

The Big Lie

Richard Johnston

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The Big Lie follows seven people throughout a school year in the 1950s post-war climate of Paris where political military and social struggles combine with the angst common to students and lovers. Set at the American High School the novel explores the meaning of “the big lie” a philosophy of life and education conceived by Hal Evans the assistant principal at the school.

Hal Evans has his own “big lie” having stayed on in Paris not for the purpose of education but to search for a lost lover. The principal Bill Helmer meanwhile is battling to defend his educational leadership beliefs against the military bureaucracy of U.S. Army Captain Michael Murphy. Captain Murphy on the other hand is trying to maintain order and discipline while protecting American children from French political radicalism—serving what he sees as his role as School Officer. Two of these students Tony Mosca and Kay Selner meet against the odds and while in their senior years face a lack of financial support fears of Kay’s domineering army chaplain father and an unexpected pregnancy.

Romance is also in the air for Principal Bill Helmer as he vies for the love of a newly arrived French teacher Colette Bernard. Little does Helmer know that he is up against an active French Communist Jean Ramuel the former lover of Bernard whose Colette has been attempting to flee. Interspersed with these trials tribulations and triumphs Johnston brings the ageless dilemmas of love and adulthood to light in a new arena showing that despite the environment some things never change.

Author Richard Johnston draws on his own experiences in World War II his time studying at the Sorbonne in Paris and his employment with the U.S. Army Dependents School system in Paris for eight years to explore the idea of democratizing education. While the text is liberally interspersed with French (often leaving a non-speaker in the dark) the story draws the reader into the raw feelings and rumors of post-war reform supporting both the characters wishing to remain with the status quo and those wanting to expand.

The Big Lie is a meaningful read for those interested in the post-World War II France. For adult or upper-level high school students who think about the importance of image in the school system external support and its consequences forging partnerships and avoiding harmful acquaintances *The Big Lie* draws attention to the “truth” in schools. Readers will appreciate this book’s exposure of “the big lie.”

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