

Literature Through the Ages

By Kathy Muether, Geneva's Librarian

As a classical Christian school, The Geneva School places a high priority on reading and the importance of exposing children to good literature. Here I want to explain a little more about how and why we do that.

We believe that reading is among the "lost tools of learning" that need to be recovered if we are going to educate our children properly. In our post-verbal and anti-intellectual age, fewer people are committed to the discipline of reading.

We can easily identify two culprits in our anti-reading age. First there are the thought police that have taken over much of public education. Current wisdom in public education challenges the very notion of a canon of classical literature. Such outdated thinking, it is claimed, gives preference to Dead White European Males and denies our children their proper exposure to the ideal of "diversity" in education. The other culprit is less ideological and may be closer to home: it is the entertainment industry that breeds illiteracy by tempting our children to allegedly more exciting pastimes than the pursuit of reading.

The twin dangers of these two culprits were described in a recent article in the Orlando Sentinel. A November 2, 2005, feature documented the dilemma of reading in public schools. In public schools, classical reading lists, or "Canons of Western Literature," are disappearing. Some argue that they must go, in order that English classes properly represent the diversity of American culture. But Shakespeare and Jane Austen are not disappearing primarily out of concern for multiculturalism, but rather in a desperate attempt to interest students in reading anything at all. "Kids just don't read anything at all," one teacher sighed to reporter Erika Hobbs.

"Anything to get kids reading," was the mantra of another frustrated Central Florida teacher. So "young adult" or "adolescent literature" that desperately tries to connect with the lifestyle of the average American teenager is replacing the staid canon of classics of Western literature.

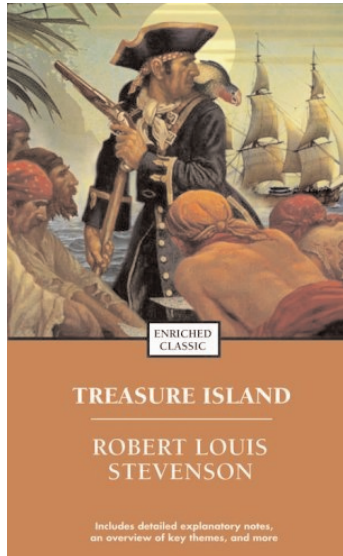
In today's entertainment-saturated world, reading is hard for young people who have been weaned on electronic toys that cultivate short, sound-bite attention spans. The novelist Walker Percy made an interesting observation on our age when he claimed that no ancient language ever had a word for "boredom."

At The Geneva School, we are committed to being resistance fighters against these trends in our culture. One way we seek to fight back is to acknowledge what this frustrated public school teacher seems to have overlooked: trying to turn teenagers into readers is too little too late. We want to develop reading-lovers at the earliest of ages.

Geneva is counter-cultural in at least two senses. We promote the importance of reading itself.

And we promote *good* reading. One way in which our school differs from other schools is that it has a library. Most schools have converted them into media centers. The change in name is not insignificant - the medium matters. We do not plan to have students reading *War and Peace* on their Palm Pilots or listening to James Earl Jones read it on their iPods.

This is not to say that we are against technology at Geneva. We believe that we should choose the right technology for the purpose we want to achieve. Good reading requires the best technology. And that technology is the book. This use of the fitting technology guards the distinction



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between education and entertainment.

Reading is pleasant, reading is uplifting, reading is edifying. Reading expands our imagination. Reading, in short, makes us more human. Reading does all of these things. And if that were all that reading did, it would justify the emphasis we place on it at The Geneva School.

But as Christians, we can say even more. Why should *Christians* read? Reading is especially important for those who claim to be "people of the Book." English professor David Lyle Jeffrey (of Baylor University) made the claim in a recent book that it was probably Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, who coined the expression that Jews and Christians were "people of the Book." Muhammad meant this as a pejorative term of contempt. He was scornful of the Jewish and Christian insistence that God revealed himself through the written word. (Islam, on the other hand, was an orally-transmitted authority.)

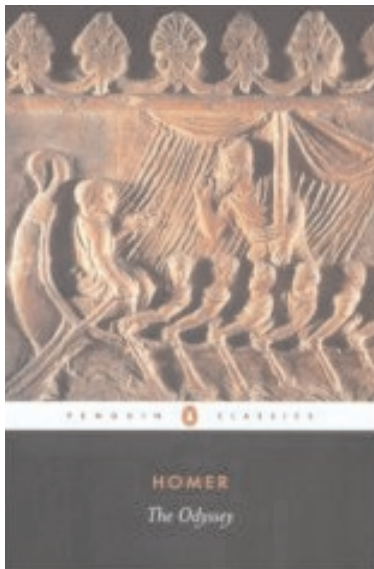
Pejorative or not, Muhammad was right, because Christianity depends on the written word. Our faith would be empty if it were not based on God's written revelation. "These things were *written* for us," Paul writes, referring to the Old Testament and assuming, of course, that we will *read* the Old Testament. As "people of the Book," Christians hold in particular reverence that which we have come to know as the "Book of Books."

