
Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/07 18:11

FYI, Below is from the Valley Patriot.

I might not be the best person to comment on this ...

I don't remember any controversial books on my high school reading list back in the puritan ages (I do remember having to read six books each summer - pick any six from a list of about 25 - or was it pick three fiction and three non-fiction??).

I suppose I wouldn't mind these two books being optional but I certainly wouldn't require everyone to read them. And, I think it shows poor judgement since obviously these books offend quite a few students in addition to some parents (and maybe even yours truly). I'm guessing you could find some similar titles without the need to be so graphic. By choosing these titles as the only required summer reading for most 11 graders makes me wonder what gets taught in Literature classes these days.

Best wishes,
ahbgone

N. Andover: Rape and incest on summer reading list

The level I and Level II summer reading agenda for the North Andover High School 11th grade students has many parents up in arms, but the teachers have the support of Superintendent Marini.

The two assigned summer reading books are: The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison and The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky. Parents are upset and questioning the appropriateness of these books in light of the adult themes and graphic details on topics of drugs, rape, suicide, masturbation, and incest to name a few. Specifically, in The Bluest Eye, the main character, an 11 year old black girl named Pecola Breedlove is raped and impregnated by her own father. She then yearns to be white with blue eyes. There is also a rape scene in The Perks of Being a Wallflower during an alcohol party involving 15 year olds and both rape scenes are quite explicit, disgusting and disturbing to read. There are also no criminal consequences with these rapists, which would have at least sent to the high school readers some positive message. With so many wonderful classic books out there for our young people to read, I wonder what the teachers at the North Andover High School were thinking and what kind of class discussions they have planned. Maybe the press, school committee members and parents will be invited to these discussions.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by dromano - 2008/08/08 08:20

Having not read the books myself I can't comment. Tom Sawyer and other books (classics) at their times were also considered controversial. 11th graders are 16 - 18 year old students?

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/08 11:48

What controversy can you cite for The Adventures of Tom Sawyer?

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 11:56

Maybe it's because my mom was a librarian, but I've always been interested in the topics of book banning and censorship. In fact, a google search on "book banning" turns up over a hundred thousand hits. Here is one such hit, coming from the American Library Association:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/challengedbanned/frequentlychallengedbooks.cfm>

The ALA put together a movie, back in the 70s, that in itself was controversial enough that 60 Minutes did a story on it.

The movie was meant to provoke discussion about the topic of censorship, using a fictional Edward Teller-like figure as the subject of a near riot in a public school on whether or not he should be allowed to speak.

Unfortunately, I think this stuff happens all the time. Shortly after I moved away from my hometown, I heard that a certain faction gained a majority on the school board, and then proceeded to vote on books that should be banned from the school library. They also voted to revoke the National Honor Society membership of a young pregnant woman. Both of these topics became national news stories.

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 12:03

Google searching on "Tom Sawyer"+banned, turned up this link right at the top:

<http://www.lib.fit.edu/pubs/librarydisplays/Banned%20Books%20website.htm>

It cites 1998 as a more recent example of an attempt to ban it.

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/08 12:20

Just to be clear - I don't think anyone is talking about banning these books or any books.

I personally think that choosing books that are obviously offensive to a non-trivial number of people in town (and apparently with consulting with parents or whoever should be consulted) shows poor judgement.

Best wishes,
ahbgone

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Actual High School Summer Reading List

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/08 12:27

Here's the actual High School Reading list:

http://nahs.northandoverpublicschools.com/images/stories/documents/SUMMER_READING_LIST.pdf

SUMMER READING LIST

JUNE 2008

NORTH ANDOVER HIGH SCHOOL

430 Osgood St.

North Andover, MA 01845

Department of English

Freshman Summer Reading:

Honors: Black Boy, The Wave and The Life of Pi

College Prep: The Wave and House on Mango Street

Sophomore Summer Reading:

Honors: Wuthering Heights, A Prayer for Owen Meaney, and Gulliver's Travels

Global Thought: Wuthering Heights and 1984

Level 1 and 2: Maus 1 and Gulliver's Travels

Level 3: Maus 1

Junior Summer Reading:

AP & Honors: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Cold Mountain, and Ahab's Wife

Am. Thought: Read 1 of 3:

Undaunted Courage
Nothing Like It in the World
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee
OR
Read any 2:
Founding Brothers
Grapes of Wrath
The Dollmaker
The Jungle
Looking Backward
Gideon's Trumpet
Sister Carrie
Babbitt
Exile's Return
On the Road/Dharma Bums (one set)
Native Son
The Rise of Silas Lapham
Blue Highways
Winesburg, Ohio
The Great Gatsby
The Octopus
Travels with Charly/Travels with Lizbeth (one set)
Into the Wild

