

# What place has the humble novel in the modern English classroom?

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*"Literature is, and has been through the ages, the great medium of thought transference. It is the mighty stronghold wherein are kept the gems of intellect.... In its depths are reflected joy, sorrow, hope, despair -- every emotion that recorded life has known" (Theodosia Crosse, 1928).*

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*"English may not be solely about a love of literature anymore, but it does not have to abandon that love of reading." (Kate Dommaille, 2002)*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

You've probably been brought here by the title of this presentation...

Maybe you're a closet luddite, wanting to hear someone else espouse a similar view to your own which goes something like: "if only we could go back to the good old days when *Resource Centres* were called *Libraries*, and the only "surfing the web" you expect to see was maybe some renegade spider not swept up by the cleaner."

Or maybe you're caught up in the ICT trend, have accepted that today's students live in a world where the screen reigns supreme, and so you've come expecting to hear me talk about the future directions (in text, context and paradigms) English must take if we are to continue to capture our students' interest and imagination (boys in particular) in this age of lap-tops, note-books, MP3's and i-pods.

Well, if you fit into either category, prepare to be disappointed.

When I first toyed around with the idea for this presentation, I was interested primarily in exploring ways to get kids into reading books. One of the librarians at the school I was working at at the time shared with me the fact that they were running out of room on the fiction shelves: we were well into Term 1 and very few fiction books had been borrowed by High School students. Yes, I had dragged my students to the library, sat them down to hear the librarian and myself "tag-team" a "book-sell" of possible titles to read before MAKING them borrow a something [ I actually had to drag some to the check out desk and force them to borrow something], but no other English teachers were really using the library and getting their kids into reading .

Was it because my English teaching colleagues were slack and uncaring in their job? No. I had the privilege of working with some very talented and experienced teachers, committed to the subject of English.

Was it because my English teaching colleagues weren't readers themselves? No. It was common to share our individual "latest reading" titles with one another.

So, what was it? Why weren't our students borrowing novels?

Was it because the scope of English was (and is) continually expanding? Visual texts, media texts, drama texts, film texts. Poetry, performances, speeches and presentations. Classic texts, contemporary texts, popular texts and everyday texts. Persuasion, suspense, recount and narrative. Instructions, directions, descriptions and instigations. Print texts, non-

print texts, comics and cartoons. Adverts, brochures, billboards and slogans. ... and the list could go on.

Are we expected to cover an increasingly large range, ways and means of communicating and using language? If so, in the efforts to cater for the needs of our students – the everyday, middle-of-the-road teenager growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – are we finding ourselves having to cut down and skim over aspects of the syllabus that ten, fifteen or twenty years ago would have been our main focus?

I believe that the novel will never lose its place, not just in the English curriculum but in the modern English classroom, because of everything the novel has to say to us. The lessons about ourselves, our relationships, our hopes and adventures... these never change because we, as people, at the core of our hearts, remain the same.

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Of course, the context alters [such as Okonkwo in Achibe's *Things Fall Apart*. Very few of us now days find ourselves in a African tribe in the 1890's, watching our culture - all we know and believe in - collapse around us because of English Christian missionaries spreading their message and self-appointed superiority] and the language alters [the rape of Tess in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; the description of the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*] but the fundamentals at the heart of the novel and ourselves remains the same.

Why else would the "old" texts such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1984 , *Pride and Prejudice* and *Catch 22* make it to the Top 10 on the ABC's 2004 Australia's Favourite Book and the Angus & Robertson's 2005 Top 100 favourite books.

As Susanne Fullerton from the Jane Austin Society, speaking about the continued popularity of *Pride and Prejudice*, says:

*"You learn about yourself, about human nature and the world we live in. Her characters might be wearing regency costumes and driving around in carriages but human nature hasn't changed since Jane Austin wrote the book. I think that people are still recognizably the same."*

(As opposed to Chris Taylor who observed: Would *Pride and Prejudice* be at No. 2 if Colin Firth as Mr Darcy hadn't emerged in an early 19th-century male equivalent of a wet T-shirt?).