But throughout church history, Christians have also revered books in general. The Christian life is, to an important extent, the *literary* life. In other words, Christians are also "people of books." In order to take the Word of God seriously, we must also take in the words of others, recognizing the importance of stimulating reading in the development of godly minds. To pursue God, then, is to read.

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Of course, it's not only *that* you read, but *what* you read. At The Geneva School, we stress classical literature. This means reading older books. We try to discourage our students from the snare that C. S. Lewis described as "presentism." Presentism is a provincialism that elevates the modern world above all the times that preceded it.

Lewis also described "presentism" as "chronological snobbery," the peculiarly-modern idea that what is latest is best, what is new is improved, and what is old is not wise, but rather dusty and obsolete. There is no better way to deprogram our children from this nonsense than to have them read older books. Reading older books will help students to challenge the biases and prejudices of our age.



To be sure, this is a challenge in the Grammar School, where many of these classics are not age-appropriate. Much of our focus falls on introducing students to the classics and whetting their appetites.

At Geneva, our students also read original sources. Here again we can borrow from the wisdom of C. S. Lewis. Lewis often regretted that his students spent more time reading *about* Plato or Chaucer or Shakespeare than reading from the classics themselves. How much easier would it be to understand these authors, he lamented, if students invested in the effort to read them?

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These are counter-cultural practices that we are trying to establish, and they are admittedly lofty

goals for your children. In setting these goals at The Geneva School, we are counting on your support and encouragement. It is vital that our aim to achieve earlier lovers of literature be reinforced in the home. Here are ways that you can help.

Set an example of good reading for your children. Read these things yourselves. Read to your children. A good starting point is William Bennett's hefty two volumes on moral education.

- o Read the Bible together during family devotions.
- o Design your home as a haven for good reading. Hide the television set. Develop, over time, a good home library. Make reading enjoyable with the combination of comfortable seating, good lighting, and a quiet atmosphere.
- o Take time to read. Good reading is slow reading. Lovers of literature have often noted an analogy between eating and reading. Sometimes we need to eat quickly, and sometimes we need to read quickly. But surely all of us would agree that the experience of a Thanksgiving feast is different from a refueling stop at Burger King. We want normally to eat nutritiously, and we also want to linger over the feast, to enjoy the food, the wine, and the company. We dare not rush the experience, lest we rob it of its pleasures. The same can and should be said about reading. There is a time to find information quickly. But there is also a time to seek knowledge and to seek wisdom. These all have their place, and they are not to be confused with each other. We should expect to *feast* on good literature - to enjoy its pleasures and even to regret when the story's end forces us to part company. Be an example to your children about how to feast on good literature. Read good books, slowly.



That is why we begin in Kindergarten with the reading of fairy tales and fables. These are stories that engage the moral imagination. Our students come to love Beatrix Potter, A. A. Milne, Robert McCloskey, and Eric Carle.

Finally, literature through the ages exposes our children to the narrative of the Christian life. All literature is about pilgrimage. All good stories, Flannery O'Connor once observed, are about redemption. When we read good tragedies, good comedies, and especially when we read good tragicomedies, we see skilled writers embody the journey of the Christian life. Ultimately, they help us to appreciate better the best story - the story about the death and resurrection of Christ. As pilgrims in this world, we must find our story in Christ's story.

It is not too much to say, therefore, that literature points us to the well-ordered Christian life. At The Geneva School, we are persuaded that the themes of great literature can and should be taught to the youngest of our children.

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These are stories that engage the moral imagination. Our students come to love Beatrix Potter, A. A. Milne, Robert McCloskey, and Eric Carle. Moreover, we coordinate the books we read in a particular grade with the time period in history that the students are studying. So, fourth graders who are learning about the Middle Ages read *Beowulf*. Fifth graders studying early American history read *Johnny Tremain*.

Students at The Geneva School are introduced early to classic stories and award-winning books. They will know and appreciate authors such as Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Jonathan Swift, and E. B. White. And they will develop healthy habits that will carry into college, and into a life-long hunger for good literature.