

Cultural Illiteracy

Our children are losing out because great books are not on the curriculum.

By Andrew Nikiforuk

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In our elementary schools, the study of great literature is suffering a slow and gradual abandonment almost as insidious as soil erosion. Gradual losses tend not to grab our attention the way sudden ones do, and this might explain why no one is shouting or weeping. Good teachers and librarians, of course, still struggle to ensure that the fairy tales, myths and legends are on the shelf, but there's no longer a canon or list of "must-reads" for Canadian school children.

In fact, there is no guarantee that an elementary student will gain courage with Pinocchio, overcome Medusa, or befriend the likes of Rat and Mole in the classroom anymore. But thanks to the power of marketplace and aggressive publishers, parents can almost be assured that their children will encounter Mr. Silly or Goosebumps.

As the system now stands, teachers and librarians generally choose what books, great or small, children will read in the elementary grades. Their selections are often compromised by the poor or uncertain reading abilities of the students.

"So much of the stuff marketed to schools comes in short sentences and limited vocabularies," notes Helen Raham, a former school librarian and the executive director of the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education. A real novel represents work for children today, and many are not equipped to handle the real thing. A lot of great books aren't taught anymore because the students just can't read them."

These realities are further confounded by unfriendly cultural giants. For starters, a great many academics, constructivists, and feminists have argued that there is no such thing as a perennial literature worth cultivating.

This camp argues that everything is relative and that the relative merit of dead Victorians or dead Greeks for that matter are now relatively unimportant. So why not let kids pick what they want to read?

In fact, every elementary school curriculum now encourages children to "select, independently, texts appropriate to their range of interests and learning needs." But if this reasoning ruled the dinner table, vegetables and a good many other good things would never be eaten.

Great literature also doesn't conform to the narrow parameters of political correctness. "On one side, the religious right doesn't like the references to the supernatural in fairy tales," notes former principal and education writer, Mark Holmes. "And on the other, the egalitarians do a head count and usually don't find enough women or minorities."

Although Canada's elementary school guides and resource lists don't exactly ban great literature, they don't really encourage their teaching either. Ontario's new grade 6 curriculum handily illustrates what's gone missing. It begins with one of those eloquent educational statements about how children should be reading "a variety of fiction, non-fiction (eg novels, short stories, poetry and myths and articles)", but there are no recommended readings, no sense that some books might matter more than others.

This ad hoc approach has never appealed to E. D. Hirsch, Jr., an English professor from Virginia who believes a shared body of knowledge is essential in a democracy. Consequently, Hirsch has produced what he calls a Core Curriculum, and its grade 6 goals include the reading of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *Julius Caesar* and *the Secret Garden*.

Although the merits of having children read a body of great literature in school may seem obvious, they bear repeating. For starters, fairy tales, folk tales and grand myths are just fun to read. They also remind children that the world can be a terrible, as well as a wonderful place. Last but not least, they are part of the moral imagination and cultural wisdom that our elders have saved for us.

Divorcing our children from this traditional canon is the modern equivalent of placing Cree children in residential schools. People with no sense of cultural history ("the democracy of the dead" as G. K. Chesterton put it) inevitably become slaves "to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking around."

Northrop Frye, who actually designed an excellent reading series for senior high school that's gone the way of clean air, also had some strong views on the teaching of literature. He believed that good stories called forth our powers of imagination and illuminated them. He argued that the best writing also helped citizens develop the ability to recognize the abundance of bad text masquerading as literature; whatever an English teacher taught, argued Frye, "he is teaching some aspect of the freedom of man."

No one, of course, is arguing that we should offer children a diet of only great books. That would be too rich a dinner. But at least 50% of what is read in elementary school should include fare as enduring as *The Wind in the Willows*. Without an authoritative list to draw from, however, schools run the risk of becoming just another marketplace for indifferent anthologies, as well as an agency dedicated to graduating cultural orphans.

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