Levels 1 and 2: The Bluest Eye and The Perks of Being a Wallflower
Level 3: Montana 1948

Senior Summer Reading:

140: "Apology," Plato
Notes of a Native Son, James Baldwin
"The Metamorphosis," Franz Kafka
Year of Wonders, Geraldine Brooks
"Allegory of the Cave," Plato
A Summer Life, Gary Soto
The Stranger, Albert Camus
Plainsong, Kent Haruf
150: The Source (chapters 1-6), A Hundred Years of Solitude, A Thousand Splendid Suns

Levels 1 and 2: A Hundred Years of Solitude, A Thousand Splendid Suns
Level 3: The Alchemist

Paul Gregoire
Dept. Chair, English
Summer Reading Coordinator
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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/08 12:33

What was the controversy with The Adventures of Tom Sawyer?

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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 12:58

I find this fascinating, especially because it's been going on for hundreds of years:

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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 13:12

Forgive the digression, but it might make sense in a moment. Also, back in the day when such classics as "Catcher in the Rye", sex education and evolution versus creation were hot topics, I had a very interesting (and feisty) 7th grade health teacher. She announced that we'd be doing a unit on sex education.

Her very first assignment was to give us a list of terms to define, which we took home. It wasn't until years later that I understood her motive. She knew we'd have trouble looking up and understanding these terms in a dictionary. She was attempting to force us to *ask*. Without us knowing it, she was attempting to force a dialog, in this town filled with many parents who had values not necessarily aligned with the public school teaching of sex education.

Contrast that with three years later, when my biology teacher announced, at the beginning of the year, that we'd be doing a unit on evolution and creation. Somehow, we never did get around to that unit during the school year.

A few years later, book banning and votes revoking National Honor Society membership.

Strange town, huh?

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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/08 14:28

Guy,

I'm sure there are many cases of teachers doing their own thing where it works out wonderfully and the townsfolk are none the wiser. There are also cases where it doesn't work out so wonderfully.

You seem to be implying that when a town demands accountability of a certain fashion of its teachers - its censorship. When the town - you and I - pay for the proverbial megaphones, its not censorship if we decide to police what is said over the megaphones. These problems don't occur in private schools because if you don't like what's going on in the school, you change schools. No matter how ill informed some residents of the town may be about certain topics (I have my own list of topics where the town is out to lunch), they have a right to complain about what is being taught in their schools when it goes against their values. And although a majority rules in most cases, I don't think its wise to antagonize a segment of the town by choosing these books and only these books for our (level 1 and 2) 11 graders.

Best wishes,
ahbgone

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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 15:20

Honestly, I don't think you should be trying to guess at what I am trying to say, or assigning a "straw man" argument to me ("you seem to be implying").

Please, and I am asking this in terms of intellectual honesty, ask any specific questions you like about how I feel or what I believe, or what I am trying to say, and I will be likely to give a polite, considered opinion. Until then, please suffice it to say that with everything I've heard, read, studied and discussed about censorship (going back maybe 35 years), I have strong opinions on the subject.

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Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/08 16:07

Guy,

Sorry if I offended you - I didn't intend to be intellectually dishonest in any way - Please accept my apologies. I was just trying to give my opinion and hint where it might be different from yours.

Please don't stifle your strong opinions on my account and correct me whenever I went wrong or you disagree.

I also have many years of experience in certain matters but, unfortunately, all I can honestly admit to is being old.

Best wishes,
ahbgone

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by sjgleed - 2008/08/08 16:10

I'm finding this topic thread very interesting, because I belong to a mother's book group that reads only novels written for young adults. The original intent of our group was to see just what types of books our kids were reading, but over the course of the past two years we've discovered some great literature.

As for the Morrison book, I'd never heard of it. I went to the Barnes & Noble website and read through a ton of comments posted there. They overwhelmingly praised the book. They did note the sexual content and the emotional upheaval they went through reading the book, and some readers felt that they may have understood it better if they had waited until they were a bit older to read it, but reader after reader claimed it was the best book they had ever read. Only one comment was posted that took major offense to the content.

Next, I went to the American Library Assoc. website and read the list of banned books. Much to my amazement, several books were listed that I have read, recently, without the slightest hesitation.

So I'm adding this new book to my "need to read" list. What's objectionable is in the eye of the beholder, or in this case, in the eye of the reader. I'll have to read it for myself.

