

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Dark Themes in Books Get Students Reading

By **Kathleen Kennedy Manzo**

Chanelle Brown hasn't found much she can relate to in the classic texts assigned in her English classes at Evanston Township High School. A top student, the junior has toiled through *The Odyssey*, *All the King's Men*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and other standards, she said, while many of her classmates at the suburban Chicago school have given up reading them altogether.

"The themes are kind of dead now," she said, "and I don't feel like any of the stories apply to me."

But Ms. Brown is glad that teachers at Evanston High, like educators elsewhere, have been supplementing the canon with recently published books to provide a more varied, and palatable, literary menu for students. Such decisions, some experts say, can add the kind of engaging and relevant content that high school reform advocates have been calling for.

Nevertheless, the use of popular literature has run up against traditionalists, who fear it will dumb down the curriculum, and parents who object to the controversial themes that characterize many of the selections.

"A young-adult text is more accessible to students and allows them to think more about complex themes," said Ken Lindblom, the director of English teacher education at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "Just getting students reading texts that they enjoy is more important than exposing them to high literature."

Doing so, however, can foster concerns about whether the content of such books is appropriate, Mr. Lindblom acknowledges. Many young-adult novels, for example, feature violent scenes, topics such as death and abuse, or protagonists who purposely hurt themselves.

"The jury is still out on whether exposing children to these ideas gives them ideas or helps them think through things they or their friends are experiencing," Mr. Lindblom said. "Is



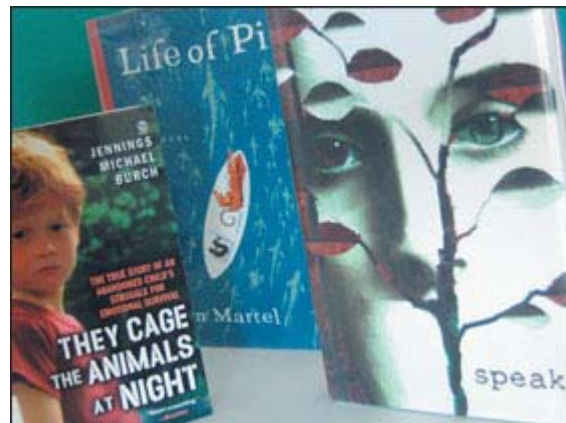
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Contemporary texts are making their way into the curriculum, a trend that some experts say makes reading more relevant.

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reading about a girl cutting herself likely to prompt more girls into doing this to themselves or to get help for themselves or their friends?"

### **Present vs. Past**

An avid reader of what she calls "street literature," Ms. Brown prefers the sometimes dark and disturbing present-day stories that define many of the trade books marketed to young adults. And she and her classmates are more enthusiastic about reading and discussing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* in her honors English class because of the real-life conflicts they portray.

Those themes have raised concerns among parents and others that students are being exposed to material that is overly grim or mature. Many of the books that face challenges by parents and community members feature violence, death, profanity, sex, and other sensitive content. While similar themes may also characterize great plays and novels—from "Romeo and Juliet" to *Jane Eyre* to *Of Mice and Men*—they tend to fuel more controversy in those set in the present day, especially when they resonate with the lives of today's students and families, observers say.

Several years ago, Barbara Feinberg became distressed at her own son's reaction to reading the realistic fiction that was assigned for his middle school English class. Her son, a fan of upbeat, humorous texts, dreaded the required readings, which he found depressing and morbid, she says.

She wrote a memoir outlining her concerns. In *Welcome to the Lizard Motel*, Ms. Feinberg argues that such selections tend to push life's harsh realities on students from an adult perspective and do not accurately reflect how children rely on fantasy and imagination to explain difficult subjects.

The director of an after-school creative-writing program in Westchester County, N.Y., Ms. Feinberg questions the idea "that kids need to be given a steady diet of 'realistic fiction' that is seen as best able to tell the truth about life," she wrote in a recent e-mail. "Sometimes books that bang kids over the head with 'difficult material' might succeed in depicting realistic scenarios, but fail at capturing more emotional (or emotionally accessible) truths."

A number of books now regularly included in middle and high school curricula have startling, if realistic, scenarios, experts say.

Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*, for example, is widely assigned to high school students. But the disturbing story of a teenage outcast, and the eventual revelation that she had been sexually assaulted, has earned the book a spot on annual lists of banned and challenged books compiled by library and booksellers' associations.

Ms. Feinberg's son, and other adolescents she interviewed for her book, were disturbed by some of their school reading assignments, like Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, and stories by Sharon Creech, which hit the reader with details of sudden tragedy.

Thanks to a growing market for young-adult literature, and prominent new awards for high-quality books in the genre, many more titles than in the past are available for teachers to

incorporate into their classes. But some experts say the problem is that the growing number of such choices has not yet transformed the curriculum.