## **PART 1: BIBLIOGUIDANCE (previously known as Bibliotherapy)**

It is my belief that, because of the increasing relationship- dysfunction prevalent in our modern society (eg. increasing rates of marriage breakdown, teenage depression and suicide), the novel is so much more important now, than ever before. Why? Because, as we know, when we enter the world described in the pages of a good book, become involved with the characters, we often close the cover having gained new insight into how a problem can be faced and generate ideas and understandings about our own life situation.

This process, of us as teachers putting the right book in the right hands of the right student at the right time, is thoroughly rewarding. And when the characters of that book are struggling and overcoming emotional turmoil related to a real-life problem similar to that of the student, and we help and guide the student to respond in a way that gets them to connect the book with their lives, discussing and reflecting on possible ways to resolve the dilemma, it's called Biblioguidance.

Biblioguidance generally refers to the use of literature to help people cope with emotional problems, mental illness, or changes in their lives (Pardeck, 1994). By providing literature relevant to students' personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times (Hebert & Kent, 2000), biblioguidance attempts to help students to understand themselves and to cope with problems such as parent's separation and divorce, child abuse, foster care, and adoption (Abdullah, Mardziah Hayati). By helping students meet literary characters similar to themselves, they may feel relief that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem, learning how to solve their problems by reflecting on how the characters in the book solves theirs.

But it doesn't just apply to those students "suffering with life". If we can identify the concerns of our students and address the issues before problems arise, we can help guide our students through predictable stages of adolescence with the knowledge of what to expect and examples of how other teenagers have dealt with the same concerns (Hebert & Kent, 2000).

For example, it's time to set the term's Independent Reading Assignment, so you drag your students down to the Library. While on Year 10 Camp last month, you learnt about Anna and how she's struggling with the separation of her parents. So you suggest she read *Tender* by Valerie Hobbs, a novel featuring a child also dealing with the her parents' separation. In the book, the main character learns to cope by relying on peer support, personal resourcefulness, and optimism. With some careful structuring and wording of the assignment, Anna can be encouraged to identify with the character. In do so, she realizes she is not the only one dealing with the problem of mucky parents: by following through with the character as she finds a solution, Anna gains insight into her own situation and the importance of using her friends for support at this time. The novel became for Anna, a model for coping.

Or, having taught Tara for a few years, and knowing that she's finding it a bit hard at home at the moment with Paul, her older Asperger's brother, you let her and her group of friends read Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, encouraging them to journal and share with each other their thoughts and feelings about Christopher, the way he sees the world and the impact this has on his family and community.

Or Year 8 student Daniel, whose behaviour since his eldest brother publicly decided to "come out" by bring home his newest boyfriend shows he isn't coping with his brother's lifestyle choice and his parent's

reaction, is guided by you to read Kate Walker's *Peter*, sharing his reading responses and reflections with the school's chaplain.

In conclusion it is the premise of Biblioguidance that states that *Reading, like all other human behaviour, is a function of the total personality. When we read fiction, poetry, or drama, we perceive selectively, in accordance with our needs, goals, defences, and values.* The experience induced by Biblioguidance includes *identification* of the issue, situation or concern of the student; *projection* of the student into the literary circumstance; and the *introjection and transference* of that learning into their own world.

And, I believe, it really is only the English teacher that knows just how powerfully *Imaginative literature provides an external frame of reference which permits the reader to view hi/hers experience freshly from the perspective of the detached observer. Being at once fantasy and reality, it permits the reader to be both participant and spectator.* And it's in the modern English classroom where students, once having identified with the main character, can be encouraged to share what they have gained in the way best suited to them, their personality, style and discovery: be it verbally in discussion, or in writing; or by nonverbal means such as art, role-playing, creative problem solving; or self-selected options for students to pursue individually.

