

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 11, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about balancing the fight against domestic communism with civil liberties. In the interview segment, ER interviews Irita Van Doren, a literary editor at the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Participates: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Irita Van Doren

[ER:] Good afternoon, this is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking. I'm happy for the opportunity of visiting with you each day and I am grateful for the many helpful suggestions which you of my listening audience send in. And now, Elliott, won't you take over for a few minutes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Thank you, Mother. All of us I'm sure read as many of today's books as we can find time to read and, of course, the factor that most determines what we read is the review that a book receives. So the program this afternoon should prove to be very informative. My mother's guest is Miss Irita Van Doren, literary editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*. Prior to our hearing their recorded interview, I have, as usual, a question for mother. But first, a message from those who make this program possible.

(Break 0:55-1:05)

[ER:] What is the question today, Elliott?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well Mother, it's-it's a very interesting question from Henry Modell [unknown name] here in New York City. His question is: "How we can combat communism at home without loss of civil liberties?"

[ER:] That's a very difficult question and it's one of the questions that I think is troubling a great many people today. I think probably the best way to combat communism at home, without loss of our liberties, is to educate people as to what communism really means. Um if you could do that then you could get rid of the fear of the type of communist who is really uh just um trying to persuade people that communism is better than democracy. And uh all you would have to do would be to leave it to the FBI to watch the really dangerous people who may be trying to sabotage this, or that, or the other thing and do something that um is a vi--has a some violent outlet of some kind. And--but what troubles um most people I think today is the fact that they--there are people who they believe are convinced communists, but who are not known, and, therefore, they are afraid that they are spreading the doctrine of communism without its being uh--without actually its being apparent what they're doing. Now, I think that can only be met by education by knowledge of what communism is, of what the party line is, of um-of what communist tactics are in labor groups, for instance, or in organizations of different kinds. And I think if we learn about it then we lose our fear and then we don't have to worry about losing our civil liberties, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] we don't have to curtail them.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Do you think uh that if we in the United States had uh a sort of uh soap box area as they do in Hyde Park-- [ER: Like Hyde Park corner] [ER laughs] Like Hyde Park corner in England, do you think that would be healthy? Uh it seems to me if that there—

[ER:] I think we have it down on Washington Square. It seems to me I used to --not Washington Square, Union square. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] I think I used to pass people on--orating. I didn't stop to listen very often the way they do in Hyde Park, but-- (3:57)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I noticed that for instance uh-uh in the-the last few months, I believe, uh there have been scheduled meetings for Union Square where the communists announced that they were going to have a great mass meeting. And then there was great agitation and uh pressure was put on the city administration to call out the police and break up this anti-American activity. Do you think that we should allow uh these big gatherings of communists where they can rant and rave and shout against our government and the way we live and everything?

[ER:] I-I think uh actual meetings like that, um particularly when they advocate violence should--the minute they advocate violence, should be broken up. But uh when it's just a question of talking about the principles of Marxism or the um inequities of a democratic system and so forth, then I think they should be allowed because um while that may inflame certain people um it doesn't usually stir people to violence. And um I think the-the nub of the matter is that there should not be violence, that-that should not be allowed.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But violence as a rule comes from violent disagreement uh on the part of partisans of different ideas.

[ER:] Well, I don't think there should be. Um I think there should be very careful uh police supervision so that those disagreements don't flare into violence. As long as the people are not um--who are speaking are not advocating uh something which they're not permitted to advocate, and the minute they do that then they should be stopped.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. Well now, you say that the-the best way to combat it is to educate the people. How can you educate the people about communism and communistic ways unless you permit it to show itself?

[ER:] Well, you can tell young people a good deal about it and it will show itself because there are always certain um communist members in a labor organization and communist students uh in student organizations. Uh there are very few places where one or two people, who may not be real communist but who think they are, turn up. Now there will be some who are really well trained and the minute they are well trained they're very good sources of education because you learn uh how they work and that's very valuable. One of the things that I think that um any young people who worked with the early groups of communists learned was uh the discipline that existed. The fact that a young communist, for instance, in a student group um never went home until the meeting was over, uh and that was one way that they frequently elected their own um officers because the others would get tired and go home. And uh they never did. They were ordered to stay and they stayed 'til the bitter end. Therefore when they saw the others were gone, they would suggest a vote and it would take place and they'd have someone that um uh would serve in an important position, and that--all those little things are things you learn if you work um in groups where there are a few communists.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but you're talking about the conditions that you run across where communism--uh to be a communist is not outlawed. It's uh, as a matter of fact, uh-- (8:21)

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[ER:] Now that is an entirely different thing. If you outlaw the communist party as such and say that nobody um can be permitted to be a communist, uh then, of course, uh there's no question under the law,

you just uh cannot uh work with a communist or talk--or have a communists and he will go underground if he's a really trained communist. [Elliott Roosevelt: Well, that's the point I'm getting at.] And he will never show um—

[Elliott Roosevelt:]How do you identify that communists and communistic doctrine that has gone underground if we pass a law?

