The Book As Museum Piece

Rethinking the High School English Canon

by Thomas Washington (January 2008)

A student phoned me over Christmas Break to tell me he was flunking his first semester of senior English under the thumb of Mrs. Knowles. Chris had failed to rewrite his term paper, worth fifty-five percent of the semester grade. This is cruel and common practice among English teachers, by the way. By placing a premium on a single project, you instill creative paralysis and assure that the bottom troop, those who need your help the most, will fail. Although his thesis and content eventually passed muster, Chris's margins, paragraph format, and Roman numeral system somehow remained askew. In addition, Chris wasn't faring well on the multiple choice pop quizzes, an apparent Monday favorite activity for Mrs. Knowles. I used to subject sophomore students to these. Twenty years later and I'm still penitent. Reading literature can never be boiled down to filling in circles. This is something better suited for the math department.

In fairness, I should mention the doctors think Chris is bipolar. Sometimes he checks out for a week at a time. Sometimes he disappears and winds up in Chicago's Drake Hotel bar, the *Coq d'Or*, where he claims Joe the mustached bartender serves him Manhattans and lets him smoke cigarettes. Meanwhile, the school counselors insist none of us can be certain if the rabbits Chris pulls out of his magician's hat are genuine or not.

This much I do know. Chris is well read. His father once owned

a book store in Wheaton, Illinois. While other parents were putting their kids in front of the television with a bowl of Fruity Pebbles, Chris spent his childhood in the rear of the store, looking at art books and illustrated editions of Stevenson and Defoe. Unlike his classmates, whose exposure to the classics after the 8th grade proceeds like force feeding a duck—the English teacher assumes everyone is an English major at age fifteen—Chris was checking books out of the school library six at a time. Weeks later, he'd slip them through the book drop and we'd carry on late into a Friday afternoon talking about Virginia Woolf, Gogol's *Dead Souls*, or why the library didn't subscribe to the *New York Review of Books*.

I switched career tracks from high school English teacher to school librarian four years ago. It's no secret that compared to managing classes of twenty-five or more students five times a day, a school library is softer on the sensibilities. Admittedly, after fifteen years in the English classroom, I'm not sure I have the nerve any longer to convince sixteen-year-olds that Thoreau is more relevant in the twenty-first century than he was in the nineteenth. After fifteen years of following the dictates of high school English programs, after just a few years of observing my appalling library circulation statistics for leisure reading and encountering many Chris Hamrins along the way, I'm left with one schooling *leitmotif*. It's a POW tunneling out fifty yards beyond the barb-wired fencing. The prisoner burrows out from his tiny mole hill, stands erect under a star-studded sky and takes in his first breath of freedom. He dashes toward the hills, but before he can pick up speed, the tower guard shoots him dead.

Chris Hamrin's reading habit was an altogether different approach to books, at least compared to most kids I've taught and from most students I've assisted in the library. Chris knows a lot of things I don't. He has the kind of smarts that rarely translates well in the standardized test world or the English classroom, a combination of irreverence, creative

impulse, mixed with a Wordsworthian ability to see into the life of things. At eighteen, he's sage-like. But if he doesn't learn to play by the rules in the next five years or so, he's headed for trouble. Call it a misplaced conceit, a stretch of my imagination, but I think holding him (and others like him) to the rule of Roman numerals and the size of his font, keeping him prisoner to the dictates of the curriculum without admitting he probably has a better instinct for literature than Mrs. Knowles (and those like her) ever will, promises one less convert to the book.

I once encouraged Chris to consider something more eclectic for his junior term paper in American literature besides the cause of the Second World War. Arguably, the cause of the Second World War has only a tenuous connection with American literature. But since Chris's English teacher, Mr. Tomlinson, was offering the kids free rein in their choice of topics, Chris was running with this idea. I suspect Mr. Tomlinson already realized his students were so fed up with the likes of Dickinson, Emerson, and Hawthorne that the prospect of assigning a major paper on one of them, in addition to the mini-assignments they already carry out over the course of the year, might lead to insurrection.