As Henry Olson said,

*... Studying believable situations in short stories, poems, essays, folk tales, and myths can empower middle schools students to make wise decisions about their own lives and to grow into*

*responsible citizens capable of a full range of healthy, loving relationships. ([Henry Olsen](#), 1975)*

## **PART 2: Manuscripts & Musings vs Music & Mass Media**

The media has replaced the family and the school as the leading impacting institution on children's lives. *Television is a huge influence on our daily lives, as shown by how much time is spent staring at its screen.* The American Academy of Paedetricians, says that the average time per week that the American child ages 2-17 spends watching television: 23 hours, 40 minutes (about 4 hours per day). Their report also states that *88% of the United States' households [have] two sets which [are] in use for an average of 5 hours a day. Television killed off small-club boxing, minor league baseball, and practically any other activity that meant leaving the living room.* Statistics for Australia would not be much different.

According to a Flinder's University study, Australian *teenagers listen to on average 40 hours of music per week, whilst American Statistics show (in music lyrics 47% of mothers with children in public schools believe that violent messages in rap music contribute "a great deal" to school violence, and 66% of 13- to 17-year-olds believe violence in music is partly responsible for violent crimes like the 1999 Columbine High School shootings.* Flinder's University also found *that the preference for heavy metal music may be a significant indicator for alienation, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide risks, sex-role stereotyping, or risk-taking behaviours during adolescence... teenagers already struggling with those issues may be attracted to heavy metal*

*music, because the lyrics express their own troubled feelings.* If only we could redirect these teenagers away from such texts that reinforce their troubled feelings and towards texts, such as books, that could speak more positively into their lives. If only it was as easy as getting them to read and reflect on a Sonya Hartnett novel!

In a pilot study conducted in North Vancouver Schools (June 2004), involving 178 students from four different schools, exploring the use of media in children's homes, found that:

- *Access to television in the home was found to be nearly universal, with only one out of 178 students without a television.*
- *72% of the students had access to a video game console in their home; 94% had access to a computer.*
- *25% of children have one screen medium in the bedroom and 14% have more than one.*
- *Watching TV and listening to music are the main forms of entertainment (24 hours per week; 3 ½ hours).*
- *Downloading music on the net, and listening to it on MP3, was in preference to listening to the radio and stereo.*
- *When young people use the internet it is largely to download music, to chat with friends, to cruise the fan sites, and increasingly to play on-line games*

( Stephen Kline 2001, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada).

Melissa Dittmann, writing in the Journal of the American Psychology Association (June 2004) found that *the advertising industry spends \$12 billion per year on ads targeted to children, bombarding young audiences with persuasive messages through media such as television and the Internet. The average child is exposed to more than 40,000 TV commercials a year, not counting the ones reaching children through new media technologies and even in schools such as through corporate-sponsored educational materials and product placements in students' textbooks.*

In the face of all this, it may seem that our efforts to promote, push and propel the novel into our student's lives is futile. Why not just embrace the fact that our society has changed, we're locked in the past, and our English classes must change? After all, our students *have grown up with momentary video images with much sound and very little substance. They are generally frenetic, energetic, and restless. They're channel surfers in all aspects of their lives—busy and constantly bombarded with stimuli from radio, television, and computers. And, if your students are like mine, they rarely take the time or even have the patience to sit quietly and read a newspaper, let alone a full length novel. If they have 15 dollars to spend, most would choose to spend it on a new CD or DVD rather than a book.*

Allowing myself an indulgent tangent for a moment, I have always been encouraged by Sydney author, Michael Frost, who describes film as becoming the new "novel" for our students since the cinema is fast

becoming the new “church” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He writes that *the cinema is now a holy or neo-religious place, where people find meaning and understanding through the stories that unfold in the screen. His ideas have been supported by Australian film-maker, George Miller, who says that cinema has effectively replaced the church’s role in society as the purveyor of stories and mythologies. ...film is now seen as a respectable medium for exploring such matters as relationships, faith, politics and meaning. ...people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively the way they once did in church. The cinema storytellers have become the new priests.*

Miller goes on to say that *...Films are like dreams. When we congregate with strangers in the darkness of the cinema, it’s a kind of public dreaming, where we possess, mostly unconsciously, the more insistent concerns of our lives.*

So, if *film-going is one of the ways we each tap into the collective mythologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, maybe, as one of my teaching colleagues believes, there are better ways of reaching our students than by forcing them to plow through some out-dated book. After all, as Frost says, *we are the stories we tell (and listen to), and that as we stitch stories together we develop a tapestry, our culture of meaning...* (*Lessons from Reel Life: Movies, meaning and myth-making*, Michael Frost 2001 pp.7-8).

