

The Librarian's Desk . . .

“What makes a book a classic?” is a recurring question posed to the Librarians. Our attempt at providing an answer always leads to interesting discussions with our patrons, as they are never entirely satisfied with any one answer, and the Librarians always have more to say about the literary hall of fame.

While there is no magisterial board of editorial literati that beknights the status of classic on a book, it is nevertheless a mysterious process. A classic seems to emerge out of the stirrings of time, like the clear vision that surfaces in the undulating mirror, revealing to the self-obsessed monarch the true attitude of those subjects dwelling in the forest thicket.

One of the best professional definitions I have seen on how a classic is made is offered by William H. Gass, author of *A Temple of Texts*. In his essay, *To a Young Friend Charged with the Possession of Classic*, Gass writes “when coined in the reign of Servius Tullius during the 6th century B.C., it meant the group, among citizens, to be called upon first; that is, during a time of war, the strongest, boldest, bravest, most fit to fight; while, when the state faced choices of difficulty and moment, the wisest, most temperate, and fair; so that then, when it was used of writers, it referred to those of first rank, and also, by an obvious step, to their works. Therefore it should now designate, with regard to the education of a citizenry still concerned with their community, the books that have most completely represented and embodied its culture, as well as those that will best instruct, enlarge, and ennoble the mind, discipline the passions, and encourage a useful and respectful approach to experience. Literary classics break new ground, instigate change, or establish fresh standards of value, enlarging the scope of the canon, discovering new qualities of excellence, and confirming the importance of range, depth, mastery, and perfection in any artistic activity.” He took the words right out of my mouth.

Gass goes on to say that people have always distrusted the classics, but that “it is now publicly acceptable to take pride in such distrust.” Apparently, books cultivate a healthy skepticism, and the more books we spread around the greater the confidence of mind readers have in expressing their personal points of view. Contrary to what we thought a decade ago, the Internet is not replacing books, is rather placing them at our fingertips for purchasing, borrowing, digitizing, self-publishing, and downloading, as well as instigating the hundreds of thousands of forums, both inclusive and exclusive, for book-talk. If only I were the chance-taking sort and had wagered a dollar every time someone tried to get a reaction out of me by saying there would be no need for libraries anymore because of the ‘Net . . . ah well.

Diverging interpretations of meaning, heated debate, and the lasting ability to unsettle a readership are often telltale signs of a book's immortality. The ripe historic timeframes and believable characters, and the eternal NOW of many classic works of fiction enable us to trade places and learn empathy or intolerance, hear a gong-sound at future indications of similar behavior.

Of the top ten books that were most frequently challenged in the 1990s, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* are numbers 5, 6, and 10 respectively, no matter that collectively 245 years have passed since their publication. Readers object to the vernacular language of Twain's underclasses, fear that Steinbeck's book promotes euthanasia, and are repulsed by Salinger's use of profanity. Will these books ever seem quaint? A couple of contemporary imprints that are widely known and have roused ire are: the Harry Potter books, on the supposition they'd lead youth to witchcraft, and *The DaVinci Code* for the questionable biblical inferences, but I doubt these will ever become classics as they are,

in my opinion, purely fun and sensational. They do not teach us anything about our humanity or our age.

While the ability of a book to disturb ceaselessly is one way it may reach classical heights, another way seems to be an author's uncanny talent of writing so affectingly, and to be so *au courant*, that their publication alters the course of events. One example is Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe (my personal favorite classic.) According to legend, when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1862 he said, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War!" Strangely, the author had never even stepped foot in the South.

We might ask ourselves if we feel the tremors of classic stature forming the next time we pick up a Toni Morrison, John Updike, Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, Marilyn Robinson, and of that ilk. One hundred prominent critics concurred that these authors are producing the best works of American fiction published in 25 years going forward or back, and hailed Toni Morrison's Beloved as the outright winner (it also appears on the banned books list.) Published in 1987, Canadian author Margaret Atwood reviewed Beloved in the New York Times, and summed it up in a compound word: hair-raising.

As a nation we agree to disagree when it comes to the contagious wave-lengths sent to our minds by books. We serve the literary jury duty that turns books to classics because we read and re-read them in our schools and public libraries, and every few years an initiate joins the syllabus or stacks. Reaching a verdict on the classic worth of a book is a challenge because, while we grasp we are in the presence of truth, it is curiously held in the form of a question. What is unquestionable is the ability great books have to speak to us, as if we were speaking to ourselves and conducting ourselves accordingly. Libraries have tried to provide a quiet place for that kind of listening.

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