
The Western Canon in Today's High Schools

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The value of books is proportionate to what may be called their plasticity—their quality of being all things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought. Where, from one cause or the other, this reciprocal adaptability is lacking, there can be no real intercourse between book and reader. In this sense it may be said that there is no abstract standard of values in literature: the greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them. The best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality; but it is generally from these books that the poor reader gets least.

- Edith Wharton (qtd. in Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer 53)

As a life-long reader and a high school English teacher, I have had my share of successes and failures with books. I have discovered a book over the summer and waited in anticipation for the opportunity to teach it during the coming school year, only to have the unit disintegrate into failure, mostly because I assumed my students would be as enthusiastic as I was about the book.

The reverse has also been true; I have loathed teaching a certain book that I thought perhaps lacked literary merit, only to have a new crop of unfamiliar students energize my appreciation for it. But in all cases the decision on what titles the entire class would read was mine. I never sought my students' input because I was the expert with a college degree and twelve years of teaching experience; they were the *tabulae rasae*. Surely I knew better than they what they should read. Or so I thought.

In 1988, Arthur Applebee began a comprehensive nationwide study surveying secondary school teachers as to what book-length titles (novels and plays) were the most frequently taught in English classrooms. His findings showed that not much had changed in the nearly twenty-five years since the last major study of its kind in the spring of 1963 (qtd. in "Stability" 27). The Western canon that had dominated secondary classrooms in 1963 still dominated in 1988. One might have expected a great shift in the canon's place in secondary schools. After all, the preceding twenty-five years had seen a civil rights' movement, a cultural revolution, and the rise of a "new" genre—Young Adult Literature. So the lack of change between the two surveys published some twenty-five years apart surprised some educators. More troubling than the consistency in findings between the two surveys was the dearth of titles from "alternative traditions" in the newer survey ("Stability" 28). Societal changes apparently had had little effect on what high school students were being asked to read in English classes. The times had changed, but what high school students were being asked to read had not.

As a high school English teacher, I was also troubled by the results of Applebee's survey. If the sweeping changes that took place in America's cultural landscape between 1963 and 1988 weren't enough to effect change in the canon, could anything bring about change that many saw as necessary to keep pace with the changing world of adolescence? After coming to the conclusion from my own teaching experiences that the traditional Western canon was not serving English students well, I was curious if there was anything teachers could do to improve students' attitudes about reading. What could make students

want to read, and thus, hopefully, read more? The answer to improving students’ attitudes toward reading is not very radical: give students choice in their selection of reading materials in their English classes. Simply allowing students to choose more of their reading materials will result in more and better reading.

In order to test my hypothesis, I designed two surveys—one for teachers in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, one for students at St. Michael-Albertville, a suburban high school northwest of Minneapolis—to solicit feedback on high school reading habits. In general, I was interested in what books were being taught at the secondary level and what secondary students’ attitudes were about reading. More specifically, is the canon that Applebee suggested was in place in 1988 still prevalent in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area today, and do students value choice as a means to getting them to read more and better?

Applebee surveyed high schools throughout America to tabulate the top titles (novels and plays) taught in public, Catholic, and independent schools. The results of the survey (Table 1) showed that the “dead white male” phenomenon still dominated the Western canon.

Table 1
Most Frequently Required Titles, Grades 9-12

| Title and Percent of School | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| Public Schools | | Catholic Schools | | Independent Schools | |
| Romeo and Juliet | 84% | Huckleberry Finn | 76% | Macbeth | 74% |
| Macbeth | 81 | Scarlet Letter | 70 | Romeo and Juliet | 66 |
| Huckleberry Finn | 70 | Macbeth | 70 | Huckleberry Finn | 56 |
| Julius Caesar | 70 | Mockingbird | 67 | Scarlet Letter | 52 |
| Mockingbird | 69 | Great Gatsby | 64 | Hamlet | 51 |
| Scarlet Letter | 62 | Romeo and Juliet | 63 | Great Gatsby | 49 |
| Of Mice and Men | 56 | Hamlet | 60 | Mockingbird | 47 |
| Hamlet | 55 | Of Mice and Men | 56 | Julius Caesar | 42 |
| Great Gatsby | 54 | Julius Caesar | 54 | Odyssey | 39 |
| Lord of the Flies | 54 | Lord of the Flies | 52 | Lord of the Flies | 34 |

Significantly, of the top ten titles required in public, Catholic, and independent schools, only one was by a female (Harper Lee) and none by a minority writer (*Literature* 66). Furthermore, Applebee's study shows that not much had changed in the previous 25 years when it came to the books taught in high school classrooms. "Of the 27 titles that appeared in 30% or more of the schools, four are by Shakespeare, three by Steinbeck, and two each by Twain and Dickens. Only three women appear on the list, S.E. Hinton, Harper Lee, and Anne Frank, and there are no minority authors" (*Literature* 69).