I did ask my nearly sixteen year old daughter what she thought of this discussion. She told me she thought the adults are being naive if they think the material contained in the book would be new to the students. She rattled off enough movie titles, music titles and electronic games examples to clearly make her point.

Oh, by the way, the book "March" chosen by the Stevens Library for the adult town read this summer has mild sexual content too. But I'm finding it's a well-written, enjoyable read. I'm very pleased with their choice.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 16:37

Please accept this as sheer embarrassment -- in no way did I intend for what I wrote to be interpreted as accusing you of intellectual dishonesty. And I am certainly not offended. So, instead, please accept my apologies.

I've seen way too many discussions on this forum get sidetracked in terms of rhetoric, and I what I did in a most bumbling manner is to attempt to ask that we stick to specific questions and issues and answers, rather than digress into rhetoric. That's what I meant by "in terms of intellectual honesty", not that I felt you were lacking in such.

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by bill_call - 2008/08/08 16:43

Please. You can't get any closer to censorship than saying "that book cannot be read." What is this accountability, anyway? Do you want to have the teachers to be in stocks on the town common?

You are trying to assert the right not to have anything "against your values" taught. That is not a right. The legitimate question is teaching things of value. That is why evolution is taught and "intelligent design" is not. One theory has value, the other is a warmed-over pile of voo-doo. Clearly, Toni Morrison's work has value - it brings up important questions of identity, race, and power.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 16:48

Hi Sandy -- I'm curious -- this reading group. Is the intention to be informed about what your kids are reading, or is the intention to pre-screen, and perhaps control, what they are reading?

My opinion: I don't have a problem with either, in fact I think parents really should be informed what their kids are reading. But here is where it gets sticky -- I've heard of so many adults and adolescents that have been pulled into reading (and I would be first to admit that reading doesn't seem as popular with kids now as it did back in the day) because of J.K.Rowlings recent work. On the other hand, she's featured prominently on lists of banned books. Someone, somewhere, nameless and faceless, thinks it isn't appropriate for kids to read. Thanks, but I'll decide that for my own kids (and so far, one of them loves Harry Potter).

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/08 18:21

Thanks, but I'll decide that for my own kids ...

Well, that's the point. If you reserve the right to decide for your own kids, what do you do if they're forced by the school to read a book of which you strongly disapprove?

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by willkell1 - 2008/08/08 18:46

The summer reading list in my opinion is an excellent one. I recognize many of the books I read in High School and College. In my opinion we have an excellent English Department at the High School. I am confident that a thoughtful process occurred that lead to the list. The point of the list is to inspire learning and develop life long readers which we all agree is a good thing. I would not like to see a sanitized reading list but a list of books that stimulates thought and discussion just as this string has done. How do we recommend books for our teenagers? Do we shelter them from the darker side of the human experience that may be present in a fine novel. That is a slippery slope. If a parent feels that strongly that their child should not read a book then they can certainly bring that up to the Teacher. But I would want to make the call myself for my own child, and not have somebody else put their value system on it.

Excellent Discussion Here

Bill Kelly

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by sjgleed - 2008/08/08 19:27

Hi Guy,

Our book group was founded by a children's librarian here in town. We all had sons about the same age who hung out

together, all the moms and sons share a love of reading, and we wanted to have another fun thing to share with our children. Our kids think it's pretty cool that we read some things they've already read, some things they might want to read in the future, and some things that the sons have recommended to us.

As I look down the ALA list of challenged books, I see that three of the books we read are on the list: Bridge to Terabithia, The Giver, and A Wrinkle in Time. I found nothing objectionable in those books...some heartbreaking passages...some disturbing passages...but nothing I would condemn the books for.

I never censor what my children read. They know my values, hopefully they will always share my values, and I trust that they will choose wisely. There's never been a problem, in their books, their music, or in the movies and electronics they choose to watch.

I believe that by censoring, you make the censored material more attractive to the person you deny the access to.

What goes on in your own home is one thing, but books assigned for class reading are another. As Bill Kelly points out, the solution is simple: tell the teacher that you object to the book and request an alternative book for your child. I am sure that alternatives have already been considered.

One last comment - the list of challenged books is really quite astonishing. My son was a very early reader (was reading by his third birthday). For the first few years, he loved Roald Dahl books. James and the Giant Peach was a great adventure that we enjoyed reading together. It's a great book. It's on the list. What a shame if people were deprived of reading such books.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 19:32

Sorry, Michael, but I think you missed my point. I don't want *you* to decide what my kids should read. As far as English literature teachers go, I think they probably have reasons for picking the summer reading lists they do, with input from, say, a department head, a committee of teachers or maybe from reasoned sources (such as the ALA).