[ER:] It's very difficult, very difficult.

[Elliott Roosevelt:]Uh because, can't those people uh be trained so they uh are very glib, very fine talkers about the maintenance of uh individual liberties and so forth and the gradually they build up a following, particularly in the school age uh young men and women of in the--in the community? Uh isn't it possible that you might establish a leadership where you've driven underground the true communists so that it's impossible to recognize them?

[ER:] Well, it's much more difficult, [ER coughs] and I think that it would um uh I-I personally, as you know, um don't believe in outlawing um practically anything uh for the reason that I think you're much safer when-when people are free to talk and you can find out what they're talking about. But um, that's only a personal opinion, and if it happens that it is outlawed then it's the law of the country and you have to abide by it, that's all.

[Elliott Roosevelt:]So you believe that uh the best way to combat communism at home uh is not to take away any civil liberties from the people, to pass no law which gives--which makes it repressive on someone to talk, unless, of course, they talk uh in a way uh at the-- they advocate a forcible overthrow of our government.

[ER:] Yes, that's certainly what I believe.

(Break 10:48-11:01)

[ER:] The reading habits of each new generation is usually deplored by their elders simply because times and tastes change, I suppose. Today, my guest is Miss Ir-Irita Van Doren, who's been in the best possible position for quite a few years to judge changes and general public trends in literature. She is literary editor of the New York Herald Tribune. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, Miss Van Doren.

[Irita Van Doren:] Mrs. Roosevelt it's extraordinarily nice to be here with you because you have several times talked to the *Herald Tribune's* guests at their book and all at luncheons and this seems a very nice return engagement.

[ER:] Well, I'm very glad to have you here. Now like so many other people in the world you didn't actually go to work at the thing that you thought you were preparing to do when you were starting out. I believe what you wanted to do was to be a dean of women in a women-woman's college. What happened?

[Irita Van Doren:] Well that was a teenage ambition. I grew up in a little town, Tallahassee, Florida, and then it seemed the only thing a woman really could do to teach, and if she was going to teach I thought I should be a dean. I was very much impressed by the dean at the college at that time. So, I came to Columbia and took graduate courses, working towards a PhD. And finally, before I had become a dean of women, having taught though at Hunter and another school, I got married and had children, and that was the end of being a dean of women [Irita Van Doren and ER laugh].

[ER:] Well, you probably learned more about um young people by having children then you would have if you'd been a dean of women [ER laughs].

[Irita Van Doren:] Well probably so, at least I uh stayed by that for a couple of years, and then decided I would like to get outside of being with children twenty-four hours a day and got a part-time job at *The Nation*. I remember that job very vividly because it was um-- I was paid twelve dollars a week which exactly paid for my nurse at that time for the children [ER laughs] while I was gone. But uh I was just utility boy around the place, clipping papers for the editors to read and so forth. But those were good years at *The Nation*.

[ER:] You enjoyed it, I'm sure. (13:28)

[Irita Van Doren:] Yes, I enjoyed it very much. It went on to other things, you know, and I ended up [ER: [unclear phrase: might be "and you finally"]] five years later as editor-- as literary editor of *The Nation*.

[ER:] That's very interesting. Well now, we'll have to get down to the present and the intricacies of being one of our leading literary ed-editors. Do you personally have to read all the books that are reviewed?

[Irita Van Doren:] [ER and Irita Van Doren laugh] You've seen them on the shelves, you know that couldn't be done. We get about five thousand, I'd say, a year in, and we can't even have all of those reviewed. No, my um associate Miss [Belle] Rosenbaum and I go over all the books that come in, weed out certain categories that we make no attempt to review, and then send the others out to people who seem competent and qualified to do them.

[ER:] And um are those um--are those reviews uh on books that you have decided were worth drawing to people's attention, how do you make your selections of books that you'll have reviewed?

[Irita Van Doren:] Well, in several ways. There are certain uh conspicuous books that you know you want--your readers want to hear about and we plan reviews of those long ahead very often. Then there are certain books by authors that we know are good authors or at least authors who attract public attention, the- their books would always be reviewed. Um most of the trouble comes in selecting what books among the new novels are worth reviewing because you know nothing about their authors, you see, so we depend a good deal on the literary grapevine for that. Some friend in a publishing house or some agent or someone who has read the book will warn us in advance that this is rather better than usual and it deserves some attention. (15:20) [ER and Irita Van Doren overlap].

