

# Double Trouble dogs *The Deep*

## Sea saga with sexist/racist overtones

### THE DEEP

By Peter Benchley

Bantam Books, paperback \$2.25

No one pretends that Peter Benchley's enormously successful novel, *The Deep*, is a serious literary venture. It is clearly a device of commerce rather than literature. Yet, *The Deep* is important for it is a reflection of and perhaps a shaper of mass culture.

On one level, the book is a simple adventure story, the struggle of good vs. evil in the exotic setting of the reefs off Bermuda. It is also the story of the education of its hero, David Sanders, by a wiser hero figure, Romer Treece. Sanders learns from Treece that it is foolish to take unnecessary risks merely to test his manhood,

may happen:

"I wonder..." Gail said.

"What?"

"I'm ashamed to say it, but it's true. What if this man turns out to be black?"

Relieved to find that the government representative is white (and therefore supposedly safe), they soon learn he will do nothing to foil the villains. This gives Treece a chance to teach the young couple another lesson: "Paper-pushers can't figure me out. All they understand is bull shit and politics, which amounts to the same thing." Conventional politics, Benchley implies, offer no solutions to important problems.

And revolutionary politics are no better. The black arch-villain, Cloche, talks like a revolutionary but is not a communist. According to Treece,

*He spouts a good Marxist line — "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," and all that. I think what he really wants is to set up some island kingdom. He won't call it that, of course. It'll be the Peo-*

may make a million dollars saying it. How is that for a Hollywood ending?"

—Arthur Zilversmit

Arthur Zilversmit is a student of popular culture and an avid reader of paperback adventures.

## Fin flick with sexist/racist overtones

### THE DEEP

Screenplay by Peter Benchley,

Tracy Keenan Wynn

Starring Robert Shaw, Jacqueline

Bisset, Nick Nolte

Directed by Peter Yates

*The Deep* is another Hollywood attempt to flash its technical agility and to overwhelm us with spectacle. The promotional material reads like Ripley's Believe It or Not. "The cast and company made 9,895 dives, at depths of 60-100 feet in four oceans, spent 10,780 hours beneath the surface, consumed 1,054,000 cubic feet of



Above: Jacqueline Bisset about to descend.

Below, left: Louis Gosset, "the most intelligent character."

## The director: '*The Deep* deserves a tidy ending.'

trouble begins. We learn that two ships; one a WWII medical supply vessel (the *Goliath*) with a cargo of 98,000 ampules of morphine, and the other, a late-19th century Spanish ship with a unique and exotic jewel cache, have been lodged on the same reef.

Many divers have been lost exploring the *Goliath* in the hopes of retrieving and selling its cargo of morphine ampules. Our clean, young, middle class couple have a healthy motive. They want the Spanish gold. But their good motives are interfered with by a band of corrupt (albeit clever) black "natives," willing to do anything for the drugs.

This crude racism is interwoven with the film's inherent sexism. In a scene that plays on deep-seated racial/sexual fantasies of power and domination, the bad black guys capture the good white guys. When they get to searching the woman, hoping to find the ampule of morphine, they put a knife to her boyfriend's neck (to literalize his impotence in the situation). The camera takes a long erotic stare as one of her captors slowly spreads her thighs to "search" for the goods.

This scene is so crude in its sensationalist effects as to be almost laughable in the same way that the simulated voodoo rape, with black man in white paint and feathers, becomes a parody of itself.

Jacqueline Bisset, as Gail Berke, is a replay of Jane in the old Tarzan films. She is either being saved from exotic monsters of the natural world, or from evil dark men who appear in the night. Or being photographed close-up in her wet T-shirt-diving outfit, or getting undressed with her back to the camera.

The movie, which people expected to be a second *Jaws*, restrains its sharks (although there are some close calls), but finally the natural world *does* intervene to right the balance. The moray eel, who has loomed in the shadows throughout the film, gets to eat the head of one of the bad black guys. The good white folk (who have, by the way, continuously put their desire for gold before human life) are allowed to triumph.

