

About that Summer reading...

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ESSAY

Summer Bummer

By JOE QUEENAN

The gnashing of teeth never stopped the year my 15-year-old son brought home "A Tale of Two Cities" as his summer reading assignment. According to him, the backbreaking obligation to read Charles Dickens blighted June, ravaged July and obliterated August. Thus, at back-to-school night in September, when his teacher informed parents that their children were gifted, a joy to work with and loved Dickens, I knew she was lying. My kid hated "A Tale of Two Cities." And he wasn't alone.

For as long as anyone can remember, well-meaning pedagogues have been sabotaging summer vacations by forcing high schoolers to read "Lord of the Flies," "All the King's Men" and "A Separate Peace." These books may be the cornerstones of our civilization, but they're certainly no fun. One reason the average American male reads only one book a year may be the emotional trauma suffered in trying to hack his way through "Wuthering Heights" at the age of 14. I myself have never recovered from going toe-to-toe with "The Return of the Native" as a teenager, not only because Thomas Hardy's bleak vision and lugubrious prose made me feel bleak and lugubrious, but also because it was my first exposure to the boundless cruelty of which adults are capable.

If my teachers had had an ounce of human decency in them they might have assigned us "Macbeth" or Caesar's "Gallic Wars," figuring that the merry carnage would at least hold the boys' interest for a while. Or they could have saddled us with "The Stranger," which had the mitigating charm of being glib and pretentious and would thus have kept the kids who were obviously going to end up at Bard happy. But by insisting that we write a full report on an uncompromisingly depressing 19th-century novel by a writer who never allowed a single ray of sunshine to brighten his work, the powers-that-be at Cardinal Dougherty High School were merely taunting the student body.

"Don't mess with us, for there is no torment too beastly for us to contemplate," they seemed to be saying. "If you even once complain about how boring and irrelevant 'The Return of the Native' is, next summer we'll make you read 'Daniel Deronda.' Just try us, punks."

Forty years after being pistol-whipped by Thomas Hardy, I am amazed that the summer reading list continues to exist. In a society that has dispensed with every other laudable cultural more, it bewilders me that students still allow adults to wreck their summer vacations by forcing them to feast on the passé cheekiness of "The Catcher in the Rye" or on mind-numbing kitsch like "The Alchemist." I'm not saying it is necessarily a bad thing that schools require students to read books during the summer: culture, like vitamins, works best when imposed rather than selected. I am simply recording my amazement that in an age when urban high schools use weapons detectors to check for handguns, educators still make kids read "The Red Badge of Courage."



And yet, the system seems to work. Recently, I conducted an informal survey among high school students I know, asking them to evaluate the books they had read over the past few summers. The results floored me. Even though today's pandering, smorgasbord-style reading lists regularly include works by such non-Nobelists as Dean Koontz and David Baldacci, the kids I talked to had mostly spent the past few summers reading books that could only be described as "good."

Though they were not always bubbling with enthusiasm, they generally used no phrase more abusive than "Well, it was interesting" to describe "Lord of the Flies" or "Beowulf." One college-bound senior, Margaret Staudter, told me she actually enjoyed "Middlemarch," even though it took her all summer to finish it.

"What I didn't enjoy was writing all the chapter summaries to prove that I'd read it," she said. "Middlemarch" has something like 86 chapters."

Other students were slightly less upbeat, but still reported enjoying the assigned books, if only because they got to read them in peace without having to examine them in the autopsy style that is the hallmark of the high school literature class. Of course, there was always the possibility that the kids were lying, merely telling an adult what he wanted to hear out of fear that any negative comments would be reported to the authorities.

But even if this were true, in the end I came to grudgingly admire what English teachers were trying to achieve. The theory seemed to be that smart students would eventually outgrow featherweight homilies like "To Kill a Mockingbird" and move on to something meatier like Chinua Achebe or Nadine Gordimer, whereas if you could get less gifted students to read anything, you were ahead of the game. In this sense, fleeting favorites like "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" and Harper Lee's *succcharine*, historically implausible novel about the Nicest White Man Ever serve as a vital bridge between books that amuse and books that astound. When I was 16, I thought "A Farewell to Arms" was a classic; then I read "The Sun Also Rises" and realized that it wasn't. No one ever gets to Balzac and Proust without first going through Camus.

My only unresolved beef about summer reading lists is their cavalier juxtaposition of the immortals and the knuckleheads, as if William Shakespeare and Wally Lamb were in the same weight class. While minor books can ultimately lure readers to the mountaintops, so-so or crummy books — well represented on many of the lists I have seen — only lure readers to more so-so or crummy books. There is a direct line from "Slaughterhouse-Five" to "War and Peace," from "The Red Pony" to "The Red and the Black." But Dean Koontz leads no farther than James Patterson. "Sister Carrie" paves the way for "Anna Karenina"; "Carrie" paves the way for "Cujo."

Even my son, now a classics major in college, seemed to realize that summer reading was, on balance, a valuable experience.

"I hated 'A Tale of Two Cities' until I got to the end," he told me recently. "I wasn't interested in the characters, and I didn't believe the history. But then when I got to Sydney Carton up there on the scaffold, I thought, 'Wow, what a great ending.' I really liked it the second time I read it."

"You reread 'A Tale of Two Cities'?" I gasped in disbelief.

"Yes," he replied. "It wasn't as good as 'Great Expectations,' but those last 25 pages were amazing."

This admission impelled me to re-evaluate everything I'd ever believed about summer reading. For 40 years I'd been cursing the day my high school English teacher was born, convinced that the months I'd wasted reading "The Return of the Native" had left indelible scars on my psyche. But if my son's experience held true, perhaps it was merely a case of my being too young to appreciate Hardy's genius when first exposed to it. Determined to clear up the matter, I picked up a copy of Hardy's rustic masterpiece and gave Dorset's most famous author a second chance to prove me wrong. On Page 6 I happened upon this sentence:

"To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepresible New."

That's when I took it back to the library. Thomas Hardy wrecked the summer of '66; there's no way in hell he's wrecking the summer of '07.

Joe Queenan is the author of "Queenan Country: A Reluctant Anglophile's Pilgrimage to the Mother Country."

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