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Anyone for the Classics?

Let's go on to the literature or reading material itself. A secondary school book in Scott, Foresman's *America Reads* series, called *Counterpoint in Literature*,[1] contained the following chestnuts, which have been anthologized for generations for school. The objectors claimed that "brutality and gruesomeness dominated this text." This is how they dismissed them.

"The Highwayman," Alfred Noyes—Girl shoots herself through the breast.
"Lord Randall," traditional ballad—The main character is poisoned.
"Danny Deaver," Rudyard Kipling—Poem concerning a military hanging.
"The Tale-Tell Heart," E. A. Poe—A man cunningly contrives to kill an old man whom he loves, carries this out and dismembers him.
"To Build a Fire," Jack London—A man freezes to death.

Any of us could play a game describing world classics in the most negative way possible and produce a list exactly like this one.

After a similar negative description of selections in an *Interaction* book of ballads for high school, the objector asked, "Is it so strange to wonder why a selection of ballads for school-age youth cannot include subject matter content that is cheerful, pleasant, happy, and inspirational?" Actually, to anyone who is conversant with the literature of ballads this *is* a strange question, because few ballads fit this prescription. The older, traditional ballads, such as one finds in Francis James Child's classic source, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, tend to commemorate dire events or to poetize the strange—"Barbara Allen," "Mary Hamilton," "Henry Martin," "Lord Randal," "The Three Ravens," "Sir Patrick Spens," and so on. One can lighten such a book, as we did, with "Scarborough Fair," a version of "Get Up and Bar the Door," and "Robin Hood and the Butcher," but certain forms of literature have an affinity with certain subjects or tones. Should, then, high school students be denied such a form? (Farther on, you will read of what happened when we editors bent the definition of "ballad" to allow us to include, for variety, "The Cherry Tree Carol.")

A teacher who had been invited to add her commentary to the criticism of the literature series *Man* (McDougal, Littell),[2] wrote:

> I think these books stink! What do they mean? I failed to find the obscenity and atheism in them that has become the issue in the fight between the factions. *What I Found* was a want of anything meaningful. The entire outlook is one of pessimism and dreariness—of "What's the use?" We have Babette [*sic*], Deutsch, Nemerov, Levertok [*sic*], Chekov [*sic*], Soroyan [*sic*], Faulkner, E. E. Cummings [*sic*]; but what of the names that have illuminated the lives of young scholars for generations? We have the modern concept of disrespect for authority, renegation [*sic*] for the elderly, the giving over of power to the poor, the out-at-the ass, the foreigner and the renegade. Why throw the baby out with the bath water? Why can't we take it a little at a time and not decide immediately that *White is Ugly?*
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> I believe that children need a period to live in a world of fantasy—they will learn that there is no Santa Claus; but they will learn in their own way what this is symbolic of—it will be no rude awakening. I believe that young people need to believe in the *ultimate* beauty and goodness of human nature as long as possible, even though they are of necessity subjected to reality every day. I think the books have a definitely "Leftist" lean, and of course, that is abhorent [*sic*] to me. I could never vote for any textbook which only offers one side of any problem—and that the negative one. I think we have enough badly written literature now; without adding to the mess. I think we need go back to the classics and the fundamentals of education—many fine people came of this training.

Interaction was loaded with classics, if by that one means long-acclaimed writings of earlier periods. It is important to bring out just how strong the textbooks were in traditional reading matter in order to understand what lies behind the charges that it conspired against accepted values. Considering prose only for the moment, some representatives were: from antiquity, Sophocles, Cicero, Mark Antony, Pliny, Plutarch, and Suetonius; from the Renaissance, Christopher Columbus, Benvenuto Cellini, Michel de Montaigne, Leonardo da Vinci; from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Francis Bacon, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Lord Chesterfield, James Boswell, Samuel Pepys, and Benjamin Franklin; from the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, Washington Irving, Bret Harte, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Sidney Lanier, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Walter Pater, William Hickling Prescott, Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexis de Tocqueville, Guy de Maupassant, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Feodor Dostoyevsky, and Leo Tolstoy.

This does not include Shakespeare and many novelists for the simple reason that anthologies don't usually include whole books, and most schools already have editions of Shakespeare. We did manage to include shorter stories of novelists like Hardy and Conrad. A list of *Interaction* poets or of twentieth century "classics" would run in the same vein but much too long to enumerate here. Also, we devoted an unusually large amount of space to folk literature—parables, myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, and proverbs—that include many classics ranging from Aesop and the Bible to familiar orally transmitted folk tales and sayings from England, Appalachia, and countries all over the world.