[ER:] Here's--here's a new--here's a new light on the horizon.

[ER and Irita Van Doren overlap]

[Irita Van Doren:] That's--that's right, yes and, [ER: And that--] uh give it a chance.

[ER:] In a way you're very powerful aren't you? Because you can either make someone by the type of review you get written about their book or, by ignoring them, you may break them all together.

[Irita Van Doren:] Well I don't believe we've got that much power. [Irita Van Doren laughs] Sometimes I would like to think we were more powerful than we seem to be, but um I think a book that's really good makes its way regardless of what the critics say about it. Frankly, it's happened in a number of instances.

[ER:] Number of times, [Irita Van Doren: Yes.] really think that's um--so the critics are not all important.

[Irita Van Doren:] I don't think they really are. I think they are very apt to be important in the sense that they can give a-a boost to a book that is worth it, or can call it to attention and then it has to make its own way.

[ER:] But really I suppose um great um uh a controversial book where people on both sides have been um-- either have said it was either very good or very bad, that in a way would excite um interest in a book, too.

[Irita Van Doren:] I think it does because the controversy in itself is interesting and then people want to read it for themselves to see which side they agree with.

[ER:] Uh, do you ever write reviews yourself?

[Irita Van Doren:] No, I never do.

[ER:] You never do?

[Irita Van Doren:] Never do.

[ER:] Aren't you tempted to?

[Irita Van Doren:] I'm not really because I haven't any instinct for writing [Irita Van Doren coughs] in particular. I like to um, I like to edit and to my mind it's a-a different type of mind, a different function. Instead of picking up a book and looking it over and immediately thinking of what I'd like to say about it, my instinct when I pick up a book is to say, "Oh, so and so would be wonderful on that book," and think of the person who should review it.

[ER:] Who should review it. Now when the copy on the review, written by the reviewers comes in, do you go over all of that?

[Irita Van Doren:] Yes, I make a point of editing all the copy myself. [H.L.] Mencken once told me years ago, when he was such a successful editor on *The Smart Set* and then on *The Mercury*, you remember?

[ER: Yes.] He said the most important job for an editor was editing his own copy because in that way you could hold the tone of the whole magazine and uh pull it together as a unit. I think he's right about that.

[ER:] So you really uh go through everything that uh the reviewers write?

[Irita Van Doren:] That's right. [ER: You do?] I read every piece of copy and uh I don't change opinions. I make a great point of never interfering with a reviewer's opinion, I often don't agree with it, but I've chosen him because I had respect for him and for his opinion and so I never change that. But often, even with experienced reviewers, you can pull a review together and the way it's written so that it's a little more effective. And with young reviewers, very often you just cut out the first paragraph. They nearly always take a whole paragraph for a springboard before they can get down to what they want to say. And uh a blue pencil is very useful there.

[ER:] That blue pencil of the editor is uh [ER laughs] is very cruel sometimes.

[Irita Van Doren:] I-I [Irita Van Doren laughs] I suppose-I suppose it is, but you know I've often found that really good reviewers, good critics are grateful when an editor sometimes puts in a thoughtful piece of editing on their copy [ER: Oh yes, it's a help.] and changes a sentence around or puts another paragraph in a certain place. (19:00)

[ER:] Oh I think it's an enormous help in making you see why the things you did were wrong. I think it's a great help.

[Irita Van Doren:] Well, an editor it's a little more distance from your work than you are when you do it and you get a little perspective on it.

[ER:] Yes, have you ever written a book yourself?

[Irita Van Doren:] No, I think there should be one Van Doren who doesn't write. [ER, Elliott Roosevelt, and Irita Van Doren laugh]

[ER:] Well, don't you ever--that again, aren't you ever tempted to write about editing or about some of the things that?

[Irita Van Doren:] I'm really not, you know. I um I like talking about my job and talking about what we're planning [unclear phrase: might be "and self-taught to do] as I really haven't any-any desire to write at all.

[ER:] I don't suppose you ever do the um work of laying out your um your paper, that's too far away.

[Irita Van Doren:] Oh no, you're-you're wrong. Miss Rosenbaum and I lay it out every Tuesday, that's our press day. [ER: Do you really?] We have dummy sheets uh there and we measure up all the galley proofs, we cut out the pictures, we pin them on, we lay the whole thing out, put the numbers of the galleys on, and go down into the composing rooms and stand over the forms, call for the trays of type we want, and fit it all in.

