

April 2008

# Should the American Canon Be Discussed in a Public Library? The Selection of Classic American Authors in One Book Reading Projects

David C. Kupfer

*Texas Woman's University*, DKupfer@mail.twu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

Kupfer, David C., "Should the American Canon Be Discussed in a Public Library? The Selection of Classic American Authors in One Book Reading Projects" (2008). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 181.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/181>

## **Should the American Canon Be Discussed in a Public Library? The Selection of Classic American Authors in One Book Reading Projects**

David C. Kupfer, MLS  
MA Student  
Texas Woman's University  
Denton, Texas USA

### **Introduction to Book Clubs and the One Book Project**

The book club has a distinguished role in American culture. The clubs were formed in the 19th century, primarily as a way to help immigrants learn the language of their new country. Discussions provided assimilation for a new land; they gave increased literacy, socialization, an upward path of mobility, and a means for the immigrant to speak comfortably in a language that was new (Fabian et al. 46). Today, clubs serve other functions. Barbara Hoffert, Editor of *Library Journal*, recognizes community health and library publicity as benefits of the reading associations: "It [The club] helps polish the library's image and build bridges to the entire community" (37). Companionship and literary skills can stimulate. Reference Librarian Sarah Scobey writes, "Book clubs fill a real void in our electronic age. They bring people together in an intellectually stimulating yet non-threatening environment, a sort of College Literature 101 course without the burden of exams and papers" (9).

One of the most prominent national reading clubs to emerge in the last decade is sponsored by the Library of Congress through its Center for the Book. Their One Book Reading Promotion Projects are operated by libraries from Hawaii to Maine, and are run in association with One Book Guidelines established by the American Library Association (ALA). The Center for the Book was itself established in 1977 by Congress "to stimulate public interest in books, reading, and libraries" (About the Center for the Book). From a single program in 1998, "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book," started by Nancy Pearl of The Center for the Book, the One Book effort has grown so that it now includes over 350 cities and all 50 states (Cole One Book). The One Book goals, "which connect people to literature through reading and discussion," promote literacy, community discussion, and an appreciation of reading throughout the country (Cole News).

Those familiar with book clubs know adult reading groups were a success long before the Center for the Book became a prominent sponsor. In 1995, Library President Paul LeClerc, of the New York Public Library, declared "the support and promotion of Adult Reading has been a Part of the New York Public Library's Work since the early 1900s," and that promotion has included a community Great Books program, which was popular after the end of the Second World War (Saal x). Book club growth has been supplemented by efforts of current librarians. Candice Michalik, Reference Librarian at Lynchburg Public Library, started in 2002 with a single book, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. After one year she declared, "I would encourage any library considering the one city-one book idea to go for it!" (9). The clubs have achieved a "runaway popularity" (Hoffert 31). Patrons coalesce through discussion and author talks; they grow with "well-crafted, thoughtful books" (McMains 3) to discover "the community of literature" (Holgate).

Projects have many names: "One Book, One City," "One Book, One County," "One Book, One Valley," and "One Book, One Community." Regardless of terminology, the clubs have resurrected the idea that every community can have a successful discussion of a play, short story, poem, long novel, or nonfiction work.

### **Current Librarians Speak About "Classics"**

One Book founder Nancy Pearl has responded to an "unmet desire for discussion of serious literature" (Holgate). If librarians foster the success of the book club, does it follow that they should adopt a particular agenda, one that requires them to select a certain class of literary materials? American classics are mentioned frequently in articles on library clubs. Selection of an author like Willa Cather may be based on whether her *My Antonia* increases "both the number and diversity of the group" (Davis 30). The idea of broad inclusiveness seems to guide many book clubs. John Cole, founding director of the Center for the Book, summarizes inclusiveness as an appropriate standard for choice. For success, "The idea is to involve as many people as possible" (Holgate 2006).

Does a desire for maximizing participation preclude a preference for selection of literary classics? This question is debated in public and academic circles. Amherst University Librarian Jackie M. Hockett states, "It is not *our job* to say which books are not worth reading" (8). Other university librarians recognize the importance of encouraging discussion about books, of "gaining a deeper understanding through the exchange of ideas and perspectives with others" (Fabian et al. 46). There is a division between those who argue for patron independence from a librarian's persuasion and those who assert that reading our nation's most revered texts should be encouraged by the librarian.

A recent set of articles in *American Libraries* shows the conflict in the role of the public librarian trying to be an impartial server of the community and a promoter of a literary canon. One view is that librarians should firmly promote the classics; another is that the librarian should not be false arbiter of taste, one that creates an unpleasantness and hostility between patron and staff. David Isaacson, a retired academic librarian, asserts there is an inherent virtue in supporting reading habits that aspire to the elite in literature. "Librarians ought to be models of good reading" (43), not as a matter of condescension, but as a duty to be an exemplar of education, a discerning purveyor of established literary tradition. By doing so, the "best traditions of librarianship are supported" (43). While Isaacson does not mention the One Book club in his article, his recognition of appropriate works argues for a literacy of discussion on the classics.

Partiality to the canon is not universal. Librarian Craig Gable of Buffalo, New York, responds to Isaacson's challenge with a different view of professional responsibility. Isaacson has confused arrogance with intellectual bravery, according to Gable (38). To insist upon any sort of discrimination, even if its purpose is to elevate a patron, is to become a type of czar. Public servants should not falsely assume the role of "gatekeepers of American freedoms" by using "cultural value" to recommend texts.

