

Chapter 1:

Why Should We Read All Those Books?

I want you to picture a California college campus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Imagine kids wandering around in the fashions of the day, which were really costumes rather than clothes. (We spent a great deal of money attempting to look *poor*.) Imagine the brick buildings and the carefully maintained beds of shrubbery. There was the “free speech area” in front of the campus bookstore, where very earnest people handed out pamphlets with pictures of starving Biafran children on them. Most felt obligated to take a pamphlet and then wait until they got out of sight before tossing it into the trash. There were the music majors (harmlessly insane), the psychology majors (seriously insane), the engineering majors (mismatched socks and bemused expressions), the business majors (purposeful strides), and then there were English majors like me (enormous armloads of books—students had not as yet figured out how great backpacks were). But I was an English major with a question.

Exactly why was I an English major? This thought kept ricocheting around inside my skull as I wandered across the campus that fine spring day, not too many months from graduation. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and I should have been on top of the world. But this nagging thought kept coming back to me: what really was the point in being an English major? What did English majors do? Well, reading is what we did. We read a lot. We read books written largely by people who were dead. I mean, they were good and dead. They were for the most part dead guys who wore wigs and knee breeches and spent a great deal of their time sitting around and thinking deep thoughts. As far as I know, they didn't have jobs that kept them busy eight hours a day, much less take care of a husband and run endless errands as I spent a considerable part of my life doing. So what did they or their thoughts have to do with me or anyone else I knew?

But I was an English major, and we were told that their books and essays and poems and plays were the “classics.” Everybody had read this stuff, so we were supposed to read it too. But why did we read those particular things? Did you ever get to the point where you’d read them all? How did you know when you’d read enough? How did you know when you were at the end?

Maybe this was some sort of huge game in which we competed to see who’d read the most. I smiled as I started to visualize the scene: a bunch of snotty little English majors on graduation night standing around at a party, and the first guy says, “I just finished reading *The Grapes of Wrath*.”

The second guy says, “*Grapes of Wrath*, huh? Well, in between my nap and my shower this afternoon, I read *Don Quixote*!”

“Oh, *Don Quixote*, big deal! How about I see your *Don Quixote* and raise you one *Moby Dick*, from which, by the way, I can trace every biblical and mythological allusion!”

“Okay, you wanna play hardball, huh? I’ll see that and raise you all the *Canterbury Tales*—in Middle English!!! I win!” at which point there is a stunned silence in the room, and all the others skulk away, beaten and broken little English majors.

Or maybe there’s some great cosmic list that’s kept somewhere. And when it’s all said and done, it’s just this: he who reads the most before he dies wins!!!

But nonetheless, there I was, a senior, having read tons of novels, short stories, plays, essays, and poems, representing all the “greats” of Western literature, and suddenly I didn’t see why I had done it, except for the fact that I would be able to impress people at parties by saying I had read and actually understood T. S. Eliot’s poetry. And, frankly, that didn’t seem enough justification for my future career as a teacher, in which I would be exhorting students to read these same “classics.”

I did, however, shortly find an answer to my dilemma, and it came in the form of a wonderful professor named Dr. George Betar. I’ll come back to him later.

At the present moment, though, why is my confusion all those years ago of any significance to you? Perhaps you are teaching literature or are contemplating teaching literature. Or you're reading literature and wondering, just as I did, why you're being made to do it. Or maybe you're through with that phase of life now, you've read a lot of stuff, but wonder from time to time why you did it. Soon, or perhaps even now, you'll have your own children coming to you and asking you why they can't just read the *Baby Sitter's Club* series instead of being made to read *Jane Eyre*, which is the story of the life of a young woman with whom they can't seem to identify at all. Or maybe it isn't literature at all that baffles you but the disputes and arguments and even armed conflicts that are taking place all over the world these days. These are all legitimate questions. And asking them doesn't indicate a lack of intellectual merit or rigor because they are being asked.

Let me tell you another story. It took place nearly 30 years after that sunny stroll across my college campus. By then I was a veteran English teacher, not far from retirement. I was having dinner in a local restaurant with my family when, on my way back from the salad bar, I ran into a former student. He had just graduated from high school and was having what was no doubt a celebratory dinner with some friends. I had taught him in my 8th-grade language arts class, and I remembered him well as one of the most brilliant students I had ever had. After our initial greetings and my congratulations to him, I asked him how his high school English classes had been and did he feel prepared for college.

It was then James made the comment that really stayed with me:

"Almost all my English classes," he said, "were just book reports, one after another."

I don't remember how I responded. It's not important, really. I smiled, we said our goodbyes, and I went back to rejoin my family.

