

Just Above Absolute Zero

by
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When slack-jawed from reading freshman compositions, my reading speed drops to some minimum beneath which only television beckons. Now is the optimum time to choose texts for next semester. At a reading speed slightly above the motion of molecules nearing absolute zero, only great books hold me. The slower the reader, the greater every word counts.

I pity the alert, spaniel-minded professor who picks books like The Name of the Rose for his students to read. Anybody can see that book's too thick. Even Dickens had the charity to spell the reader of his long novels, publishing them in monthly segments. When a slow reader like me opens Umberto Eco's novel, he gets lost in the plot within the first twenty-five pages, or three hours' reading.

Choosing texts for classes, I have another advantage over the brilliant speed reader. Besides sharing my students' concern for brevity, I still can't keep a simple story straight. In Much Ado About Nothing, for instance, who the heck is Beatrice's father, and why does Hero marry that clod Claudio? Or in Tom Sawyer, are we really supposed to think Tom's transformation from trickster-hero to capitalist a happy ending? What would Bugs Bunny be with money in the bank? Money Bunny?

Slower readers make better teachers because if a book appeals to them, it will to their classes. At my school, and I suspect at more schools than will admit it, students are largely innocent of literature. They live in a prelapsarian, bookless world, before the knowledge of evil, or of anything much. When we slowly read aloud V.S. Naipaul's Miguel Street, or Twain's Tom Sawyer, it is often a revelation to them. Reading is such a simple pleasure and one of the cheapest. Book prices often vary inversely with the literary value of the book. Most Shakespeare plays can be picked up for a nickel to a quarter at church bazaars and garage sales. The most expensive books are newly published science

texts and even social-science texts. For a slow reader like me, these are largely unreadable. And out of date within three years.

I suspect that the majority of reading done by prospective teachers in all disciplines, and not just in the sciences where we might expect a recent focus, concentrates exclusively on twentieth-century authors. Because of internal pressures in the learned professions, the scholarly equivalent of fads, graduate students can spend all of their time reading the latest books by their own teachers and their teachers' friends.

Gibbon's friends are mostly dead, so the pressure to read Gibbon is reduced. His resounding prose, modeled on Tacitus and Montesquieu, if read at all now, merely examples ideological bias. He is read historiographically, with eyebrow raised, to catch him napping.

Gibbon is not the only one who can be caught napping. We teachers can expect to become more and more the subject of testing and assessment. Frankly, I am worried. What if they test my reading speed and find it is the same as that of my students? What if they find out I refuse to read books I can't enjoy? What if they see me with a copy of Mark Twain rather than Derrida or Lacan? Twain used to be considered ninth-grade reading, but I believe that was typical British condescension in regard to American authors. Or maybe because it's a pleasure to read. Anything pleasurable can't be very advanced.

In that case, the prose of specialists is very advanced. Everything about American learning is advanced, but what I look for is not advanced readings, but readings in retreat.

Slower readers make better teachers. We read at the same rate as our students, so we can pick texts they can stand. Of course, we have different aims. I read so slowly that I ignore plot; if I didn't, I'd go crazy with anticipation. I suspect many of my students do.

I read so slowly that if my class and I begin a book at the same time, I have to shut them up about how it ends. This year we did Tom Sawyer, and

they were racing through after the first dozen chapters. I hate books like that. Three students did not attend classes for the last month. With these three, I wasn't sure who was who because they always cut as a threesome, the Musketeers. Yet Tom Sawyer they read completely. In fact, they had great insight into Tom's skipping school and his faking Bible learning.