To be even more clear -- I think these three statements are distinct:

1. I don't think that book is appropriate for my children to read.
2. I don't think that book is appropriate for children to read.
3. (said to a school board) I don't think our children should be reading that book.

Only one of those statements I consider to be an attempt at censorship.

And, personally, if I had a problem with the contents of a summer reading list for my kids (and my wife just informed me that she's been reading pretty much every book our kids have been reading) I would take it up with the teacher, not the superintendent or the principal.

I would also want to be clear, and I don't think it is in this case, are these lists recommendations, suggestions or requirements? From the list on the HS website, I don't think it is clear. The VP is implying otherwise, by saying these books were assigned.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 20:05

Thanks, Sandy.

My mom wasn't a children's librarian, but one of the advantages I had as a kid was that I got first crack at Newberry award winners (and first crack at new books that came out that nobody -- nobody but librarians -- knew about yet).

I agree, I think the list is astonishing too. It makes one think "what problem did someone have with that book?" And that

is the problem...nameless, faceless people with some kind of covert or overt agenda.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Dawn Cres - 2008/08/08 20:56

This is one of those times when I am glad my kids are still in elem. school! I am able to guide them in their reading and movie choices. I still read many of the same books my kids read. I guess the struggle at the HS level is to actually find books teens will read. If I were the parent of an HS student and I objected to the book choices, I would approach the teacher. If no options could be offered by the HS staff, I would work my way up the chain of command til options could be provided. It all boils down to core family values. I want the right to censor what is read in my own home but I don't believe I have the right to censor what is read in someone else's home.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by willkell1 - 2008/08/08 20:57

To go back to when a parent objects to a book "recommended" to read for their child. These are recommendations by the English Department and are not "forced" ie, you will get a F unless you read what we want you to read. If there is an objection to a novel I am positive that after consultation with the Teacher a alternative novel can be read. Lets not forget that the English department recommends reading not based on whim and what is popular but on their curriculum standards and where their students need to be achievement wise.

Bill Kelly

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Dawn Cres - 2008/08/08 21:05

Excellent point about curriculum Bill. Thank you for clarification on the required vs. suggested. This issue is perhaps great preparation for what our kids will encounter when they head off to college and books are assigned...like it or not.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by willkell1 - 2008/08/08 21:05

Dawn,

Right on. When your kids get to the HS or the Middle school for that matter if you have an issue with a book recommended for one of your kids you go to the Teacher. If you hit a brick wall then you elevate the issue. In my experience I have not heard of a time when a Teacher did not accept the alternative or have one to recommend. My guess would be that most would enjoy the discussion with a concerned well read parent.

Bill Kelly

censorship

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/08 21:27

I want the right to censor what is read in my own home but I don't believe I have the right to censor what is read in someone else's home.

Hi Dawn:

It's not censorship in your own home!

From the ALA website:

What Is Censorship?

Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous. It is no more complicated than someone saying, “Don’t let anyone read this book, or buy that magazine, or view that film, because I object to it! ” Censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else. Censors pressure public institutions, like libraries, to suppress and remove from public access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds about it. The censor wants to prejudge materials for everyone.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/11 09:12

I think the last 5 or 6 posts confuse the issue.

From the summer reading list, can we all agree that all Level 1 and 2 11 grade students must read: A Hundred Years of Solitude, A Thousand Splendid Suns? Further these are the only books they are required to read.

Since this is the summer reading list, parents who don't like these books can't complain to the teacher - they're all off on vacation. The only person answering the phone over the summer, apparently, is the superintendent - so that is the person to complain to.

The Valley Patriot note implies that the superintendent sided with the teachers. It isn't clear how many parents are complaining and what was or wasn't said.

The issue, in my mind, is what happens when the public schools don't support your values. If its only a handful of families, I understand that the majority will rule. However, if its a non-trivial number of families - as might be the case here - what do you do? If your values are being supported by the schools, attempts to change the schools amounts to cries of censorship.

I don't think the suitable answer is to have one group of kids reading the bible while having another group of kids reading pornography (I'm exaggerating here). There's a middle ground and have we found it yet?

Best wishes,
ahbgone

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/11 09:44

I think there are several things confusing the issue, but it's not necessarily the last five or six posts (half of which are probably mine).

First of all, the "must read", "assigned", etc. is something that is assumed. The actual list doesn't say. We don't even know if this is considered a "suggested" list. We don't know. We don't even know if the teacher(s) involved will allow alternate selections.

