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We're Teaching Books That Don't Stack Up

By Nancy Schnog
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Browsing in Barnes & Noble one recent afternoon, I found myself drawn to the "Summer Reading" table, where neatly stacked piles of books by Charles Dickens and John Steinbeck and Zora Neale Hurston sat waiting for the teenagers who were supposed to read them by the first day of school. Gazing at the gleaming covers, I had to wonder how many students were in fact turning the pages with any real desire to get to the next one.

It's the time of year when I'm reminded of my twisted fate as a high-school English teacher. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, more teens and young adults are dropping literary reading than any other age group in America. "The percentage of 17-year olds," it reports, "who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled" in the past 20 years. I teach juniors and seniors -- yes, 17-year-olds.

If ever there were a teaching conundrum, today's high-school English teachers are smack in the middle of it. It's our job to take digital natives -- teens saturated with images in video games and on YouTube -- and get them to strike up a relationship with pictureless chains of black print and focus on the decidedly internal rewards of classical literature. More and more, this mission feels like blind idealism.

But as school starts up again, it's time to acknowledge that the lure of visual media isn't the only thing pushing our kids away from the page and toward the screen. We've shied away from discussing a most unfortunate culprit in the saga of diminishing teen reading: the high-school English classroom. As much as I hate to admit it, all too often it's English teachers like me -- as able and well-intentioned as we may be -- who close down teen interest in reading.

"Butchering." That's what one of my former students, a young man who loves creative writing but rarely gets to do any at school, called English class. He was referring to the endless picking apart of linguistic details that loses teens in a haze of "So what?" The reading quizzes that turn, say, "Hamlet" into a Q&A on facts, symbols and themes. The thesis-driven essay assignments that require students to write about a novel they can't muster any passion for ("The Scarlet Letter" is high on teens' list of most dreaded). I'll never forget what one parent, bemoaning his daughter's aversion to great books after she took AP English Literature, wrote to me: "What I've seen teachers do is take living, breathing works of art and transform them into dessicated lab specimens fit for dissection."

As someone who teaches in private schools, I find this especially painful to acknowledge. I haven't been constrained in my teaching methods by Standards of Learning or No Child Left Behind testing. But even where teachers are free to design their own "best practices," I've been amazed at the chasm between their sense of purpose in their curricular choices and teens' sense that what they choose for them is irrelevant. Ironically, kids' turn-off to books can originate in teachers' hopes of turning them on.

How do I know? Because kids tell me. Every June, when I asked my students at a previous school to write about a favorite book of the year, they mostly gushed over two: J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby." For years, "Catcher" served as a successful icebreaker for my juniors, exciting debate while eliding the gender divide. Whether they admired Holden Caulfield's quirkiness or disparaged him as a jerk, both my male and female students were eager to argue about him.

So imagine my dismay when "Catcher" was demoted to the eighth or ninth grade. Apparently it wasn't sophisticated enough for 11th-graders, its language too facile, the plot insufficiently complex. That many 17-year-olds identify powerfully with Salinger's 17-year-old protagonist was a fact cast by the wayside.

But here's what a former student wrote in an essay about this book that knocked her socks off: "To my twelve-year-old self, the book didn't seem to move anywhere. I didn't understand why Holden couldn't just try a little harder at school. By tenth grade, I had been drunk for the first time. I knew rebellion against my parents, the difficulties of teenage romance, the fakeness of social interaction. As a reader in the eleventh grade, I grew close to Holden; he was a friend who understood me." In adults' determination to create sophisticated teen readers, we sever them from potential fictional soulmates.

It's hard to forget my son's summer-reading assignment the year before he entered ninth grade: Julia Alvarez's "How the García Girls Lost Their Accents." Try as he did, he never got beyond the first of 15 vignettes about four culturally displaced sisters who search for identity through therapists and mental illness, men and sex, drugs and alcohol. I could hardly blame him. We ask 14-year-old boys to read novels about the travails of anguished women and want them to develop a love of reading?

Far too often, teachers' canonical choices split from teenagers' tastes, intellectual needs and maturity levels. "Why do we assume that every 15-year-old who passes through sophomore English is an English major in the making?" asks a teacher friend. "It's simply not the case. And the kids go elsewhere, just as fast as they can -- anywhere but another book."

I watched this play out last year when the junior reading list at my school, consisting mainly of major American authors, was fortified with readings in Shakespeare, Ibsen and the British Romantic poets. When I handed my students two weeks of readings by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge after a month-long study of American transcendentalists, it became clear that they had overdosed on verse packed with nature description and emotional reflection. "When will we read something with a plot?" asked one agitated boy, obviously yearning for afternoon lacrosse to begin.

One of my recent juniors was particularly eloquent on the subject. After having sat in my classroom for a year forcefully projecting his boredom, he started an e-mail dialogue with me over the summer. "The reason for studying fiction escapes me," he wrote. "Why waste time thinking about fabricated situations when there are plenty of real situations that need solutions? Cloning, ozone depletion, and alternate fuels are a few of the countless problems that need to be addressed by the next generation, my generation."

Okay, you may think, this is a kid geared to excel in history and science, not literature. But read his closing words: "Granted fiction has a place in this world, but it is not in the classroom. It is beside the night lamp next to your bed, the car ride to the beach, the soft glow of a fireplace. Fiction is about spending beautiful days indoors because you can't wait to get to the next page. Because I like science fiction, my Shakespeare, my Fitzgerald, my Dickinson are Haldeman, Asimov, Herbert. They dare me to think and question my beliefs."

So there you have it: A smart teen and motivated reader goes to high-school English class and discovers that the classics have nothing to offer him. "The reason I did not participate in class," he admitted, "was that I found the reading a chore."

Parents of high-school students are probably familiar with the product of this classroom: the alienated writer who turns up sulking at the dinner table. When students have to produce an essay on a book they care nothing for, it becomes a nightmare for both the student (think "all-nighter") and the teacher, who'll spend precious weekend hours reading papers devoid of content. The upshot of this empty drill: teens increasingly resistant to great books.

If I were a student today, surfing the gazillions of Web libraries or model-essay banks for insight into an assigned school classic, I'm sure I'd be asking myself, "What on Earth could there be left to say?" Last year, when I thought that I was stepping out of the mainstream by requiring my students to write a review of "Dead Poets Society," I was shocked to find, with just one click, that the 1989 Robin Williams movie had already been analyzed by hundreds of online literary pundits. Asking our students for yet another written commentary has a certain absurd ring to it, no?

The lesson couldn't be clearer. Until we do a better job of introducing contemporary culture into our reading lists, matching books to readers and getting our students to buy in to the whole process, literature teachers will continue to fuel the reading crisis.

I'm not suggesting that every 11th-grade English teacher adopt "Catcher," drop Shakespeare or ride the multicultural bandwagon. But if we really want to recruit teen readers, we're going to have to be strenuous advocates for fresh and innovative reading incentives. If that means an end to business as usual -- abolishing dry-bones literature tests, cutting back on fact-based quizzes, adding works of science fiction or popular nonfiction to the reading list -- so be it. We can continue to alienate teen readers, or we can hear them, acknowledge their tastes, engage directly with their resistance to serious reading and move gradually, with sensitivity to what's age-appropriate, toward the realm of great literature.

So if your kids haven't yet started their summer reading, or are having trouble getting through it, perhaps now you know why. It may be what they've learned at school.