

IN THE INFORMATION AGE, where the global economy is knowledge-based, education is more important than ever. Despite a number of education reforms, U.S. academic performance remains mediocre. After graduation, more than one-third of high school and college students never read a book again for the rest of their lives.

Why do so many Americans hate to read? Perhaps a long-outdated academic tradition is the root cause. Teenagers are condemned to read the same classic literary fiction that has plagued several generations. Compelling them to navigate dull, dated, frustrating, and unintelligible novels sucks the joy out of reading. This consequently suppresses their love of learning—perhaps permanently.

We cannot afford to cling to an antiquated tradition that does not produce modern results. It is time to renovate public school English curricula. Antagonizing students by assigning books they hate never has made sense. If we replace the so-called classics with books to which students can relate, the U.S.'s abominable academic statistics just might rise.

For decades, we have endured the belly-aching that Americans lag behind many other countries academically. Yet, our educational system remains addicted to *Beowulf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Oliver Twist*, and scores of other established novels that do not seem to produce superiorly-educated students. Classic literature has been given a free pass—it has been grandfathered into the system. The assumption that it is the best-suited means to developing children's reading and writing skills must be questioned and tested.

Imagine the enthusiasm kids would have for reading and learning if they were assigned books they actually found interesting and relevant?

Culture and art are profoundly important. However, literacy must not be predicated upon incurring the wrath of the prose of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and members of the classic literature legion of doom. How many of us have fond memories of the novels we were required to read in school? Were these really effective teaching tools? Could past generations have excelled in life without studying the works of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, John Steinbeck, or F. Scott Fitzgerald? My success as a doctor and abilities to write creatively, professionally, and academically hardly have been the product of begrudgingly being immersed in the drudgery of Homer or Geoffrey Chaucer. Seeing my own children suffering the same fiction fiasco was the last straw.

With the aid of feedback from children, adults, and educators, I formed the Illiterate Hypothesis. I submit that replacing the bulk of the school-assigned novels with more-desirable contemporary fiction—or, better yet, a wide variety of nonfiction—will result in improved reading and writing skills. Shifting the focus away from literary fiction to modern texts, short stories, and articles would pro-

IS SHAKESPEARE MAKING OUR KIDS ILLITERATE?

BY DONALD LIEBELL

"Perhaps there was a time that the literary art of Shakespeare, Hemingway, Dickens, and other notables served our children well. However, along with The Old Man and the Sea and Moby Dick, their ships have long sailed. It is time for these dinosaurs finally to become extinct . . . at least where our schoolchildren are concerned."

mote a love for reading, and therefore a love for learning.

There is a massive urgency to crack down on how the English language is taught altogether. The subject pretentiously has been renamed Language Arts. Are we too embarrassed to call it English anymore? Perhaps it is because the English language itself long has been lost as the focus of the classroom. Liter-

ary fiction indeed is a form of art, which warrants exposure and appreciation. Perhaps kids do become more cultured by reading novels deemed literary classics. However, is the goal of public education to produce adults capable of quoting Shakespeare at parties? Do we want to sacrifice competency in reading comprehension, writing, grammar, usage, and style for a pompous pedigree of high-society snobbery?

Schools are supposed to help prepare children for functional adulthood. Equipping our youth with the skills and knowledge to succeed in life is paramount. Children who are minimally competent in English language skills should not be bombarded with complex and confounding literary fiction studies. It would be absurd to expect students who have not mastered basic mathematics to succeed in advanced calculus. However, rising sixth-graders are burdened with the analogous task in the English classroom.

Equipped with a dazzling array of delightful, colorful, and entertaining books, parents introduce their children into the wonderful world of reading. Elementary school teachers, for the most part, do a fine job reinforcing and enhancing the concept that reading is fun. However, in middle school, the foundation crumbles in a heartbeat. The sudden death of Curious George, Olivia, Amelia Bedelia, and other fictional friends gives rise to a confounding consortium of arch enemies from which there will be no escape.

