

Michael Milburn

By the Book

I read some books that were the right books for me. I read them and I didn't even notice turning the pages anymore.

Markus Zusak, author of *The Book Thief*, on discovering his affinity for reading

In a 2015 article entitled “Zuckerberg, Read These 10 Books First,” the writer and English professor Jay Parini responds to Mark Zuckerberg’s announcement of his new Facebook book club. Parini describes Zuckerberg as “hoping to channel the reading attention of the millions who follow him on Facebook,” and concludes that “anything that gets people reading and talking about books is a good thing.” It’s hard to tell from these statements whether Parini expects the club to motivate non-readers or to give habitual readers suggestions for what to try next. When it comes to recommending books, the distinction matters. In the first case, the selections would serve as bait to lure people away from whatever else they are doing and toward a better use of their time. In the second, they would seek to broaden knowledge and taste. Inevitably, Zuckerberg’s book club would also attract people curious about what the Facebook founder was reading for pleasure and—in both the personal and financial senses of the word—profit.

Zuckerberg appears to be more interested in broadening than in baiting. He seeks, in his words, to "emphasize learning about new cultures, beliefs, histories and

technologies." His choices bear out this intention: *The End of Power*, *Creativity Inc.*, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, *Rational Ritual*, *Dealing with China*, and *The New Jim Crow*. It's doubtful that anyone who feels tentative about reading would fall under its spell thanks to these works, which is fine—plenty of other book clubs exist to get people reading for pleasure. If Zuckerberg had merely added his endorsement to the Harry Potter series or duplicated Oprah's mainstream choices, that would be cause for complaint. Book lists are also unhelpful when they target new or reluctant readers, but feature books more likely to reinforce views of literature as difficult or boring.

That's the mistake Parini makes in the list he proposes as an alternative to Zuckerberg's. Parini casts himself as a broadener, writing that "I would aim for books that can be read slowly and carefully by busy people in their spare time, choosing ones with the capacity to enlarge their sense of what it means to be human and to live respectfully and generously among others." But the fact that Parini's list appeared on cnn.com makes him a baiter by default. His audience includes people who haven't read or don't read many books, and who click on his article looking to change that. They are as credulous as I am when I trust the internet to tell me which cell phone to buy. What troubles me about Parini's criteria is that they ignore literature's biggest selling point for many of these people and for me—its capacity to entertain. I worry that they will pick up his fourth choice, *Walden*, and struggle as much as I did when I failed to get through its first chapter during a college vacation. In a recent reappraisal of Thoreau in *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schulz calls that chapter "one of the highest barriers to entry in the Western canon: dry, sententious, condescending, more than eighty pages long."

Instead of making a list that will get people to read, Parini skips the getting part and addresses established readers. *The Death of Ivan Illych*, by Tolstoy (#2), *Tao Te Ching*, by Laozi (#6), *What Is God?* by Jacob Needleman (#8), and *Of Woman Born*, by Adrienne Rich (#9): even I, a former English major, current English teacher, aspiring writer and avid reader, would have to wait for the distraction-free days of summer vacation and a surge of ambition to brave these books. As for number five, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, I read it for eighth grade English class and still see it through that lens of coercion. I couldn't finish number ten, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (I know, just about everyone loves this book, but I resist anything magical in literature). Out of the remaining books on Parini's list that I have read—*Huckleberry Finn* (#1), Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (#3), and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (#7)—I'd say that only the first has the wit and narrative momentum to move a reader out of the non-reader camp and into a book club, and even then its datedness and racist language could limit its appeal.

I have no quarrel with the quality of Parini's picks, and there may be novice readers who find them absorbing as well as profound. But insofar as he hopes to inspire many readers, including or especially inexperienced ones, his approach reflects a wrongheadedness about recruitment that needs correcting. Like many book recommenders, he chooses books that he thinks are good rather than ones that his audience will like. This is fine for a college professor preparing a syllabus, or Mark Zuckerberg, whose followers want to learn about his taste and interests. But if you're hoping to hook a variety of readers on the habit of reading, then you have to choose the right bait. For Parini this might mean adding accessible contemporary books (only one of

his ten was published within the last thirty years) that will entice people away from television, cinema, social media, video games, golf, or whatever else occupies their free time. None of Parini's favorites deserves to be removed on the grounds of merit, but some would have to go in order to make room for more inviting reads.