Gable's comments show an antagonism toward commending or favoring certain books or types of literature. Given this opposition, should public librarians support American classics in book groups, and can they do so if there is no historic agreement about the composition of that canon?

### **The ALA Guide for One Book Projects**

The authenticity of canon is the crux of the problem for any librarian managing an adult book group. To answer the question of whether American masterworks should be supported, it is necessary to examine a framework of librarianship, as presented by ALA, the "oldest and largest library association in the world" (Home Page). Steve Holgate, Washington File Special Correspondent for the US Department of State, refers to the role of ALA in reading clubs: "The American Library Association also has weighed in, promoting the Big Read, which encourages communities to read classics of American literature" (One Book). Is there anything from ALA within their documents specifically created for the One Book program?

ALA uses a document called "Planning Your Community-Wide Read," also known as the "One Book One Community Planning Guide," as a resource (One Book Resources). The Center refers it as a "handy planning guide" (One Book Introduction). The guide can be accessed at no charge through the ALA Public Programs website (One Book Resources). It is a comprehensive 44-page toolkit for creating and maintaining a successful club (One Book Guide). It has clear goals for patron growth. "Civic unity through the readings of literature" (4) is paramount, as well as combating illiteracy, encouraging tolerance of different cultures, and bringing families together through a shared educational experience (4-5) Popularity must also be considered. Thus, the "well-known" book is an integral part of selection, to ensure the "broadest participation" (15).

The One Book Guide does not devote much attention to the appreciation of classics, but it does not ignore their intrinsic merit. ALA sees merit in the selection of literary giants:

The book selection choice you make may be between classic or contemporary literature. Communities have used this initiative to celebrate classics such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Fahrenheit [sic] 451*. Readers often rediscover classics that they have not read since high school, and others pick them up for the first time (ALA One Book Guide 16-17).

In this pivotal statement, ALA affirms that the American classic is worthy of selection. This validation does not deny the value of public input. Librarians should be sensitive to public perception, but they are not "snobbish" (Hockett 8), nor do they "intellectually discriminate" (Bujold 8) when they recommend a classic over a more popular but less substantial work. To reform Isaacson's argument, the appreciation of great writers can flourish without the imputation of prejudice against the tastes of patrons.

## The American Canon

A canon can be defined as a "national literature" and also "a body of writings especially approved by critics or anthologists" (Baldick). If our nation's top literary critics cannot decide just what the classics are, then librarians have a problem. There is much debate in the humanities as to whether there is a dependable list of "American classics." One respected proponent of the canon is Harold Bloom, author of bestsellers on Shakespeare and Western Literature, and the Sterling Professor of the Humanities and English at Yale University (Yale).

In *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*, this preeminent scholar answers those who assert that a distinct literary canon can never be established (Bloom). He defends the idea of a national body of great authors in light of continuing changes in the theory of criticism. He argues that the American canon is crucial, and does exist. Its encouragement through reading promotes an appreciation of our nation's values and history. He asserts that every age has a new set of definers as to what makes a book worthwhile: "All canons, including our currently fashionable counter-canon, are elitist.... There are also the vast complexities and contradictions that constitute the essence of the Western Canon, which is anything but a unity or stable structure" (37). Even with the instability, we can identify a "Western Canon" of great writers, and American greats within that group. Bloom writes:

If one attempts to list the artistic achievements of our nation against the background of Western tradition, our accomplishments in music, painting, sculpture, architecture tend to be somewhat dwarfed ... The exception is in literature. No Western poet, in the past century and a half, not even a Browning or Leopardi or Baudelaire, overshadows Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson. (264)

Bloom contributes to the idea of literary growth through group reading. When he singles out Walt Whitman, he writes, "When you read aloud to someone else or in solitude, there is a peculiar appropriateness in chanting Whitman. He is the poet of our climate" (289). The discipline of librarianship can reason that patrons should read our nation's giants, and read them aloud, to appreciate whatever

they find distinctive about our country. Libraries offer a mature location for adults to gather together and rejoice in the giants of "our climate."

Andrew Delbanco seconds Bloom's praise in *Required Reading: Why our American Classics Matter Now*. This Columbia University humanities professor recognizes different approaches to canon; regardless of disputes, he recognizes a body of great American literature with Melville, Thoreau, and Chopin. Insightful critics encourage others to enjoy them: they can agree with Delbanco when he commends the canon's giants: "I celebrate them because I have no doubt that the world is better for their having written, and because I believe it is the responsibility of the critic to incite others to read them" (214).

Delbanco even sees an inspiration to learn in the craft of writing. The reader becomes a writer when enjoying a work that meets two criteria; the literature has both "aesthetic delight" and a celebration of the "dynamic society of the United States" (ix-xi). Our timeless novelists, poets, and essayists give us the pleasure of learning an American spirit, about the attributes of the English language. These themes are pertinent to group discussion. Of authors such as Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Edith Wharton, he states:

First and last, they were inspired practitioners of the American language. Although they valued the literary achievements of the past, they were determined to enlarge the expressive range of the language beyond where their predecessors had left it ... Through this *literary* experience – this refusal to submit to precedent, no matter how honored or honorable – we can partake of the democratic faith in the capacity of all human beings to perform the miracle of creation. (xi)

By reading contemporary critics like Bloom and Delbanco, librarians can appreciate the sublime experience of the canon. They should not shrink from the classics because they believe there is no canon. The canon grows over time, and One Book leaders should have flexibility in assigning great authors to a particular group; this choice depends on the understanding of the community. Different communities have different goals. Regardless of which authors are selected from an established set of writers, the club should see a standard body of essential American literature as a way to appreciate great writing and a spectacular achievement in art.

