How Classics Create an Aliterate Society

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ere you an avid reader as a teenager? Did you love *Wuthering Heights* and *The Scarlet Letter* in high school? Good for you! At the same time, that could be a problem for you, because it may be impossible for you to understand why so many students in your school do not feel the same way about the classics. It seems to be part of human nature for us to think that everyone has had experiences similar to ours and that they share our perspective on things. Thus, as a lover of classical literature, it seems logical for you to conclude that there is something wrong with today’s students if they don’t share your passion. You may never consider how the required literature in your school’s curriculum affects kids who are not like you.

I’ve been able to see things differently, for I was not an avid reader as a teenager. I read my assignments—I was an obedient student. But I almost never read for pleasure. Books were dull. Adults who are avid readers say that reading is active because readers use their imagination, as opposed to watching television, which is a passive activity. HA! For me, playing baseball and stickball and football was active! Hiking and camping were active! Building forts in the woods, deep sea fishing, climbing trees . . . those were active! Sitting in a chair to read a book, in comparison, was about as passive as anyone could get!

There were also no books in my home, except for a dictionary and a couple of Bibles. My father read the New York *Daily News* every day, and my family subscribed to *LIFE* magazine. And when I was a Boy Scout, I subscribed to *Boy’s Life* and read it thoroughly each month. But that was about it.

Like many teens today, because I did not read much I had a weak vocabulary, and I did not write very effectively. That was doubly bad, because not only was I not interested in reading books like *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hamlet*, and *Silas Marner*, I had to struggle to understand them when they were assigned.

Moreover, I did not see any connections between my life and the lives of the characters in those novels and plays. There’s a character in Mel Glenn’s poetry book, *Class Dismissed II*, whose viewpoint I shared. In that poem, Paul Hewitt says he can’t identify with Huck Finn or care about Willie Loman. He asks if the teacher has any books that “deal with real life” (18). Why was I supposed to care about a Puritan woman who got pregnant from having sex with a minister? What did I have in common with a crazed old king who alienated the only daughter who really loved him and then didn’t have enough sense to come in out of the rain? I did enjoy the witches and bloody stuff in *Macbeth*, and I found the riots and beheadings in *A Tale of Two Cities* interesting, but all that knitting by Madame DeFarge was boring.

Many of my classmates and I could never figure out what we were supposed to get out of those assigned stories and poems. Like most students, we relied on the teacher to tell us what they meant. One of my former college students defined a classic this way: a classic is a book that “requires a teacher to figure out a glimmer of what it says.”
Nevertheless, I did read the required books, as I said; I listened in class most of the time, and I passed quizzes and tests on the material, usually with Bs and Cs because I was a fairly intelligent kid. (As a matter of fact, I and my parents were often told by school counselors and teachers that I was “not working up to my potential.” You know the type.)

My classmates Marjorie and Elizabeth, on the other hand, always earned As—they were smart and they loved to read. My less intelligent classmates did not fare as well: Roy, Richard, Vincent, Tony—the guys. Like the irradiated marigolds in Paul Zindel’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, Marjorie and Elizabeth had mutated and flourished (they probably grew up to become teachers), while Richard and Tony and others like them, badly burned by their experiences, shriveled up and swore never to read another book in their lives.

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Like too many students, I never learned much from those classics then, never developed a love of reading from them. Fortunately my life turned around halfway through college when my roommates Stu Wilson and Al Fassler, who loved to read, introduced me to Holden Caulfield and Immanuel Kant, as well as to classical music. I also had several excellent English teachers, especially Dr. Jim Prins, who helped me see the relevance of the issues in classical literature. More significantly, my interest level caught up with the level at which classical literature has always existed. What interested me in real life was suddenly what all those books were about!

