

Cynthia Herman 9.3 Position Statement on Classics

Some people believe classics must be high quality and must be of a certain age. They believe students must read classics because they are high quality and because they are so old. I used to think that. I thought that classics were important because for some reason teachers kept assigning them to their students. I now believe reading classics are a right of passage. Since there are so many classics, no one has read them all, but every time a child reads a classic children's book, they share something with every other person who has read that book. They should read classics not because they are assigned to them and because they are old, but because they are a part of our culture now. American children and adults can relate to each other through classics.

These books have become classics because there is something in them, a message or a theme, that people connect to, and they connect to it by the masses. There's a shared experience among readers of the same classic. They have shared memories even if they've never met. When we read the scholarship about Little Women we saw that generation after generation of readers connected to the characters in the book. What was interesting was that each generation connected to the book in a different way. The book comforted some readers during the depression. It raised questions about family roles for women during women's movements. Readers from the past felt something strong while reading Little Women.

Young readers today could take from reading Little Women the theme of selflessness. Marmee and the March/Alcott family spent their lives helping those less fortunate than themselves, and they were not that fortunate to begin with. They gave away what small luxuries they had, like a warm, delicious Christmas morning breakfast. The March/Alcott women could serve as an inspiration to girls today to find a way to make a difference in other's lives. Classics tend to have a message or a theme that touches the lives of many different readers from different generations. So it's important for contemporary readers to continue reading classics.

Classics are made, not born. In our discussions around creating criteria for what makes a classic, we found that classics tend to be around for a long while. We wondered why we felt we couldn't include popular books from today. Well, classics become classics over time. They survive and thrive over time for some reason. There isn't a set amount of time classics need to be popular for, but I feel a classic needs to be able to be significant for at least two generations before it can begin to attain classic status. I feel this way because each generation lives in a slightly different world, so it's important for a classic to touch a diverse group of readers. Through the scholarship about Little Women I found that the book was a classic because it was able to fit into the changing world through every bend in the road. For a book to remain important even after changes in our culture, it could truly be a classic. In order for a book to remain important to different generations it needs to be well written. It needs to have different themes, where every reader could read it

a different way and learn a different lesson through its characters. A classic book inspires its readers to do something, perhaps to change their world for the better. Contemporary readers should continue to read classics because maybe that classic has the answer they need to make their world better.

When we looked at the scholarship for Little Women we found that it wasn't an instant bestseller. The book gained popularity after a few years. What made it a classic is that it continued to be popular after generations of readers. For a book to be so popular, it must reach many people within each generation. In the same regard, each culture group has a different set of 'classics.' For a book to be considered a classic, it should be recognized and loved by much of that culture group. We've been reading and studying about white, middle class classics, but other groups might cherish and pass down a completely different set of books. We found ourselves grappling with the Newbery and how it's committee of judges are not very diverse. We didn't feel that makes for a very strong award, saying it's the best book that year in America, when not every voice in America is represented. Classics, however, have the opportunity to be recognized as such by the readers themselves. It's a grassroots effort to make a book a classic just by reading, connecting to, and telling others about it. Classics are a good source for young readers to find a good book.

Classics are important to today's youth because they bridge the gap between generations. They have the opportunity to read and cherish something their parents read and cherished. Likewise, it's an opportunity for parents to share a book they loved with their child. People have connections to these classics. There's a huge sense of nostalgia when hearing about these loved books. We reported we feel this nostalgia in our first discussion about books we thought were classics. We especially felt nostalgia about classic picture books because we have memories of our parents reading them to us. When we were shaping our criteria for classics too we also mentioned that classics give us a feeling of nostalgia. Reading these books take us back home, safe and sound.

I feel classics can kind also of be like an inside joke. You won't get it unless you've experienced it. Unless you've read the classic book yourself, you won't get references made in other medium. Other works inspired by the classic might also be overlooked as such by somebody who hasn't read the classic. Our group has chosen to read Peter Pan for our classic and just last week Tinkerbell was referenced by one of the characters on 'The Office.'

I think teachers have a responsibility to introduce classics to their students. Because a lot of classics are written with a style and language that is different than contemporary books, teachers may need to assist with reading and understanding the classics. When I read Peter Rabbit I understood it, I think, but there was language that my students might not understand because it is not the way we speak anymore, same with Little Women. Many of us mentioned not liking Newbery or Classic books because they had been required reading and we were forced to read

them in school. I do feel teachers should introduce classics, but they should not force students to read them when they are not ready. A balance of student-selected and teacher-encouraged literature would make a young reader more well-rounded. A lot of these classics, especially the lengthier ones are difficult to read and could turn students off because the language is foreign to our modern students. It's a challenge, but a worthy challenge.

Having a contemporary child read a classic welcomes them, one book at a time, into our American culture. It's a right of passage. A classic is a well-written, well loved work of art that has the ability to change a reader's life. A classic has gained its status because its readers felt something when reading it. A reader of classics can talk about them with their friends. They can understand references in popular culture. They have a connection to readers from the past. They have a connection to the older family members who experienced the same stories. They have a connection to leaders from our past that may have been inspired to do great things after reading the same classic.

We teachers know the power we hold to shape our nation's future. Looking back on this module I see how a classic can carry multiple strong lessons suitable for many generations. From now on I will feature more classics in my classroom library. I'll do more book talks about classics that I've read. I'll encourage children to read those books together so that they can have deep conversations about classics. I've learned through this module that a classic isn't just a book to enjoy. It holds a high status in our culture. We read them because they hold that status. We want to be a part of the community of readers that have read that same book. We want to know what they know. I will read more classics to my own children someday to welcome them to the world of quality, classic literature, and I will encourage my students to read classics (as well as award winners from smaller culture groups) on their own.