(honestly, we also don't know about expectations placed upon level 1 and 2 readers -- from everything I've heard, most teachers are ecstatic if a student reads anything at all over a summer break -- and most reading lists are put together with the notion that there is some value in reading what is placed upon the list)

Secondly, who is complaining? Some unknown number of parents. Certainly the tone of the VP item is clear that the VP is complaining. But as far as parents go, we don't know who, or how many, or how they complained, or anything else. We don't know. Non-trivial? Based on what? We don't know. The VP might know, but the item didn't say. It just said "parents".

We also don't know about the contents of the books. Of course, we have the synopsis of what the VP says these two books contain, but there is no other mention of any other literary value at all. We only have one side of a story. There is some editorial bias built into what we have heard so far.

So, some unknown number of parents have allegedly complained to someone, and we have heard from the VP that the superintendent is backing teachers, but we don't even know what their motive is. If their motive is to control what is on a summer reading list, then if you ask me that's where we're getting into attempts at censorship. The "What is Censorship?" post I made should have made that clear. I think it is perfectly relevant to the discussion we're having.

Hidden in all of that is the other discussion you wish to have -- values. Others, like me, have said that yes, we reserve the right to retain our values. When it comes to summer reading lists, yes we reserve the right to monitor what our children are reading. But when I wish my values to control what your children might be reading, then we're getting into shady territory.

But all of this is moot, I think, if the posted summer reading list is merely a list of suggestions.

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/11 10:56

If the summer reading list is optional, our high school isn't as good as I expected. I have never heard of an optional summer reading list.

I don't see much room for common ground here so I guess we'll have to have a civil war or I'll move to Canada.

Best wishes,
ahbgone

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Melynda Renner - 2008/08/11 13:10

Bill Kelly says elsewhere that HS reading books are suggested but not required. My experience with my daughter who graduated this spring is that her summer books were all required. Perhaps that was because she was in the upper level courses all through her time at the high school; maybe the lower level English classes had book options, but her selections were required.

Last summer in particular, she did not care for the chosen books and hated 'Ahab's Wife.' Her summary was that the choices seemed to have been made with choosing depressing books as one of the main objectives. Perhaps that was just standard grouching, but it is unfortunate if there's any truth to it. My daughter loves to read, and has not been turned off reading because of last year's required books, but I did notice she disposed of 'Ahab's Wife' as soon as she could. Anyone seeing our family bookshelves would recognize how significant that was.

OK, perhaps 'Ahab's Wife' has some redeeming merit (I'm not in a position to know), but it is a valid question to ask why a particular book is chosen. All literature does some social engineering. 'A Tale of 2 Cities' promotes making noble choices and the possibility of redemption, in addition to telling a really good story. 'The Plague' examines the essential question of the meaning of life in the midst of tragedy, and any ensuing discussion must deal with the conflicting good of individual choice and social contract. Incidentally, neither of those books promotes my faith, but both promote serious civic virtues.

So, what social engineering do our current required--in our experience--books promote? If the books promote an agenda not supported by the town, then perhaps the teachers should chose different books. There are a lot to chose among. Or perhaps it would be good, from a community point of view, to have someone explain the unique value of a book that get lots of complaints. If no one can make an adequate case for a particular book, than why should it be required (or highly suggested) for a large segment of our youth?

That doesn't strike me as censorship. Shoot, the discussion will probably have a lot more folk reading the book to see what the fuss is about. But some books might not pass such a muster. Well, let the discussions begin. No social engineering agenda should be set that cannot withstand the scrutiny of the town.

(For the fun of it, I recommend the short story A Do by Connie Willis. I don't like all of her writings, and much prefer her earlier work, but some of it will certainly make the Classic Lists in the coming decades. A Do is about a conference determining how much editing a Shakespeare play needs before being covered in a class.)

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Melynda Renner - 2008/08/12 08:21

I've just gone back to the beginning of the thread, and have 2 additions:

I clearly misremembered Elinor's reading lists--she did Ahab's Wife not last summer but 2 summers ago. But yes, it was required then.

The 2 books listed for the year with The Bluest Eyes do look Required, as in "this is it" and NOT merely suggested for the level that they're listed. And since this isn't a particularly high level, it would require kids/parents who aren't coming in backed by tremendous previous success to now buck the system. And I'd just as soon 15 year olds (it is the summer BEFORE that school year so they'll be on the younger end of the spectrum) NOT be required to read about graphic rape and incest. These kids hormones are already raging. If you jump-start the hormones, how are you going to get them to settle down and THINK about anything. Graphic sex descriptions of even the most approved relations won't help the kids with thoughtful processing of any theme.