Yet, as I argued back to my colleague, if we are the stories we tell, and that it’s through the public telling and sharing of these stories that we collectively arrive at meaning, people still write, books are still published, and, if you want the “collective” sharing of this, readers still gather at library book discussion groups and such events as writer’s festivals.

So, if in society the novel is yet to be eradicated, why should it be so in the modern English classroom?

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### **PART 3: WHY WE STILL READ**

I mention earlier Susanne Fullerton's rationale why Jane Austen still remains popular with 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. But personally, my two favourite explanations as to why we still read comes firstly from Atticus who quite rightly says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (p.35 *To Kill a Mockingbird*). The second comes from the film *Shadowlands*, when CS Lewis says "we read to know we are not alone". It is in this way that the novel can do what the film can't: the novel allows the reader to enter the character's head and heart. While the film tells the story and the consequences, the medium of the novel tells the thoughts and feelings.

For instance, my Year 11 students felt they had a good understanding about Charlie, the main character in *Flowers for Algernon*, after watching the film. But then, when we explored the story in written (short story) form, they could see the impact of his transformation on himself (his feelings and thoughts about himself in relation to those around him); something they didn't pick out from the film. Or, when we explored Joe Simpson's story in *Touching the Void*. Yes, we gasped with horror as we watched the film – watched the actor fall while Simpson himself narrated what actually happened to him. But having seen the visuals, this quite

incredibly unmotivated bunch of boys, wanted to hear how he described it in the book (...it was one of those rare moments when they surprised me with their interest!).

*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick (1993) is a powerful novel (which has also been made into a film) about love, loss, imagination and courage. It is the story of two boys with great needs - one of the spirit and one of the body - whose gifts of friendship to each other transform their lives. This book's message is about how to recognize human potential, especially in those who seem to possess few of what we might ordinarily think of as the seeds of success; how to recognize true friendship even when it appears in the form of "freakish" pairings; how love and support can make people heroic; and how "sticking it out" in the face of difficulty makes life rich and, against impossible odds, happy. While the film shows this well in the story that is told, I have found the book to work really well with some boys, particularly the ones who feel that they are "freaks" themselves.

Other novels I have found to work really well include *Peeling the Onion*, *Borrowed light*, *Killing Aurora* and *Veronika decides to Die*, particularly in their ability to strike strong reactions from female students whom I have (unregretably on occasions), forced to read! To read of a seventeen year old, feeling great about school, her boyfriend and sporting success, suddenly be plunged into a physically debilitating, life-stealing situation; lying in a hospital bed with nothing left to do but peel away the layers of who she thought she was and find herself again ...Helena was struck by how suddenly it all can change, yet, "...with the right support and attitude,

such a tragedy can open up into paths of joy. My dad always says, what doesn't destroy you makes you stronger. I think my dad and Wendy Orr must be similar."

"We read to know we are not alone." Some of my most rewarding teaching experiences have come from students who have learnt this same truth by a book I have [forced] to read. And, if the reading has come because of the accompanying film's influence, then I'm okay with that (especially when they say that the book was better than the film!)

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#### **PART 4: WHO CARES WHAT IT IS, JUST LET THEM READ!**

What about boys? What place has the novel in a classroom where, for our male students, there is an increased tendency to prefer non-fiction to fiction?

Firstly, I agree with everyone who says that, providing that they're reading, then who cares what it actually is! Yet, this doesn't sit fully comfortably with me...

I direct my non-novel-reading students to biographies and autobiographies. Reading stories about people's lives and adventures offers similar lessons and moments of inspiration as any fictional novel.

