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INSTRUCTIVE IDEAS

The Last Castle: *Better Beach Books* Update

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College common readings—one book assigned to all incoming freshmen—are no small feature of the landscape of American higher education. The National Association of Scholars' latest annual *Beach Books* report about the phenomenon lists more than 350 colleges with common reading programs, including (by *U.S. News & World Report*'s rankings) half of the top one hundred universities in the United States and almost a quarter of the top one hundred liberal arts colleges.[1] These books, selected by oversized committees well stocked with academic administrators, are meant to create a sense of community among college students, set academic expectations, and forward a college's institutional values—all in aid of promoting student retention. They also function as an abbreviated, remedial version of a common core, where one book represents the entirety of the communal knowledge a school expects its student body to acquire. Common readings double as emblematic snapshots of the state of American higher education.[2]

These snapshots reveal a bleak terrain. The vast majority of common readings were written within the last five years. Their characteristic

[1]David Randall, *Beach Books 2014–2016: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2016), 57, https://www.nas.org/images/documents/NAS-BeachBooks2014-16_Full_Report.pdf.

[2]See Ashley Thorne, Marilee Turscak, and Peter Wood, *Beach Books: 2013–2014: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2014), https://www.nas.org/images/documents/Beach_Books_10-21-14.pdf.

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genres are memoir, biography, dystopian science fiction, and the young adult novel; their simple grammar and flat style address readers either juvenile or semiliterate; their protagonists are "relatable" callow youths; their messages alternate between outrage at worldly suffering and inspirational exhortation toward worldly action. Moreover, the typical college common book is a work of progressive propaganda conveyed in banal prose to a ninth-grade reader.

Our previous *Beach Books* reports delineated broadly similar terrain. Some aspects of this portrait are changing for the worse, however. The immaturity of the genre becomes more pronounced each year, as common reading selections shift toward ever more juvenile protagonists, juvenile themes, and juvenile writing—simple novels for adults, such as Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), young adult novels at heart that quickly found a young adult audience. Such work is being supplanted by young adult novels pure and simple, such as Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), or by graphic memoirs—comic books—such as John Lewis's *March* (2013), whose language is appropriate for fourth graders. Common readings have traveled half the distance from *Doctor Faustus* to Doctor Seuss, and seem intent on finishing their journey.

The genre likewise appears set to grow even more banal, as a result of its intensifying allergy to offense. By way of omen for the future, this year the University of Kentucky provided a trigger warning for its own common book selection: "The content deals with an account of a sexual assault and may be triggering to some people."[3] The common reading, *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption*, by Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, Ronald Cotton, and Erin Torneo (2009), discusses rape and wrongful arrest, and the selection presumably was intended to argue the prevalence in America of both. Ironically, it fell afoul of that component of the modern progressive complex that seeks to silence anything remotely upsetting. The University of Kentucky's innovation looks to be the making of a trend: if "trigger warnings," "microaggressions," and their like continue to rise in importance, we may expect ever more common readings to carry such labels in future years. Alternatively, and more likely, the fear of such a warning will lead selection committees to choose common readings too dull to detonate.

To these deteriorations we may add the worsening taste of selection committees increasingly ignorant that better books exist. This ignorance probably

[3] "Introduction to the Common Reading Experience," University of Kentucky, Common Reading Experience, http://www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/NewStudentPrograms/CRE4/aboutcre.php#7.

already affects the selection process: the abandonment of the canon is already several generations old, and the selection committees likely are already staffed in good measure by faculty and administrators themselves educated to be unacquainted with the canon, indifferent to its merits, and unable and unwilling to read challenging books, whose own increasing ignorance annually compounds the ignorance of their students. The committees used to choose books worse than those they enjoyed themselves; increasingly, they choose bad books because they know no better.