When I look back at that phenomenon now, it all makes perfect sense to me. I wasn’t READY for classical literature when I was 13, 14 ... 17, 18. Even though I was more physically mature than most of my peers (I was shaving weekly before my twelfth birthday), I was still a typical teenage interested in teenage things. The classics are not about TEENAGE concerns! They are about ADULT issues. Moreover, they were written for EDUCATED adults who had the LEISURE time to read them. They were also, not incidentally, written to be ENJOYED—not DISSECTED, not ANALYZED, and certainly not TESTED. When I became an adult, I became interested in adult things, and so the classics finally had meaning for me, and I could finally appreciate them.

Now you can see why I understand and sympathize with the tenth grade boy who told me that his required literature books “... have nothing to do with me.” And the tenth grade girl who defined literature as “keeping in touch with the dead.” Or the teenager who said, “I’m tired of reading this boring stuff. I want to read something with a pulse!” One of my former graduate students put it this way: “My experience in high school with the classics was similar to dissecting a frog: it was tedious and it stunk.”

Such negative experiences and their resulting attitudes have created over the last half century an aliterate society in America. We are a nation that teaches its children how to read in the early grades, then forces them during their teenage years to read literary works that most of them dislike so much that they have no desire whatsoever to continue those experiences into adulthood. Daniel Pennac, a French author, in his book Better Than Life, first published in French in 1992, describes the role of the typical school this way:

... it looks as though school, no matter the age or nation, has had only one role. And that’s to teach the mastery of technique and critical commentary and to cut off spontaneous contact with books by discouraging the pleasure of reading. It’s written in stone in every land: pleasure has no business in school, and knowledge gained must be the fruit of deliberate suffering. A defensible position, of course. No lack of arguments in its favor. School cannot be a place of pleasure, with all the freedom that would imply. School is a factory, and we need to know which workers are up to snuff. (91–92)

Pennac continues the factory metaphor, with teachers as bosses, subjects as tools, and competition as the model of the workaday world. He concludes his chapter with this:

It is the nature of living beings to love life. ... But vitality has never been listed on a school curriculum. Here, function is everything. Life is elsewhere. You learn how to read at school. But what about the love of reading? (92–93)
What about the Love of Reading?

I'd like to see “the love of reading” listed as the number one goal of the English curriculum at every grade in all school systems. What a revolutionary idea! Of course, those who advocate the teaching of classics have always said that loving and appreciating literature is their goal. The opposite, however, has been the result of those good intentions, as G. Robert Carlsen and Anne Sherrill show clearly in Voices of Readers: How We Come to Love Books. After studying the randomly selected autobiographical essays of 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students written over a thirty-year time span, they conclude:

... [T]eachers profess that by presenting the classics, they are really increasing reading enthusiasm or teaching appreciation of great works or both. It is disturbing that the protocols indicate that exactly the opposite is happening to many of the young. (136)

In the early 1980s I asked students in a number of Connecticut schools how the books they chose to read on their own compare with the assigned readings in their English classes. Several students wrote: “Teacher books are boring.” Several said the obvious: “The books I like are interesting.” “Mine have a lot of action...” One student said: “The books I read sometimes are the same as to what is going on around me” (implying that assigned books are not connected with the real life of teenagers). Similarly, another student wrote, “[My books] talk and use the same language as me.” Another said, “The books I read on my own, you never want to put them down; the ones assigned, you never want to pick up” (Gallo “Reactions” 7–9).

In that same survey, 40 percent of junior high school boys and 35 percent of girls said they seldom or never liked the books they were required to read in school. In senior high schools, the percentages were 41 for boys and 23 for girls. In contrast, only 20 percent of the students said they usually or always liked the assigned books (8).

So, what do most teenagers today want from a book? Whatever the type of reading, almost all kids will be more attracted to a book that grabs their attention immediately—which right away leaves out most classical literature. Consider this opening from George Eliot's Silas Marner:

In the days when the spinning wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses—and even great ladies, clothed in silk and thread-lace, had their toy spinning wheels of polished oak—there might be seen in districts far away among the lanes or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country folk, looked like the remnants of a dispossessed race. (1)

And that's only the first sentence! The first page of Great Expectations, Pride and Prejudice, The Good Earth, or The Scarlet Letter (if you consider “The Custom-House” as the opening chapter) aren't much better, especially when you consider them from the point of view of an Internet-savvy, TV-literate, MTV-viewing contemporary teenager.