While one might think that with the push for diversity and multicultural titles in recent years, the canon would have opened up a bit, Applebee concludes that "rather than being diluted in recent years, the role of the literary canon seems to have been strengthened" (*Literature* 69). Despite the findings, Applebee is encouraged that many of the changes in the list between 1963 and 1988 "reflect the schools' attempts to introduce contemporary literature, though many of these 'contemporary' titles are now 40 or more years old" [at the time of publication in 1993] (*Literature* 70).

Applebee's survey showed that the canon is firmly entrenched. But is reading the canon the best for high school students? And if it isn't, must we abandon the classics in order to get adolescents to read? These questions introduce the contentious point of what our young people should read, or, rather, what should English teachers encourage/require our young people to read in order to make them better, more willing, readers. There are no easy answers to these questions, and there are as many critics who support the canon as those who call for its dismantling. Rosenblatt believes there is much good in the classics, but urges caution in how they are taught:

Many of the great classics have elements of vivid action, strong emotion, and suspense that may provide an incentive for the more mature or the more secure student to clear away the obscurities due to unfamiliar language or literary forms. Too often, however, the classics are introduced to children at an age when it is impossible for them to feel in any personal way

the problems or conflicts treated. (Literature 205-206)

Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, is a little more flippant in his response to this age-old question. According to Trelease, “about the only people in this country who read them [the classics] are teenagers—and only because they are required to ... everything I have seen in the last thirty years indicates we are misusing them in schools” (140). Basically, high school teachers require students to read books that are never read by the general public. “Serious and classic book sales account for only 1 percent of bookstore sales” (140). The question, then, is not what to read; rather, what is important is the obvious declaration that kids need *to* read.

Defenders of the canon might argue that a watering down of the literature curriculum will result in a decline in the skills traditionally associated with the English classroom. Stephen Krashen, who has studied reading and second-language acquisition for more than thirty years, researched the effects of free voluntary reading and found that reading more, whatever that reading entails, does increase these skills. Krashen supports free voluntary reading programs as opposed to traditional direct instruction. Krashen uses the phrase “free voluntary reading” to include any programs that simply let students read what they want. They are often known by acronyms such as D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) or S.S.R. (Sustained Silent Reading). These programs may be part of a building-wide initiative to get kids energized about reading, or they may simply be variations of the reading workshop popularized by Nancie Atwell in which students are responsible for choosing their own reading materials. Krashen’s comprehensive studies of free reading programs “show that more reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development” (*Power* 17). He cites numerous studies to support his conclusion. A consistent finding in Krashen’s review of free reading studies is that “reading itself promotes reading” (*Power* 81).

The research seems to indicate that students would be better served if more choice were offered in secondary litera-

ture classes. Specifically, it would likely lead to more reading, which would lead to better readers. Offering students choice, however, sounds easier in theory than in practice. What exactly does offering choice mean? How much choice? Are all choices students make equally valid?

If one's goal in the teaching of literature is to help students enjoy reading and to become lifelong readers, then offering students more freedom in their selection of literary titles would be an important first step.

To confirm or refute the findings of the above research, however, I needed to do more than consult secondary sources—I needed to do my own research. To this end, I designed two surveys—one for teachers and one for students. My survey for teachers initially began as an attempt to verify if Applebee's 1988 study, which concluded that the traditional Western canon still dominated, was still in place in 2006, at least in the suburban schools surrounding Minneapolis and St. Paul. Because St. Michael-Albertville is a suburban school, I wished to narrow down my search to metro area school districts. Therefore, I decided to exclude schools in the Minneapolis and St. Paul districts and focus on only suburban schools similar or larger in size to St. Michael-Albertville (approximately 700 students in grades ten through twelve). This narrowing left me with approximately forty-five districts to survey. By the end of the summer, I had gathered data for twenty-nine of the forty-five schools.