Teachers still enjoy sending kids home for the weekend with these missives, as though research topics are ripe for the picking now that we have the World Wide Web, as though the teacher himself were skipping home and keeping company with *Britannica Online.* Part of me admires Mr. Tomlinson's willingness to work out of the box here, to expose and connect his literature students to a wider intellectual arena. Yet even with the wellsprings of the information frontier bubbling at their feet, kids' minds still remain stuck in that post-50's junior scholastic innocence. They could write about nanotechnology or Dolly the cloned sheep, but they stick with smoking and euthanasia. The attention deficit culture has either pigeonholed their concentration or they are just too

young to gather intellectual steam. In short, Mr. Tomlinson has got it backwards here. Instead of sending the kids out on research reconnaissance missions, why not work with war literature (for lack of a better term) and have someone like Chris compare and analyze a series of books centered on the same theme rather than send him out into the context free INet universe? O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a good start here, so too Hemingway or Mailer.

Before I tossed out more ideas, Chris stopped me and said, "Please, Mr. Washington, it's not like my teacher is Cornel West or anything." Perhaps it's not a big deal if a teenager knows Cornel West, but imagine how much further along this student will be by referring to this author at the age of seventeen. This is not so much a matter of a cumulative gleaning of knowledge (in the order of an SAT) as it is in demonstrating Chris's proclivity to ideas, to exploring a curriculum that has no tether to the English classroom.

Rarely, if ever, do I field reference inquiries of a student's own design. Maybe it's too idealistic to expect a junior or senior in high school to follow the research trail of a novel or poem he reads in class, to pick an idea from an English classroom lecture and follow through with a further search in the main stacks. But why, I wonder. Adolescents have a built-in detection device for exploration. If they are not roused by ideas passed around in an English class discussion, where then?

I once worked in an English department that included William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation* in its curriculum. For over a quarter century the English department chair at this school made his students slog through Bradford's *History* because he was too lazy to draw up a test for something more contemporary, say T.C. Boyle's *Drop City*, a counter culture narrative of an altogether different sort, one which the kids might relate. Sometimes I'd come across the English chair's students in the library carrels or in the hallways, where they

held solitary confinement bouts with Bradford's work. Always on the lookout for that pop quiz or an upcoming Scantron test—those long score sheets with the ovals running up and down the page, a Hemingway novel reduced to filling in tiny circles—the students would highlight entire paragraphs in fluorescent orange. Although I still believe kids have to pay their dues as readers—you make them more skilled readers by reading Bishop or Tolstoy in the same way a fitness instructor would slowly increase weight to create muscle—I question this choice of reading for an examination of colonial America. It will shut out any further exploration of the American frontier as surely as *Natty Bumppo*.

If this English department is going to insist students bring home the information booty on Bradford (as their penchant for those Scantron tests demonstrates) instead of simply admiring the book's aesthetic values of form, rhythm, and content, then kids need not bother with Bradford really. For proficiency's sake, and ever since the information overload bomb dropped it's all about proficiency, we can amass far more data in less time with a secondary text, whether a *Cliff* note or some website wordage from an American history scholar. If, on the other hand, we hope to convey to students the value of Bradford's craft, his exceptional view in the annals of American history and literature, then by all means, we should spend weeks poring over this treasure, but maybe not until the kids turn twenty-one, after they've had a chance to open their eyes to nuance and sublimity.

Living under this full court press of information overload forces a few key questions: What do we need to know? Why do we need to know it? And given the fact that by the end of our lives we will only have absorbed and converted to knowledge a sliver of the information available to us—the web page universe, as an example, is expanding and contracting at the rate of 1.5 million pages a day or more—should we bother knowing it? In short, what should these English compositions

be about, anyway?