Compare the opening of Silas Marner quoted above with this opening paragraph from Walter Dean Myers's recent award-winning Monster:

The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help. That way even if you sniffle a little they won't hear you. If anybody knows that you are crying, they'll start talking about it and soon it'll be your turn to get beat up when the lights go out. (1)

Or these opening sentences from a short story by Will Weaver titled “The Photograph”:

“Naked?”
“Yes.”
“Ms. Jenson? Our beloved phys ed teacher and girls’ track coach?”
“Skinny-dipping. Absolutely. She was in the lake totally naked.” (3)

I can't imagine any high school student not wanting to read more of that story.

Middle school kids, especially boys, want action, adventure, suspense. A seventh grader writing to his pen pal, one of my graduate students, a couple years back explained his tastes bluntly: “I like horror with a lot of killing and suspense.” The writing also has to be vivid so that readers, as one boy said, can “get a clear picture of what is happening.” Another seventh grade boy, in a class taught by a friend of mine, says he enjoyed a novel by Raymond Feist called Shadow of a Dark Queen because “it had great detail” so that “when he decapitated a guy because he killed a girl that he liked, I could visualize the picture in my mind.” Maybe that's not quite the kind of interest we would like to see, but these seventh graders are very clear about their likes and dislikes.

What teens want more than anything else from novels is entertainment. And that's exactly what I want—and what I suspect most readers want—
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from a novel. That’s also primarily what writers say they want readers to get from their books. If readers learn something along the way, that’s even better. But once the lesson becomes the primary reason for using a book, the act of reading becomes a chore. So it makes good sense to find teachable novels whose stories are lively, interesting, enjoyable, hopefully humorous, too, from which we can also learn something—about how people deal with their problems, how other people interact, possibly how other cultures function (though younger teens, being basically self-centered, prefer to read about people as much like themselves as possible), and so forth.

One of my former university students recalled her early adolescent experiences with books: “As a teenager, I was able to be myself when I was reading, while the rest of the time I was fitting in. Because a lot of the novels I read dealt with teenagers with similar problems, I felt comfortable.”

Another student, this one a seventh grade girl, when asked to analyze what makes a book interesting, wrote this:

Most of my favorite books have all had one thing in common. That is the main characters in the books were young kids, or teens. I think that books with kids in them are very interesting to me because I can sort of relate to them, and I like reading about things that could happen to people my age. Also, sometimes when I read books that have older characters in them, they are dealing with problems that I can’t relate to or don’t understand.

One of the most valuable qualities of contemporary teenage fiction is that it helps students feel normal, comfortable, understood. In many school systems, teenage fiction is limited to middle school classes or to remedial level classes in the high school, mainly because those books are easier to read than classics. Older and more advanced readers can handle the classics—true. But even our brightest students are still teenagers with typical teenage problems and needs, and by limiting those more advanced students to classics, our curricula fail to meet their social and emotional needs. Everyone knows there are easy teen novels for younger and less able readers, but there are also some superb novels in this genre that are more complex—sophisticated enough for even AP readers. (On that topic, check out an article by Patricia Spencer in the November 1989 English Journal.)

But, you may ask, if we stop teaching classics, or at least decrease our reliance on them, how would we teach the reading and analytical skills with less challenging literary works? Significant question. The answer is easy: teach the newer books basically the same way. Well, let me qualify that. I mean teach the same literary concepts and develop the same analytical skills, but perhaps in a better way. There are still too many teachers who kill any book by the way they teach it, asking students to recall picky and insignificant details, testing every day, removing whatever joy a kid might have had in reading the book in the first place.

Like classics, contemporary books for teenagers have plots that can be charted, settings that play significant roles, and characters whose personalities, actions, and interactions can be analyzed. There are figurative language, foreshadowing, irony, and other literary elements in the best of the newer works. The symbolism, however, usually isn’t as heavy as in most classics, and the vocabulary is usually less difficult, but no young adult reader will object to those things; in fact, many teachers I know will be relieved by that as well.