[ER:] That of course to me is most interesting because for a brief period I edited for the New York State Democratic women's division, a um [ER coughs] democratic sheet let's call it. It was eight pages, [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] once a month, [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] and Louie Howe, who was my husband's assistant for a great many years, eh taught me how to do all that [Irita Van Doren: Oh, yes.]handwork of putting it together. And I've always looked upon it. It used to take me most of one night. [ER laughs]

[Irita Van Doren:] But didn't you find it fascinating?

[ER:] Oh yes, I loved it.

[Irita Van Doren:] Mhm, I liked going down to the composing room.

[ER:] But now we must stop for a minute.

(Break 20:56-21:15)

[ER:] I'd like to ask you, Miss Van Doren, about one of your recent book review sections in which you gave intimate pictures and stories of well-known authors. That section caused a good deal of comment because it was so new. I wonder if you'd tell our listeners something about the issue and the story that lay behind your doing it.

[Irita Van Doren:] Did you find it an interesting issue?

[ER:] Yes, I found it interesting.

[Irita Van Doren:] We were uh delighted with the results, frankly, because um it was an experiment; no one had ever done it before. And uh we uh wrote to about sixty of the leading fall authors, we limited ourselves by taking only those of the fall, and asked them to tell us something about themselves quite informally, their work, how they played, how they worked, what their interests were, what they read, and

to send us some informal pictures. And out of the sixty, we--forty-eight sent us the material we asked, which I thought was a [ER: [unclear phrase] wonderful, yes.] tremendous percentage and they were most gracious and kind about it. And it all came out very nicely. John Mason Brown called it our nudist number because we had asked authors to reveal themselves [ER and Irita Van Doren laugh] and some of them, I think, were more revealing than they realized which made the issue for the readers of course that much more interesting.

[ER:] Oh, I think it was very interesting because uh someone told me that in the sketches you had--you uh --obtained that uh there were things that were put down that nobody could find in a textbook or in uh life of the person.

[Irita Van Doren:] Well you see no reference books are immediately up-to-date. [ER: No] And all this material was um un-unique material so that school teachers and librarians and people all over the country have saved it and asked us to do it again, and asked us to put it in book form, and to make an annual of it. Even the um the publications for the blind are reprinting it, [ER: Oh I think-] which I thought was very nice.

[ER:] Well, that's very nice, [Irita Van Doren: Yes.] because that's uh that'll give the blind um something that they don't have at present. I've done some-- occasionally I've gone down, when I had a new book and read [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] my first chapter for them. [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] And uh they seemed to get so much joy out of those books and this would be a wonderful thing for them.

[Irita Van Doren:] Well, they get so little that's really fresh [ER: Yes.] and uh I think they particularly would like it for that reason.

[ER:] Oh, I think that's very wonderful. And now you've done, in a more recent issue, something that I really loved. I loved all the things about Doctor Dolittle in-- for which you did for [ER and Irita Van Doren overlap here] children's book week, for the last twelfth.

[Irita Van Doren:] Yes, oh yes, last Sunday's issue, and we-we—

[ER:] I loved the reviews of the children's books. I've always wondered, do you think children ever read those reviews?

[Irita Van Doren:] I don't think they do, except the older children. They're written, of course, for their parents because uh parents do the buying of the books for children. As Mrs. Becker used to say, "every book for a child has got to carom off an adult," and I think that expresses it very well. So that the reviews are really addressed to the parents who we hope will buy them for the children.

[ER:] It's a little bit um-- it's a little bit hard I think for children, almost always have their books bought by their elders.

[Irita Van Doren:] I know.

[ER:] I wonder if it oughtn't to be possible [someone coughs] to turn children loose, um periodically, in a library or in um a book shop or book room [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] and let them choose because that's half the fun of getting a book. (25:11)

[Irita Van Doren:] That's true, and we're doing that more and more now. Of course, there's a wonderful children's room at the public library, and [ER: Yes, I remember.] every year at the children's spring book festival, which we started in order to make another spot in the year of main interest to children, we have

exhibits at the Tribune of um all of the new children's books that are published and all of the original artwork and the illustration. And classes of children from schools come in for a week and really they are wonderful to watch in those rooms.

[ER:] But do they, do they really choose?

[Irita Van Doren:] They make lists [ER: They make lists.] themselves of what they want and uh, as far as possible, those are bought for their classes.

[ER:] Well I know [Irita Van Doren: It's very nice.] that when I was young I used to choose the books that I wanted for birthday and Christmas and so forth um and then ask to have them given to me. I rarely get asked by one of my grandchildren to choose something they want. Uh if I send a book because I've decided it's a good book for them to read.

