A History of Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*

Cheryl Hill

LIBR 548F: History of the Book
Anne Russell
November 26, 2004
Introduction

Many people have read Daniel Keyes’ 1966 science fiction classic, *Flowers for Algernon*. Both in its short-story format and its full-length novel format, the book is a staple in many school curriculums. The story of Charlie Gordon, the mentally-disabled man who just wants to be smart, has touched the hearts and minds of readers across the world for more than 40 years. This paper will take a look at the history of this important and influential novel.

The Story and Its Reviews

*Flowers for Algernon* tells the moving story of a sweet-tempered, mentally disabled, 36-year-old man named Charlie Gordon. The novel is written in the first person via a series of journal-like progress reports. Charlie desperately wants to become smarter, so he is excited that two scientists are using him as a human guinea pig to test their technique for increasing intelligence. Dr. Strauss’ and Professor Nemur’s experiment thus far has only been performed on one mouse named Algernon. In preparation for his own surgery, Charlie is made to finish a maze in a race against this mouse. Algernon wins the race, but not long after Charlie’s surgery, he is easily finishing the maze before Algernon. He soon leaves his janitorial job at the bakery to start a new life. As Charlie’s intelligence increases, his progress reports become more sophisticated, with correct spelling and syntax and complex thoughts. In addition to an increased mental intelligence, Charlie experiences an increased emotional intelligence, and he comes to discover that the men he had worked with at the bakery, men who he had formerly considered friends weren’t really his friends after all. Charlie also begins to remember his painful childhood, his mother who resented him, and his younger sister who treated Charlie poorly because she thought he received special treatment, even though she received more attention from their mother than
Charlie did. Charlie falls in love with and starts dating Alice Kinnian, his former night school teacher at the Center for Retarded Adults. Eventually, Charlie becomes even smarter than the scientists who “created” him, but with this powerful intellect comes the crushing understanding of the experiment’s eventual failure. Towards the end of the book, Charlie watches as Algernon’s intelligence rapidly decreases, and he knows that the same fate awaits him. Algernon eventually dies, and Charlie buries the mouse in his backyard. Despite his best attempts at holding on to even a little of the knowledge he gained, he eventually becomes the same as he was before.

The novel was well received when it was published, and continues to receive good reviews to this day. Many critics commented on Keyes’ extraordinary ability to touch the hearts and minds of readers. “Charlie’s hopeless knowledge that he is destined to end in a home for the feeble-minded, a moron who knows that he is a moron, is painful, and Mr. Keyes has the technical equipment to prevent us from shrugging off the pain.” (“Making up a Mind” 1966).

Many critics commented on the effective use of the progress reports to tell the story. “The revelation of Charlie’s raw hopes and dreams through his laborious “progris riports” works so well because the arc of his progress is apparent in his spelling, grammar, and word choices, as well as in what he chooses to record about his life” (Shelby 1998).

The critics also touched on the ethical and moral themes that the book presented. One critic highlighted one of the difficult lessons that Charlie had to learn: “increased intelligence does not hold the key to positive social interactions, to happiness, or to peace of mind” (Ickes-Dunbar 2004, 3). This reviewer also pointed out how much closer we are to the reality of the book: “What was science fiction in 1959 is science in 2004. What seemed far-fetched fifty years ago seems highly plausible today in the dawning era of genetic engineering” (Ickes-Dunbar 2004, 7).
Background

Daniel Keyes’ development of the story occurred in bits and pieces. It first started in 1945 while riding the subway train to New York University. During the ride, he contemplated how his pre-med major (his parents idea) was at odds with his desire to write. He thought to himself, “My education is driving a wedge between me and the people I love.” Then he wondered, “What would happen if it were possible to increase a person’s intelligence?” (Keyes 1999, 16). And so the seed was planted. Algernon the mouse was inspired by a dissection Keyes had to perform on a mouse in a university science class and the name Algernon came from the poet Algernon Swinburne, a name Keyes recalled because he thought it was so unusual. Keyes wanted to study psychoanalysis in graduate school so he could learn about what motivated people. The professors he encountered were the inspiration for Nemur and Strauss in the book.

In 1957, Keyes was working as a teacher for a special needs English class. One day a student said to him, “I know this is a dummy class, and I want to ask you: If I try hard and I get smart by the end of the term, will you put me in a regular class? I want to be smart.” (Keyes 1999, 97). The student’s question haunted Keyes and stuck with him. The next year, when the editor of the science fiction magazine *Galaxy* called and asked for a story from Keyes, he remembered his thoughts on the train all those years ago, and the elements of the story started falling into place. When the editor wanted the ending changed so that Charlie retained his intelligence, married Alice, and lived happily ever after, Keyes refused, and instead sold his story to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It was published as the lead story of the April 1959 issue.