The people who promote the film tell us: "One word above all characterized the production of *The Deep*—reality." I'd like to suggest one that characterizes its point of view—reactionary.

—Carol Becker

Carol Becker is a free lance writer in Chicago.

IN THESE TIMES interviewed director Peter Benchley on the making of the film version of *The Deep*.

He was particularly interested in discussing the differences between Benchley's earlier success (*Jaws*) and this new underwater thriller. The books, he insists, have nothing in common but the liquid environment. "Repeats of smash hits are always rip-offs—except for *Godfather II*, which was better than *Godfather I*."

Adapting the Benchley novel for the screen involved some problems which Yates believes were handled successfully. One was the character of the heroine. In the book she was "negative — always holding the man back, always timid, unable to participate in the adventure." The Jacqueline Bisset version of this lady is "scared for damn good reasons." She partakes of all the action. She is more "reflective" than the men. She sees the right path in the muddle of possibilities and urges it.

The other dodgy problem of the novel was the matter of skin color. The villains were black and were motivated by "political considerations." This seemed "irresponsible" since the film is set in Bermuda where, according to Yates, relations between blacks and whites are, on the whole, good.

So the motivation of the blacks was simplified. They are now interested in the morphine because it represents a lot of money. Greed is "an acceptable, because universal motivation." Also, Cloche, the principal black villain, played by Louis Gosset, who was last seen in *Roots* is "the most intelligent character in the film."

*The Deep* is also an example of the new look in endings. There was a period during which audiences (and the public in general) were cynical about happy endings. They preferred "untidy" ones in which the wrong people were killed. But that is changing. In Yates' opinion *The Deep* is the sort of film that ought to have a happy ending. And it does.

—J.S.



that the real mark of manhood is the ability to face the real challenges that life inevitably produces. At that level Benchley is telling us something about the difference between heroics and heroism.

But indirectly he is also saying something else. *The Deep* is a profoundly racist book. Not because its villains are black. We can certainly accept blacks as villains as well as heroes. But here *all* the villains are black, and there is not a single trustworthy or even likeable black in the book. Even more significant is the fact that Treece—the book's voice of wisdom—is an unabashed racist:

*Treece noticed that Gail started at the words "black bastards" and he said, "...I have no prejudice. But I do have my biases. And my reasons. The blacks on Bermuda have ample to complain about, and they do ample complaining. But they've got a way to go before they earn my respect.*

The idea that one group must earn respect is, of course, at the core of racism.

Although Gail (David's wife) is, at first, shocked by Treece's racism, she later succumbs to it. When she and David plan to go to the authorities to report the black plot to salvage a sunken cargo of morphine for the illegal drug market, they discuss what

ple's Republic of some goddam thing.

What does he really want? "Money. Power." Black revolutionary ideology is nothing but a cloak for naked self-interest.

*The Deep* serves up a generous measure of sexism along with its racism. David has married Gail after leaving his first wife because she bored him in bed, and because

*To Gail, sex was a vehicle for expressing everything—delight, anger, hunger, love, frustration, annoyance, even outrage. As an alcoholic can find any excuse for a drink, so Gail could make anything, from the first leaf of autumn to the anniversary of Richard Nixon's resignation, a reason for making love.*

Although this might be a put-on, there's every indication in the book that Benchley means what he says. A woman who expresses the whole spectrum of human emotions in sexual activity is, of course, a great male fantasy, but she is no more authentic than the pseudo-Marxist villain.

This is not merely bad writing with stereotyped characters. It is a message: not only is it perfectly all right to accept racist clichés, to describe women as purely sex objects, and to reject political action for individual heroism, but you

compressed air,..."

And blew millions of dollars to produce an eighth-rate lust-for-gold adventure.

In the visual effects department the film outdoes itself. "The realistic underwater atmosphere" makes the ocean appear as well-lit and furnished as your living room. All the suspense, shadow and ambiguity we have come to associate with underwater adventure is lost.