As it stands, the typical reading is not likely to improve. Colleges could partially justify their choices if they served to form a modern canon from the best of this generation's fiction and nonfiction—but the colleges' desire to choose recent books makes for a constant churn of common readings. Just as the vast majority of books chosen in 2010 were published since 2005, so the vast majority of books chosen in 2015 were published since 2010. The emphasis on *timeliness*, all too often translated as stenographic fidelity to the latest cause, makes these books further subject to the mutability of the progressive party line. Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) had its moment in the sun as the most popular common reading of 2011–2012, 2012–2013, and 2013–2014, not least as an auxiliary to the campaign for universal health care.[4] The post-Ferguson substitution of the campaign for "racial justice" has led *Henrietta Lacks* to be eclipsed in 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 by Wes Moore's *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010). *The Other Wes Moore* will also be replaced, perhaps by books promoting the transgender movement such as Amy Ellis Nutt's *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of an American Family* (2015). When *Wes Moore* has done its work, *Wes Moore* can go. Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (2006) can advertise itself as a "beloved classic"[5] by dint of a decade's survival and the continuing political relevance of the agitation to amnesty illegal immigrants—but *Enrique's Journey*, too, is being supplanted by newer works of amnesty propaganda such as Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014). Common readings remain mediocre not least because they fail even to form their own canon.

The focus on recent works leads not only to uniform selections but also to fewer books. The older and better books of the Western tradition have been

[4]Stanley Kurtz, "Obama's Secret Weapon: Henrietta Lacks," *National Review Online*, August 19, 2013, http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/356139/obamas-secret-weapon-henrietta-lacks-stanley-kurtz.

[5]"Enrique's Journey," Sonia Nazario, http://www.enriquesjourney.com.

rejected throughout higher education not least on the grounds that they were in some manner a confining choice; in this instance, they have been replaced by a common reading-genre monoculture that focuses upon a relatively small number of trendy choices.

To say that common readings have become a standardized product that is routinely discarded and replaced with the next year's model is to say that they are disposable. The effect of this is described well enough in Edward Humes's *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash* (2012), a popular common reading the past few years. Hume describes what he takes to be the necessary consequence of the modern economy:

> The purchases that drive the markets, the products that prove the dream, all come packaged in instant trash (the boxes, wrappers, bags, ties, bottles, caps and plastic bubbles that contain products). And what's inside that packaging is destined to break, become obsolete, get used up or become unfashionable in a few years, months or even days—in other words, rapidly becoming trash, too.[6]

If the prospect seems one of unredeemed gloom, there are some remaining gleams of light within the panorama. Some colleges choose works of lucid moral philosophy as common readings, such as Michael J. Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do* (2009). Some select fine modern novels, among them Adam Johnson's *The Orphan Master's Son* (2012). Several classics feature: *Hamlet*; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*; *Major Barbara*. Common readings that aspire beyond the genre's narrow bounds come to only a few dozen out of hundreds—but they do exist.

Such books are unusually important. They represent the last castle of traditional learning, the few survivors of the old world that still command some attention in the academy. If they disappear from the common readings, it will register the disappearance from our schools of the entire past of our civilization. We therefore should interest ourselves in discovering what sort of books they are, with an eye to preserving their fingerhold within the common reading genre. If they do survive, it even remains possible to change the metaphor, and transform them from a last castle to a beachhead of learning.

The primary characteristic of traditional books that survive is that modern progressives consider them still worth reading. They form, therefore, a very partial selection from the canon. William Shakespeare remains a name to

[6] Edward Humes, *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash* (New York: Penguin Group, 2012), 6.

conjure by, so his plays get chosen—but *The Taming of the Shrew* also serves as a cue for the latest iteration of feminist polemic. Within American literature, the African-American compartment survives most strongly: no Melville, no Twain, no Faulkner, but Douglass's *Narrative*, Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1940), and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962). Sandel's *Justice* appears; Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) does not. Danielle Allen's *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014) provides students a close reading of our foundational political document—blended with moments of memoir by Allen, emphasizing her identity as a multiracial woman. Leopold Aldo's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) combines canonically fine nonfiction prose with ecological subject matter that reinforces modern environmentalism.