There are lots of other books available, either a good defense should be made of these specific books, or they shouldn't be on a list that most certainly looks required.

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Re: English Dept. Explanation of HS Reading List

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/13 13:37

I sent Paul Gregoire, (NAHS Dept. Chair, English), an email with the following questions on Monday. He sent a reply this morning. I have placed Paul's replies in italics below the questions.

Summary: 1) Books are required 2) Completing reading assignment impacts Fall grade 3) No book substitutions allowed

1. Are these books required reading for students in the various incoming grades and levels?

The books for summer reading are required reading and complement the existing curriculum so that the summer reading is not separate from what we do during the school year. It helps both students and teachers "hit the ground running" as soon as we return to school.

2. What happens if a student does not complete any Summer Reading? Are the journals graded? If so, do they impact the grade given for the English class in the Fall?

There is no separate grade for the journals/notebooks. When we return, students will pass in their notes. This will be followed by class discussions on the material. The last component is a summative writing assessment which will be graded. Any student who fails to do the required summer reading will be subject to a 5-point deficit from his term 1 grade.

3. If a parent objects to a particular title (for example, Junior Summer Reading: Levels 1 and 2: The Bluest Eye and The Perks of Being a Wallflower) but no other books are listed in order to substitute, how can substitutions be made? Should parents contact a teacher to agree on a book substitution? If so, how can contact be made?

There are no substitutions for titles. The department of English along with the school librarian, a total of 14 educators, chose these specific titles because they complement elements of the existing curriculum. Once students have completed their readings and their notes, these will be passed in. This will be followed by class discussions on the works so that students have had an opportunity to process, analyze and share information. Finally, there will be an in-class piece of writing as a summative assessment. If substitutions were allowed, students would not have the benefit of class discussions which defeats the purpose of the entire process. Please keep in mind that it is not the specific titles that are important. It is the process. Reading is only one facet of this process.

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Re: English Dept. Explanation of HS Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/13 15:02

Mike,

Thanks for tracking this down. I don't think there are any surprises in the answers from Mr. Gregoire. They have their curriculum and they're following it.

My comments - If you don't like the curriculum (e.g. new elementary science, elementary math, or the summer reading list), it won't do much good to go to the teachers (unless you really have an individualized situation). Although I'm sure the curriculum isn't a secret, I'm also sure they also don't go out of their way to publish it so residents can easily take a look at it (i.e. the less you know the less you'll complain).

Best wishes,
ahbgone

Re:Valley Patriot - High School Summer Reading Lis

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/13 15:12

http://www.northandover.org/option,com_fireboard/Itemid,253/func,view/catid,520/id,628/#628

1. Turns out you are 'forced' to read these books. (You won't get an 'F' for not doing Summer Reading but could lose half a letter grade for Fall term.)

2. No substitutions allowed. (Appeal to teacher is fantasy.)

See link for previous post on the actual methods used for the Summer Reading program.

Re: English Dept. Explanation of HS Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/13 15:16

Same here...thanks, Mike, for tracking this down. I find Mr. Gregoire's answers interesting, not only what he says, but what he doesn't say.

Re: English Dept. Explanation of HS Reading List

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/13 15:52

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/0601.pdf> Would allow attachment of .PDF files

I found a 2001 version of the Massachusetts ELA Framework.

There is such a breadth of recommended writers listed in the Framework and that these specific works were selected out of the entire canon makes one wonder why.

I cut and pasted the Framework's list of 'Contemporary' (i.e. Post-WWII) or 'World' below (see Appendix B on attachment). There is another list for pre-WWII American writers in Appendix A.

I assume the selections in question were focused on 'Contemporary' or 'World' writers. Toni Morrison is included as a 'Contemporary American' writer. The lists are considered as '... a starting point; they are necessarily incomplete, because excellent new writers appear every year.'

Contemporary American Literature

FICTION:

James Agee
Jamaica Kincaid
J. D. Salinger
Maya Angelou
Maxine Hong Kingston
William Saroyan
Saul Bellow
Jon Krakauer
May Sarton
Pearl Buck
Harper Lee
Jane Smiley
Raymond Carver
Bernard Malamud
Betty Smith
John Cheever
Carson McCullers
Wallace Stegner
Sandra Cisneros
Toni Morrison
Amy Tan
Arthur C. Clarke
Joyce Carol Oates
Anne Tyler
E. L. Doctorow
Tim O'Brien
John Updike
Louise Erdrich
Edwin O'Connor
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
Nicholas Gage
Cynthia Ozick
Alice Walker
Ernest K. Gaines
Chaim Potok
Robert Penn Warren
Alex Haley
Reynolds Price
Eudora Welty
Joseph Heller
Annie Proulx
Thomas Wolfe
William Hoffman
Ayn Rand
Tobias Wolff
John Irving
Richard Rodrigues
Anzia Yezierska
William Kennedy
Leo Rosten
Ken Kesey
Saki