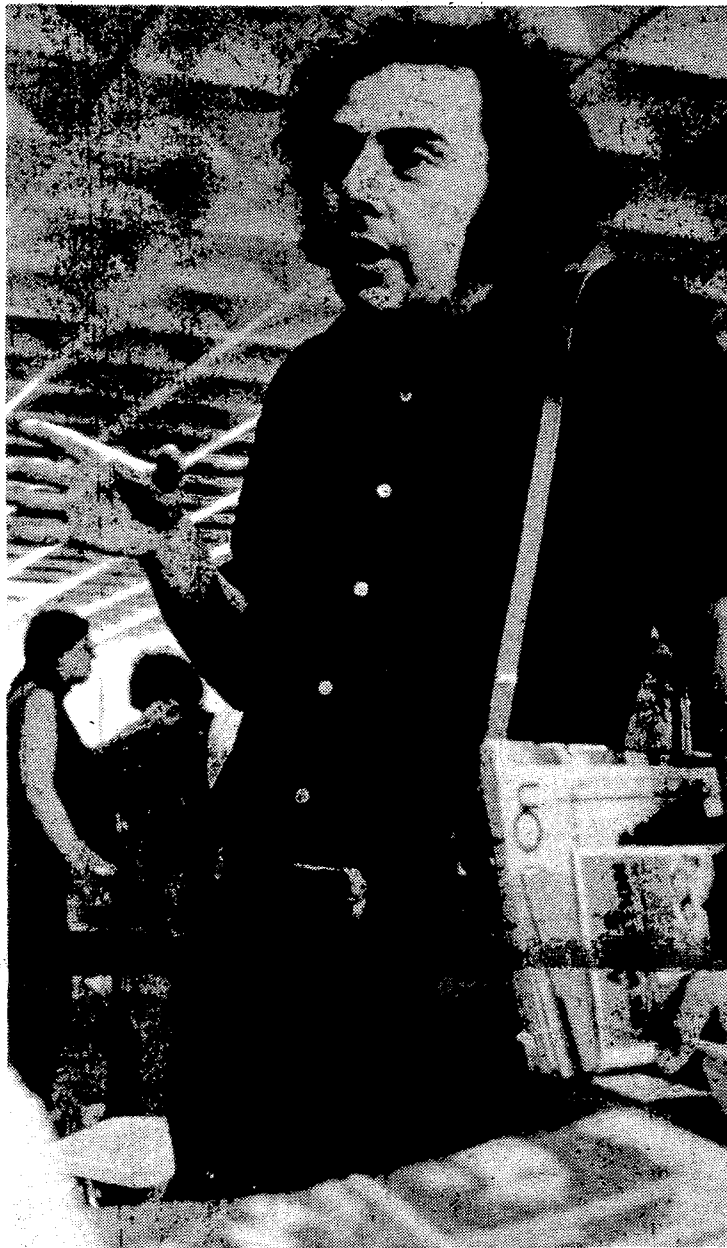
*The Deep* is both racist and sexist, as well as cliché. Within its own genre its scare tactics are totally predictable: one moray eel, a bloodthirsty school of sharks, people cutting air hoses, etc. Add to this a helpless woman (in a negligee) alone in her hotel room and a group of sinister black men who continuously jump out of dark corners or enter through unlocked windows to perform acts of faked Haitian voodoo and you have the spectrum of experiences.

The plot is, to say the least, simplistic. A reasonably glamorous couple (Nick Nolte and Jacqueline Bisset) on a diving vacation to Bermuda bring up a strange medallion and a small bottle from the site of an old wreck. When they take their find to a "treasure-diving expert" (played by Robert Shaw) the



# Herb Kohl: A need to teach

*Persuasion not propaganda is required*



Photos by Jane Melnick

By David Moberg  
Staff Writer

In a school system that often cripples kids through its authoritarianism and destructive kinds of competition, simply being a good teacher is a revolutionary achievement, teacher and educational critic Herb Kohl suggests.

Yet teachers can also unite with other school workers, run for local government positions and support community control of the schools in an effort to make education serve the ends of the democratic socialist values Kohl advocates.