I'm off base in at least two assumptions here, maybe. First, I'd always assumed a high school English department needn't be bogged down in this recent obsession with Johnny's apparent delinquency in mastering the advanced reading skills needed to succeed in college and the workplace. I thought we could be enough assured with the repeated sight of Johnny's retreating to the library or his bedroom for another chunk of time with Stephen Crane or George Eliot, especially since this testing obsession, driven largely by voices shouting "more more, more," is making mincemeat of most everybody's time clock. Yet a recent study by ACT Incorporated makes a good case for raising the bar.[1] Their study finds students are falling off a disciplined reading track sometime around the 10th grade. The damning results are creating further demands for better reading instruction, more rigorous standards for high school reading, and the use of more sophisticated texts and teaching approaches to "sharpen the nation's competitive edge."

My second oversight is in assuming every student functions at a level of cool equal or greater to Chris Hamrin, my teenage reading hero. I recall another recent study in the *New York Times* bi-annual education section that figured the majority of college students wind up as business and accounting majors. Apparently, these students don't want, much less need, progressive-minded sorts encouraging the love of reading.

Years ago, in the middle of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, I told a junior English class it was youth's job to question authority. By their nature, adolescents hold adults suspect, at least this is what I perceive in their healthy skepticism. These days, though, kids appear starved for order and structure, as though they like being told what to do. The melting polar ice caps, Iran's nuclear research, or talk of World War 111: It's no surprise that students have a need for a security blanket. And literature does not often provide a

pretty picture of what lurks beneath the surface of things. A parent recently challenged Cormac Mcarthy's *The Road* as a school library title selection and claimed it was too "dark" for a teenager to deal with. According to her, part of my job was to offer up some semblance of optimism for young minds today in the form of Harry Potter or *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Those of us who entertain darker visions of life's reality, should not be allowed near students.

Studying English grammar provides the ballast against literature's dark side, against potential litigation for something the teacher said in class or against a banned book. Grammar also keeps the locus of power firmly positioned, away from the shadier nuance of the text itself. And the likelihood that half the class still won't be able to remember the difference between a gerund and an intransitive verb once they start composition 101 is more reason to teach it. Grammar is the English teacher's safety net. Whenever I had a batch of incorrigibles subliminally threatening mutiny, I would make them take out their Webster's *New World English Grammar* textbook. Like the visiting football team who blows the sails out of the 30,000 strong spectator crowd with a touchdown in the first two minutes of play, grammar knocks the wind out of kids. It transforms potential rebellion into compliance every time. I used to go up and down the rows in crack the whip fashion. And I made sure never to give the lame brains enough seconds to figure what number they would have by the time that whip came down. Other times, I would challenge the class to a contest and offer them something like a movie day or having class outside if each row answered correctly. Of course this would never happen. By the time the second row was up, the classroom transformed into a vigilante madhouse, turned against falsehood.

Seriously, with the numerous paths to choose from in high school English—sentence diagramming (It's still taught in many English classrooms.), reading, composition, public

speaking—and knowing English teachers have the kids in their talons forty minutes a day, three hours and twenty minutes per week, does it not make sense to choose the high road and ante all our learning chips on the book? What practical application does grammar have in the "real world" as kids ask? Does is not follow that good readers will make good writers?

That the high school teacher bathes in a pool of mediocrity is not news. Most every profession suffers some level of derision—the bottom sucking attorney or the repellent salesman—but only teachers toil under the vilifying line "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." This certainty has stalked me for twenty years. Besides teaching, what else could I have done with an English degree? How one "does English" (as one might do engineering or chemistry) remains uncertain, but if it implies writing and getting paid by the word, staying true to language by studying the masters and employing one's subsequent tiny arsenal of knowledge wisely, then I rarely measure up. Librarianship at least implies some sort of servitude to the word, being a conduit to the ideas hidden between all those book covers.

School librarian or teacher, the kids are on to us. So is the public. The profession ignites rounds of pummeling in the daily news with the hand wringing mantra "What's wrong with our schools?" The question supposes teachers inhabit a high rung among the culture's practitioners of a higher good, on the same level as the cleric or philanthropist. Sure, the kids and parents respect teachers to a degree, but few hope to model themselves on our short string model of success. Kids seek us out as a debutante consults the butler for a last minute tip before the ball commences. In a best case scenario, a handful of us might get honorable mention for a dedicated lifetime of service a year or two before we expire.