My initial survey to teachers focused on two main questions: 1.) What titles (novels and plays) are currently taught in your high school? 2.) To what extent are students allowed to choose titles that they read? The survey began as an attempt to replicate Applebee's survey (albeit on a localized scale). I was curious to see what, if any, changes had occurred since Applebee's study was conducted during the 1988-89 school year in those book-length titles taught in secondary English classrooms. I eventually added the second question to query teachers on the extent to which students were able to choose their reading materials.

My first question was a simple attempt to gather as complete a picture as possible of the titles taught at metro area high

schools. Table 2 (below) includes responses from the twenty-nine schools that responded. For ease of comparison, I've reprinted the results from Applebee's 1988 study (Table 1) prior to the results from my own study:

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| Scarlet Letter | 62 | Romeo and Juliet | 63 | Great Gatsby | 49 |
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| Hamlet | 55 | Of Mice and Men | 56 | Julius Caesar | 42 |
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Table 2
Most Frequently Required Titles in the Twin Cities Metro Area, Grades 9-12

| Title and Number of Schools Book Required In (out of 29 surveyed) | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Rank | Title | Number of Schools | Percentage |
| 1 | To Kill a Mockingbird | 24 | 83% |
| 2 | Romeo and Juliet | 23 | 79 |
| 3 | The Great Gatsby | 22 | 76 |
| 4 | Of Mice and Men | 18 | 62 |
| 4 | The Crucible | 18 | 62 |
| 6 | Hamlet | 16 | 55 |
| 6 | Huckleberry Finn | 16 | 55 |
| 8 | Night | 15 | 52 |
| 8 | Lord of the Flies | 15 | 52 |
| 10 | The Scarlet Letter | 14 | 42 |
| 10 | The Odyssey | 14 | 42 |

The results indicate that there has been little change in the nearly twenty years since Applebee's study. Only two titles from Applebee's study did not make the updated survey: *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Both, however, still ranked in the top fifteen. My survey included only one title not included in Applebee's original study: *Night*, by Elie Weisel.

The fact that the results show little to no change is not necessarily surprising. To become part of the canon of books taught in secondary schools, a book must be deemed a classic. To be deemed a classic takes time. The latest published work in Table 2 above is *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. What did surprise me is the dearth of contemporary and or Young Adult titles. Only one novel, *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien (published in 1990), that is considered a contemporary work made the top twenty. It is taught in twelve area schools, ranking it tied for twelfth on the list of most frequently taught titles. For Young Adult literature, Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* led the way, but it was mentioned by only four of the twenty-nine schools, placing it outside the top forty. Only two females made the top twenty, Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*), whose books placed first and fourteenth respectively. Also, only two minorities made the top twenty—Hansberry and Chinua Achebe, whose *Things Fall Apart* placed sixteenth. These results show that, although there has been a lot of talk about opening up the canon in recent years, this talk hasn't translated into widespread practice.

In addition to surveying teachers, I realized that I also needed to survey students on their reading practices. After all, what better way to find out what students' attitudes are toward reading than to ask them. Since I teach sophomores, and all sophomores at St. Michael-Albertville High School must take English 10, I decided they would be appropriate survey subjects. I prepared a survey and distributed it to all sophomores enrolled in the spring semester of English 10 during the 2005-06 school year. This number was approximately 170 students from all ability levels, but I ended up receiving ninety-eight surveys by the end of the school year.

The questions on the student survey were open-ended. Students were given space below each question to answer the question however they saw fit. I was mainly looking to solicit feedback on what students' attitudes are on reading—both the reading they are required to do inside the classroom and outside. The questions were not directly related to Applebee's survey, but they did give me needed information on how adolescents view reading in the twenty-first century, at least sophomores at St. Michael-Albertville. Both the teacher and the student survey also gave me important feedback on the question of whether, and to what extent, students were able to choose their reading materials in area high schools.

When students were asked what English teachers could do to make reading more enjoyable, the leading response was "let us choose our own books" (23 responses). Other leading answers included "pick books that are interesting for us," (18) and "have a good discussion so that we understand what is going on in the book" (12). This last response was curious because presumably one would assume good discussions are going on with any book, but apparently, at least in the eyes of the students, that is not always the case. The relevant piece that emerged from the two leading responses was that students need to be interested in what they read to rate reading as enjoyable. Too many students view the books selected by their English teachers as not being relevant to their lives.