[Irita Van Doren:] Well, how did you choose them? Where did you see them, did you--? (26:18)

[ER:] Well, I was turned loose in my grandfather's library, eh and um I would rummage round in that and read anything that came, I-I'm afraid largely the classics, but there were also, because there were lots of young people in the house, a good many modern books around. There weren't children's books in those days, they just didn't exist. [Irita Van Doren: That's true, of course.] And um then I would find something that I wanted to own. There were a few children's books, there were things like, uh oh I think *The Little Lame Prince* and uh Carrots [this may be a book title or an author] and things of that sort. But um you would um you'd want to own it yourself and you'd ask for it.

[Irita Van Doren:] That's right. I had that same experience, but I was thinking more of books for little children who can't read, [ER: Oh yes,] you see, and aren't quite able to choose their own so they have to be chosen for them by other people. But um, I think that there is very little published for teenage children uh that's very interesting, it seems to me, because most teenage children are reading adult books, [overlap between ER and Irita Van Doren begins here] as they should be.

[ER:] Yes, they've begun to read adult books, I think, and uh that's um really um something they should do, too, because unless at that age they read um the fairly well-known books they never will read them later. They must read them [Irita Van Doren: That's true.] between the ages of fifteen and eighteen [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] or fourteen and eighteen [Irita Van Doren: Mhm.] because later life becomes too hurried for them and they really don't have uh the chance to read them [Irita Van Doren: As much as they'd like.] I suppose really they'd-they'd think that life was too hurried at fourteen. [Irita Van Doren laughs] But I-I still think those are the years [Irita Van Doren: You look back on those as quiet years.] you should read your-your background books, [Irita Van Doren: Yes.] books that form a background [Irita Van Doren: Well, I think that's true.] in your knowledge of literature. [Irita Van Doren: Mhm, that's true.] Do you have any particular rush season when you get more books to review and choose?

[Irita Van Doren:] Yes, there are two rush seasons, publishing seems to be divided that way. The fall is the biggest one, from first of September to the first of December, books pile in faster than you can possible handle them. In fact, in all this last month my desk has been piled so high with books that I can't see over them and every chair in the office is filled and-and they really aren't getting handled with anything like the speed in which they come in, just because we haven't the space to handle them as well as the uh ability to.

[ER:] And then again you have it in the spring?

[Irita Van Doren:] That's right, not quite so much, but from February through uh April they're publishing very steadily.

[ER:] Uh do, for instance, I look-look though rather carefully the-the *Herald Tribune* book section every every Sunday. Do-do readers write you about uh your reviews or about what you've said? [coughing in background]

[Irita Van Doren:] Oh yes, we get quite a sizable mail on the reviews.

[ER:] And do you get questions about books that sort of thing?

[Irita Van Doren:] We get questions, we get protests, we occasionally get even kind letters. [ER and Irita Van Doren] (29:37)

[ER:] Oh it's not only those who protest who write you? That is—

[ER and Irita Van Doren overlap here]

[Irita Van Doren:] Not only, although I must say those who have something to object to seem write more readily than those who approve.

[ER:] Well do they--do they protest if you publish--if you've spoken of a book that's been published on certain subjects, for instance, which they don't like. Or what--what are the protests about?

[Irita Van Doren:] Well, I think the whole American public is in a very sensitive state of mind these days, and a great many subjects that are so touchy that you can hardly speak on them one way or another without getting protest from one side, [ER: Side or the other.] and so a great deal of the correspondence is of that sort. Then, of course, there is an occasional author who feels very much uh injured if his book hasn't been praised. I once got a postal card addressed to Miss Irritating Van Doren. [ER laughing]

[ER:] Oh I think that's quite lovely. How far in advance do your reviews have to be written?

[Irita Van Doren:] We go to press twelve days in advance, so we like to get the reviews, if possible, two weeks in advance.

[ER:] I see, and what would you say was the most popular reading matter today?

[Irita Van Doren:] I really think non-fiction is way up in the list--biography, uh current history reports of what's going on and so forth in the world today.

[ER:] And you think the books that are going to live in the future are in the non-fiction area?

[Irita Van Doren:] They're more apt to be, I'd say. Though I was telling Mr. [W. Somerset] Maugham just the other day, someone said Maugham, who'd just gone back to England, "I think his--his um *Of Human Bondage* is a classic within his own lifetime," you see. I don't know if it will last for another lifetime or not.

[ER:] Well, I hope we'll have some classics from this period in the future.

[Irita Van Doren:] I hope so, too. It's hard to tell what they'll be.

[ER:] Thank you so much for being here today, it's been awfully kind of you to be with us.
[Irita Van Doren:] It's very nice.

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