Teaching is a blue-collar profession, mainly, a kind of glorified plumbing practice. The high school is not the arena for pin-striped suits and company expense accounts. We're the

ones in the egg shell colored short-sleeves and the ratty T-shirts, the black, rubbery shoes, the polyester, and the tired socks. We drive a Hyundai hatchback to work. Spend enough time with this bunch and you will see the buoyancy and charm of the novice teacher reduced to a slouch and shuffle within the decade. For good reason, we use the vernacular "kid" when referring to our client base, as in "we're in this for the *kids*." The word is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as 1) "young goat" or, 2) "to engage in teasing or good-humored fooling, as in kidding around." Clearly, the public needs a bit of perspective before they start poking around too much in school affairs.

And here is the first shining irony behind the trade. Despite the teacher's bottom shelf value (and more so the librarian, perhaps)—our salaries command less than the electrician and the garbage man—we maintain huge egos. How else would the English teacher, outlining the hinge points and themes of the *Scarlet Letter* five times a day, get through it, were it not for his perception that the audience was riveted by his performance? Teachers and school administrators are exercising power trips all the time, from smothering an essay in red ink to flunking a student for the semester. Was it not enough, for instance, for Mrs. Knowles to pass Chris just for showing up to her class each day under the pretense that he took a genuine interest in her presentations?

Hollywood is not fooled by school personnel. The bumbling egoist, Mr. Woodley in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off,* offers a superb example of pitiful rule. The bitter principal, Mr. Vernon, in the *Breakfast Club*, or Mr. McAllister in *Election*, Carver High's civics teacher, whose thwarted lust for power and sex turns him into deceitful little Napoleon, further illustrate the point. The genre of moviemaking, the high school as poky (and how many of them do appear as a penal complex from a distance) still attracts because everyone relates. Everyone has known a Mr. Woodley. At some point in

their careers, these characters missed a turn. They are better suited as army or precinct captains, anyplace where they can play out their need for control without the charade of educator.

Oddly, the English teacher has escaped Hollywood's rebuke. For every dunce head Mr. Woodley at the front office helm, a John Keating (*Dead Poet's Society*) stands at the door to inspire students in a love of poetry and to seize the day. In *Dangerous Minds*, ex-Marine English teacher Louanne Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) tames a bunch of inner-city, underachieving recalcitrants into a puppy litter of hopefuls. Despite the stereotypes, Hollywood gets one thing right here. The only high school department that stands a chance at converting the doltish ranks into visionaries is the English department. Inspiring the teenage mindset will likely not happen with an algebra book, much less a chemistry text. Nor does the physical education teacher stand much of a chance, except for that ephemeral gridiron glory, usually wiped out midway through junior college.

As I turned over to kiss my wife goodnight the other evening, she held me in her arms and expressed a sense of wonder, not the miracle that I still lay nestled beside her after fifteen years, but the marvel that our bodies still remain unbroken after so many close calls. Our family pets bit us both in the face when we were kids. Each of us survived a car crash. We've suffered broken limbs. I once had an oven blow up in my face. That I survived the gauntlet of high school English amazes me even more than the absence of bodily wear and tear. That I still open the first page of a novel with the same exhilaration I knew in the 3rd grade surprises me. I feel like a freak of nature when I read Shakespeare and still wonder how I didn't develop a lifetime's repugnance for *King Lear* after failing Mr. Gleason's English class and doing it all over again in summer school. Rounding the bend at forty-seven, I'm still entertaining the idea of entering a PhD program in

English.

My sophomore English teacher, Mr. Martin, once assigned me a 3-pager on Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." He returned my paper weeks later (By the time we got these papers back from teachers whatever learning objective stood in place with the assignment had long expired.) with a shocking pink appointment slip attached, drew an arrow in the corner of the slip and wrote "over." When I flipped the sheet, a giant red F appeared with a "See me immediately!" underneath.

