

Consider the Classics

Time-Tested Titles for Even the Most Reluctant Reader

by Rebecca Shapiro

In the movies, getting kids excited about learning seems dramatic, alluring, and, if you put your nose to the grindstone, not even all that difficult. Who wouldn't want to be the one who made every kid in a troubled South Central Los Angeles high school pass the AP Calculus BC exam, as Edward James Olmos (playing teacher Jaime Escalante) did in the film *Stand and Deliver*? Or, more poignantly for me, who wouldn't want to inspire failing students to wade through the works of Dylan Thomas and thus to understand literature's relevance to their own lives, as Michelle Pfeiffer (portraying teacher Louanne Johnson) did in the movie *Dangerous Minds*?

As a graduate student in education, I watched these favorite inspirational stories and couldn't wait to create my own. I wanted my students not only to engage in the material that I gave them in class but also to experience reading as something fun and exciting. I wanted to share with them my own favorite classics, from *Madame Bovary* to *Light in August* to *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

Of course, I found that it wasn't as easy as Michelle Pfeiffer made it look. It was a good day when my students at Charlestown High School in Boston remembered to come to class, let alone remembered to come prepared and ready to discuss literature. Even while I was working for Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (a nonprofit organization for highly motivated students in New York City public schools), I found that outside the classroom, my students were about as interested in Jane Austen as I was in their hip-hop moves.

As frustrating as my attempts were, however, teaching only reinforced exactly how important it was to instill in students a love of reading. For the first time, I could see that getting my kids to read classics outside of the classroom would have concrete effects far beyond the warm, fuzzy feeling I had in my stomach when I watched *Stand and Deliver*.

Reading is important in helping students strengthen not only their imaginations but also their vocabularies, their writing skills, and their experiences of living. Research has shown that the best way for students to prepare for the verbal section of the SATs is not by studying flashcards or vocabulary but by consistently reading. While it helps for students to read anything, classics tend to expose them to different words and situations. The classics provide a context that will help young adults to understand other texts, to participate in a wider variety of conversations, and to see beyond their own worlds.

The question, however, remains: Is it possible to get adolescents interested in classics? If so, how?

Appeal to Their Interests

The first great lesson I learned as a teacher is that it wasn't my responsibility to create a classroom of my protégées. It actually didn't matter at all if my students were reading the books that *I* loved. It mattered that they were reading books that *they* loved. Though I never liked Herman Melville when I was in school, he could become for my students what Faulkner and Fitzgerald became for me. It is essential to let students make their own, guided choices and to give them options that will fit with their interests.

For those who have expressed an interest in the military, *The Red Badge of Courage* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* are full of energetic battle scenes. *Moby Dick*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Three Musketeers* will appeal to those with a sense of adventure. Travel and outdoor enthusiasts will enjoy the works of Jack London and Rudyard Kipling.

Include Some Skinny Books

When it comes to classics, for many people, size does matter. Give one adolescent boy *The Count of Monte Cristo* at 1,488 pages and another *Charlotte Temple* at 144 pages, and the one with *Charlotte Temple* is sure to think he's got the better end of the deal. *Charlotte Temple* is certainly important and is not to be missed in the classroom, but teenage boys would be far more likely to get into Dumas's epic tale of treason, prison breaks, and sword fights. Most, however, would never

figure that out, because they wouldn't look past the thick spine and the hefty page count.

Using size as an advantage, though, can help students get excited about reading. Short books, novellas, and even short stories won't intimidate students and can be great introductions to an author's writing. For example, the Ray Bradbury story "All Summer in a Day" is a great precursor to his classic *Fahrenheit 451*. Similarly, *Notes From Underground* is a good way to give students a taste of Dostoyevsky before they plunge into *Crime and Punishment*.

Get Inspired by Banned Books

Most students have at least a small rebellious streak, and at first glance, reading—particularly reading the classics—doesn't quite fit into that attitude. Helping students to understand that some classics were long considered edgy can make many books more appealing. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, seems a bit more dangerous after students find out that in many town squares, *The Scarlet Letter* was burned for its sexual deviance.

Also, the category of historically banned books is simply a great place to start when thinking about reading material for reluctant readers. Books generally incite controversy because they are on the vanguard of intellectual discourse, which means that they are energizing, provocative, and downright exciting. From *Frankenstein* to *The Jungle* to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, banned books represent some of the richest, most fun literature available.

Make Them Think That They're Missing Out...

For the better part of a school year, whenever my student Jim raised his hand, I would call him "Lord Jim" (after the Joseph Conrad title). Almost every day after class, he would ask me about the origin of the nickname. My response was always the same: "Go find out, and come tell me." I wasn't overly optimistic, but one day in March, he waited after school and announced proudly: "It's a book, Miss! What's it about?" Again, I figured that if I continued to use the nickname and if he got curious enough, he might actually read the book. My ploy worked: Jim slugged his way through, and by the end of May, he was clumsily referencing Conrad in his papers.