Students were also asked how their own list of books that they read outside of school differs from what they are expected to read in English classes. Interestingly, the majority of the students responded that they spent some time reading outside of school. The general response (paraphrased) was something akin to "Out of school I like to read mysteries, suspense, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, etc. but in school we have to read classics, old books, boring books, books that are trying to teach a lesson, books having to do with different races, etc." Several students commented that the books they read outside of school would not be appropriate in-school reading. One student said, "All the books that I've read [in school] were horrible. I don't like many

of them because they were slow usually from ancient days not many of the books we read in class are up to date or deal with kids/teens.”

The responses on the student surveys indicate that many kids do enjoy reading, but most differentiate between the kind of reading required of them in English classes and the kind of reading they do at home. In short, few students would pick up a “classic” of their own volition and read it outside of school. On the other hand, many students reported a thirst for reading that is satisfied by choosing their own reading materials outside of the classroom. In the words of one non-reader, “The books that we read interest us and relate to us. We usually aren’t able to read these books in school because they aren’t school appropriate.” What should be appropriate for school are books that relate to adolescent readers. The list of required books in Tables 1 and 2 above relate to the human condition, but they do not necessarily relate to the more particular adolescent condition. The question, then, becomes a philosophical one regarding what teachers view as being the purpose for teaching literature in schools and, thus, how to select literature to achieve those goals.

Nearly twenty years have passed since Applebee conducted his research on the most frequently taught book-length works in American high schools. His conclusion from the 1988 survey was that the Western canon taught in secondary English classrooms had changed little since a previous study in 1963. Applebee’s survey of American high schools was an attempt to replicate this earlier study and compare findings.

My own research was a similar attempt to compare findings. I was curious as to whether or not this list of titles had changed since Applebee’s study. After surveying teachers from suburban districts in the Minneapolis and St. Paul metro area, I found the results to be nearly identical: a certain canon of books—written mostly by dead, white males—still dominates secondary English classrooms.

In an attempt to remedy this “problem,” I decided to implement my own version of a readers’ workshop in sophomore English the next fall. Students, with a little coaching from me,

would be able to choose any fiction book they would like. They would bring this book to class with them each day and read for thirty minutes. When I say coaching, I simply mean giving book talks—picking up certain titles that have energized former students and me in the past and trying to “sell” them to my current sophomores. As students read, they would keep a journal which combined their thoughts as they read with an analysis of certain literary elements we would be discussing. At the end of the month-long reading workshop, students would produce a newspaper project consisting of a certain number of articles, such as a lead story (plot), Dear Abby column (conflict), personal profile (characterization), etc.

The first time I implemented this new reading workshop, it was a great success. The advantages of the program are many—some enumerated in this paper, some not. Most importantly, students were able to choose what they read, which led to more reading. My top reader read four books during the unit; all students save one completed their book. Some had several false starts, but each false start taught them something about their own reading likes and dislikes. Students learned the elements of literature in a way that was more relevant to their reading interests rather than attaching it to a classic they had difficulty understanding. The disadvantage: I had to give up one classic (don’t worry, Hansberry and Steinbeck still remain), but I doubt the students missed it.

In my twelve years of teaching, I have noticed an increase in the number of students who struggle with reading. As our society becomes more reliant on images rather than print, the problem seems to be getting worse rather than better. For too many adolescents, the reading that they are usually asked to do in school is seen as a chore. Trying to motivate them to read has also become a chore. Allowing students to have more say in what they read in high school hasn’t solved all my problems when it comes to the teaching of literature, but has made teaching literature more enjoyable. Giving students choice in their selection of what they will read, at least in the reading workshop unit, has helped energize their reading and my teaching.

As Edith Wharton said, “the greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them.” In my few attempts at the reading workshop approach, I’ve found that my students have gotten a lot out of the books they have chosen—much more than I could ever impart. While doing away with a classic or two in the literature curriculum may alter the canon in high schools, it will do so for the betterment of the student and will ultimately lead to his or her growth as a reader. In the end, high school teachers can do their utmost to guide students, but kids ultimately come to love reading through their own choices.

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