Bloom and Delbanco ably defend the American canon, and ALA gives further reason for promoting it. It can be agreed that no critic or an anthology editor or library association defines the classics precisely. Imprecision is desirable in a nation which prides itself on pluralism, on multiple schools of thought on science, politics, and culture. Through the discernment of literary critics and ALA, there are keepers of faith in a national canon. Librarians should include established classics and popularize the "not-yet-classic works of literature," the newer works that have potential for "longevity" (ALA One Book Guide 17). A common cultural vigor is expressed through works that have become – or will become – paradigms of our nation's literature. American classics build a critical appreciation of writing while showing that American thought, the ideals of democracy and growth and civic pride, are expressed in varied forms through the heritage of our nation's most respected authors.

### **Methodology of a Comparison between Classics and Bestsellers**

Many how-to guides on reading clubs offer chapters on selecting classics and bestsellers. Few give a comprehensive justification for their choices. This paper supports a mature and detailed documentation of sources terminology for an empirical analysis. New data focuses on the One Book club, to determine if its adults receive a substantial diet of classic literature in discussion groups. The frequencies of selection between classics and bestsellers are compared, beginning at the inception of the One Book program in 1998, and continuing through 2007. The results allow a statistical measure of selection patterns for those leading One Book projects.

Classification of "classic" and "bestseller" is imperfect, just as it is for canon. This paper defines workable parameters of American writers based upon reasonable standards of "classic" and "bestseller." For the classics, there is a single list of American authors who have won great critical fame from four leading authoritative organizations. Each of these authors has earned at least one of the following awards: a Pulitzer Prize in one of their literature categories; a Nobel Prize in literature; an entry in the Modern Library Editorial Board List of the "100 Best Novels" or "100 Best Nonfiction" works of the 20th century; or placement in the Library of America's catalog of renowned authors. All of the chosen authors can be found at the websites of the Pulitzer, Nobel, Modern Library, and Library of America organizations, which are listed in the references cited at the end of this paper.

As for the "bestseller" list, a grouping was made of *Publishers Weekly* yearly bestsellers for the last 10 years of *The Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac* (R.R. Bowker et al. 1998-2007). The *Bowker Annual* is one of the leading authorities for statistical research for information professionals. It provides a benchmark for assigning the label "Bestsellers" to a group of books that have the greatest empirical support for that title. The initial entry in the "Bestsellers Of" chapter of each year's *Bowker Annual* is a double category of the 15 most popular works of fiction and the 15 most popular nonfiction works, as calculated by reported publication figures for the appropriate calendar year. One fiction list and one nonfiction list for each year are combined into a single group. This grouping of bestselling authors, representing the 300 top selling books from 1998-2007, replicates the time frame in which the One Book Project has been in existence while providing a basis for finding authors chosen for their "popularity" in One Book clubs.

The criteria for both "classics" and "bestsellers" are limited in scope and time frame. They should be sufficient for the entire ten year history of the Center for the Book program, and it may not be productive to expand the lists. For example, if one looks at the most recent *Bowker Annual*, from 2007, one finds numerous bestselling lists with a plentitude of merit prizes. In the Bestsellers of 2006 chapter, one finds lists of "Fiction Runner-Up," "Non-Fiction Runners-Up," "Paperback Bestsellers," "Trade Paperbacks," "Almanacs, Atlases, and Annuals," and "Mass Market." Each grouping is divided into numeric categories, from works that sell 100,000 units to those of "Two Million+" (2007 555-570). The chapter "Literary Prizes, 2006" numbers over 100 awards in the year 2006, from the Ambassador Book Awards, which "honor an exceptional contribution to the interpretation of life and culture in the United States," to the Wallace Stevens Award, which honors "outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry." (2007 597-607)

These parameters highlight exemplary American authors and current bestselling ones. A defense for the authority for the bestsellers will be briefly presented. *Bowkers* encompasses the years 1997-2006, and the One Book Project has had a life history of 1998 to 2007. The annuals therefore allow a close parallel comparison between all national bestsellers and those bestselling authors selected for the One Book clubs. There is no claim that the *Bowkers* 1997-2006 listings were used exclusively by librarians for selection. *Bowkers* shows a time period in which librarians could have relied upon similar "blockbuster" lists to furnish their own One Book groups when popularity was the dominant standard for selection.

For the authority of the classics, all four organizations are recognized for expertise in their measurement of artistic skill. The Nobel Prize in Literature is an international achievement for literary excellence. Over a six decade period, ten Americans, from Sinclair Lewis to Toni Morrison, have won the award for their fiction (Nobelprize). The Pulitzer Prizes are strictly national but have a broader scope (Read Winners). Since 1917, they have encompassed seven categories and have honored both "distinguished" fiction and nonfiction, specifically those works "by an American author, preferably dealing with American life" (History). The Modern Library has an Editorial Board which now includes Maya Angelou, Jon Krakauer, Joyce Carol Oates, Salman Rushdie, Oliver Sacks, and Gore Vidal (Modern Library Board). The Modern Library serves American cultural life by publishing the "World's Best Books." In 1998, the editors of the Modern Library published its "100 Best" list to honor "the best novels and nonfiction of the 20th century" (Modern Library 100 Best). The Library of America is another valuable definer of the American canon as it publishes "authoritative editions of America's best and most significant writing" (The Library of America Home Page).