If what is meant by classics is children's classics, good coverage must range from the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, and Andrew Lang, who wrote famous personal renditions of inherited tales, to modern folklorists like Richard Chase, Maria Leach, and Harold Courlander, to those authors of modern children's stories and poems such as Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter, Christina Rossetti, Hilaire Belloc, Else Holmelund Minarek, Eve Merriam, Marilyn Sachs, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Elsie Locke, Roald Dahl, and Lafcadio Hearn. All of these authors appear at least once in *Interaction* and many several times.

A sampling of stories for primary school includes, besides numerous nursery rhymes and Mother Goose tales, "Henny Penny," "Jack and the Bean Tree," "Tom Tit Tot," "Mr. Miacca," "The Three Pigs," "The Elves and the Shoemaker," "The Bremen Town Musicians," "Johnny Crow's Garden," "The Old Woman and Her Pig," "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," to list some of the better known ones in this culture. Traditional folk literature in upper elementary included Arthurian and Beowulf material and such myths as those of Thor and Pandora; fairy tales like "Rapunzel," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Rumpelstiltzkin"; the legends of Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, William Tell, and Hans and the Dutch dike; animal stories like "Charlotte's Web" by E. B. White, "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" by Rudyard Kipling, and others by Gerald Durrell, Farley Mowat, and Sterling North.

This goes on into juvenile literature for secondary school that includes vast amounts of neutral types and subjects—having virtually nothing to do with sex, politics, religion, race, or other taboos—such as mystery, adventure, humor, science fiction, and sports, all of which were heavily represented in *Interaction* by several separate books devoted entirely to each one at a time. Among these authors were Saki, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Anthony Boucher, Zane Grey, Thor Heyerdahl, William Pène du Bois, James Thurber, Ogden Nash, Howard Pyle, Jack London, G. K. Chesterton, Wilbur Daniel Steele, H. G. Wells, Richard Connell, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Zenna Henderson. This sampling risks even making the program appear overly

traditional, but I have of course deliberately stocked the lists with the more familiar or "classical" works and writers.

What got us into trouble in Kanawha County was not really any exclusion of the classics or of traditional or neutral reading material but the *inclusion*, besides this, of works and writers not usually represented at that time. This is true of probably all the reading programs to which objections were raised. The others were well stocked, like *Interaction*, with literary chestnuts and expected kinds of selections by well regarded authors. No major publisher, regardless of philosophy, would dare market books purporting to constitute a literature or reading curriculum without this kind of insurance.

On the authors' economic side, it is much cheaper, I realized during the course of working out these anthologies, to compile older texts because anything over fifty-eight years in copyright at that time belonged, with some exceptions, in public domain, which is to say that it could be reprinted *free*. I began to perceive that one reason earlier textbook programs comprised so many old selections and lacked contemporary readings concerned not necessarily a stand for the "classics" but rather a stinginess in paying permissions rights. It's time the public knew more about the coarse finances that operate in the sensitive area of their children's learning. Normally, the publisher does not pay for these permissions but merely advances the costs to the textbook authors by paying the rights-holders for them upon publication and charging the amounts to the authors' royalty accounts.

Interaction co-authors ran up a debt of nearly a quarter of a million dollars in reprinting and recording permissions, more than our earnings ever paid off before *Interaction* went out of print. We paid top dollar to get the very kind of *total* coverage that our detractors deplored. We could have made them very happy by publishing only what was old enough to be public domain or hackneyed enough to cost very little. The market in reprinting is interesting. Even giant writers that were still under copyright, like James Joyce or Joseph Conrad, cost only a fraction of the price to reprint something of popular contemporaries like Flannery O'Connor or Kurt Vonnegut or minority writers like Maya Angelou or Piri Thomas. Well anthologized famous moderns can simply not bring the price of newer writers and, especially in the early seventies, Third World authors, who were enjoying a bull market. As did also our competitors in Kanawha County, I'm sure, we co-authors ran up a big bill to ensure a broad representation of periods and points of view. We paid for just what the objectors didn't want. By being cheap about reprints, conventional compilers can make higher profits while appearing to stress "our cultural heritage" and thus pleasing bigoted school constituencies.