We met the following day in his English office cubicle. I've visited a lot of school cubicles since the age of fifteen, but Mr. Martin's still stands out. He had a picture of Walker Percy thumb tacked into his cell wall. A tiny flower pot with brown water sat on his desk. Mr. Martin's teaching degree from Northern Illinois University hung beside Percy's picture. When I asked Mr. Martin who the man was in the picture, he looked at me as though I were some yokel who should have known better. Mr. Martin had a long, bumpy nose and a mustache with brass-like bristles, the kind attached to those grill cleaners. He had one last outpost of hair in the middle of his forehead, a wild tuft, which, I think, succumbed by the term's end.

Without even a greeting, much less an invitation to sit down in the electric chair, (He simply acknowledged me with the cursory glance one would pay a fly on a stick of butter.) he jumped right into a reading of Jarrell's poem as though it were a call to prayer:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,

And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.

Six miles from earth, loosed from the dream of life,

I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Mr. Martin told me that Jarrell's poem was "deceivingly simple." Then he pressed the bridge on his glasses and uttered, "This paper, if we want to call it a paper, has presumably missed the deceptive part. Tell me please, Mr. Washington, what do we call this drivel you have so painstakingly typed up and down the page? Did they teach you anything here in freshmen English or were you out to lunch last year, fantasizing about the girls maybe?"

The paper might have deserved an F, except I've always thought something should be provided for effort, the same passing award one expects just for showing up to class. The art teacher, Mr. Brady, used to tutor me in poetry. Like freshmen algebra, I just didn't get it, if only because the likes of Mr. Martin, and later Mr. O'Hara, hammered home the point that some secret nugget within a couplet or quatrain was always ripe for proper interpretation. I remember one phrase Mr. Martin had underlined. I had written something to the effect of "And the gunner knew that sitting in the belly of a fighter plane would cause a *great deal* of trouble." Besides the banality of the sentence itself, Mr. Martin had trouble with the "great deal" phrase. He fumed, and he told me a "great deal" is something we find in a poker game, never in an English essay. I've since come across a "great deal" a great deal of times in my reading. Each time I do, I wonder if Mr. Martin has stumbled over the same line.

As I remember, the female English teachers never inspired the same resentment. I was in love with my freshmen English teacher, Miss Withey, the bosomy, strawberry blonde who often flushed in the middle of her sentence diagramming. Rumor had it Mrs. Cook across the hall was the one who took a special

liking to the boys, but I always fantasized Miss Withey was hungrier for affection, all that tortured diagramming with her back to us, that body heat turning her chest and neck crimson. Even though she taught by the book—in hindsight, I'm pretty sure this was because she was fresh out of college with her education degree, where she never learned the courage to stray from the text—she sometimes expressed a sympathy for our plight, however muted, by skipping over quizzes and sending us home on Mondays and Fridays with no homework. The Miss Witheys were oases in a string of semester hurdles.

Mr. Johnson, a borderline senior citizen who hailed from Mississippi, had an enduring love for William Faulkner, whom he subjected his juniors to in American literature. Besides a freshmen practice run with "A Rose for Miss Emily" or "Barn Burning" (pedagodic disasters in themselves), I don't recall any English department that I've been a part of taking on Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* with a circus ring of 16-year olds as Mr. Johnson did. He was sneaking in his private stock of English wares based on personal preference, not what was appropriate for high schoolers. *Huckleberry Finn*, anyone? It's a sadistic practice. I've seen colleagues inflict this punishment numerous times: Mr. Newman and *The Deerslayer*, Mrs. Morris and her obsession with 18th century British poetry and Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott." Morris was twenty-three going on fifty-eight. She treated books as though they were museum pieces, to be taken off the shelves, dusted and admired, and then placed back under lock and key before the next batch of tourists showed up. If her line by line commentary on *Romeo and Juliet* wasn't enough to purge the hope for a lifetime habit of reading, then Newman's bushwhacking through Cooper's forest of words in *The Deerslayer* finally did students in.

I was guilty of the same practices as an English teacher. I once special ordered Delillo's *White Noise* and Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*. I thought this pair might appeal to youth's predilection for cool or avant-garde in my modern fiction

elective. The students were befuddled and turned off, that's all. Year after year I bored sophomores to tears with the likes of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Cicero's *De Republica* in world literature because I was too much of a coward to challenge a change of course in the department's philosophy.