There may be objections to these authorities because they are not based on college anthologies and syllabi. English language anthologies are part of the voice of critical appreciation. A look at the most recent edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* shows a significant portion of authors is approved in the college classroom (Baym). In the 6th edition (2003) of *Norton*, 16 of this report's 48 authors were chosen as representative of American writing. Some may object that this number is too low to support the methodology. *Norton* does not focus on historical works or on full-length novels. Given that stipulation, the canonicity of the study's list is confirmed because one third of that list is also part of *Norton*. As for the absence of the other two thirds, consider that full-length novels, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, are not included in the collection; more recent nonfiction titles, such as John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* and David McCullough's *1776*, are also left out. Historic works of literary value will be taught in American history classes as full-length modern novels will be taught in English classes. *Norton* covers an important part of older fiction writing that is taught in university English departments. The 32 writers left out of their collection will be found in supplemental readings and anthologies through a broad spectrum of other humanities offerings that are part of a liberal arts curriculum. What the 2003 *Norton Anthology* shows is that the classic authors included in this study are part of the literary curriculum that introduces classics to be read, discussed, and valued by college students and professors.

## The Data

Literary merit can now be contrasted empirically with sales figures. Five distinct groupings comprise the basis for analysis. The first group is the Total Authors category; that is, the total number of authors chosen by all libraries for all One Book Projects since the inception of that program. The latest entries from the Center for the Book were dated June 26, 2007 (One Book By Author). It was from these entries that the number of authors represented in the One Book Projects for the entire history of the project was determined. The second group is the American classics authors, or the CL Authors category; this includes all the "honored" authors, that is, all the "Mark Twains" or "Willa Cathers" who satisfy two conditions: 1) they were recognized by the Nobel, Pulitzer, Library of America, or Modern Library organizations, and 2) they were also selected at least once by libraries documented in a One Book program. For this category, international writers are excluded. Their greatness is not in dispute, but a Sophocles is vital to ancient Greek drama, not modern American canon. The third group is the current top bestselling authors, or the BE Authors category. This includes the "blockbuster" authors, such as Stephen King and David Baldacci, regardless of nationality, who were chosen to be read at least once in the last ten years. All authors in either of the CL or BE set, regardless of how many times they were chosen by a local library, could only be noted one time for the CL group or the BE group in which they were assigned. There was no duplication of authorship, so that Harper Lee, although read in 53 communities since 1997, is listed just once in the CL group. However, the two groups were not mutually exclusive, so that writers with exceptional merit could be selected for both the CL and BE list. This occurred if a double achievement of bestselling sales figures and critical plaudits warranted the inclusion.

Two more lists are added for comparison: a "Both CL And BE" group, which includes authors that are both bestsellers and regarded as literary giants; and a "Neither CL Nor BE" group, which includes authors not defined by the criteria as classic or bestselling. This fifth group includes the majority of authors selected by libraries. Most writers chosen for adult discussion are neither documented with an award such as the Pulitzer Prize, nor recognized by any *Bowker Annual* with an entry into their yearly *Publishers Weekly* "Best of" lists for top sales.

These five groupings categorize every writer selected for the entire ten year history of the One Book Projects. The results are in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** 1998-2007: The One Book Club. A Comparison Between Classic American Authors and Current Bestselling Authors.

	One Book Projects for All Participating Communities in the United States, 1998-2007
Total Authors	529
CL (Classic) Authors	48
BE (Bestsellers) Authors	16
Both CL And BE	3
Neither CL Nor BE	472

### Analysis

Table 1 gives a sharp measure of preference between classics and bestsellers. It shows that American classics do not play a secondary role to current blockbusters in the selection process of the librarians who organize the One Book clubs. The CL Authors category, those that represent a Nobel Laureate, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a featured author in the Library of America catalog, or a citation in the Modern Library of America's "100 Best," combine to total 48 writers. The BE Authors category, from one of the two *Publishers Weekly* top "fiction" or "nonfiction" sets during the last 10 years, numbers only 16 writers. To work down from the total, 529 writers have been read in the One Book Projects since the program's inception (One Book By Author). Of these, One Book communities have chosen 48 "classic" national authors as opposed to 16 top "blockbuster" writers. In the history of One Book enterprise, 9.1% of their 529 authors are from the CL group, as compared to only 3.0% from the BE group. The CL group is represented more than 3 times more frequently than that of the BE group. *Forty-eight classic American authors, winners of the highest critical acclaim, have been selected to be read; that figure is exactly triple the 16 writers who made the Bowkers' top bestseller lists.*

Table 1 demonstrates that for adult discussion groups, public librarians prefer American classics over current blockbusters. The statistics lend credence to the belief that librarians have a critical appreciation of writing. The CL number, considered in comparison with the BE number, ranks American classics respectably as a choice for group discussions. *In the last ten years, one author in eleven qualifies as an American classic.* Only one in thirty-three qualifies as a top current bestseller. It is interesting to note that the CL and BE categories are not mutually exclusive. The combined unit of Both CL And BE Authors has three distinguished writers. David McCullough has one two Pulitzer Prizes since 1993, Toni Morrison has won a Nobel and a Pulitzer Prize, and Tom Wolfe has won a Pulitzer Prize: all three "classic" authors have written top bestsellers in the last decade that made it to the *Publishers Weekly* yearly "Bestsellers of" lists.

