

Why Students Need the Books Schools Don't Want Them to Read

When I was in school, we had to hide the trashy literature inside the classic books we were supposed to be reading. Now kids have to hide the classic books inside the trashy ones. Not only are schools now increasingly willing to replace classic books with “YA” or “Young Adult” literature, but classic literature is increasingly the target of the Tolerance Police.

This is unfortunate, since modern students are far more in need of the classics than my generation (the late baby boomers) was.

Partly because of the prevalence of digital technology, modern students live in a very culturally homogeneous world. Between video games and text messaging, today's young people—literally and figuratively—don't get out much.

Add to that the fact that the modern pop culture they imbibe through their smart phones is largely self-referential: Almost every allusion in modern film and television is to something else in modern film and television. Hollywood doesn't seem to have any knowledge of anything outside of Hollywood. American media culture in particular is extremely inbred in a way that British visual media in particular and European media in general are not.

In prior generations, most people read books, and they commonly read books we now consider classics. We tend to forget that authors such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck were not just great writers, but very popular ones. But even if you were not much of a reader, classic literature and history were an integral part of the popular culture you grew

up in.

You didn't have to even read the classics if you grew up in the 40s, 50s, or 60s to know a) what they were; and b) what they were about. They were common reference points in movies, on television, in comedy routines, and in popular music. Just go back and look at the Warner Bros. cartoons during the Golden Age of Chuck Jones, Tex Avery, and Fritz Freleng. They were chock full of references to classic books and movies, World War II, the founding fathers, the Civil War, and ancient history.

If you think "Looney Tunes" is a good description of the current politically correct nonsense now going on in schools, you're wrong. The real Looney Tunes were nothing if not culturally literate.

Disney has been the subject of controversy over how it sometimes changed classic stories, but the more important point is that they treated them at all. Disney not only told and retold the folk tales and history of America and the world on television and in its films (Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Davey Crockett, Daniel Boone, Zorro, Old Yeller), it created rides and attractions at its theme parks based on them (Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, The Wind and the Willows, Dumbo the Flying Elephant, Pinocchio), each having an attraction devoted to it.

Disney no longer builds rides based on books. Instead it makes movies based on rides (Pirates of the Caribbean, The Haunted Mansion).

Pop culture no longer does what Warner Bros., Disney, and virtually every film and television studio used to do. Movies refer to other movies, television shows to other television shows. Rather than surveying our culture's long and interesting history and literary tradition for story plots and settings, an astounding number of contemporary movies are now

either sequels or reboots of other recent movies (Star Wars, Star Trek, Mad Max, Spiderman, Captain America, Batman, Planet of the Apes, etc. etc.).

Culture is now cannibalistic, feeding on itself.

In this cultural context, it is easy to see why a modern student would be in greater need of books that take them outside the narrow, culturally illiterate world he inhabits. Unfortunately, the people who now run most schools were products of the first culturally illiterate generation—roughly the Generation Xers. They too are narrowly acculturated and hence cannot even understand the benefits of broad culture literacy.

And so [we have the censorship of Huckleberry Finn and To Kill a Mockingbird in a Virginia school](#), a decision that has apparently now been reversed. But the fact that it happened in the first place is just one more sign that the people who tout “diversity” in our culture not only don’t really believe in the principles they champion, but, because of their narrow cultural blinders, can’t even understand what the word “diversity” could possibly mean.

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