My model for an ideal book recommender is the librarian at the school where I teach. For five minutes at the end of her lower school library classes, she strolls among the shelves trailed by fifteen third graders, pointing out books and offering succinct summaries and reviews. She doesn't neglect to mention that a book has won an award or is considered a classic, but the sentences she repeats most frequently are "If you liked book X then you'll like this" and "Sally, you would love this one," addressing children whose tastes she has made a point of learning.

One reason for my strong feelings about this issue is my own path to reading. Growing up, I distressed my parents by watching a lot of TV and only reading comics and sports books—novels by Matt Christopher with titles like *The Kid Who Batted 1000* and *Catcher with a Glass Arm*, and how-guides such as *Orr on Ice* and *Hockey, Here's Howe*. My parents and siblings read a great deal, competitively even, and tried to prime my interest by including contemporary novels such as *Catch 22* and *Henderson the Rain King* among my Christmas gifts. In my late teens, having outgrown my love of sports and its literature, I adopted my family's habit of only choosing books that challenged me—long, dense novels and works of nonfiction that I approached like my daily training runs—deriving little pleasure from the reading but much from the having read. It took me until middle age with its specter of mortality to stop reading to impress myself and others, and resume

choosing books that I liked, as in the old Matt Christopher days.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is my job as a high school English teacher. I teach ninth graders, who are at the age, fourteen, where they're mature enough to read books written for adults and discuss them in an adult way. They are on the cusp of becoming sophisticated readers, not only in their academic roles, where they will be discussing and writing about books through college, but in their lives outside of school. And even if they are not reading extracurricularly, every parent I have ever listened to during November parent conferences would love for his or her child to be doing so. On the list of things that parents hope their kids acquire in my class, it's a tie between the ability to write well enough to ease them into and through a good college and career, and the habit of reading. Given that my own motivation faltered at this age, it's no surprise that when Mark Zuckerberg and Jay Parini propose lists of books, I'm ready to listen, consider, and flat out judge.

One lesson I have learned in my classes is that readers are ultimately created by books, not by teachers, parents or other bibliophiles. The key that unlocks someone's passion is a book that sparks the thought "I love this, I want more." A misconception about English teachers is that they can create or destroy an affinity for reading. Even John Keating, the character played by Robin Williams in the film *Dead Poets Society*, is not, for all his inspiring desktop recitals of Walt Whitman, turning students into readers; Whitman is. Granted, a charismatic English teacher can make thinking and talking about literature fun, and start or ease the process of taking it seriously, and deepen the interest

of someone already tuned to reading, but all of these effects start with handing over a book, and depend on that book for their success.

I'm not claiming that a good syllabus can make up for an incompetent teacher—kids want to talk about what they read, and if they are lectured at or subjected to unimaginative questions or assignments, their frustration may dampen their interest. A talented teacher working with bad or difficult books can help motivated students to illuminate the text, but for others the drudgery of slogging through slow paragraph after slow paragraph will make reading something to dread. A book's importance is most evident when it boosts an average teacher's effectiveness. I love anticipating my reading-averse students' surprise when they start a book that I know they will like because their predecessors did. On the night of their first assignment I imagine them being drawn in and wanting to share their enthusiasm in class, an unprecedented response for them to any book, especially one required for school.

The first book I taught that affected students this way was Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*, which came out in 1999 and led to an increase in the popularity of young adult (YA) literature, causing teens (and publishers) to crave more stories of this kind. The account of a ninth grade girl who retreats into silence after being raped at a party, *Speak* is full of teenager slang and references to cliques, cafeteria showdowns, and menacing and empathetic teachers—the kind of book that a fourteen-year-old girl reads on her own in an afternoon and wants to press upon and discuss with her friends. Shift that enthusiasm to a English classroom and you have students who are happy to be there.

In *Speak*'s wake came a trickle and then a flood of young adult novels centered on topical teen issues. Each summer our school librarian gave me a stack of new releases to take home as I vowed to replace all of my class books with ones as effective as *Speak*—harder than it sounds. Not only did I have to find books that appealed to both genders, they had to have some literary merit, a tricky call when it comes to books written for young people. Unsurprisingly, the YA revolution spawned a formula: to one part teen slang add two parts teen social drama and three parts contemporary social issue, blend with an out-of-touch parent pitted against an in-touch parent, sift in a divorce, locate in a conspicuously urban or suburban setting, top with a first-person narrator, and voila, you have—or a publisher hopes that you have—the next *Speak*. The only missing ingredient in most cases is Laurie Halse Anderson's skill. At least that was what I thought, a middle-aged English teacher who found much YA literature—even *Speak* to some extent—bland in style, repetitive in theme, and cloying in tone, and could only hope that I would recognize the perfect book for my students if it came along. Indeed, I almost missed it.