There are further revealing characteristics from Table 1 about the qualities of authorship. Harper Lee, from the CL group, is also the most popular writer of the One Book program. Her *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1961 (Read Winners), has been selected for 53 communities over ten years: ten of those communities, as of July 26, 2007, are planning to read her novel for 2007 (One Book By Author). Mark Twain, another CL author, has had four different works selected by communities, the most diverse choice of any in the CL group: his books include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Puddn'head Wilson*, and *The Selected Works. Huck Finn* is the most popular; it has been selected by five different cities since 2004. Interestingly enough, West Boylston, Massachusetts chose *Huck Finn* in 2004; this city is only 36 miles from Concord, Massachusetts, where the book was banned in 1885 by the Concord Free Public Library. The library now boasts itself as a "cornerstone of the social, cultural, educational, and recreational life of the Concord community" since its official founding in 1873 (Home Page). Twain wrote satirically about their Library Committee members, calling them "moral icebergs" (Vogelback 266); it would be interesting to learn from Twain, wherever he



may reside today, whether he thinks that moral rectitude among library directors has thawed in the last 120 years.

After Harper Lee, the most popular author for all One Book Projects for the last ten years is Khaled Hosseini. The graduate of the California-San Diego's School of Medicine has been read or will be read in 39 cities: 38 entries are listed for *The Kite-Runner* and one for *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (One Book By Author). Hosseini has received critical acclaim and an entry in the New York Times Bestseller list (Hosseini) Yet, he did not qualify within this report as a classic or bestselling author. As the One Book program continues into its second decade, authors who have not received a listing as a CL, such as Hosseini, may later be included in an updated CL category, as they are awarded a Pulitzer for a new work or honored for a cumulative body with a listing the Library of America catalogue, or are recognized in a new "classics" list for the 21 st century from the Editorial Board of the Modern Library.

## Implications

Henry Louis Gates, General Editor of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, addresses a lamentable proclivity by some scholars for shredding the American canon. In *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, he synthesizes the idea of pluralism with more traditional understanding of literary value. As a college professor and literary critic, he explains implications of new critical theory, including its impact on "the politics of identity for the future of American society and culture" (*Loose Canons* xii). He notes that American identity has always been a subject of debate, "always occasioned lively disagreement among American educators" (xiv). Gates takes on liberal and conservative critiques of American education, including those who challenge the core of American readings. While noting some of the more lugubrious forecasts of the impending core's demise, he finds strength in the idea of a "civic culture" (xv) that respects the rich variety of a national experience. He writes:

I suppose the literary canon is, in no very grand sense, the commonplace book of our shared culture, in which we have written down the texts and titles that we want to remember, that had some special meaning for us. How else did those of us who teach literature fall in love with our own subject than through our own commonplace books, in which we inscribed, secretly and privately, as we might do in a diary, those passages of books that named for us what we had for so long deeply felt, but could not say? (21)

To continue with Gates's reasoning, college instruction has the unique opportunity to reach young adults through adult discourse about the meaning of American society. It is not expected that all liberal arts professors agree in interpretation. Sometimes the debates are acrimonious. As Gates explains, there has been a rise of multiculturalism that "threatens to fragment American culture into a warren of ethnic enclaves" (174). One must add to Gates's argument and ask these fracturing critics, "Has not our country always been a 'melting-pot' which strives to assimilate different groups, although the process is often slow?" Our country is built on the same pluralism that some critics decry as undermining a proper evaluation of our past. All adults in library classrooms now have similar opportunities of study as to college students. Patrons need not redefine themselves in quarrels that incite the deans of education as they find a repository of established texts and discover that culture presents a language that changes over time and is still exciting and persuasive. History, politics, economics, as well as dialects of speech, are sculpted within the impressions of canonical authors. The American culture becomes a shared enterprise when adults develop literacy with a national canon.

Adults relish history as much as they are entertained by it. They share economic, religious, and ethnic themes that have been commonly discussed only in high school and college. In *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice*, Peter Jarvis argues that lifelong learning for adults is an American privilege. He writes:

Hence it is maintained that lifelong education – or now, lifelong learning – should be regarded both as a human right and a fundamental necessity in any civilized society so

that all people can respond to their learning needs, fulfill their potential and discover a place in the wider society. (67)

Jarvis correlates a transfer of knowledge to enrichment. As "the humanity of the adult students and the teachers" are essential to the study of materials in all subjects (188), then teachers in non-traditional areas become "agents transmitting a selection of culture to the learner" (152).

How does the public library fit into the articulation of culture through literature? In *Adult Learners Welcome Here*, Marguerite Crowley Weibel writes of the library as the "preeminent keeper of the myriad manifestations of the human story" (118). Her point is a keen understanding of the potential for a library canon. Scholars may begin to recognize the transmission of a lyric and poignant body of written works is aided by adult discussion. The librarian becomes part of the "keeper of our culture" (5) when patrons have a discourse on great books. They enjoy autonomy not found in the formal classroom, directing themselves to their own instruction at the pace they choose. The librarian facilitates mature learning for those in an environment that contributes to a definition of canon.

Jarvis argues the nominal instructor's role is out of place in a more modern learning experience (155). In the non-traditional classroom, adults can "reach conclusions other than those held by the facilitators" (155). They bring individuality to interpret subject matter. Within this framework, they seek a mentor to find stimulation through an unrestricted discussion of the primary texts of our nation. Books of spiritual significance are appreciated through an open exchange in the library, a place that will not impinge on the learner's power to interpret books spontaneously and to the fullest of their potential.

