

Required Reading
Selections & Purpose...Get It Right

By Brian P. Cory

June 19, 2017

In 2015, **Think Warm Thoughts**, highlighted a sampling of suggested or required readings at various colleges and universities.

The essay concluded with some broad questions regarding selections and purpose:

If you were asked to suggest a book for your school to read, what would it be and why?

Would your suggestion be selected to encourage student participation and interaction, promote critical thinking on a current or emerging topic, offer opportunities to foster appreciation of diversity and diverse perspectives, reinforce the mission and principles of our school/district, or facilitate exciting transitions?

Other reasons?

Would your selection be on war, peace, ethics, justice, “the new world”, “the old world”, technology, hope, despair, discovery, etc.?

Other topics/themes?

Fast forward to 2017, the *National Review* – a conservative magazine and website – recently published a **provocative article** on the topic of “common-reading programs.” The article is crafted around the latest report, *Beach Books 2016-2017: What Do Colleges Want Students to Read Outside Class?*, from the *National Association of Scholars (NAS)*. NAS defines the association as “a network of scholars and citizens united by our commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education.” A related **media packet** is posted on the NAS website.

Below is an updated sampling for the Class of 2021:

Princeton University: [What Is Populism?](#) by Jan-Werner Müller

Duke University: [Prince of Los Cocuyos](#) by Richard Blanco

University of Southern California: [Callings](#) by Dave Isay

Tulane University: Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

New York University: Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Rutgers (School of Arts and Sciences): Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

Penn State University: It's What I Do A Photographer's Life of Love and War by Lynsey Addario

Clemson University: This I Believe by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman

Stanford University:

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History by Elizabeth Kolbert

Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward

Bucknell University: Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson

Tufts: The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility by Professors Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj

Luther College: There Was and There Was Not: A Journey Through Hate and Possibility in Turkey, Armenia, and Beyond by Meline Toumani

Elon University: Make Your Home Among Strangers by Jennine Capó Crucet

Miami University, Ohio: Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance

Bard College:

Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation by Jonathan Lear

Citizen: An American Lyric by Claudia Rankine

University of Notre Dame (Glynn Family Honors Program):

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking by Susan Cain

Laudato Si' by Pope Francis

The Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare

The Joy of X: A Guided Tour of Math from One to Infinity by Steven H. Strogatz

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance

Siena College: Frankenstein by Gris Grimly

Brown University: Beautiful Souls by Eyal Press

California State University: Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The College of New Jersey: No Apparent Distress by Dr. Rachel Pearson

University of California- Berkley:

Hamilton cast recording for the Broadway musical

March by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell

Borderwall as Architecture by Ronald Rael

Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee

Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream
by Sara Goldrick-Rab

Flight Behavior by Barbara Kingsolver

Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy by Kevin Bales

The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer by Siddhartha Mukherjee

Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness by Simone Browne

Virginia Commonwealth University: Dream Land: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic by Sam Quinones

Delaware University: The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead Cora

Skidmore College: The Book That Change America: How Darwin's Theory of Evolution Ignited a Nation by Randall Fuller

Northwestern University: Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality by Danielle Allen

Of course, summer reading is not limited to higher education. Last week *Business Insider* published a piece which featured the summer 2017 reading lists at six “**prestigious private high schools.**”

Whether at the collegiate or secondary level, a couple broad questions persist:

How and why are the selections selected? What is the purpose of the selections?

Since educators at these learning institutions presumably selected the readings and the schools are requiring that their students read them, at the very basic level, one must assume the common-reading programs are viewed as an integral component of the education being designed and engaged.

National Review's article suggests that the new common-reading programs “have cut of the classics.” The article argues: “The classics stand the test of time precisely because they soar above petty political divisions and touch us through our common humanity. They convey the wisdom (and folly) of the ages from one generation to the next. They challenge us intellectually, morally, and spiritually. They help us to feel at home in the world, and to begin to understand who we are.”

I have actually read some of the selections that made the lists above (and posted some of them on my **Recommended Reading** shelf. Countering the concerns expressed in the *National Review*, I would conclude that the selections I read actually challenged me intellectually, morally, spiritually, and touched the core of my humanity while helping me to begin understanding who I am (or hope to be.)

Would any of that have changed if a school or educator had required me to read them? Honestly, I don't know. Should the insights and lessons I learned from the books have been part of my education journey if I was still a student? Honestly, I don't know.

One thing I do know is that there is something to be learned every day. In that sense, all of us are lifelong students. Another thing I am pretty certain about is that we – educators – should be very mindful in making selections and defining the purpose of the education we design.

Our choices and mission is more important now than ever before. Whether it is through the classics or more modern books (or, yes, even a cast recording of a Broadway musical...see UC Berkeley), we need to get it right.