In 2006, the librarian included in my summer stack a first novel that had just won a prestigious YA award. I took it home, subjected it to my usual test of reading fifty pages, had my usual reaction of cringing at the writer's attempt to sound the way kids sound, and placed it in my reject pile. When I returned in September, the librarian mentioned that the book was generating buzz on school library blogs. The following month she directed me to hundreds of gushing reviews by teenagers as well as a few by parents and educators that deplored the book's profanity and explicit sex scene. At the end of the year I decided to assign my students the book's first hundred pages followed by a final report

in which they would tell me 1) if they thought they would finish it on their own over the summer; 2) if I should include it on my syllabus the following year; and 3) what they thought of it. Leafing through these reports after my last class, I saw identical answers to the first two questions: “I already did” and “Definitely.” One girl’s response to the third question jumped out at me. In huge block letters using colored pencils, she had written MR. MILBURN, THIS BOOK IS THE BOMB!

If you had looked at the *New York Times* young adult bestseller list at any time in the past three years or so, you would have found this book, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, in one of the top three places. During this period, two subsequent novels by Green—*The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*—occupied the other top slots, trading places depending on the release dates of their movie adaptations. When I ask my students what they like about Green’s novels, they might mention reading about kids their age, or the thrill of the romantic or geographic chase that propels each plot, but mostly they cite characters and relationships: “I like Margo”; “At first I hated Alaska and then I loved her”; “I cried so hard when Gus died”; “I can identify with Q”; “I liked how Pudge pined for Alaska, how Alaska trash-talked The Colonel”; “Gus and Hazel’s banter”; “Alaska’s aggressiveness toward guys.” One aspect of the books that engages them so naturally and age-specifically that they seem not to notice it is the talky narrative voice. Sitting at home doing their English homework, they would rather be addressed by an irreverent peer than a formal third person narrator. Here are the openings of *Paper Towns* and *Looking for Alaska*:

The way I figure it, everyone gets a miracle. Like, I will probably never be struck by lightning, or win a Nobel Prize, or become the dictator of a small nation in the Pacific islands, or contract terminal ear cancer, or spontaneously combust.

Paper Towns

The week before I left my family and Florida and the rest of my minor life to go to boarding school in Alabama, my mother insisted on throwing me a going-away party. To say that I had low expectations would be to underestimate the matter dramatically. Although I was more or less forced to invite all my "school friends," i.e., the ragtag bunch of drama people and English geeks I sat with by social necessity in the cavernous cafeteria of my public school, I knew they wouldn't come.

Looking for Alaska

My students assure me that these narrators sound like them, though the voices still strike me as self-consciously glib, like an adult trying to impress kids with his irreverence and self-deprecatory self-awareness. That's one reason I find it hard to respect YA literature except for its effect on my students, who think that John Green—to quote a boy overheard in our ninth grade lounge—is a fucking genius. I could, and some English teacher eventually will, expose them to writers that I consider geniuses, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Anton Chekhov, but at their age only a few of them would agree.

My only regret about stocking my syllabus with YA books is that while they are good for creating interest in reading, they're less useful for modeling great writing. Stories like Green's are compellingly, wittily, and compassionately told, with full-blooded characters, and deal intelligently with pressing teen issues, all qualities that would earn them a place on the shelf between *David Copperfield* and *Huckleberry Finn*, but they lack those books' artful styles. I try to expose this lack by choosing as our final text of the year a book whose style I admire: Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. Though American bookstores and libraries classify Zusak's novel as YA (a smart marketing move these days), it was

originally released for adult audiences in the author's native Australia. Some credit for the book's originality goes to the personality of its narrator, a world-weary, sardonic Death, but even a brief excerpt reveals the lyricism and subtlety of Zusak's writing:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically inhaled it, but still, I wavered. I buckled—I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched. Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them. A small soul was in my arms.

Whereas *Looking for Alaska* inspires students who have never heard of John Green to seek out his other books on their own, *The Book Thief* doesn't elicit that kind of passion—some students struggle with its elegant language, fractured chronology, and arch narrator. One girl who had begun the book with high expectations e-mailed me after one early *Book Thief* assignment: “I know it's supposed to be a masterpiece, but I'm still not into it.” Still, because I would feel remiss if I didn't, I tell my students that in my opinion it's the best book we have read all year. Some nod in agreement; others roll their eyes.