There is a dilemma for some who believe selecting a classic work means rejecting a more appropriate popular one. That idea has created a long dialectic on librarianship, with a set of arguments that offers a paradox. Does not the presence of a trained professional, a bibliophile, imply a responsibility for competent advisement? If so, how can the librarian ensure, as a dispassionate public servant, that the patron is not being manipulated? One can counter with the proposal that proper graduate level training implies the capacity for literary discernment. If the librarian does not recommend the highest caliber works, how is the patron to profit to the fullest? A zeal for great books should resolve the conflict for those who believe that the aloof and impartial librarian cannot be an active teacher.

Tension will always exist between offering interpretive counsel and restricting approval to empirical matters. This strain is not limited to group reading. In building up collections that satisfy both intellectual tastes and popular ones, library leaders have tried to find workable and objective lists of items for purchase, balancing anticipated use with merit. Academic and public librarians judge books that have worth as defined by a general population or academic institution. Thirty years ago, Daniel Gore, the then Library Director of Macalester College in Minnesota, noted an effort to create a catalog of appropriate exemplary works for his collection. He evaluated the principles of acquisition. He warned that critical opinion had relegated inferior works to an elevated status, had "been used to seal with immortality books that scarcely lasted the lifetime of the critic" (89). He wrote of the fears of taking an active role in promoting works to patrons. The patrons, who have a desire to learn, may be answered with this observation on the "giants" of literature: "Librarians, prompted by worthy motives of neutrality, instead show them [patrons] everything ... The giants fade from view amid a swarm of pygmies" (88-89).

From the previous arguments of Gore, Jarvis, and Weibel, the 21st century librarian may redefine the word "public" in public libraries. There is a challenge now to make literary discussion available to those adults who cannot afford the costs of college education, or do not have time to engage in a lengthy course of study. How many working adults can enroll in a weekly 90-minute class requiring exams and term papers in addition to reading and discussion? Adults can find a bridge between ambition and opportunity, one that melds convenience and cost in a learning group which does not charge for study of classic texts. Fourie and Dowell write of new public libraries in the capacity of having "developed collections, programs, and services to help them fulfill their principle of service to all" (88). To expand upon this judgment, one can assert innovation should be a service objective to leaders of adult reading. It is a boon to provide access to solitary reading as well as to communal literary appreciation. Librarians

can become educators as they find books that provoke responsive communication. They can focus on a discussion-based study of great novels and biography that adults may find prohibitively costly elsewhere – if they can find it at all. There is no limitation to exploit a specialized role in lifelong reading. Small group sessions permit learning that may be unavailable financially in any other instructional format. Adults are able to tutor themselves to find self-esteem and stimulation. They engage enthusiastically in a voluntary activity and receive tangible benefits that are not dependent on tuition fees, inflexible time schedules, or grading policies of the community college.

The public library can create its own continuing education program – at no charge to its clientele. The One Book program has potential to rival any syllabus in a general literature survey for adults at a neighboring college. For adults renewing their formal studies, the library can compliment programs that offer college credits. For those with a concurrent college enrollment, the library becomes an adult learning center by offering established literature. Classic books find an adult market for those who pursue a degree and for those who do not want to incur the cost or time commitment of a degree plan.

This is not a call for public librarians to substitute the classics for bestsellers, either for group discussion or for book shelves. Popular fiction is a dominant element in library circulation statistics. Senkevitch and Sweetland use multiple authorities to conclude, "Fiction remains the most common adult material taken out of the library" (104), and "Findings indicate that the most widely held adult fiction titles are recent, popular works that form a stable core from one year to the next" (102). There should be multiple genres of popular authors in book discussion – detective stories, mysteries, romance, even science fiction and fantasy – along with distinguished works. However, by reinforcing and perpetuating the American canon, librarians become preservers of classic works and promoters of a common cultural identity. This clientele has a need to discuss themes outside the traditional classroom and find an identity that cannot be threatened by current fragmenting trends in popular culture.

The library meeting room becomes an enrichment center, a cultural archive, offering an understanding of what Bloom calls the "American consciousness" (94). Bloom, Delbanco, and editors of college anthologies can define that consciousness with eloquence. They should be aided by One Book participants in readings on Twain, Cather, and Whitman. An American identity in books will show the dramatic, the grotesque, the humorous, and the sublime of an American experience. For adults who have missed the classics that others enjoyed in childhood, or for those who wish to find a more mature understanding of them, the library arena becomes a *de facto* college experience. It tells the patron that a non-traditional classroom is viable for literary growth. Unlike the college professor, the librarian does not have to work through a required reading list or curriculum set by an administration. There is no barrier to stimulating works that are never arcane but always relevant. The public library becomes the citizen's university with a knowledgeable moderator to guide the clientele to the heritage of classics. Trenchant communication reinforces a canon used by scholars, public school teachers, and university professors to explain America through her best authors.

