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Miss Le Clerc Phillips Interviews Storm Jameson for The Bookman.

"If you want to know what I consider to be the most deplorable aspect of English fiction today," she said, "it is the social irresponsibility of the popular novelists. Here we are: the whole civilized world sliding fast to what promises to be a horrible catastrophe, the popular novelists taking absolutely no notice whatever of the conditions producing this danger and continuing to write just as if these conditions did not exist. I commented on this fact to a very popular novelist only a few days ago. I said to him: 'Don't you feel any social responsibility about it all, considering that your books are accepted by your enormous public as a realistic picture of modern life?' He replied: 'My first duty is to my wife, my family, and myself, and not to the public. After all, what the public want is to be made happy and sent to bed comfortable, for they're sick to death of being told that we're in a bad way. Just give them what they ask for, and they'll eat out of your hand. Social responsibility to the public! The public are there to keep me alive.'

"I take it", continued Miss Jameson, "that this is the attitude of the average popular novelist in England today. The public are there to keep them alive. In other words, they are just looting the shop while the world is sliding into chaos. In my opinion, it matters enormously that the most popular writers are not making the slightest attempt to deal with reality. Their neglect - or refusal, if you like - to do so might not have mattered so much in any other age; but now, when some sort of crash seems to be imminent, it matters very much indeed. There is a sense in which a novelist may be said to be more important than a teacher; he can do a good deal more harm. A great deal of what young people are taught in schools and colleges slips by them, simply because they know that they are being taught and so are on their guard against it. The normal child's resistance to direct formal education must be nearly unlimited. But the novelist gets by unchallenged. You pick up a novel in the expectation of being pleased or entertained and consequently your mind is prepared to receive everything the novelist is offering. You are fortunate if he offers you a good plot; but in most cases what he offers you is something much more insidious. He is offering you his attitude to life. He does this in such a way that you don't realize what is happening to you. You imagine that you are reading simply his account of some experience. Actually, you are seeing this particular experience through his eyes, feeling it through his emotions about it, and thinking about it with his mind. A transference of personality takes place, and for the time being your thoughts and feelings are those which he lends you. If you knew that this was happening to you, you would be on your guard. But you don't know; and in time, if you are a confirmed reader of Mr. Blank-Dash, the popular novelist, you find yourself looking at life with his eyes.....

"This is so obvious that it is entirely ignored and people like me are allowed to continue our deadly work without any required certificate of character. If a schoolmaster were to persuade his pupils that the best possible life consisted in having a powerful motor-car, plenty of money, love affairs, and drinks, I don't know what would happen to him. But if I choose to write a novel in which, with all the art at my command, I make such a rotten life look supremely attractive, no one rebukes me. On the contrary, I would even get paid for it.

"All this sounds as though I were saying that a novelist should have a moral purpose. I am really saying something much more flattering to the novelist. I am saying that unless he is so dull that no one reads him except reviewers (who are paid to expose their minds to every kind of infection), he cannot possibly avoid having a moral effect of some kind. When you reflect that a popular novelist is directly influencing not less than a million people, you realize that each time he publishes a new book it is as though a tiger were being turned loose in Piccadilly in the pious hope that it will turn out to be kind - or toothless." -- The Bookman, February, 1933.