Grades 9-12 Historical and Contemporary Literature

FICTION:

Chinua Achebe
Isak Dinesen
Alberto Moravia
S. Y. Agnon
E. M. Forster
Mordechi Richler

Ilse Aichinger
Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Alice Munro
Isabel Allende
Nikolai Gogol
Vladimir Nabokov
Jerzy Andrzejewski
William Golding
V. S. Naipaul
Margaret Atwood
Robert Graves
Alan Paton
Isaac Babel
Hermann Hesse
Cesar Pavese
James Berry
Wolfgang Hildesheimer
Santha Rama Rau
Heinrich Boll
Aldous Huxley
Rainer Maria Rilke
Jorge Luis Borges
Kazuo Ishiguro
Ignazio Silone
Mikhail Bulgakov
Yuri Kazakov
Isaac Bashevis Singer
Dino Buzzati
Milan Kundera
Alexander Solshenitsyn
S. Byatt
Stanislaw Lem
Niccolo Tucci
Italo Calvino
Primo Levi
Mario Vargas-Llosa
Karl Capek
Jacov Lind
Elie Wiesel
Carlo Cassola
Clarice Lispector
Emile Zola
Camillo Jose Cela
Naguib Mahfouz
Julio Cortazar
Thomas Mann

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Dawn Cres - 2008/08/13 15:54

Mike, again thanks for obtaining some factual info. It is refreshing that Mr. Gregoire replied and took a stand. I am concerned that he couldn't state why the particular books were chosen.

All I can say is Wow! As a parent I am disappointed and surprised that options are not allowed. I would think 2 book lists could be offered and kids could be placed in class based upon the books they read. However, this may be an ignorant statement since I have heard about HS scheduling issues at every SC mtg I have attended and I freely admit I do not have insight into the HS schedule.

I would suggest that the concerned parents who approached the VP with this topic, take their concerns to a school comm. meeting for an open discussion. While we all seem to agree that censorship is not something we approve of, I also don't think we should have book choices that do not align with our family values forced upon our kids.

This has been an interesting topic/discussion as I only have elem. age students.

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by sjgleed - 2008/08/18 19:48

Dear Readers,

First, I think this has been an enlightening topic thread, and I would like to thank Ahbegone for getting it started. I have now finished reading Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and my perspective has changed somewhat from when I first responded to the prior postings.

I do see this topic as having two aspects: is censorship of assigned readings in public school appropriate or desirable and are the books chosen for required reading both educationally valuable and appropriate for high school readers?

My answer to the first question: "Censorship", in the sense of choosing what books are offered on the summer reading list, is the responsibility of the English Department teachers, not unidentified "parents" who may or may not have read the books, who may or may not even have students in the school, and who may or may not have political or religious objections not necessarily shared by other families.

HOWEVER, with that responsibility comes the teachers' duty to select works of literature generally accepted as educationally pertinent and not so controversial that the beauty of the writing is overshadowed by crude language or situations included more for shock or entertainment value rather than as necessary literary devices. Teachers should be choosing books generally accepted by leading academia as prime examples of excellent literature, books the teachers themselves have read, and not books recommended by Oprah Winfrey or selected because "kids could relate to it". Furthermore, there must be a procedure in place for students and parents to discuss any concerns about required reading, BEFORE the assignment is due, not after-the-fact.

Was *The Bluest Eye* a good book, well-written, a prime example of the best literature available and pertinent to the grade level curriculum or even pertinent to other core classes? I have no idea if this book has any relevance to the curriculum, I thought it was an "ok", not a "great" book, and there were crude parts that could have been deleted with no negative effect on the narrative. By the way, the rape of the main character by her father was brief, at the end of the book, and a whole lot less graphic than other questionable descriptive paragraphs sprinkled throughout the book.

I checked through the reading lists for comparable communities to North Andover, and this same book is included on many town lists, including Andover's summer reading list. Andover's reading list is extensive – very extensive – and I would look to our NAHS teaching staff to expand our summer reading list to resemble Andover's list.