Bloom complains of a fragmentation of American romance and spirit, one that is engendered by those who engage in a "Balkanization of literary studies" (518). He challenges dissentious literary critics and holds to an "aesthetic value of literature" that can be shared among those who "still read for the love of reading" (518). To add to Bloom's thesis, one can discern a bridge between history and knowledge, between passion and learning, which is crossed with the American canon. The librarian becomes preceptor and voyager – even a definer of canon – through the book club enterprise. Bloom's notion of the "perpetual agon between past and present" (520) is sealed when the contest reverberates in debates among adults who have found a new campus. A library center that has discussion on the strengths, weaknesses, and triumphs of books helps make canonization, the elevation of books acceptable to spirited public study. A free people's quest for reading shows librarianship itself is a descendent of the beginning of our republic. That ideal of a mix between reading and speech requires the enduring public forum. The selection of classics confirms that American traditions are transcendent. It is the public realization of the power of language, through metaphor and humor and vision, that originality is realized in Twain, Poe, Thoreau, and Morrison. As for Mark Twain, his position is secure. Huckleberry Finn is the "Hamlet of American Literature for teachers" according to the Professor David Kesterson, a noted authority

on Twain scholarship. The five cities that have chosen to read it since 2004 share a role with university students in safeguarding the American canon. Its uniqueness shows current generations can find intimacy with the past and a link to the pleasure of words.

## Future Study

Joan Bessman Taylor, in her article "Good for What? Non-appeal, Discussability, and Book Groups (Parts 1 and 2)," is one of many scholars who examines the book club dynamic. This report continues Taylor's work by looking at the practices of leaders who stimulate discussion and recommend titles of merit. The results compare authors of critical plaudits favorably with those of sales strength. Future investigators may expand upon the sources, cull additional information, and present a valid idea of authorship that gives more generous definitions of "classic" and "blockbuster."

Future analysis may include: comparisons of university-based settings for discussion with that of the library; popular genre trends and authorship; the role of independent surveys, such as the *Bowker Annual*, in determining genres; the independent reader advisory and selection; a geographical survey of One Book Projects with respect to genres; the relation between electronic and face to face discussion; the use of scholarly lists to find classic authors; the place for library canonicity in a liberal education; and the role of censorship in the acquisition of controversial materials for group communication in public institutions.

## Conclusion

Libraries are stewards in promoting an appreciation of reading. There is a fluid expression of thought in American classics, and that expression is preserved through library groups that fall under the aegis of the One Book Reading Promotion Projects. Librarians are not simply information brokers, they are transmitters of materials that reflect values and cultural heritage. In *Walden*, in the chapter entitled "Reading," Henry David Thoreau, the great national essayist exclaims, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!" (Project Gutenberg). That thought is alive in today's library leaders. They create new eras by encouraging an aesthetic appreciation of the best of American fiction and nonfiction.

There need to be vigorous springs of an American canon. Lynn Bloom – no relation to Harold Bloom – discusses different types of canon in her 1999 article "The Essay Canon." This Professor of English at the University of Connecticut desires to establish the professional essay as a worthy genre that deserves more attention in general anthologies. She writes of two primary intellectual schools that establish important texts, the first is the teaching canon, the second, the critical canon. Within each group there may be subdivisions, such as national and historic for the critical canon. Different canons and their multiple subdivisions can influence each other. She adds, "The canon, any canon, may be viewed as the map of the territory it claims to encompass" (403). This view can be expanded to other areas of the humanities. If a library is to judge canonicity correctly, it should rely upon existing pedagogical and scholarly works. It should synthesize teaching with critical reviews to choose authentic masterworks that preserve American literature.

This report corroborates the common belief that librarians support the classics. It also shows than a list of books can be created from authoritative origins and used for adult discourse on the canon. The canon presented in this study is only one interpretative judgment on university pedagogy and critical praise. It is not intended to serve as a final rule of reference that never permits reassessment of authors. Those of the study wrote a distinguished body of works, with an uncommon place in national thought. Other scholars can expand upon the list as they interpret research, classroom anthologies, and school syllabi. The American canon already has a place in the One Book club. It is not a negligible niche. Adults who count on classics will continue to find it in a public curriculum.

Sherry Evans writes about the success of using a classic to manage her book club: Steinbeck's *The Pearl* was an excellent choice as it produced one of the "liveliest and most thought-provoking discussions" in the group (348). In the 21st century, patrons will find other equally compelling Nobel Laureates. New writers will gain their place in the literary round table of lecture and conversation. Old masterworks, such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*, will continue to please. "Mark Twain is the fountainhead to the great winding waterway of America's native-born literature," declares Ron Powers. Mr. Twain leads an admirable list. When adult readers ask for our literary heritage, the jewels of discussion, they will be answered, "Yes, the American canon should be discussed in a public library."

## References

ALA Public Programs Office. "One Book Guide." 2007. American Library Association. 5 August 2007. <http://publicprograms.ala.org/orc/pdfs/onebookguide.pdf>

ALA Public Programs Office. "One Book One Community Resources." American Library Association. 2 August 2007. <http://publicprograms.ala.org/orc/discussionprograms/bookdiscussion/onebook.html>

American Library Association. "Home Page." 3 October 2007. <http://www.ala.org/>

Baldick, Christopher. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, 1996. Oxford Reference Online. 27 August 2007.

Baym, Nina. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 6th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.

Bloom, Lynn Z. "The Essay Canon." *College English* 64.4 (1999): 401-430.

Cole, John Y. "News from the Center for the Book." 2003. Library of Congress. 27 August 2007. <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0311/cfb.html>

Cole, John Y. "One Book Projects Grow in Popularity." January 2006. Library of Congress. 8 August 2007. <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0601/cfb.html>

Davis, Donna. "Libraries and Book Clubs." *Mississippi Libraries* 64.1 (2000): 7-9.