In other words, the charge that the offending programs neglected tra-

ditions and classics in order to bias their presentations is false, but what is important here is why the book opponents had, or gave, this impression. Obviously, the publishers were banking on *both*—traditional representation plus conspicuous addition of writing by minorities, women, and other comtemporaries who dealt with today's realities and did so in a style children could relate to easily. Had we offered only the conventional textbook fare, *then* we would have biased our books. It is perhaps only natural that including what has not before been included made the objectors truly feel that what they were used to was being left out when in fact it was only being supplemented.

Their *perception* concerns me in all this, because this is what we all need to understand. It is not as a complaint that I say the dissenters ignored our traditional literature and screamed in outrage about the new writers, new subjects, and new styles. I believe that the emotions aroused by today's realism, minority dialects, the casual profanities in dialogue, sexual frankness, black humor, multicultural viewpoints, and new-age desperation about changing quickly a very sick world, so overwhelmed the objectors that they really could no longer see the totality of the books —*all* of what was in fact there. It was precisely the totality that posed the problem for them. They wanted a highly selective, not an eclectic, package. So to them *Interaction* looked diabolically biased. Perceptual difference is a serious matter, especially when one group is seeing quite differently from another group. It can make for war.

In the objectors' view it was not mere name-calling to say of one of our senior high books called *Monologue and Dialogue:* "Cover to cover, *Trash.*" Besides a couple of opening bits of whimsy—Richard Brautigan's poem, "Gee, You're so Beautiful that It's Starting to Rain" and one of the droll Don Marquis pieces from *Archy and Mehitabel*—this book contains Walter de la Mare's "The Tryst," Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," William Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble," John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," Richard Wilbur's "Two Voices in a Meadow," and T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." This makes up roughly half the number of selections—some major poems in the English language and several lesser known but respectable selections of the sort that have appeared in many anthologies without creating a stir.

Actually, as we'll see, the objectors are not happy about many of the classics themselves, but for now let's note simply that five of the remaining items in the book are by blacks. One is in "plantation dialect" ("Jealous" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, an older black poet), one is a Barbadian telephone conversation in which the two black gossipers unwittingly satirize themselves, one is in West African pidgin English, and the other two are standard-dialect poems by black writer Welton Smith. Mono-

logues by John O'Hara, Anthony Hecht, J. F. Powers, and playwright August Strindberg account for all the rest of the book except for two cartoons, by Rob Cobb and Jules Feiffer. (Powers' "The Eye" is the selection Elmer Fike was so exercized about.)

Multicultural representation does not account entirely for the harsh judgment on this book. Drawing on evidence, again, from objections elsewhere, I believe that the dissenters really are appalled by many of the classics themselves. Looked at negatively, Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble," and Arnold's "Dover Beach" are all negative—"morbid," "depressing," "hopeless," and quite possibly "anti-Christian" if you are compelled to look for that too. Blake, or rather the pebble, says,

> Love seeketh only self to please,
> To bind another to its delight,
> Joys in another's loss of ease,
> And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

Keats' soliloquist says

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death. . . .

Arnold's lover says to his beloved that the Sea of Faith has withdrawn, and the world

> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The fact is that most literature deals with negative emotion, even often when it is funny. (Freud said wit is a defense.) All tragic plays end in death. Emphasizing the classics means amassing what can be construed as negativity. Consider carefully even *Alice in Wonderland* and *Huckleberry Finn*. There are atrocious scenes in both. As for books attacking authority, consider that the Alice books and the *Wizard of Oz* are big exposés of adult incompetence, the Wizard even being shown finally as an outright fraud. Book burners calling for the classics do not mean what they say. They may mean that they want taught in school the same books they were assigned in school themselves, because those are familiar and hence "classic." They may not regard books they read as a child as

negative, but classics they did not read as a child may strike them as violent and morbid. By "classics," some simply mean certain patriotic chestnuts or even certain lines like "Give me liberty or give me death."

Presumably a classic is a classic because it deals with important human experience in a very artful way, so that catharsis, insight, and pleasure are produced perhaps even *because* the material is painful or fearful. Art transforms experience in the mind and does so, in the case of literature, by playing a pleasing game with words. It is both coping and sporting at once. Book-banning people may become so hypnotized by the subject matter, especially if it is something they're waiting to red-flag that they cannot respond to the form or manner or technique in which something is written and thereby miss its real function, to lift us beyond negative emotion, to take it and transmute it.