In a well-known denunciation of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the critic Harold Bloom deplores Rowling's writing (“Her prose style, heavy on cliché, makes no demands upon her readers”) and blames her books for the “dumbing down” of literature. In a follow-up article responding to the criticism he received, Bloom quotes readers who asked whether reading Harry Potter “wasn't, after all, better than reading nothing at all? If Rowling was what it took to make them pick up a book, wasn't that a good thing?” Bloom's reply:

It is not. Harry Potter will not lead our children on to Kipling's "Just So Stories" or his "Jungle Book." It will not lead them to Thurber's "Thirteen Clocks" or Kenneth Grahame's "Wind in the Willows" or Lewis Carroll's "Alice."

Bloom's review made me bristle the first time I read it. Even when he confessed that "I hope that my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery," I concluded that a highbrow snob was exactly what he was. If I had allowed my impatience with *Speak's* angst-ridden teenagers and colloquialisms, or John Green's wisecrack-stuffed sentences to keep me from introducing those books to my students, some of them would still be reading the *SparkNotes* versions of *Ethan Frome* or *The Scarlet Letter*, or not doing their homework at all. Over the years, however, I have come to empathize with Bloom, or at least take him seriously as a cautionary voice against too readily embracing the popularity of books written for young readers.

Unlike Bloom, I do think that a kid who finds pleasure in a book (or seven in the case of the Potter series) will seek pleasure in more books, perhaps ones that increase in sophistication as he or she matures. The more imaginative the telling, the more authors will use language to create character and emotion. But I worry that the relative superficiality of the books I am teaching will keep them from having a profound impact on my students' lives, one that would, in Jay Parini's words, "enlarge their sense of what it means to be human and to live respectfully and generously among others." Am I simply being lazy in depriving my students of this reward by giving them books that they find effortless and entertaining, often reading past the assigned page? "Why read," Bloom asks, "if what you read will not enrich mind or spirit or personality?"

Fortunately, a recent experience with one of my students proves that a good YA book can enrich and enlarge as profoundly as any on Parini's list. Louisa struggled with depression throughout her ninth-grade year. According to her parents, the reading that she did inside and outside English class helped her to cope, as she used her favorite characters as lenses through which to view her pain, identifying with their setbacks and adopting their perspectives and methods of survival. By June her mood had improved and she showed me an application essay she had written for a summer writing program. In it she reflected on a philosophical question posed by the title character of *Looking for Alaska*, one that serves as a kind of motto for the book: How do we escape life's labyrinth of suffering? Louisa had found solace and strength in Alaska Young's inquiry, and credited the character with helping her to escape her own labyrinth.

What I risk overlooking in questioning the quality of YA books, and what Bloom overlooks in dismissing Harry Potter, is twofold: first, there's nothing simplistic about the way young people view beloved fictional characters and their problems; and second, the complexity of these books lies in their stories rather than their prose. A better writer than John Green wouldn't improve upon his books any more than Henry James would improve *On the Road*. At best, the book would just become more of a literary feat than a storytelling one. Some of my students will come to appreciate and crave such virtuosity, as I have, but others will remain content with story, perhaps even reading YA books into adulthood.

My concern is with high school teachers who only assign classics that they consider great literature rather than books that will excite and please their students. They

put the literature cart before the storytelling horse, asking beginning readers to appreciate the art in its refined state before discovering its basic appeal. Kathryn Schulz says of *Walden*: “You could scarcely write a book more appealing to teenagers: Thoreau endorses rebellion against societal norms, champions idleness over work, and gives his readers permission to ignore their elders.” This may be true, but in order to appreciate these attitudes the young reader must navigate that daunting first chapter.

Not that John Green or J.K. Rowling necessarily belong on Parini’s list, but I miss any acknowledgment there of the primal, unpicky, guilt-free aspect of reading for pleasure, just as I missed it, in the sense of not including it, in my English syllabi before I discovered young adult literature. Even in recommending *Huckleberry Finn*, a masterpiece of headlong storytelling, and perhaps the ultimate young adult / high art crossover book, Parini paints things drab with his professorial brush: “This is the primary text of American literature, high on any serious list of world classics. It's a book about the American soul, about race and community, and about the urgent need to "light out for the territory." Well, sure, if you want to get all highfalutin’ about it, as Mark Twain might say, but anyone beginning this book ought to do so for the same reason that Huck boards the raft—to set off on a great ride.