ANALYSIS: THE STATUS QUO

Colleges overwhelmingly assign books for students who are presumed to regard reading as a strange and difficult activity, to which they must be introduced with careful thought and great caution. Since these colleges usually do not dare to require the students to read the books they assign, or make the requirement hollow by failing to test for it, they instead have to allure the students with the sweetener of easy, exciting reading. The colleges therefore tend to assign no-fuss digestibles—memoirs and nonfiction, young adult books, science fiction, and comic books, books with young protagonists and books where the students might already have seen the movie, and affirming books that make the students feel good about themselves and what they can do with their college education.

Mission statements for common reading programs further limit the selected texts. Common reading programs that require an author available for a campus visit have to select a recent work, and probably from an author associated with a book publisher specializing in the commercial genre of common reading books. The desire to create community limits the common readings to the most anodyne of topics, excludes any intellectual topic interesting enough to be controversial, and has a marked tendency to redefine community around a shared catechism of belief rather than around a shared love of inquiry into truth. The emphasis on fostering non-academic values such as community, civic engagement, and social justice leads to selecting books that emphasize collective effort for non-academic pursuits rather than for the solitary disengagement that is a fundamental component and delight of the life of the mind. College, this sort of common reading tells the incoming student, is a place to indulge a jolly, earnest desire to change the world for the better—and nothing more.

The common reading committees have distinct tastes that tend to narrow the possibilities for texts yet further. Partly their tastes are traditionally American—as early as 1920, H. L. Mencken criticized American fiction for its unending optimism, for its cheery desire to inspire as it tells of adversity overcome and hope rewarded, for mistrusting the life of the mind, and for denying that sorrow and sin are inescapable aspects of the human condition. Mencken denounced these themes in the then-dominant modes of saccharine religiosity and Horatio-Alger-enterprise; but, mutatis mutandis, common readings now celebrate an equally saccharine secularized humanitarianism and Horatio-Alger-social activism. (The common reading selections of stylized denunciations by latter-day muckrakers of the evils of the world are part of this genre: outrage about suffering will lead to action, and ultimately a solution.) Independent of their political leanings, common readings are overwhelmingly the sort of God-never-shuts-a-door-but-He-opens-a-window material that would have given that old curmudgeon Mencken apoplexy. Common readings partake almost universally of this American tradition of perpetual optimism.

76 This section of Analysis as a whole significantly recapitulates the Analysis of Thorne, Turscak, and Wood, Beach Books: 2013-2014, pp. 49-52.

The common reading committees’ obsession with suffering protagonists rather than on achievement is only partly traditional. The interest in affliction is distinguished and ancient—it traces back not least to the martyrrologies that underlie Jewish sacred history and the Gospel account of Christ’s Passion. Yet the endless emphasis on suffering rather than on achievement is a peculiar tic of the modern genre. A gruesomely large number of memoirs assigned as common readings display protagonists with missing limbs, stories of war are more likely to tell of wounds than of valor, and mental or physical dysfunction recurs as a subject again and again. These accounts are assigned with no sense that the interest in other people’s suffering might be prurient, that the desire to have a memoirist display his wounds is obscene, or that there is dignity in privacy at least as much as in an exhibition of the inward self.78 Moreover, while suffering is often the predicate of achievement, the emphasis on suffering is remarkably large.

College reading committees overwhelmingly select books that align with the liberal and progressive worldview that pervade academia. Race is always a predicate of identity, and presents a problem to be solved. The environment is always a Pauline in peril, and in need of saving. Illegal immigrants contribute so much to society, and would contribute so much more if only they were legalized. A book associated with the NPR or the NEA Big Read must be good. The urge for consensus and soft edges makes most common readings cautiously liberal; a significant minority are daringly progressive; books that challenge the liberal worldview in any fashion are few and far between. Beyond ideology, simple political partisanship is the most plausible explanation for curious absences from the common reading genre. For a notable example, there are still no common readings about the Deepwater Horizon (BP) Oil Spill (2010), while books on the effects of Hurricane Katrina (2005) continue to be selected; the absence of the one and the continuing popularity of the other does not seem explicable for any reason save that the spill occurred during a Democratic presidency and the hurricane during a Republican one. The presence of Sonia Sotomayor’s My Beloved World (2013) and the absence of Clarence Thomas’ My Grandfather’s Son (2007), both the memoirs of members of racial minorities who triumphed over adversity to reach the summit of success among the judiciary, likewise is most simply explained as a register of political partisanship. Such skews may or may not be deliberate exclusion in any particular case: while some of the liberal skew must be a matter of virtue signaling, at other times it apparently just doesn’t occur to the committees that other books exist.

College reading committees also generally choose English-language books written by Americans. This applies both to classics and to modern works. Even where the subject matter is foreign, the

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writers generally write in English, and are part of the English-language culture. The reliance on English-language works renders these selections parochial.

Finally, college reading committees are predictable in these preferences just summarized. The predictability is best measured by the existence of the common reading genre, with a marketing language and a range of books designed to appeal to the committees. Publishers know college reading committees so well that they can sell books to them, by the thousands, along with well-packaged author visits. The common reading committees are supposed to choose a book that makes students think as individuals—but they think in so standardized a manner themselves in choosing books that they have reduced themselves to the consumers of an equally standardized product in the marketplace.

The common reading genre, in sum, is parochial, contemporary, commercial, optimistic, juvenile, obsessed with suffering, and progressive. Not every selected text embraces all these categories—a few escape all of them—but these adjectives define the characteristic common reading. It is a gateway to becoming a reader of middlebrow best sellers, but not an introduction to the life of the mind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have both old and new recommendations in this year’s edition of Beach Books. The old recommendations we will repeat briefly; the new ones we will expand upon, for emphasis and for fuller explanation. We recognize the difficulty of acting on all these recommendations immediately; nevertheless, we present them both as ideals and as programs suitable for careful, long-term implementation.

The 10 recommendations we repeat without elaboration are:

1. Seek diversity—the intellectual kind.
2. Seek books that are neither too long nor too short.
3. Seek works that are not contemptuous of humanity or dyed in profound cynicism.
4. In fiction, seek works that exemplify elegance of language and a degree of complexity, along with moral seriousness.
5. In nonfiction, seek works that exemplify important ideas lucidly argued and writers who take their rhetorical task seriously.