The story was a success, and the next year in 1960, Daniel Keyes found himself accepting a Hugo Award (one of science fiction’s highest honors) for best science fiction
novelette of the year. That year the story was also reprinted in *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction* and in the *Fifth Annual of the Year’s Best Science Fiction*. In 1961 it was reprinted in *Best Articles and Stories* and *Literary Cavalcade*. Also in 1961, it was adapted for television in the drama *The Two Worlds of Charlie Gordon*. Keyes went on to expand the story into a full novel, which was published in 1966 by Harcourt Brace. It won science fiction’s other highest honor, the Nebula Award and it quickly became a bestseller. In 1968, the Bantam paperback edition was published. That year also saw the film adaptation’s release, *Charly*. Cliff Robertson won an Academy Award for his portrayal of the main character in the movie (Scholes 1975, n.p.). Among other things, it was also a Broadway musical in 1978, *Charlie and Algernon*, and a television drama in 2000.

**Historical Context**

For readers in the twenty-first century, *Flowers for Algernon* is a moving story about mentally disabled man. But for readers in the 1960s, the book was much more than that. In the United States, society and culture were in the process of transforming their thinking about the mentally disabled. The civil rights movement was focused on acquiring equal rights for African Americans, but it also meant that attention was given to the idea of equal treatment for all people. The book was published at a time when there was a “growing awareness of the problems and the rights of minority groups” (“Historical Context” 2004).

The President’s Panel on Mental Retardation was organized in 1962 and the Declaration of the General and Specific Rights of the Mentally Retarded was created in 1968. Just a few years later, “developmental disability” replaced the term “retardation.” In addition, laws were passed that protected the mentally handicapped from violence and discrimination. In the years to
follow, many issues regarding the mentally handicapped were finally dealt with in the legislature and the courts. So it is clear that the message in *Flowers for Algernon*, a message of tolerance and understanding, reflected the social and political struggles of the time (“Historical Context” 2004).

In the 1950s and 1960s, most people were familiar with psychoanalysis as a treatment of emotional disorders because of the widely-known and influential theories of Sigmund Freud. Repression, neurosis, and the unconscious were familiar concepts to most people, as was the idea of human motivation stemming from childhood experiences. Thus, readers of the novel would have recognized the psychosocial themes of Charlie’s emotional problems that stemmed from the childhood abuse he suffered at the hands of his mother (“Historical Context” 2004).

Another trend of the day was a focus on scientific research. It was the height of the Cold War and many government organizations and private foundations spent millions on scientific research. Competition for obtaining and keeping funding in universities was intense. With this knowledge in mind, the pressure that Professor Nemur and Dr. Strauss feel to carry out a successful experiment on Charlie is even more understandable (“Historical Context” 2004).

It should be noted that despite the acknowledgement of the rights of mentally handicapped people at this time, political correctness was often lacking. For example, in a review of the book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Charlie is referred to as a “moron” (“Making up a Mind” 1966), which was a common term used to refer to the mentally disabled, and even had scientific grounding in that it was the official classification for people with an IQ between 50 and 69. While the readers of this 1966 review wouldn’t have thought twice about the word, today it is considered offensive to label a mentally disabled person as a moron.
Influence

In addition to being a very popular book, *Flowers for Algernon* has also been a socially and culturally influential book. The novel has an especially striking ability to appeal to adolescent readers. Like Charlie, they “are struggling with their own emerging intellect and conflicting social needs. They often experience troubled relationships with peers who are perceived as ‘different’” (Ickes-Dunbar 2004, 3). The novel also teaches students a lesson in empathy in way that no teacher or parent could ever convey through lecturing. Through Charlie’s eyes, many students are able to discover what it is like to be on the outside, to be tormented and teased and made fun of. Students’ reactions range from “I know how Charlie feels” to “I wanted to say ‘sorry!’ to all the people in my life that I have ever made fun of” (Ickes-Dunbar 2004, 7).

Students at Kimball Middle School in Arlington Heights, Illinois were so inspired after reading *Flowers for Algernon* that they decided to make up their own project for class. They set out to collect donations for Little Angels, a home for children and adults with developmental disabilities. Their goal was $200, but in the end, the students collected $246 in change from students and $100 worth of individual contributions from teachers and staff at the school. They delivered the donations to the home, along with craft supplies, videos, and books on tape for the residents (Tabor 2000, n.p.).