Take, for example, Ben Kozel's *Three Men in a Raft*, the account of his extraordinary adventure of rafting down the full length of the Amazon River (7,000 Km, "from source to sea"). While the book promotes itself as "both a travel book and an adventure story, laced with humour, danger

and vivid description – unlikely, endearing and enthralling”, the book’s three characters: Colin with his “gung-ho mettle... a trait inherent to all successful adventurers” (p.4); Scott for whom “the world was a place with endless potential for him to realize his dreams” (p.168); and Ben, the author, who

“had gone to South America expecting to come back feeling changed in some way, able to apply some new attitude in the way I went about my day-to-day life. Yet, apart from the memories, several scars and a tan, I couldn’t say that I looked or felt much different. I still saw myself as one of three ordinary blokes, straight off the street, who had decided to have a crack at something unusual” (p.319).

The book “worked” with one student, who wrote in his journal:

*What I’d love is a proposition to come my way. Something that would make me throw everything to the wind and risk it all. To have the guts to take the leap, with no safety net possibilities and know that the most certain cuts, scarpes and bruises will come. I’d like to find out, as Ben did, that the escape clause is deleted: to either grit my teeth and endure, or die. Though, I’d rather not have the “die” option!*

So, what can we do to bring the novel “to life” for our students? We must find successful ways, if students are to see that reading books can have a place in their lives: to glimpse the joy of reading; to think about themselves and other’s feelings, emotions, hatreds, outcomes, consequences, actions and alternatives. After all, as John Hibble defines, *young adult literature is reading which readers between the ages of 12*

*and 20 choose to read instead of what they may be forced to read for class assignments... English teachers cannot become so preoccupied with covering only what teachers consider quality. Teachers must use that which excites students about reading and engages them...- "the THAT of teenage reading is more important than the WHAT"."*

One of the places to start is by continuing to promote reading for reading's sake. Although this is a declining position to take because of the societal trend towards immediate gratification (reading is too slow for many students who, accustomed to movies and computer games, have not the patience to take the slow pace needed to absorb a novel), we need to let these students in on "our secret" to taking this "picturesque wander" in the heart and mind of another. We need to share our interest, excitement and learning with them, tempting them that, they too may meet an incredible person within the pages of a book.... Even if that person is completely fictional, written in a time when digital watches were at the forefront of technology, hitchhiking was considered an "okay" form of travel and finding answers to those "ultimate questions of life, the universe and everything" was something groups of people seriously sat about and discussed! Once I explained this to Lauren, getting her to keep in mind that Douglas Adams was writing in the 1970's, she could appreciate the humour of it all (My next challenge is to introduce her to John Marsden's *The Journey* or Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, "serious" stories of men on journeys to find the answer to those "ultimate questions").

The current, prolific stream of Young Adult novels flowing from Australian writers means that our students have some much potential to meet a "kindred spirit". Characters like Marina (*So Much To Tell You*), Alibrandi (*Looking for Alibrandi*), Ellie (The *Tomorrow* series) and Blacky (*Deadly Unna?*) are just a couple of the characters who have provided some of my students with a mirror to use in their own search for self-understanding; an avenue to explore the questions *Who am I?* and *Where do I fit in?* Bridget Lowy, Marcus Zusak, Nick Earls, Steve Herrick, Anthony Eaton, Sonya Hartnett and David Metzenthen are others who have provided my students with this self-same mirror. And, I'm sure we could all name boys who have found understanding by reading Tim Winton's *Lockie Leonard* books.