Indoctrinating pre-teens into the "cult" of Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, etc. is even more emotionally devastating than the tragic demise of the beloved characters of youth fiction. Without any warning (or at least a pre-literature preparatory course) the children are required to decipher plots and symbolism, identify epiphanies, perform character analysis, and decode the intended meanings of long-deceased novelists.

It is patently dishonest to preach reading is fun, but consistently prove otherwise. Elementary school graduates magically are expected to transmogrify into literary scholars. The many who have not mastered the basics of English are abysmally unqualified to tackle complex novels.

Anything that discourages children from reading handicaps academic progress and achievement, regardless of individual aptitudes or potential. With our current system, reading ceases to be fundamental after elementary school. It becomes a boring and perplexing burden. Enticing young children to read with charming and engaging stories, and then unceremoniously confiscating them in favor of intricate and often unintelligible literary art is a bait and switch con.

Nobody wants to eat foods that taste bad, or watch television programs or movies they dislike. Not everybody is a connoisseur of fine wines, Cuban cigars, caviar, opera, or abstract art. Those who are not enthusiasts for these iconic cultural pursuits are hardly stupid, unsophisticated, or uncouth. The same is true for

appreciation of literary art. It is a “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” situation for which most students do not see the splendor.

My criticism is not of literary fiction itself, but rather its mandatory usage in teen education. From an early age, nonfiction books (primarily science and nature) were my salvation. My parents recognized that novels were a nuisance to me. They gave me the appropriate tools for me to prosper. I succeeded at every academic level, despite my intense disdain for being forced to read fiction.

In the fall of 2011, my eldest son entered middle school. He and his sixth-grade classmates suffered the indignity of reading Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* for their first assignment. Many parents agreed that this Victorian English novel was an unreasonable choice. How could 10- and 11-year-olds possibly complete the nightly projects without significant parental (and Internet) assistance?

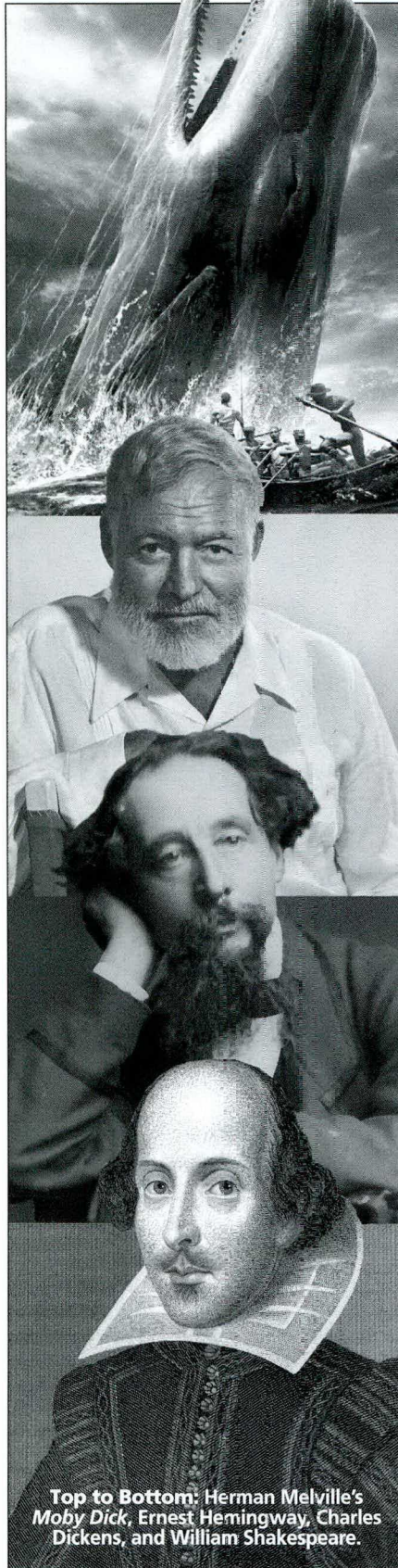
Other parents shared my opinion that this book was inappropriate on many levels. The story is fraught with violence, cruelty, and anti-Semitism. The character of Fagin is painted to be cheap, greedy, cowardly, and big-nosed. Must we glorify and revere an author who referred to one character as “the Jew” more than 250 times, yet never identified others by their religion or ethnicity?