*Flowers for Algernon* has been published around the world, including Japan. A 1999 survey in Japan asked more than 24,000 Japanese people to name the most memorable book they had ever read. The most popular choice was *Flowers for Algernon*, which was published in Japan in 1978 and it quickly created a large following. Just as in America, the book is often read by young students in school (Reynolds 1999, n.p.).
The book was so widely popular and influential that in 1999 – 40 years after his story first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* – Daniel Keyes published *Algernon, Charlie and I: A Writer’s Journey*. The book traced the journey of his most popular novel, starting with his childhood desire to write and following the evolution of the story through novelette, novel, movie, and beyond. Through the retelling of this journey, Keyes talks about the life of an author, the writing process, and the trials and tribulations of getting published. He also gives the reader a fascinating look into the development of the plot, as outlined above.

**Challenges**

Despite its popularity with readers around the world, some people have challenged *Flowers for Algernon* in the U.S., usually attempting to have it banned from school libraries or curriculums. The book is #47 on the American Library Association’s list of most frequently challenged books (ALA 2004). These challenges almost always center around the parts of the book where Charlie experiences a sexual awakening in connection with his love for Alice, and then he starts remembering his mother’s brutal punishments when he started expressing sexual interests as an adolescent.

Steve Rose was a 10th grade English teacher in central Nebraska and he had taught *Flowers for Algernon* for many years. However, one year, a parent declared that he did not want his son to read the book because he found it objectionable. Neither did he want his son present during class discussions of the book. Even though past class discussions had never come close to being offensive, Rose agreed to have the student read a different book. The following year when it came time to teach the book to the new class of 10th graders, the parent from the previous year distributed photocopies of the “racy” sections of the novel to several churches in town. These
sections had to do with Charlie’s struggle with sexuality and romantic relationships, which most would consider tastefully written. Even though no parents came forward with photocopy in hand demanding their children not read the book, the principle wanted the book pulled right away. During a school board meeting to discuss the issue, the only parent who showed up was the original father who had first come forward. With the lack of concern among parents, in the end, Rose was allowed to teach the book. (Rose 1998, 84).

But this was unfortunately not the only example of attempted censorship of the book. The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom documented at least nine other challenges of the book. In 1977, parents and community religious leaders in Emporium, Pennsylvania, successfully pressured the school board to remove Flowers for Algernon from all the schools in the district. They objected to the book because of references to sex, specifically the scene that dealt with Charlie’s attempt to understand his sexual desires. Parents felt that the scene would stir students “natural impulses” (Newsletter 1977, 73).

Parents in Oberlin Ohio objected to the book because of the detailed sexual encounter described. But a review committee and the school board voted not to remove the book, arguing that the sexual descriptions were not blatant and the overall theme of the book offered the opportunity for important ethical discussions in the classroom (Newsletter 1984, 26).

Amazingly enough, Flowers for Algernon has received some interesting comparisons to pornography. In Glen Rose, Arkansas, Keyes’ book was compared to “books in plastic covers you see at newsstands.” So school officials banned the book because of the sex scenes and explicit and obscene four-letter words (Newsletter 1981, 91). In Glenrock, Wyoming, a parent, who was also a community religious leader, objected to the book’s use in school. He compared it to Playboy and Hustler and other forms of pornography and claimed that he had found several
explicit and distasteful love scenes just by “flipping through the book.” The school board voted to keep the book in the high school curriculum anyway (Newsletter 1984, 122).

The book has also been challenged in Plant City, Florida, Arizona, Virginia, and Georgia. All of the challenges centered around an objection to the adult themes, profanity, and references to sex and drinking that could be found in the book (Newsletter 1976, 85; 1981, 47; 1996, 100; 1997, 97).

Conclusion

*Flowers for Algernon* has never gone out of print, having been through more than 30 printings. It has sold more than five million copies, been translated into 27 languages, and has been published in 30 countries. It has been a novelette, TV drama, full-length film, and full-length novel. In 2004, the book was re-released yet again by Harcourt in a new paperback edition. The story’s popularity is a testament to the enduring legacy of Daniel Keyes remarkable storytelling ability. He transformed a piece of science fiction into a touching story of one man’s intellectual rise and fall. Keyes could not forget the student who told him, “I want to be smart.” In the same way, the reader of *Flowers for Algernon* cannot forget the sad story of a man’s transformation from mentally disabled to smart and back again. And even though the reader remembers the entire experience, Charlie mostly does not. “I bet Im the frist dumb persen in the world who found out some thing inportent for sience. I did somthing but I dont remembir what. So I gess its like I did it for all the dumb pepul like me in Warren and all over the world” (Keyes 1966, 311). And just as Charlie wept when he buried Algernon and put a bunch of wildflowers on the grave, the reader will likely weep at the end of Charlie’s last progress report: “please if you get a chanse put some flowrs on Algernons grave in the bak yard.”
Bibliography


*Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 45, no. 3 (May 1996): 100.