Today, I do the best I can to align the library's goals with the English department's objectives. I'm still assuming we share a love of reading, an interest in promising habits of lifetime reading, but given the reports from my six junior advisees, I doubt it. To counter my advisees' unanimous distaste for the *Scarlet Letter* et. al. (I don't necessarily believe this is a bad novel—I finally understood its craft by the time I was an English major—but by and large, we have no business teaching it to a seventeen-year-old.) I booby trap my library with shelf displays of books that stand a better chance of success. Displaying books around the library reminds me of fishing as a kid. When I watch students troll the display shelf it carries the hope of having that fish on the line and feeling the tug and pull in the wrist. Fishing announces an attempt. You string the rod and reel, bait the hook, and cast the line. If nothing comes of the effort, so be it. Having your bobber in the water is sometimes enough.

The book display is nestled in the fire exit corridor. At first glance, the location makes little sense. The exit signs, emergency lamps, and the twin red bells establish the comfort level of a bomb shelter. I've had enough time to measure the traffic flow in here, though. Teens dart around like a flock of sparrows, but for some reason they feed around this corridor, between the reading room and the computers.

Any retail window designer will tell you displays need to work around a theme, seasonal or otherwise. The only unity behind this display is nostalgia. These books won me over at fifteen, not from the encouragement of someone like Mr. Martin, but from that innocent choosing that Butler refers to, from the sense something exciting awaited me between the book covers.

My fall paperback lineup, for instance, included S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish,* Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five,* and Madeleine L'Engel's *A Wrinkle in Time*, among others.

To a degree, the lineup was weak. My display exposed the fantasy that a paperback with pages the color of rotting teeth could still claim the top shelf in a teen's world. This is part of the problem with school librarians these days. Some of us are scouting the technological wonderland of new classroom gadgetry, while others remain stalled in a Mr. Roger's universe, forever lauding yesteryear's innocence while dusting off the film projector, waiting for the next customer to stroll in. We're little different in this sense from Mr. Johnson's fantasies of making Faulkner's Old South come alive in suburban Des Plaines, Illinois, circa 1977. As much as we might think we have the child's best interest in mind—if they know what's good for them, they'll read it!—we're stuck in our own fancy. How could Hinton's Ponyboy, after all, draw pathos in the 21st century's teen psycho terrain of cutting, depression, and rainbow parties? The greasers and socs are burlesque figurines while the voices of Steinbeck's Doc and his band of merry men are near drowning point in that Monterey tide pool.

Nonetheless, I pulled this paperback lineup from the back shelves with the same hope that a sports coach might send the 2nd stringers on to the field to shake things up. I slipped a piece of hot pink paper in an acrylic stand and titled the display "Washington's Readers Choice Awards." Under the display title, I annotated each book. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as an example, read:

This is a novel from the 1960's, a powerful story about life in a mental hospital as told by a half-Indian patient called Chief Bromden. While you're reading, think of the mental

hospital as a weird day in school, think of R.P. McMurphy as a loud mouth classmate and Nurse Ratched as a mean teacher, and when you finish, ask yourself: Who really needed that lobotomy?

The corridor first attracted the usual suspects, those on 24/7 lookout for fun and amusement. They finger the book for a minute at most, thumb the pages, turn it over to inspect for images, and then they tell the rest of the pack "the movie version sucked" before sticking it back on the rack. The English department, by the way, ignores them.

One day a senior picked up *The Stories of John Cheever* and read the opening page. I sent her telepathic messages from my chair, ten feet away. This book is a perfect match for you. You must read this! The "Torch Song," "The Swimmer," "The Country Husband," "The Enormous Radio!" My nostalgia motif aside, these stories are perfect for her age. Twenty pages in, and this high school senior would find out what's she's likely suspected all along here in the land of skyrocketed real estate and type A personalities. She'll realize that Cheever's twisted version of the American Dream is haunting us like never before. And then she'll take comfort in knowing that she is not the only one who feels that odd, cold wind blowing through our suburban Virginia Eden, the United States at large.