The only two elements common in the classics that some contemporary young adult novels lack are plot complexity and dull, lengthy descriptions. This doesn’t mean that no contemporary novels for teens have complex plots; the works of Robert Cormier, M. E. Kerr, Chris Crutcher, and Chris Lynch, for example, are quite complex. The most appealing characteristic of young adult novels, of course, is their high interest level. In short, we can teach high
school students literary skills with YA books while everyone enjoys the reading activity. (If you want research proof, go way back to 1965 and read Nathan S. Blount's report in the Journal of Educational Research and Bruce Appleby's 1967 dissertation.)

It bothers me a great deal when high school English teachers or university professors condemn young adult books because they believe they are shallow and poorly written. Those people are ignorant elitists who haven't done their homework, haven't read even an adequate sampling of the novels, short stories, nonfiction, and poetry for teens that is available for classroom use and independent reading. Those critics seem to think that young adult books mean shallow romances, Sweet Valley High, transparent mysteries, or supernatural thrillers like those by R. L. Stine. They equate simplicity with lack of quality. And they are partly right, because those kinds of books are part of what some kids are interested in, especially in middle school. But there is so much more. No thoughtful reader can ever accuse After the First Death by Robert Cormier, Dancing on the Edge by Han Nolan, Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson, or Whitechurch by Chris Lynch of being simplistic. Spend a couple of hours reading I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This by Jacqueline Woodson and then try to tell me it's shallow. Read Ironman by Chris Crutcher and you'll eat your words. Read Gary Paulsen's Soldier's Heart and you'll wonder why anyone would want to struggle through Crane's The Red Badge of Courage.

If you want to hook your students with a mystery, there are none better than The Killer's Cousin and Locked Inside, both by Nancy Werlin. If you want multicultural perspectives, check out Go and Come Back by Joan Aheleve. If you are looking for books with strong female characters, try Annette Curtis Klause's Blood and Chocolate, Joan Bauer's Rules of the Road, Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak, or Jerry Spinelli's Stargirl. For superb sports novels that are about more than sports, read Thomas Cochran's Roughnecks or Rich Wallace's Playing Without the Ball. For historical fiction, you'll find nothing better than Jason's Gold by Will Hobbs. If you want to have top-notch discussions in your classes, you can't miss with Rob Thomas's Doing Time, Ellen Wittlinger's Hard Love, Will Hobbs's The Maze, Joyce McDonald's Swallowing Stones, Chris Lynch's Whitechurch, or one of the many short story collections published recently, such as Twelve Shots, edited by Harry Mazer, or Time Capsule, which I edited.

There are literally hundreds of great books like these, written by sensitive, knowledgeable, and insightful writers who understand teenage readers. Along with the well-established writers in this field, such as Richard Peck, Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, Norma Fox Mazer, Caroline Cooney, Bruce Brooks, M. E. Kerr, Alden R. Carter, Will Hobbs, and Walter Dean Myers, there are many talented newer writers such as Ellen Wittlinger, Rob Thomas, Han Nolan, Adam Rapp, Trudy Krisher, Margaret Peterson Haddix, and Laurie Halse Anderson. You need to read their works and experience them for yourselves. Then, you need to tell your students about them, even if you never teach these books in your classroom, because there is no other way your students will ever hear about these books or others like them.

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How else will your kids know about them? They don't see ads for these books on television. They don't hear them discussed on the radio. Their parents and grandparents can't recommend these books because most of them weren't written when those older folks were teenagers. In too many schools, library/media specialists do not get a chance to recommend these books to kids because most teachers, especially in high school, never invite the librarians to their classrooms. Worse, many librarians who work with teenagers—in both school libraries and public libraries—were never trained in the field of books for young people, so they don't know as much about these books as they should.

