

In the Beginning, and in the End

Carol Iannone

Published online: 24 April 2015

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

In the beginning is indeed the word, and the rise of the digital universe and its weblogs, webmags, webpages, webinars, social media, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Google, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Dropbox, Instagram, Flickr, MeetMe, and so on has not changed that. As Rupert Murdoch explained in an interview, it all depends on *content*, and content starts with the word—spoken, written, and read—the focus of our special feature in this issue, “Common Readings, Uncommon Conversations.”

For five years now, the National Association of Scholars has been tracking what books colleges have chosen as common reading for their entering freshmen and compiling the results. In “Common Reading Programs: Trends, Traps, Tips,” NAS executive director Ashley Thorne takes us on a *tour d’horizon* of the findings of the most recent edition of the study, *Beach Books: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class? 2013–2014*, which comprehensively surveys 341 colleges and universities and the 231 books they chose.

One of the stated purposes of the common reading project, Thorne notes, is to create community on campus. Ironically, years ago, when most liberal arts schools required a core curriculum of some nature, not identical perhaps, but similar, students could automatically and even unconsciously feel a sense of “community,” though it wasn’t called that then. And they could feel it not only on their own campuses, but with students from other campuses, with college graduates who preceded them, and with human beings in general who had at

some point read and thought about the agreed-upon classics. This is what was known as “the life of the mind.” But the fragmentation and trivialization of the liberal arts curriculum has precipitated the need for “building community” on the slim foundation of a single book read over the summer or outside of class. As Thorne points out, many of the chosen books are current bestsellers and as such can pass from common interest rather quickly. What community effect is created tends to be rather constricted, like a family ritual only the family understands.

Nevertheless, Thorne has some good ideas for making these projects more fruitful. While the study generally finds that the books assigned are trendy, temporal, given more to advancing political correctness and multiculturalism than genuine enlightenment and timeless truths, she understands that better choices must be made carefully in that many entering college students nowadays have not read a book from beginning to end. (How could this be? What happened to the huge cohort who devoured the Harry Potter series as it emerged from the pen of J.K. Rowling? And has not the mania passed down to their little brothers and sisters?) At any rate, Thorne’s thoughtful recommendations include classic and contemporary choices, fiction and nonfiction. As a person whose early life was enlarged by *The Diary of Anne Frank* as well as by *Little Women*, I am glad for this range of suggestions.

To augment Thorne’s suggestions, we asked a variety of professors, writers, and editors for their recommendations for first year common reading, thus our forum, “Better Beach Books.”

The necessary exposure of the disastrous decline in the contemporary academy has had the unintended consequence of turning some public figures against higher education altogether except in its most utilitarian form, as job preparation. In a recent proposed budget Wisconsin governor Scott Walker was ready to jettison language that stated the purposes of publicly funded higher education as creating better citizens, furthering the search for truth, and adding to the improvement of the human condition, and retain only “meet[ing] the state’s workforce needs.” Egad. Fortunately, he did backtrack on that, but this should alert us to the need to speak ceaselessly of the higher functions of higher education.

And believe or not, liberal arts majors do go on to lucrative and fulfilling careers in the commercial marketplace. Just a few I’ve noted in recent times include former Hewlett Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, retail businesswoman Marcy Syms, MSNBC morning show host Mika Brezinski, and Matt Czuchry, a history and political science major with a running part in the hit TV series *The Good Wife*.

This is by way of introducing “The Liberal Arts as Conversation,” in which Jack Kerwick addresses careerism as a goal of higher education, and finds it

lacking, along with two others that he sees being advanced today—traditionalism and activism. His own proposal is “conversationalism,” based on the ideas of Michael Oakeshott.

Asking “Why Don’t Schools Teach Poetry?” Robert Maranto emphasizes the value of poetry in bringing us to levels of awareness and illumination not possible in simple prose. Not that long ago even popular entertainment could assume a certain knowledge of classic poems, and Maranto recalls “Bullwinkle’s Corner,” in which the lovable if rather dim-witted cartoon moose with the precise diction enacts parodies of famous poems. Maranto examines possible reasons for the decline of poetry in lower education and looks for a turnaround.

Jeffrey Zorn tells of further depredations against clear writing and Standard English in “Translingualism: Tongue-Tied in English Composition.” In supposed sympathy with the supposedly oppressed, translingualists would deny students the power that comes with mastery of the language.

So much has been written about the Common Core State Standards, pro and con, but how do they translate into action, into actual textbooks that actual teachers must use? I look at Prentice Hall’s eleventh grade reader *The American Experience* in “Experiencing the Common Core,” the final entry in our special feature.

How did criminology come to be a study of good men done wrong by a bad society? Mike Adams traces this phenomenon to C. Wright Mills, one of the major molders of the discipline of sociology, in “The Criminologists’ Imagination: C. Wright Mills and the Legacy of Subjectivity.”

In “Scrutinizing Diversity: Challenging the Premises of Affirmative Action,” John T. Bennett offers a brisk survey of the major claims for the value of affirmative action and shoots them down one by one in clear, lawyerly fashion.

The story behind the implementation of the new Advanced Placement United States History standards is worse than you probably realize. Peter Wood relates the whole saga in “APUSH: The New, New, New History.”

For University of Michigan philosopher professor Carl Cohen, the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965 was one of the four most thrilling moments of his life, on a par with VJ Day, when Cohen was a lad of fourteen. But the old school liberal Democrat and civil rights crusader watched in dismay as the color-blind justice he fought for deteriorated into outright racial preferences at the university where he has taught for sixty years. Russell K. Nieli returns to our pages for “Keeping the Faith,” a review essay of Cohen’s memoir, *A Conflict of Principles: The Battle over Affirmative Action at the University of Michigan*.

Poet for this issue Susan Spear also evokes the power of “A Word.” Donald Downs examines Stanley Fish’s *Versions of Academic Freedom: From*

Professionalism to Revolution, and questions whether Fish's minimalist view of academic freedom is sufficient for the contemporary university. Nathan Harden reviews *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, by William Deresiewicz, and has to agree with much of the author's portrait of the cash- and career-driven nature of Ivy League culture. Glenn M. Ricketts heartily disagrees with Robert Zemsky's recommendations in *Checklist for Change: Making American Higher Education a Sustainable Enterprise*.

Finally, Peter Wood takes another turn at Books, Articles, and Items of Academic Interest with an extensive rundown of recent books on higher education.