Hooked on Classics*

A CLASSIC PROBLEM: THE PUSH TO MODERNIZE READING LISTS IS CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF LITERATURE. SURPRISE: NOT EVERYONE IS HAPPY ABOUT IT.

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Above, and on the following pages, we reimagine the classics — in a more inclusive way.
THE GREAT GATSBY

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD
books that many believe all high school students should be studying. The problem is that what was once defined as “common” — middle class, white, cisgender people — is no longer the reality in our country. Unfortunately, Mason says, “making a case for new literature by different authors of color, authors who are not cisgendered, or even just female authors” is a challenge.

LIZ PHIPPS SOEIRO, ED.M.’19, an elementary school librarian in Cambridge, realized the canon’s power after returning to the White House 10 Dr. Seuss books donated by First Lady Melania Trump in 2017. In a now viral blog post explaining her reasons, she wrote about disappearing school libraries, policies that work against underprivileged communities, and how although considered a classic, Dr. Seuss was “steeped in racism and harmful stereotypes.” People responded harshly through personal attacks and threats on Soeiro and her family.

“It’s more complex than ‘I want to throw Dr. Seuss away,’” she says, disputing the charge that she hates Dr. Seuss. While attending a children’s book conference 10 years ago, she saw no diverse books being highlighted and asked the book vendor why, only for the question to be dismissed. It forced Soeiro to think more deeply about inequities, realizing that books — even the most beloved — are part of systemic issues. “Knowing the history of this country and the history of our educational system really puts into sharp focus just how urgent it is to have representation in our books, stories, narratives, and media that we share with children,” she says.

Literacy experts have long called for more representation in children’s literature. In 1965, literacy champion Nancy Larrick’s Saturday Review article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” noted how millions of children of color were learning from books that completely omitted them.

Then, nearly 25 years later, children’s literary expert Rudine Sims Bishop reiterated children’s need for mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors in books to “understand each other better” and “change our attitudes toward difference.” As she wrote in the 1990 publication Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, “When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our difference and our similarities, because together they are what makes us all human.”

Yet, in the past 24 years, multicultural content, according to book publisher Lee & Low, represents only 13% of children’s literature. Despite national movements like We Need Diverse Books and Disrupt Texts, and despite a growing number of diverse books, only 7% are written by people of color.
Reloading the Canon

Looking for new books to offer your students that might offer other perspectives? Us too. So we asked PAMELA MASON, M.A.T.’70, ED.D.’75 ( ), senior lecturer and director of the Ed School’s Language and Literacy Program (along with librarian Adrienne Almeida) and JABARI SELLARS, ED.M.’17 ( ), middle school English teacher in Washington, D.C., for some new ideas. Here’s what they recommended:

- American Born Chinese (Gene Luen Yang)
- America: The Life and Times of America Chavez (Gabby Rivera)
- Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (Benjamin Alire Sáenz)
- Born Confused (Tanuja Desai Hidier)
- Brown Girl Dreaming (Jacqueline Woodson)
- Children of Blood and Bone (Tomi Adeyemi)
- Finding Langston (Lesa Cline-Ransome)
- Hey, Kiddo (Jarrett Krosoczka)
- It’s Not Like It’s Secret (Misa Sugiura)
- Kindred and Kindred, a graphic novel adaptation (Octavia Butler)
- Miles Morales: Spider-Man (Jason Reynolds)
- Prince of Cats (Ron Wimberly)
- Some People, Some Other Place (J. California Cooper)
- Song of Achilles (Madeline Miller)
- Swing or Rebound (Kwame Alexander)
- Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers (various authors)
- The 57 Bus (Dashka Slater)
- The Marrow Thieves (Cherie Dimaline)
- Their Eyes Were Watching God (Zora Neale Hurston)
- This Promise of Change: One Girl’s Story in the Fight for School Equality (Jo Ann Allen Boyce and Debbie Levy)
- Toil & Trouble (Maigrheed Scott)
- Your Black Friend (Ben Passmore)

Considering that the American student population is now 50% nonwhite, the need for that mirror — for opportunities for children to see themselves and navigate a more diverse world — seems more pressing. Much like Sellers’ students, children notice the lack of representation surrounding them. English teachers interviewed for this story, particularly at middle and high school levels, described how students complain about representation, cultural relevance, and boredom in text. Those complaints, especially boredom, signal to Mason a greater need for variety in the classroom.

The solution seems obvious: Add more books that represent LGBTQ issues, gender diversity, people of color, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities. But even as teachers appear aware of a need to diversify the curriculum, there can be roadblocks to making it happen. For example, there’s a diversity gap in the book publishing industry regarding who gets published (mostly white authors), who gets awarded (mostly white authors), and which books make it onto school vendor booklists (mostly white creators). Add in the fact that new books are typically more expensive than classics, says CHRISTINA DOBBS, ED.M.’06, ED.D.’13, an assistant professor of English at Boston University, and it can be hard to make a case for change.

Even when teachers have the support of school administrators, funding, and autonomy over book selection, they still might feel lost.

“Some teachers might think, ‘I want to diversify the literature,’ but don’t know what to do with it,” says Lecturer VICKI JACOBS, C.A.S.’80, ED.D.’86, a former English teacher who retired this summer as director of the Ed School’s Teacher Education Program. “They need to understand the multiple contexts — including background knowledge and lived experiences — that both they and their students bring to their reading and interpretations of those texts.”