But I couldn't quite let go of what James had said to me. This boy had read a lot of fine literature in high school. I knew he had taken Advanced Placement classes, taught by teachers who worked very hard to make sure their students truly understood what these books were saying and what the authors had "really meant." But if

a gifted student like James still came away from each “novel study” feeling he had just read a book and maybe taken a test on it or written a paper, what must the other kids be feeling? Did they think they too were just doing a series of book reports? Maybe James was saying it felt as though there was some Great List somewhere with all the stuff people were supposed to read. So they would read it, take a test, maybe write a paper, and then somewhere some box would get checked, and they'd move on to something else. Sort of like, “Been there, read the book, saw the movie, got the tee-shirt. Next?”

But why in the world were we reading this seemingly endless succession of stuff? Not only did I not know the answer to that question, but I felt strongly that I would enjoy reading the great classics of our civilization a lot more if I did. Let me give you an analogy that might help:

Suppose you were handed one piece of a big jigsaw puzzle and told to study it. You weren't told it was a puzzle piece that fits together with other puzzle pieces to make a big picture. So let's stretch our imaginations even further and say you do indeed study that puzzle piece in great depth. You take quizzes on it. Maybe you write an essay or a research paper about it. Maybe you do an oral presentation having to do with that puzzle piece. When you've finished with whatever it is you're required to do with that piece, you go on to other things and, by and by, you're handed another individual puzzle piece and told to study it.

It's unimaginable you'd put up with this for long, but that's sort of how I remember my education in literature being in high school and even during my first few years of college. Book after essay after play after poem after book. Each one was an individual puzzle piece, although I didn't know that at the time. I had no idea that, if properly understood, they would fit into a large puzzle that would reveal to me what it means to be a well-read, well-educated, and thoughtful person living in the time and place in which I find myself.

I remember in my sophomore year of college taking a class called “The Great American Novel,” the main focus of which was Mark

Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a book with which I had long struggled. I'm going to talk about this book in more depth in a later chapter, but I bring it up now because it was in this class that I began to see that there was supposed to be some connection among all these works of literature and, more important, between them and all the other subjects I was studying. By no means did I know what the "big picture" on the puzzle box was, but I now knew I was actually working on a puzzle instead of just studying individual pieces.

Suddenly this book, which I had unsuccessfully tried to read for so long, became one of my favorites! What was more significant, however, was that I began to get a glimmering of what it meant to read great literature. It was as if this fine young professor showed me that an individual puzzle piece, the book itself, fit together with other puzzle pieces. The other puzzle pieces in this case were the added information about the history and intellectual atmosphere of our country when it was being written. It told me a lot about what it was to be an American in the mid 19th century, which of course has led us to who we are as Americans today.

So I learned from this class that I needed to educate myself about the time and place in which a piece of literature was being written so I might be able to attach that piece of writing to a bigger picture. This helped, but it still didn't seem to be enough; I still seemed to be dealing with a series of little puzzles made up of a few pieces.

What was it all for?

As I mentioned before, this is when we go back to my senior year in college where a critical event in my education occurred. This is where Dr. George Betar enters the narrative. He was one of those men who was rather good-looking, in a messy-haired, tweedy sports jacket sort of style, Central Casting's idea of the "cool" college professor. I think he was in his early 40s when I knew him. He was an incredibly gifted teacher, passionate and knowledgeable about his subject, very witty, and extremely charismatic. He was secular in his approach and very cynical, but

he would always listen with respect to people whose opinions differed from his own.

I took a couple of classes from him, and I believe this was “Survey of American Literature I.” A “survey” class is one in which you sample bits of literature, either American literature or British literature or world literature, in chronological order. Often you don’t read entire works in a survey class; you read excerpts, carefully chosen samplings from those books or poems or whatever. Survey classes are usually where English majors start out, and then they get into more focused “elective” classes. I don’t know why I, as a senior, was still taking survey classes, but there I was.

I have a distinct memory of one class meeting in which Dr. B. admonished us sternly that we definitely did not want to miss the next class meeting because he was going to deliver his universally renowned lecture entitled “The History of the World.” We all laughed dutifully at what had to be a joke, because we knew no one could lecture on the history of the world in one class meeting, but we were certainly intrigued. So we all showed up at the next meeting, opened our spiral-bound notebooks, clicked our ballpoint pens, and raised our eyes expectantly. I had no idea I was about to experience a turning point in my intellectual journey.

One of the greatest regrets of my life is that somehow I lost the notes to this lecture in which Dr. Betar laid out his vision that Western culture and literature are one long dispute. In time I forgot what the two sides were arguing about, but the basic idea of our literature—the literature of Western culture—as one big ongoing dispute remained with me. I remember asking a zillion questions during the lecture. (I was never able to be quiet in class. I often made bets with myself I’d go to all my classes and not ask one question. Want to know how many times I actually pulled that off? Not once.) But I vividly remember walking out at the end of that particular class in total silence. I must have looked like one of those zombie-like folks from a bad 50s horror movie like “Invasion of the Pod People” or some such thing. I was so “gobsmacked” by the ideas from that lecture I think I just wandered to a bench somewhere and sat.