The moral of my story about Jim isn't that giving out nicknames will necessarily get kids to read. Rather, I found that no one likes to be on the outside of an inner circle—be it of friends, jokes, or even knowledge. When Jim thought that the whole world except for him knew why he had a nickname, it motivated him to do some investigation of his own. His story is indicative not only of a way to get kids to read classics but, again, of why it's important. Classics are consistently referenced in any number of sources, and students who understand these references will have a leg up in and out of the classroom.

After two years of teaching, I became an editor. I have been lucky enough to be in a position at the Modern Library that allows me to think about books, and particularly classics, in a new way. I now spend my days thinking about the definition of a classic, about what is missing from the canon of classics, and about what introducers and translators and editors can do to help bring out the best of these classics.

I still firmly believe in the importance of the classics, and after spending time in the classroom, I have seen the impact that these great books continue to have on students. I know now that it is extraordinarily challenging to inspire young minds. Not every classroom story has a neat Hollywood ending like those of the movies I admired. With the right tactics and with some extra patience, however, it is certainly possible to help students build a lifelong relationship with reading, both inside the classroom and out.

About the Writer

Rebecca Shapiro *has worked as a writer for Kirkus Reviews; as a writing instructor at Charlestown High School; and as a teacher and counselor at Sponsors for Educational Opportunity, a nonprofit organization for motivated students in New York City public schools. She holds a B.A. in English from Brown University and an M.Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

Suggested Reading...

Books cited in this article include:

Fahrenheit 451

by Ray Bradbury

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-41001-6, 192 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Del Rey, MM, 978-0-345-34296-6, 208 pp., \$6.99/\$10.99 Can.

The Red Badge of Courage

by Stephen Crane

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21011-8, 160 pp., \$3.95/\$5.99 Can.

The Red Badge & “The Veteran”

by Stephen Crane

Introduction by Shelby Foote

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-679-78320-6,

336 pp., \$8.95/\$13.95 Can.

The Count Monte Cristo

by Alexandre Dumas

Introduction by Lorenzo Carcaterra

Modern Library, MM, 978-0-345-48354-6, 1,488 pp., \$8.95/\$12.95 Can.

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-375-76030-3,

1488 pp., \$12.95/\$19.95 Can.

The Count Monte Cristo

by Alexandre Dumas

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21350-8, 544 pp., \$6.95/\$9.95 Can.

The Three Musketeers

by Alexandre Dumas

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21337-9, 656 pp., \$5.95/\$7.95 Can.

The Three Musketeers

by Alexandre Dumas

Translated by Jacques Le Clercq

Introduction by Alan Furst

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-375-75674-0,
640 pp., \$11.95/\$15.95 Can.

Light in August

The Corrected Text

by William Faulkner

Modern Library, HC, 978-0-679-64248-0,
528 pp., \$21.95/\$29.95 Can.

Madame Bovary

by Gustave Flaubert

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21341-6, 512 pp., \$5.95/\$7.95 Can.

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Introduction by Kathryn Harrison

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-679-78338-1,
304 pp., \$5.95/\$8.95 Can.

The Scarlet Letter

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21009-5, 256 pp., \$3.95/\$5.50 Can.

Moby-Dick

by Herman Melville

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21311-9, 704 pp., \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

Moby-Dick or, The Whale

by Herman Melville

Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick and Rockwell Kent

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-679-78327-5,

896 pp., \$11.95/\$17.95 Can.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

The Dupin Tales

by Edgar Allan Poe

Introduction by Matthew Pearl

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-679-64342-5,

160 pp., \$8.95/\$11.95 Can.

All Quiet on the Western Front

by Erich Maria Remarque

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-449-91149-5, 304 pp., \$13.95/\$21.00 Can.

Ballantine, MM, 978-0-449-21394-0, 304 pp., \$6.99/\$9.99 Can.

Charlotte Temple

by Susanna Rowson

Introduction by Jane Smiley

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7121-7,

144 pp., \$10.95/\$15.95 Can.

Frankenstein

by Mary Shelley

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21247-1, 256 pp., \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus

by Mary Shelley

Introduction by Wendy Steiner

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-375-75341-1,

352 pp., \$7.95/\$10.95 Can.

The Jungle

by Upton Sinclair

Afterword by Anthony Arthur

Introduction by Jane Jacobs

CENTENNIAL EDITION

Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7623-6,

416 pp., \$9.95/\$12.95 Can.

The Jungle

by Upton Sinclair

Contribution by Morris Dickstein

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21245-7, 400 pp., \$5.95/\$8.95 Can.

The Adventures Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

Afterword by Alfred Kazin

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21079-8, 304 pp., \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

The Adventures Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

Ivy Paperback, MM, 978-0-8041-1571-1,

384 pp., \$4.99/\$5.99 Can.

Fawcett, TR, 978-0-449-91272-0, 384 pp., \$14.00/\$22.95 Can.

The Adventures Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

Introduction by George Saunders

Modern Library Classics, TR,

978-0-375-75737-2, 304 pp., \$6.95/\$9.95 Can.