One other point I'd like to make – I'm now very concerned that many, many people posted comments on the Barnes & Noble website stating that *The Bluest Eye* was the best book they had ever read. That now tells me that these people aren't reading nearly enough truly good books. For instance, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, deals with some of the same issues as *The Bluest Eye*, but with far better writing; Kidd doesn't need to include objectionable material to develop her story.

High School required reading is supposed to expose students to fine, classic writing in a wide range of genres they might not typically choose for themselves. Required reading is supposed to inspire a love of literature and set the bar against which students can judge the books they read for the rest of their lives. I really hope that a book like *The Bluest Eye* is not the standard that today's youth - or their teachers - are using as an example of fine writing...

By the way, my daughter does not attend North Andover High School. Her summer reading list for entering her sophomore year at another local high school includes *Catcher in the Rye*, *Jane Eyre* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So I'm not affected by North Andover High School's required summer reading...but I do have a middle school child for whom I'll keep a sharper eye out for in future years as he brings home his own reading assignments.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by ahbgone - 2008/08/19 10:44

Sandy,

My position was that the English department showed poor judgment in selecting these two books only these two books (for a certain segment of the HS population) since it was obvious to me that a non-trivial portion of the town find the books offensive (so why purposely offend people when other options are available).

Now that you've read one of the books, can you provide any clues to why our English Teachers would choose "The Bluest Eye"?

Best wishes,
ahbgone

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Re:Valley Patriot - Andover HS Summer Reading List

Posted by MikeQuinlan - 2008/08/19 11:10

<http://www.aps1.net/AHS/Mediacenter/2008HighSchoolSummerReading.pdf>

Above is a link to the Summer Reading List at Andover High School that was referenced by Sandy. The list is much more extensive than North Andover's list and, most helpfully, includes a brief synopsis of each book. This would make it easier to choose which book to read.

I could not find how the books are assigned per class or what students are expected to do with the Andover Summer Reading List on the AHS website.

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by sigleed - 2008/08/19 12:54

Dear Ahbegone,

I have always loved to read, and as I've grown older and busier and my free time has dwindled, I have chosen only books of high interest to me, rather than books highly popular or books held out as award winners. So my typical reading selections are historical novels and gardening journals, I'm working on reading some of the classics that my own schools never assigned, and there's a sprinkling of young adult novels from my book group and an occasional recommendation from my daughter. So I'm no authority on what criteria the English teachers use to select required reading...but I'll give it a go and hope that the department head is reading this thread and may be moved to offer the actual answer.

I'm guessing that teachers may have been attracted to the following attributes that I, myself, appreciated in *The Bluest Eye*: it tells the story from different characters' viewpoints, it is well-written from a mechanical standpoint, it deals with social issues such as race, poverty and contrasts between the black and white experience, it deals with psychological issues such as how someone perceives themselves and their role within the greater society, and it deals with motivation/power struggles. It's also possible that the story ties in with history curriculum if they study the history of civil rights, but I have no idea if that is so.

Quite frankly, I have never heard of anyone, ever, questioning the required reading lists (even when I was in school – I went to Stoneham High, and at the time, it had an excellent school system). So this time, I'm very interested to see if this discussion thread has any impact on the future reading requirements at North Andover High School. I'm wondering if any parent – especially whoever took their concerns to the Valley Patriot – will care enough to attend this evening's School Committee meeting, 7pm in the NAHS lecture hall and bring up the subject during the Public Comment period. Seems to me that someone affected and offended by the book selection ought to bring the subject up for discussion...not rely on an anonymous reference in a small local newspaper to do the job for them...

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

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Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/19 13:42

I've heard of it, and seen it...not only the example I gave from my home town, also in a city just south of where I grew up where a "non-trivial" number of people, all members of the John Birch Society, along with a sympathetic prosecutor (and later judge), managed to dictate to the community what is and what isn't offensive. Their reach extended to bookstores, newsstands, movie theaters, broadcasters, private businesses, art museums and on to my college campus.

Does anyone, by any chance, remember an episode of "WKRP in Cincinnati" where a Jerry Falwell-like character shows up at the station to "suggest" they change their programming? That was based on fact.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by bill_call - 2008/08/20 10:15

I wasn't able to stay until the public comment period, did anyone talk to this? Sandy, I would also appreciate it if you could post a brief summary of the meeting - I was there from 7:45 to 8:45 and missed the Thomson school portion as well.

The meeting was being taped so we should be able to watch it on CATV.

Re:Vally Patriot - High School Summer Reading List

Posted by Guy - 2008/08/20 12:44

I was there, and I think the E-T summarizes the AYP issue fairly well:

http://www.eagletribune.com/punews/local_story_233095835.html

The summer reading list issue wasn't addressed at all.