Working with kids seems to have kept Kohl animated, exuberant and elfin—like a greatly overgrown, 40-year-old second-grader whose bushy hair has just started to recede. His 15-year career in public school teaching has been punctuated by exits from and returns to the teachers union, a hectic turnover of jobs as he performed a "strip-tease" of his personal authoritarian crutches and covers in front of his students while searching for the "open classroom," and a steady stream of books, since the early bestseller, *36 Children*, including such works as *Reading, How to; How to Teach; The Age of Complexity* and *The Open Classroom*.

Now Kohl is a teacher in Berkeley public schools and initiator of the Center for Open Learning and Teaching. The center sends out reports on innovative educational materials and ideas, which are often published by the teachers themselves, to 50,000 sympathetic souls.

Although he doesn't make the point explicitly in his books, his teaching experiments have been motivated by socialist ideals. Those have developed over the course of his confrontations with pedagogical bureaucracies but were inspired at an

early age by a grandfather who slyly advised him always to carry his picket signs on a 2-by-4.

In an interview with *IN THESE TIMES*, Kohl criticized strains of "radical" education that are afraid of teaching or are devoted to a purely individualistic notion of self-fulfillment, but he was optimistic about the variety of ways in which socialist teachers could change schools and society.

Too many teachers and school administrators hate kids, he suggested. Also they don't realize sufficiently how the old adage—knowledge is power—applies to children learning how to read and write.

Teachers also have to run for public office and find allies in the community and among the janitors, secretaries, bus drivers, lunchroom attendants and other school workers, Kohl said.

Pleasurable and creative experiences of working cooperatively, whether on the picket line or in the classroom, will be more likely to make socialism attractive, he argued, than hectoring harangues on why socialism is a good thing.

Here's part of what Kohl said:

*Do you think there's a danger of misreading what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has been saying about the primacy of political militancy to mean there's just struggle, struggle—and no need for education?*

He's been saying very strongly that education is in a sense the essence of the struggle. The other thing he said, which I believe, is that it is quite conceivable that there is a place in human life for instruction. It is much easier for me to teach you how to run a tape recorder in two minutes than to give it to you and say, "Discover

it." It's much easier to take what limited knowledge I have about certain things and—when you want to learn it—teach you, directly.

*Do you think radicalized teachers become afraid of teaching?*

They become afraid of knowledge. "Radicalized" is a very complicated question. A lot of people become radicalized in the sense of rejecting the public school and everything it stands for without any social view wider than that. They can move into a libertarian school environment in which their total response is not to the creation of a future world but to the negation of traditional schooling.

*Also, it seems that a reluctance to teach, leaving everything up to the kid to discover, can be very intimidating.*

There are times when kids want adults to make them feel secure and to teach them, to turn over the power. I've been in a lot of situations where people have learned how to read and I've been a part of it, and therefore I've taught reading. I don't know exactly how it happens, but one of the things kids ask is why should I learn how to read. My answer is simply: if you don't and I can then I can know stuff you can't know. They want that power. Reading is the acquisition of many kinds of power.

**A standard of competency.**

*A lot of kids who become delinquent are partly that way, it seems, because they've been shut off from that kind of power and resort to violence.*

Absolutely true. I see this happen with 5- or 6-year-old kids. Teachers expect that they won't learn how to read. So they allow them to run in the halls for a while

in gangs so that life for kids in the room and the teacher can be made easier. The next time those kids approach the book they first have the notion of being behind, which must be totally eliminated.

I sometimes work with 35-year-old adults who have college degrees and can't read. Because liberals are intimidated by Third World radicals, some of them can bluff their way through an experimental program and get a degree and never be tested, which is, by the way, a form of racism that is outrageous and crippling—having no standards for Third World people. Then they have to read and say, "Herb, I'm 12 years behind." I say, "You're not behind. You just haven't learned to read. It will probably take you three weeks."

*How can we use that notion of standards in a way that doesn't turn education into just passing tests and away from learning?*

My standards all have to do with competency. They don't have to do with how you rank with someone else. For me success is not whether someone can produce a better film than someone else. It's can you produce a film, can you write a book. One reads or one doesn't. There are stages when you tackle something you've never read before, but nobody can ever read everything in the world. It's the level of com-

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