This lack of understanding could explain why an elementary teacher of color from Virginia who attended a literature institute last year at the Ed School reported that she had discovered that other teachers in the school, who were predominantly white, weren’t using the more representative books she pushed for in the school library.

“It’s a mistake to think having the books gives people the tools to teach the books,” Dobbs says. In her role training teachers, she sees that many want to have conversations about diverse books but don’t know how. “We don’t have evidence that teachers can close that gap independently.”

Mason noticed similar apprehensions among educators, prompting her to create two professional learning experiences — an online module called Culturally Responsive Literature Instruction and its companion workshop on campus, Advancing Culturally Responsive Literature. Both programs, offered through the Ed School’s Professional Education program, focus on instructional literary practices that support and value the many identities present in the 21st-century classroom.

Last fall 51 educators, mostly teachers from the United States, gathered on the Ed School campus for a weekend spent learning how to bring new texts into their classrooms. There was plenty to discuss, like how to vet new books and develop a diverse curriculum to more predictable topics about meeting standards. (Common Core doesn’t identify required reading or tell you how to teach.)

Rachel Schubert, an 11th and 12th grade English teacher at Martha’s Vineyard High School in Massachusetts, attended the workshop to learn from other educators who are prioritizing this work. In her diverse classroom, she aims to strike a balance between the “classics” and multicultural texts like Ta-Nehisi Coates’ Between the World and Me and Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake. Still, she knows...
many teachers who stick to a classics-only approach, insisting there are ways to teach old books with a different lens too.

Schubert finds new books and methods helpful in creating space for students to grapple with tough issues and questions about identity. “The kids I teach are extremely hungry for these experiences. Diversifying the curriculum is one way to reach them,” she says. “Once you start doing it, it’s not that scary anymore.”

Fear can be a powerful deterrent to making change in the classroom. When adding diverse books and readings, Schubert and Sellars already know the tricky scenarios — how to address stereotypes or not being able to answer a student’s question — that might keep teachers away from the work.

In a lot of ways, learning how to understand and discuss difference with students connects back to the need for diverse books in the first place.

“In our nation, we haven’t been good at learning how to talk across differences in a respectful way,” Mason says. “And that is supposed to be the fabric of our democracy.” When you add in the fact that teacher training hasn’t always included work about race and identity, or even about addressing cultural assumptions, it becomes easy to see how adding diverse books to the curriculum can seem like treacherous territory.

New books come under scrutiny even though they often contain similar elements as classics. For instance, consider the racialized language in *Huckleberry Finn*, or the treatment of disabilities in *Of Mice and Men*, or even the sexual content in *Romeo & Juliet*. But those books still maintain a place in classrooms around the country, whereas new books like *The Hate U Give* get challenged as “anti-cop” and for profanity, drug use, and sexual references, according to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom. The book also happens to deal with racial injustices and police brutality, and is written by a black female.

“It’s kind of odd that we don’t have a problem giving students of color books written by dead white men, but we get a little queasy when we give white students literature written by African American authors, Latinx authors, transgender authors, Asian American authors,” Mason says. She suggests that, rather than banning books, we instead lead students through a balanced analysis of literature.

As educators try to diversify texts in their classrooms, they need thoughtful intent when choosing which books are appropriate or in determining the methods to teach material. Without that clear purpose, Jacobs fears teachers get lost, along with students, in the text. That purpose also helps safeguard against backlash when you know why you’ve selected certain work.

“A lot of people will see a brown child on the cover of a book and think that’s enough,” Soeiro says. But it’s not. “We have to look critically at the agency of that child, who wrote the book, the dominant narrative in the book. It takes a lot of work.”

It’s work, say educators like Soeiro and Dobbs, that teachers need to do.

“If all you read is one book by an author of color and five books a year by dead white guys, how does that shape your ideas about how stories get told, who they’re about?” Dobbs says.

In some ways, we already know. Today’s educators and students still exist in a canonized world, where prized books both teach and constrain us.

“An inherent part of developing culturally responsive instruction is coming to terms with our narrow view of literature,” Sellars says. “Making our classes culturally responsive may mean bringing in new texts and media, which means teachers will relinquish their position as experts. Many teachers are reluctant to introduce a new text, or even teach an old text from a different perspective, because doing so doesn’t allow them to rely solely on previous lesson plans and teaching strategies.”

After Sellars’ student made him see his “blind spots,” he could have kept everything the same. It would have been easier. But he spent the summer rethinking the reading list. The following year his eighth graders read newer, less canonized books: *Ultimate X-Men*, *Persepolis*, *Black Boy White School*, and excerpts from *The Song of Achilles*. The experience moved Sellars from what he describes as just talking about being culturally relevant to actually doing the work.

Mason believes a new culture of teaching literature will emerge, one classroom success at a time, as long as we chip away at the lingering notion that diverse books aren’t worthy of teachers’ time and attention.

“When teachers learn about the cultural assumptions that made them leery about including new, multicultural literature, then learn how to teach the books, that sets them off in a stance of strength and knowledge. Then they have a couple of successes in the classroom,” Mason says. Describing the potential for that success to then snowball among fellow teachers, she adds, “Another teacher tries with their support, and they get successful too, and the new book starts to become part of a larger repertoire of literature to share.” When confronted with a book from the canon, it becomes, ‘Do we have to teach that book again on this theme?’ Well, here are some other options that might be worth a try.”