*Young people are more likely to view reading as pleasurable and become life-long readers if they are introduced to literature containing plots consistent with their experiences, themes of interest to them, main characters who are young adults, and language that corresponds to their own language. As we all know, Students are motivated to read when they see characters and situations reflecting their own experiences.*

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## **PART 5: NOW WE'VE READ IT, WHAT DO WE DO WITH IT?**

*Too often literature has been taught as autopsy. The corpus put on the table, bright lights turned on, the blood drained, and the cold dissection continued until the remains are buried. ... teaching literature [must be done] in ways that are not so clinical and bloodless but that*

*are enlivening and vital. We need to first urge our students to react to the selections intuitively, emotionally, vigorously, to note the appealing and appalling traits of the characters, the nuances of conflicts, and the consequences of decisions and actions. Mind maps, character webs, plot paths and setting spirals are just some of the ways I get my students to do this: sometimes individually; sometimes in small groups or as a whole class, depending on the year level of the class or the nature of the task set*

*Then, I encourage students to go beyond their initial impressions, to revisit and refine their insights, to respect differing opinions, and to explore what is it the author is trying to tell us.*

We do a disservice to both them and the novel when, after having read and/or studied a novel, we set the compulsive summative assessment essay. We need to be creative in the assessment tasks we set, embracing such helps as Bloom's Taxonomy and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, thereby giving students the opportunity to "connect" in their best way.

How?...

Refer to handout : 103 ways to respond to literature

*NOTE: This list is far from exhaustive. The activities listed under section may well be appropriate in a different section, depending on the year level of the class, the nature of the task and the intended outcome. Use it as an ideas springboard only.*

*With most writing tasks set (particularly those requiring Higher Order Thinking Skills), students are required to write a written reflection which explains the way they interpreted and analysed the piece of literature in order to complete the task. This is not included in the ideas listed below.*

## **Knowing - reading & viewing**

DESIGN A DETAILED MAP OR MAPS FOR THE SETTING(S) OF THE BOOK. If the setting is mostly outside, build a relief map. If the setting is mostly indoors, recreate the scene within a shoebox model.

## **Understanding - reading & viewing**

KNOW THY SUBJECT. Using various mediums, create a collage that comments on a particular theme or issue in the book

## **Applying - reading & viewing**

DESIGN A BULLETIN BOARD TO STIMULATE CLASS INTEREST

## **Analysing - speaking & listening**

OBJECT IN A JAR Choose an object that symbolises your character. Place this object in a jar, design an appropriate label before presenting the object and its explanation to the class.

## **Creating - writing**

PEN SOME POETRY.

## **Evaluating- reading & viewing**

[ LITERARY] OSCAR WINNERS What is/was the most outstanding piece of literature (rather than the best poem, the best play, and so on)? Have students search for nominations, writing objective support for their nominations and to include the equivalent of "film clips" — passages that show the strength of their nominations. Categories include:

*Outstanding Character – Male*  
*Outstanding Character – Female*  
*Supporting Character – Male*  
*Supporting Character – Female*  
*Setting*  
*Animal Character*

Edward was enthralled by the Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* series in year 8. I'll not forget the lesson he came in to class the day his Independent Reading Assignment was due, guitar in hand, and proceeded to sing us his *Hatchet* song. Two years later we were treated to another original composition, this time on James Maloney's *Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*. That same year, Belinda presented a pictorial summary of Sonya Hartnett's *Sleeping Dogs*,

highlighting how the different characters were each, in their own way, “sleeping dogs”, and John delivered a haunting monologue as Lucas from Anne Proovost’s *Falling*, denying his innocence with regard to Benoit’s activities and Caitlin’s accident.

## **CONCLUSION**

To reestablish the place of the humble novel in our modern English classrooms, we must reconfirm our belief in the power and place of the novel (story): the power of *vivid literature to entice readers to become involved openly, to care about the characters and their fate, when the situations are believable and relevant*; the power it has to *break into the sense of individual isolation, that so often induces apathy and me-ism in teenagers, by giving them an awareness that they are part of a larger community, that they alone do not carry the burden of certain thoughts, ideas and feelings*; the place it has in *stretching students to look beyond themselves and find what is important in friendship, family, and love.*

We must be real and honest with regard to our enthusiasm for the process and product of reading. We must do “book sells” with our students. We must shove books into student’s hand. And we must take an active interest in what they’re reading, asking not “what page are you up to” but “what’s happened”. And we must draw forth responses from students that come from who they are – how they express themselves and how their insights and opinions have been expanded by this latest book they have read.

The humble novel may not have the place it once had in the English classroom, but it still has a place. ...

Thank you.