"I would be very pleased if it was a trend, but I don't see it," said Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, a professor of English education at Idaho's Boise State University and the author of *You Gotta BE the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. Mr. Wilhelm conducted studies with colleague Michael W. Smith about the reading habits and preferences of teenagers.

"The classical, canonical literature, which I personally love, in fact was written for very sophisticated adult readers, ... but the attitude [among English teachers and traditionalists] is, 'Let's kick their butts with something they can't possibly understand.' "

Mr. Wilhelm argues that the high school English curriculum needs an overhaul, including incorporating more relevant and engaging reading assignments. In his interviews with teenage boys, most, including both high- and low-achieving students, expressed dissatisfaction with their reading assignments.

"It was almost completely agreed upon that school reading sucks and that they hate it," Mr. Wilhelm said.

In one class he and Mr. Smith studied, none of the students actually read the assigned text, Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." But the students had found "30 different ways to fool the teacher" that they had read it, he said.

Reading scores on national tests may reflect students' dissatisfaction with the content of their English classes. On the latest 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress, one-fourth of students tested could not demonstrate even basic skills on the test of reading comprehension and text analysis. Another third scored at the basic level, which requires overall understanding of text excerpts, as well as some interpretation and analysis.

### **Making Connections**

Age cannot wither Shakespeare, or the works of other masters, which still dominate the curriculum, according to Arthur N. Applebee, a professor of education and the director of the Center on English Learning and Achievement at SUNY Albany. Mr. Applebee has conducted several studies of the English curriculum throughout the 20th century.

"The core of the canon is still there, and Shakespeare is always on top of the list by a long margin," he said. But the trend toward incorporating more diverse and recent works has generally had a positive impact on the curriculum, Mr. Applebee argues. The most widely used literary anthologies, he said, now include more works by women and members of racial and ethnic minorities, and feature stories about other cultures.

Students' distaste for classic works, or the difficulty of tackling such hefty readings, shouldn't deter teachers from their responsibility for teaching them, according to Carol Jago, a longtime high school English teacher and prolific writer on the subject. Ms. Jago, the author of *With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students*, said that while contemporary works have a place in English classes, they should be chosen carefully for their

quality and relevance to curriculum goals. Too often, she said, teachers take time away from timeless works to introduce easier books.

"Teachers are so desperate to have students read something, anything," said Ms. Jago, who retired last year from California's Santa Monica High School. "So some teachers are bringing in works that kids don't need any help reading."

Those teachers, she said, are misunderstanding their jobs as English teachers.

"Our job is not simply to dispense books that kids will read and love," she said. "We need to help them tackle books that are hard for them, ... help them negotiate challenging texts."

Some students at Illinois' Evanston High have come to appreciate that kind of hard work, even though they prefer current choices. Laura JanVier was a reluctant convert to the merit of classic texts. The junior has been able to get her fill of contemporary works through an after-school book club, which Ms. Brown also belongs to. Her view of Shakespeare and other writers, however, turned favorable as she began to recognize the universal and enduring topics they present.

"My point of view on this has changed, because I've been able to learn different things from those books," such as "Romeo and Juliet" and other established fare, Ms. JanVier said. "When you take an in-depth look at a book, you can see its value."

Teachers at Evanston have tried to help students grasp the lessons in traditional readings by comparing those texts with contemporary titles that have similar themes, according to Cassie Schatterly, who teaches English and reading. Teachers in her department have worked to pair traditional and young-adult novels to bolster their lessons and increase students' interest in both, she said.

That strategy has proved effective for helping students connect with more traditional texts, said Mr. Lindblom.

"You can take some of the feelings of alienation from a book like *Speak* and compare it to Hester Prynne's behavior in *The Scarlet Letter*," he said. "When you use a young-adult text, ... it allows [students] to think about more complex themes in more accessible terms, and then you can teach it in conjunction with a text that is more difficult."

### **Life's Struggles**

Popular texts have long created a stir in the classroom, Mr. Applebee points out.

Not too many years ago, works by Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison came under regular fire for the authors' frankness about sexual assault and other issues considered taboo. But now those works, while still controversial in some places, have earned them a prominent place in the high school curriculum at large, according to Mr. Applebee.

"People forget that what we teach now started off as contemporary literature" that was often considered dark and controversial, he said. Those older works are more accepted, he added, because of "the cushion of time and their acceptance in the canon."

Many experts argue that there is room for both in the curriculum, and teachers don't have to sacrifice quality to incorporate newer texts.

"Some young-adult literature is very challenging in its own right," said Jane Alsup, who teaches English education courses to aspiring teachers at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. "Many of the books deal with complex narratives and story lines, characters that go through a great deal of change and struggle."

Those struggles may make the texts a target of criticism. Ms. Brown and some of her friends at Evanston High, however, prefer stories that reflect some of their own struggles, and portray life honestly.

"Not every book has to end happy," she said. "Maybe we can relate to books more if they're about real things we're dealing with, or maybe they will make me stretch my mind so I can understand other people's problems more."

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