This remnant of tradition that coincides with radical causes is itself partial. Neither Robert Hayden nor Robert Wright make it into the African-American canon, and once-famed progressive works such as Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) have receded into the forgotten past. A host of environmentalist books chosen for common readings mention the influence of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), but no college assigns the book itself. Yet if a stand is to be made for the canon, in colleges as they are, the radical tradition provides some of the best ground. The interest in diversity can be a fulcrum by which to assign such fine works as Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). The interest in sustainability can be channeled toward John Muir's *Studies in the Sierra* (1874). Delight in the radical temperament might inspire the selection of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776). The surest means to preserve some part of the canon is to allure progressives to preserve the best of their own tradition.

Of the secondary characteristics that define the remnant of traditional learning among common readings, the most notable is membership in one or more of the three categories of *religious works*, *genre fiction*, and *memoirs*. Sectarian colleges continue to assign traditional religious works, both nonfiction and fiction, that refract piety through a memoiristic lens. Examples include Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1884), Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), and Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1952). A fair number of classic genre works appear among common readings—thrillers such as Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) and speculative fiction such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), George Orwell's *1984* (1948), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). As memoirs are generally the staple of the common reading genre, the few survivors of the canon unsurprisingly also include a fair sampling of memoirs: such works include Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) and Anne Moody's *Coming of*

Age in Mississippi (1968). Collectively, religious works, genre fiction, and memoirs provide a gate as important as progressivism by which to preserve the canon within the common reading genre.

There is a limit to what can be done. Luther College displays no impulse to assign its namesake's *On the Bondage of the Will*, no Catholic college has assigned Thérèse of Lisieux's *The Story of a Soul*, and it is unlikely that such choices ever will be common readings. Yet within the limits of the genre, science fiction stories such as Cordwainer Smith's "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" (1964) could provide students at sectarian colleges a genre introduction to piety, while modern novels such as Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) could do the same in a more sophisticated manner. The desire for genre fiction might lead to a Western such as Walter Van Tilburg Clark's meditation on justice in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940), whose anti-lynching note ought to appeal to college selection committees. Alternatively, John Le Carré's psychologically acute thriller *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (1963) provides notes of cold war moral equivalence that (alas) ought likewise to attract progressive approval. Memoirs provide a wealth of possibilities: modern exemplars that might attract selection committees and students alike include Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain* (1989). Examples in all three categories could be provided indefinitely; collectively, they demonstrate that many paths remain by which to preserve the canon (or at least its literate middlebrow penumbra) among common readings—and hence, by extension, within the academy at large.

Such tactics concede a great deal, of course. They acquiesce to progressives' insistence that the tradition only matters to the extent that it affirms their agenda—and this concession not only surrenders the claim that the tradition's value lies precisely in its autonomy from or contradiction of ideology but also makes the tradition hostage to the political ascendancies of the moment. We must try alternate means of preserving the canon, and our *Beach Books* studies contain many superb choices complete with explanations of their importance and guidance. James Watson's *The Double Helix* (1968) may never make it into a progressive common reading, since Watson makes no bones about his prefeminist attitude toward women; we think that it should be read because it is a lively memoir about how science is really done, and tells about an extraordinarily important scientific discovery of the modern age. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is anathema to progressives because Kipling was an enthusiastic imperialist who thought Englishmen superior to their subjects; we want students to read an exciting adventure story, a loving portrait of India, and a sophisticated understanding of just how the British Empire worked. Although we believe that *Beach Books* will prompt some

improvement in the choice of books for incoming freshmen, collaboration with progressives may never make Watson or Kipling a college common reading. We know that we must never rely exclusively upon such alliances.

Yet while some portion of the canon survives in the academy, defenders of tradition should devote a significant portion of their energy to its preservation—and not least through those icons of the academy's standards and values, the college common readings. It may be only a small achievement to persuade a common reading selection committee to choose *Gilead* rather than *Ready Player One*—but it will not be a trivial one.