The intense study of classic literary fiction should become an elective subject . . . in college. Twenty-first century teens do not want to read Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*; neither did their parents. The arduous task of deciphering such works does not pave students’ way to prosperity. My research, including conversations with both teens and adults, ranks *Jane Eyre* among the most-boring and reviled of all school novels.

I told my son he was doomed. I should have launched my crusade 20 years ago. Perhaps I could have spared him from his indoctrination into the domain of Shakespeare. After dreadfully dealing with *Oliver Twist*, there is nothing a sixth-grader loves more than being force-fed Shakespeare. Literary art of such complexity cannot continue to be the means by which educators attempt to develop children’s much-needed English skills.

Outstanding English grammar, spelling, usage, and style may not necessarily be prerequisites for success in the working world. Nevertheless, the goal is to increase each student’s odds for success. Artistic literary fiction often skillfully depicts characters by applying their distinguishing dialects. Although this is a clever and effective literary device, exposure to it can hinder grammatical competence. Novels encumbered by the vernacular of the uneducated, or the lingo and colloquialisms of other cultures from centuries ago, can be exasperating and confusing. Students do not become more proficient by reading stories laden with poorly-speaking characters.

Classic novels inarguably are works of art. However, American teenagers need less art from their Language Arts class, and more lan-



guage. Thanks to the Internet, more written material is read all over the world. Should this not fuel a heightened demand for improving grammatical skills? Is our youth so articulate that they can afford a seven-year hiatus from the fundamentals of English language to ana-

lyze novels and poems? Perhaps with every tweet and text message sent it has become progressively more acceptable to write and speak poorly. This further validates the urgency for education reform. We must embrace daily lessons in mastery of the English language from kindergarten through 12th grade.

If classic literature is so wonderful, why is there still so much cheating? *Monarch Notes*, *Cliff Notes*, and other “study guides” have been the saving grace for several generations of students. These are books that explain other books. Aided by these and a plethora of websites, modern students are heavily armed to navigate the minefield of their school assignments. SparkNotes, an extremely popular online resource, was created by Harvard students to meet the demand for understanding the characters, plots, and themes of literary fiction.

Whether their usage constitutes cheating long has been a debatable issue. Nevertheless, without them, a sizable percentage of students would be paralyzed to perform their English assignments. The fact remains that they are not designed solely for mediocre, poor, or lazy students. Highly intelligent and motivated students swear by them, too—not because they provide a shortcut, but rather to fulfill the need to decipher otherwise incomprehensible writing. This feedback consistently comes from doctors, lawyers, college professors, and other holders of advanced academic degrees.

If top students need the equivalent of a cipher to crack the code of a cryptogram, what hope is there for the average or below-average student? How marvelous it would be if our students were assigned reading materials that do not require translation.

There are video games that are designed to be so difficult that the only way to navigate them is to obtain the cheat codes or walk-through guides from the Internet. Public education is not a video game. Graduates must enter the working world equipped with life skills. By no means do I suggest we should dumb down the reading list but, rather, update, renovate, and expand it.

We live in an age with an unprecedented abundance and access to exceptional written materials, if we make the effort to pursue them. With a modicum of effort, a modern and more-effective English language curriculum could and should be constructed. Perhaps there was a time that the literary art of Shakespeare, Hemingway, Dickens, and other notables served our children well. However, along with *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby Dick*, their ships have long sailed. It is time for these dinosaurs to finally become extinct . . . at least where our schoolchildren are concerned. ★

Donald Liebell is a physician and author of Illiterature—Why Our Schools’ Classic Literary Fiction Addiction Kills Kids’ Love for Learning by Destroying Their Desire to Read, from which this article is adapted.

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