Delbanco, Andrew. *Required Reading: Why our American Classics Matter Now*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997.

Evans, Sherry. "But I Only Want to Read Books with Happy Endings: Strategies for a Successful Library Adult Book Discussion Group." *Public Libraries* 42.6 (2003): 347-9.

Fabian, Carole Ann, Charles D'Aniello, and Cynthia Tysick. "Multiple Models for Library Outreach Initiatives." *The Reference Librarian* 39.82 (2003): 39-55. Hawthorne Press Online. August 8, 2007.

Fourie, Denise K., and Dowell, David R. *Libraries in the Information Age: An Introduction and Career Exploration*. Computer File. Greenwood Village, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 2002. 27 September 2007.

Gable, Craig. "The Freedom to Select." [In reply to Don't Just Read - Read Good Books by David Isaacson]. *American Libraries* 38.3 (2007): 38.



- Gates, Henry Louis. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. Computer File. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 8 October 2007.
- Gates, Henry Louis, and McKay, Nellie Y. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996.
- Gore, Daniel. *To Know a Library: Essays and Annual Reports, 1970-1976*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978.
- Hockett, Jackie M. "Good 'Good' Books?" [Letters and Comments.] *American Libraries* 38.1 (2007): 8.
- Hoffert, Barbara. "The Book Club Exploded." *Library Journal* 131.12 (2006): 37-38.
- Holgate, Steve. "One-Book Programs Sweep the United States." 17 April 2006.
- International Information Program of the U.S. Department of State. 18 July 2007. <http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/Archive/2006/Apr/17-467171.html>
- Hosseini, Khaled. "Khaled Hosseini." 2007. 8 August 2007 <http://www.khaledhosseini.com/hosseini-contact.html>
- Isaacson, David. "Don't just Read - Read Good Books." *American Libraries* 37. 11 (2006): 43.
- Jarvis, Peter. *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Theory and Practice*. Computer File. London; New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004. 29 September 2007.
- Kesterson, Professor David. Personal Communication. University of North Texas, Denton, TX. 9 October 2007.
- Maxwell, Nancy Kalikow. *Sacred Stacks: The Higher Purpose of Libraries and Librarianship*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2006.
- McMains, Victoria Golden. *The Readers' Choice: 200 Book Club Favorites*. 1st Perennial ed. New York: Quill, 2000.
- Michalik, Candice. "One Book, One City, One Great Experience!" *Virginia Libraries* 49.4 (2003): 7-9.
- Modern Library. "Modern Library 100 Best." 2007. 8 August 2007. <http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/100best.html>
- Modern Library. "Modern Library Board." 2003. 9 August 2007. <http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/aboutboard.html>
- Nobelprize. "All Nobel Laureates in Literature." Nobel Web AB. 2007. 18 July 2007. [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/lists/all/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/all/)
- Powers, Ron. "Twain, Mark" *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Ed. Jay Parini. Oxford University Press 2004. Oxford Reference Online. 8 October 2007.
- Project Gutenberg. "The Project Gutenberg Etext of Walden, Henry David Thoreau." Project Gutenberg. 1995. 30 June 2007. <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext95/waldn10.txt>

R.R. Bowker Company, Council of National Library Associations, and Council of National Library and Information Associations (U.S.). *The Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Information*. 43-52 ed. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1998-2007.

Saal, Rollene, and the New York Public Library. *The New York Public Library Guide to Reading Groups*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Publishers, 1995.

Scobey, Sarah. "Why Book Clubs in the Technology Era? Book Clubs at the Fort Collins Public Library." *Colorado Libraries* 30.4 (2004): 9-10. August 8, 2007.

Senkevitch, J. J. and Sweetland, James H. "Public Libraries and Adult Fiction: Another Look at a Core List of "Classics." *Library Resources & Technical Services* 42.2 (1998). 102-112.

Taylor, Joan Bessman. "Good for what? Non-Appeal, Discussability, and Book Groups (Part 1)." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46.4 (2007): 33-6.

Taylor, Joan Bessman. "Good for what? Non-Appeal, Discussability, and Book Groups (Part 2)." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47.1 (2007): 26-31.

The Center for the Book. "About The Center For The Book." 27 April 2007. 9 August 2007. <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/ctr-bro.html>

The Center for the Book. "One Book By Author: One Book Reading Promotion Projects." Updated 26 June 2007. 18 July 2007 <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/onebookbyauthor.html>

The Center for the Book. "One Book Introduction." <http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html>

The Library of America. "The Library of America Home Page." 2007. 19 July 2007. <http://loa.org/>

The Pulitzer Prizes. "History." 2007. 8 August 2007. <http://www.pulitzer.org>

The Pulitzer Prizes. "Read Winners." 2007. 18 July 2007. <http://www.pulitzer.org/>

Vogelback, Arthur Lawrence. "The Publication and Reception of Huckleberry Finn in America." *American Literature* 11.3 (1939): 260-272. 16 September 2007.

Weibel, Marguerite Crowley. *Adult Learners Welcome Here: A Handbook for Librarians and Literacy Teachers*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2007.

Yale University English Department. "Harold Bloom." 3 October 2007. [http://www.yale.edu/english/profiles/bloom\\_h.html](http://www.yale.edu/english/profiles/bloom_h.html)

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Alfred Guy Litton, PhD, Associate Professor of English, and Director of the Honors Program at TWU, for his editorial suggestions.