It's the THAT, Teacher

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urious, isn't it, how some expressions capture attention and linger awhile in our language, even as others, no doubt equally worthy, are forgotten within seconds of their utterance? Think on these: As Dorothy, a young Judy Garland reminded us and Toto that “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” Television’s most inept spy, Maxwell Smart, was “Sorry about that.” Yogi Berra entered Bartlett’s with “It’s deja vu all over again.”

More recently James Carville of the 1992 Clinton presidential campaign kept workers on task by constantly telling them “It’s the economy, stupid.”

I’d like to modify that last line to open this admittedly biased piece about the value of adolescent literature in secondary school (grades six through twelve) English classes by suggesting that “It’s the THAT, teacher.” Said a bit differently but with the same intent: “The THAT of teenagers’ reading is vastly more important than the WHAT.” Pure and simple: I want kids to be readers, a goal I think I share with most English teachers. I worry, however, about whether the common schoolhouse preoccupation with the classics—belles lettres—helps achieve this goal or, as I believe, runs counterproductive to it.

CLASSICS IN THE CURRICULUM

Readers of this journal need but a brief recounting of the pedagogical imperatives that sustain classic literature as a major part of the English curriculum. It has, after all, “stood the test of time.” Classic literature also plays well in Peoria, with principals and school board members pleased that today’s kids are getting the right stuff. It’s relatively safe from the censors: even if Dimmesdale and the married-to-someone-else Hester do the nasty, how can one censor an author like Hawthorne? Classics are traditional, they’ve been around, with teachers able to use last year’s (if not last decade’s) teaching tools: lesson plans, tests, even bulletin boards. (My favorite bulletin board was one I saw a few years ago, entitled “A Choo-Choo Train in New England Literature Land.” A train cut out of laminated cardboard wound its way over an outline map of the New England states, with boxcars labeled Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, and so on.)

And I agree fully that classic literature is good. I’d be elated if students adored Hamlet, shared my belief that Jane Austen has benefited humankind in significant ways, returned every so often to Twain or Dickens just for the sheer pleasure of doing so. But that seems not to be the case. We have too much evidence, from our own observation, from excellent scholarship like Beyond the Classroom by Laurence Steinberg (1996, New York: Simon and Schuster) and Horace’s Hope by Theodore Sizer (1996, Boston: Houghton Mifflin), from anecdotal and incidental learnings, that today’s secondary school students are not doing much reading. A bookstore manager recently told me that her store moves Cliffs Notes “by the bushel.” Bestsellers include the usual suspects—any Shakespeare play that schools require, The Scarlet Letter, Moby Dick, and so forth. She went on to say that the buyers are secondary school students, some of whom, she pointed out with bemusement, bought the required book at the same time they bought the Cliffs Notes about that book. Ugh.

The question thus becomes an easy one to ask—and, as it happens, in my judgment at least, an easy one to answer. The query: how do we get kids to read, not simply their assignments but just to read for the sake of reading? The response: use young adult literature.

YA LITERATURE

Much of what I said about classic literature above applies to young adult literature. Viewed one way, it has stood the test of time. If you think of the life span of adolescence as about four or five years—eleven or twelve to about sixteen or seventeen—then a work like, say, The Outsiders, which has been widely read for almost 30 years has, in effect, been around for six or seven generations of readers, as long relatively as late nineteenth-century adult literature.

Adolescent literature can play well in Peoria, too. We do need to be patient, give it
the same chances that the Bard has had, repeated exposure, continued support from teachers and librarians, but ultimately we will be rewarded with favorable community reactions.

I must acknowledge the potential censorship difficulties inherent in much adolescent fiction, but these, too, can be dealt with, I think, by a frank admission that adolescent literature typically focuses on adolescents’ problems and in their language, a language that often features epithets stronger than “oh my goodness” or “shucks.” All anyone, censors included, has to do is to listen to adolescents talk to each other to discover that the problems and language of the literature often mirror the problems and language of life.

Adolescent literature permits the same pedagogical tools classic literature affords: analyses of character, theme, language. Tests. Response-based classes. Small group discussions. All sorts of writing activities. Even bulletin boards. (I’ll return in a minute to this topic.)

