read them with less facility," said the authors. "Publishers, in response, make the books even simpler."

Other attempts to spice up textbooks have, in fact, worked against reading. Some publishers have doubled the space devoted to illustrations, making the printed text even less appealing by comparison. Others emphasize play; in one well-known series, school does not even come up until the end of the second-grade reader, in a chapter entitled "Too Much Is Too Much of Anything."

The average European first-grader can read far more words than can his American counterpart. A look at one Swiss primer series suggests why. The books are filled with difficult words, familiar rhymes, poems and stories by famous German authors (past and present); often they deal with the critical events in a child's life—sickness or the birth of a sibling. In short, they do more than teach the cold mechanics of reading; they hint at the treasure to be found in the printed word.

*Teenage Suicide*

"Adolescent Suicide: A Growing Problem for the School and Family" by Elsie J. Smith, in *Urban Education* (Oct. 1981), 275 South Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills, Calif. 90212.

Within the past 10 years, the suicide rate of American teenagers has nearly doubled. Suicide is now the third leading cause of death among U.S. adolescents. Smith, an associate professor of education at SUNY-Buffalo, outlines current research on the problem.

In 1978, for boys age 15 to 24, the United States had the fifth highest suicide rate among the Western industrial nations—20 per 100,000—behind Switzerland, Austria, Canada, and Germany (in order of severity). Suicide is generally considered a white phenomenon. But there is a key difference between blacks and whites. Whereas white suicide tends to increase in later years (after age 45), blacks commit most suicides earlier in life (20 to 35). Blacks who survive a deprived youth, some researchers speculate, make compromises with life just as whites are beginning to feel its frustrations. Suicide among young U.S. blacks (15 to 24) is increasing, just as it is among young whites, but the rate for black youths remains substantially lower.

Regardless of race, however, adolescent males commit suicide at a rate four times higher than females. Smith suggests that society is more tolerant of female emotion and female failure.

Warning signs of suicide are generally clear: severe depression, excessive fear or uncertainty, social isolation. But causes cannot be so easily singled out. Most theories stem from the writings of Émile Durkheim, founder of the French school of sociology, and Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis. According to "Durkheim's Law," the likeli-