

Hello, Norma Jean. Goodbye great books

Students enrolling at a prominent Australian university this week will be able to choose [an elective](#) that is likely to leave all the competition for dead. A course designed to tie in with an art exhibition at neighbouring galleries offers La Trobe undergraduates credits for studying the famous blond bombshell of the 1950s, Marilyn Monroe. The course, "Exhibiting Culture: Marilyn", which is also open to the general public, will be taught by Dr Sue Gillett.

Now, one lecture, I can understand. But a whole course? A semester?

Evidently there are important historical and cultural insights to be gained from studying the gal who once said, "I defy gravity." The topic puts me in mind of an acquaintance who wrote her MA dissertation on Mills and Boon novels. I have since discovered that she is not the only one to have won a degree by attempting to plumb the shallows of popular romance.

Of course, films, film stars, popular writers and romances tell us something about their era. Usually the message is all too clear. Dr Gillett, however, will present the star of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as both a victim and a manipulator of 1950s female roles, as well as a person of interest, after marrying playwright Arthur Miller, to the FBI in the McCarthy years.

But if that is all students learn about the "1950s" in their university career – and for some at least it will be – they will carry with them very vivid images of a certain movie legend but an ideologically skewed and superficial idea of both women and politics at the time.

A similar problem has been highlighted by the National

Association of Scholars in the United States after studying the type of books that incoming college students are required to read before they start classes.

In [Beach Books: 2014-2016](#), a report released this month and covering more than 350 institutions, including top universities, the NAS finds that the books are predominantly “recent, trendy, and unchallenging,” dealing with subjects like racism, immigration, environmentalism and transgenderism. They are predominantly non-fiction and biographical, and many feature adolescent protagonists.

The rationale?

“Most colleges see the key purpose of a common reading program as fostering community on campus and student activism in the world.”

This, admittedly, is a big step up from the life and times of Marilyn Monroe, but still several steps back from the canon of Western literature, or even modern classics. The report notes that “only a handful of colleges assigned works that could be considered classics,” and “many distinguished living writers failed to make the grade”.

The most popular title for assignment over the two years is *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (memoir of African American experience, emphasizing poverty, family dysfunction, and crime – overcome); closely followed last year by *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (exploitation of a poor black woman whose cells, taken without her knowledge in 1951, became one of the most important living tools in medicine); and this year by *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (a compassionate young lawyer at odds with the US justice system).

Also assigned by a number of colleges: *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*; *Orange Is the New Black: My Year In a Women’s Prison*, a memoir which

has given rise to a very popular television series (the awful US prison system); and *Enrique's Journey*, about a boy from Honduras trying to reach his mother in the United States (the awful US immigration policy).

All were published since 2006. And all, no doubt, are interesting and worthy books. But most of them are rated at [junior high reading level](#), and the pursuit of relevance that they represent in common reading programmes consumes precious academic time and resources on reading matter that students could well consume in their own time.

If students have to be lured to university with Hollywood sex symbols or easy reads about contemporary figures who affirm politically correct values (especially if they can watch the movie version), it tends to confirm that the whole enterprise is in trouble.

The Beach Books report gives an honourable mention to a handful of colleges that assigned the following classics and recent works: *The Power and the Glory*; *Hamlet*; *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*; *The Orphan Master's Son*; *A Companion for Owls: Being the Commonplace Book of D. Boone Long Hunter, Back Woodsman*; *A Farewell to Arms*; *Major Barbara*.

The value of older books, says the report, is precisely that "they are *not* contemporary" and therefore "serve the excellent purpose of drawing students out of the limitations of the here and now, to learn about worlds which are new, alien and wonderful."

It is up to universities to introduce young people to these new worlds if they do not already know them. If it is worth their while to explore the world of Hollywood's Marilyn – one that is already ancient history – with students, why not the world of Jane Austen's Emma, or George Elliot's Dorothea, or

Willa Cather's Antonia?

Or on the male side Charles Dickens' Pip and Joe; Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, or Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich?

They would be at least as noble as today's heroes, and more novel.

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