CLASSICS IN YA LITERATURE

And YA literature is good literature. There’s even the beginnings of a canon of sorts. A couple of surveys I did a few years ago suggest such a “classics” (for want of a better word) list among adolescent novels. My first survey of some university-based professors of young adult literature, secondary school teachers, librarians, and publishers asked about the best adolescent novels of all time. These eight were the most commonly mentioned (the full survey can be found in English Journal, December 1989):

*The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier
*The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton
*The Pigman* by Paul Zindel
*Home Before Dark* by Sue Ellen Bridgers
*A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck
*All Together Now* by Sue Ellen Bridgers
*The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks
*Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson

A second survey asked about the best novels of the 1980s and yielded these results (see English Journal, November 1992):

*Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen
*Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers
*Permanent Connections* by Sue Ellen Bridgers
*Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson
*The Goats* by Brock Cole
*The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks

Dicey’s Song by Cynthia Voigt

Provided I make it, I plan a year-2000 survey about the best of the 1990s, and I’ll bet you a milkshake that these novels get considerable support:

*The Giver* by Lois Lowry
*Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff
*The Toll Bridge* by Aidan Chambers
*Tunes for Bears to Dance To* by Robert Cormier
*The Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene
*Ironman* by Chris Crutcher

Can any teacher doubt the quality of these books, their importance, their usefulness with young adults? I hope not.

STUDENTS READ YA LITERATURE

Thus, there are lots of good reasons to use adolescent literature in the schools, but I’ve saved the best to last: students will read it. Get a kid 30 pages into a Paterson or a Crutcher, a Bridgers or a Brooks, and she’ll finish it. If you share my judgment that the THAT of teenaged reading is more important than the WHAT, then I think you will also agree that young adult literature belongs in the curriculum in a central, not a peripheral, place, as readings in common, not just as books on a list of supplementary materials.

TEACHING LITERATURE

But I must return to pedagogy, both as culprit and as savior. Part of the problem of students’ dislike of classic literature may—I’m hedging here—lie in outmoded and uninspiring methods of teaching that literature, an overweening focus on literary history and biography, for example; hunts for obscure symbols; lit crit kinds of activities that tease out tensions and ironies but make the book an intellectual artifact and not a living, breathing, meaningful, powerful, and potentially life-changing force for its readers. One is reminded of the pregnant warning from writer Flannery O’Connor:

If teachers are in the habit of approaching a story as if it were a research problem for which any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious, then I think students will never learn to enjoy fiction.

And enjoyment, I think, is what we’re after, at least at the secondary school level, where our students are going to grow up to be pediatricians and politicians, carpenters and car mechanics, bookkeepers and beekeepers, but only very rarely English majors.
who need this early lit crit training. What we want is to excite them about reading while they are in school, help them share our love of it, so that they will remain readers when they are adults, readers at least of Michener if not of Melville. And they will be readers to their children, too, so that the cycle of enjoyment of print will continue.

READERS’ RIGHTS
To that end teachers would find useful a marvelous little book by French author Daniel Pennac: Better Than Life (1994, Toronto: Coach House Press). In a series of short, pithy, and pointed chapters Pennac traces the reading habits of youth, from the pre-school delights of being read to, to the nervousness at school, where one MUST READ and, worse, MUST UNDERSTAND, and do both very quickly. And the longer the kid stays in school, for many youngsters, the worse it gets, with greater and greater pressures to read and understand. The joy of reading is gone. One of Pennac’s chapters summarizes his concerns about the state of affairs in more than a few schools today:

To each his loneliness. The boy with his contraband notes on his unread book. The parents faced with the shame of his failure. The English teacher with his spurned subject matter. Where does reading fit in? (79)

Pennac ends this important book with his Reader’s Bill of Rights, some ten principles worth the attention of all teachers. Though not all will agree with every one of them, just thinking about these rights can change teaching habits and student attitudes and, I think, make reading the winner for both teacher and student. Here they are:

- The right to not read.
- The right to skip pages.
- The right to not finish.
- The right to reread.
- The right to read anything.
- The right to escapism.
- The right to read anywhere.
- The right to browse.
- The right to read out loud.
- The right to not defend your tastes.

(175–207)

Pause for a moment over these rights. How might the implementation of one or more of them change literature classrooms? And would the change be for the better? Would it result possibly in the goal I am seeking, a focus on the THAT of students’ reading, a lessening of the emphasis on the WHAT? I believe Pennac is right, that we must return to the joys found in the printed page, to that magic pre-school threesome—Mom (or Granpa), the kid on her (or his) knee, and Dr. Seuss, all of them worrying about whether the cat in the hat will get the house cleaned before Mom comes home.

This, then, is my hope, as I concurrently thank you for reading all of this, that teachers of secondary school English take to heart my Carville paraphrase: it's the THAT, teacher. And if they do, I am confident that they will find in young adult literature a THAT well worth classroom time and attention.

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**EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO**

**Grammar as the Sacred Tradition of English Education**

“What is the matter with formal grammar? Not many years ago grammar shared arithmetic the place of greatest prominence in the upper grades. The gruelling grind in grammar is thought to have brought many of us into a mastery of the mother-tongue. Not a few of us are accustomed still to think that we purified our diction upon conjugations and declensions and incidentally sharpened our wits by the self-same process: Have we lost faith in the efficacy of grammar? Have we abandoned the sacred tradition of language teaching?”