The senior eventually managed to check out a book on her own. It was neither a selection from my display, or, as far as I knew, a book a teacher had recommended. She chose a dark horse among the fiction shelves, just around the corner from my display, a book I never could have imagined students reading anymore: Wharton's *The Age of Innocence.*

A school librarian and an English teacher of course have a mutual drive to lead kids to books. How we go about doing it remains a question. In truth, I'm not blaming English teachers for the decline in reading habits, not entirely anyway.[2]

Surely there are hundreds of John Keating types out there who are proving me wrong everyday. And while the teenagers' natural aversion to books is nothing new—most of us still believe the teen will one day return to the love of books as sure as the prodigal son returns to his father—the stakes are higher today. The chances of losing kids to books is more likely than ever, despite the insistence from others, librarians included, that the digital age, the interactive book, and the image are in themselves a form of literacy, one which might, in fact, demand a higher thinking and processing order than sitting alone with the printed page. In light of such changes, relying on the standard curriculum seems more an act of desperation or obstinacy rather than wisdom.

English teacher or librarian, we cannot help but stand in the way as a kind of censor, a catcher in the rye for kids. The high school student needs guidance form adults in what we've learned constitutes a good read, but I wonder if today, with all that head noise out there convincing us there is no time, we might be better served by devoting entire days, weeks even, to browsing, to picking our own corner of the school library and keeping our own company with minds, large and small.

We live in a scatterbrained age. Bringing kids back to the love of books, helping them reconnect with that 4th grade or 7th grade love of a story is a bit like bringing a patient back from a coma. We keep kids on a permanent reading track by evocative recall so that once again, through the rocky stages of adolescence they never lose their grip on books. We promote reading and making books a habit that sticks for life by devising a high school reading syllabus (Talk to a junior high English teacher or librarian, and they will tell you kids love to read in the 7th and 8th grade.) where one book stands a good chance of leading to another book. Instead of asphyxiating a sophomore boy with Austen, instead of holding the Chris Hamrins hostage to his font size rather than setting him free with his own best instinct for reading, we advise on

selections from the scores of young adult fiction, a genre that contains all the great themes of the masters, only on a smaller feeding scale: *Fat Kids Rule the World*, *Whale Talk*, Will Hobbe's *Far North*, Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, Jack London.

Finally, we blast a large hole through the traditional high school canon of Twain, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Salinger, Austen, and Dickinson (As if there were only half-a-dozen literary masters for a seventeen-year-old.) and introduce memoir, contemporary poetry, fiction and nonfiction from literary quarterlies and current anthologies into the mix. And while doing so, we realize that the Chris Hamrins and others like him need the high school English department more than ever.

In an essay titled "Why Literature?" Mario Vargas Llosa writes: "Literature has been, and will continue to be, as long as it exists, one of the common denominators of human experience through which human beings may recognize themselves and converse with each other, no matter how different their professions, their life plans, their geographical and cultural locations, their personal circumstances. It has enabled individuals, in all particularities of their lives, to transcend history: as readers of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dante, and Tolstoy, we understand each other across space and time, and we feel ourselves to be members of the same species because, in the works that these writers have created, we learn what we share as human beings, what remains common in all of us under the broad range of differences that separate us."

So, if we consider the book as the supreme teacher, and I've yet to sit in on a high school lecture that can match, say, a reading of *David Copperfield* or the *Grapes of Wrath,* then the English teacher stands alone as our messenger. What better course of study, after all, than literature for teenagers to examine their newfound angst, their aspirations, hopes, and

frustrations, their identification with others' sorrow? Books initiate and unite students into humanity's pool.

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[1] The report, titled "Reading Between the Lines," concludes that too many American high school students are graduating without the reading skills they'll need to succeed in college and in workforce training programs.

[2] See the NEA's 2004 report, *Reading at Risk, A Survey of Literary Reading in America* and the more recent "To Read or not to Read" (2007).

Thomas Washington's essays have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Common Review*, and *The Washington Post*, among others.