Who is left? The only people in the whole universe who can talk to students about books—other than their peers—is us! Unfortunately, the evidence shows that most teachers DON'T talk with
their teenage students about books that will interest them. In fact, 35 percent of the seventh grade students in a survey that one of my former students conducted said that they couldn’t recall a single teacher ever recommending a book of any kind to them, and 60 percent recalled only one teacher who had ever done so (Cararini). And if their teachers did recommend books, it was usually classics that the teachers had read in college, books that were written for well-educated, leisured adults and that don’t have a single teenage character in them. In that same survey of kids in a medium size city middle school, only three out of the fifty-seven eighth graders surveyed checked the statement, “Teachers know what books students like.” How sad. In fact, that’s almost criminal.

One of the best ways I’ve found to introduce teens to good books is to have an extensive classroom library—mostly paperbacks because they are easier for kids to handle and carry. Every classroom should contain dozens of them, nonfiction as well as fiction, and poetry too. Even picture books. Add to your collection frequently. Booktalk a few of them each week. (Of course, to do that, you will need to read them first.)

If you can’t completely change the curriculum so that you can replace some of the classics with contemporary books, especially books with teenage main characters, then consider pairing teen novels with one or more of your classics. In From Hinton to Hamlet, Sarah Herz and I explain how you can do that quite efficiently. In four separate volumes of Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics, edited by Joan Kaywell, you can find teaching ideas and even some daily lesson plans for doing that with several classics.

Another way to incorporate more teen lit into your classroom is to introduce your students to some of the numerous short stories with teenage characters that are now available. Twenty years ago there were five collections of stories written for teenagers. Today there are more than 100 collections. You can find an extensive list of many of those short story titles and how to use them in a text called Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers, edited by Kyleen Beers and Barbara Samuels (340–45).

Providing a block of time each week, or even each day, when kids can read whatever they choose for pleasure will increase reading interest and experience. Consider it practice. Athletes practice; musicians practice; our students need to practice reading, too. It would be even better if the entire school set aside 15–20 minutes every day for silent reading. School reading assignments are not allowed. No homework. Just pleasure reading. And you get to read as well.

You might even start your program by reading to your classes. Read the opening chapter or a particularly vivid scene from a novel and then stop. If the story and your lively reading of it have done their job, at least one of the students in your class will ask to borrow the book so she or he can read the whole thing. Don’t be surprised if they do so in one night. And if one student is enthused about a book, that will influence others to try it. Good experiences are addictive.

You say you don’t know where to find information about good books for teenagers? There’s a young adult literature column that appears regularly in this journal. And there are two journals devoted exclusively to books for teenagers: The ALAN Review and VOYA—you can subscribe. The National Council of Teachers of English publishes two volumes every three years or so that are just pages and pages of annotations of new books for teens, organized by topic and genre: for middle schools it’s Your Reading; for high schools it’s Books for You. Every library in your system should have a copy of the current and back issues of those books, and you should have a copy on your desk for easy reference.

Do I need to remind you that you can find reviews of these books on the Amazon or Barnes & Noble Web sites? If you want biographical information about authors, one of the best recently published sources is a four volume set called Writers for Young Adults, edited by Ted Hipple. And by the time you read this, a new Web site called Authors4Teens.com should be up and running, featuring extensive interviews with top authors in the field, though it is a restricted site. (For access, contact Greenwood Press.)

The most inspiring place to learn about books like those I’ve been discussing is at the yearly ALAN Workshop that follows the NCTE convention each November, where for two full days you will hear more than a dozen authors and an equal number of educators talk about books for teens. You will also go home with a shopping bag full of autographed books to enjoy and share with your students and colleagues.

One final word: please do not conclude that I am against reading and teaching classics. But knowing that our traditional classical literature curricula have done more harm than good to so many students
over the years, I urge you to also consider using some of the wonderful contemporary books that are available to meet the reading needs and interests of today's students. Not only will your students appreciate them, but I guarantee that YOU also will enjoy them. Here's to the joy of reading!

Works Cited


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Donald R. Gallo, a former professor of English, writes and edits books for teachers and teenagers.