

Beach Books in Practice: The View from My Island

At California State University, Northridge, the Freshman Common Reading selection committee is midway through the process of choosing our ninth book. We'll announce the winning title in early January 2015, and I'll spend the following several months on programming that targets faculty and staff who will be working with the fall 2015 incoming freshman class.

If you have not participated in a program of this kind, you might think that the process is simple and straightforward: one picks the best book possible--preferably a complex and thought-provoking literary classic, or a challenging and compelling work of non-fiction. That view is partially right: the best book possible is the goal. But in practice, one must choose a work in context and under a set of local circumstances.

I'm an English professor. My dissertation examined the role of literary allusions in selected novels of Henry James. But a work by Henry James would be a poor choice indeed for the freshman common reading program at our campus. Allow me to explain why.

To begin with, the Common Reading selection is not required reading for our incoming freshman class (well over 5000 new students). We begin registering freshmen for their fall classes in early April, a time when their thoughts are focused firmly on senior prom. They haven't yet decided what summer job to seek to help them pay for college; they are hoping that they will magically be exempt from the math and writing courses in our state-wide Mandatory Early Start program (which most of them are required by Board of Trustees policy to complete during the summer). For our students, summer reading is not the much-anticipated leisure-time luxury that delights most faculty members. Reading is something assigned, something that looms and punishes. To suggest that students read what one of my own colleagues called "an improving book" not of their own choosing during the summer because it is good for them is not very different from removing high-fat pizza and sugary drinks from the high school cafeteria because these things are bad for them. On both counts the adults are correct—but students go right on not reading while drinking sodas and eating burgers and pizzas as though we had never spoken. Students, in short, resist reading.

Of course, students resist a lot of the things we want them to do. College math comes to mind. But college math, and for that matter high school math, have a big advantage over summer reading: they occur during school. They are social in nature; they are part of the curriculum; and faculty guide (or coach or cajole or threaten) students to completion and occasional mastery. In the summer, students are free. Their time is their own.

But, you might ask, can't colleges institute assignments targeting the summer reading? How about a quiz, discussion groups, a bit of writing due when students arrive for move-in?

If we were a small (or even smallish) residential college, that would be a very reasonable plan. But we're a large urban university. About 5 percent of our students live on campus; the rest live elsewhere, and they start their semester with their first class—not with a week-long orientation program. Furthermore, with more than 5000 of them, it's not clear who would be reading or evaluating the quiz or written work—or leading small-group discussions. That would require time and money we don't have.

If you work with 18 year-olds or have even a cursory acquaintance with Student Affairs or student development theory, you probably know all about the zone of proximal development, and you may skip immediately to the next paragraph. For the rest of you: our freshmen are teenagers. They are finally beginning to learn how to control their impulses and manage their time. They are not yet reliably able to read an assigned text on their own just because it's the right thing to do. They're ready to start learning how to do the right thing—but if you build a common reading program and simply expect that they'll rise to the occasion, you will find yourself in deep trouble.

Then, of course, we have our faculty. I am an outspoken defender of academic freedom. Even if I had the authority to require faculty to adopt the freshman common reading as a text in their classes, I wouldn't do it. Instead, I pitch each year's book as hard as I can, offering faculty discussion groups, sample assignments, suggested topics, lists of discussion questions, and so on. Faculty on and off the selection committee have told me privately that this or that nominated title was a wonderful book, but would require unbearably steep uphill teaching just to get freshmen to grapple with the vocabulary.

It's obvious that no book will please everyone on campus. I hope that my discussion here, however, has offered enough context to explain some of the factors that affect our selection process at my campus (and I think at many others).

The English professor in me secretly wants to choose a slim volume of fine poetry for our next Common Reading title. Though I work with a thirty-member selection committee comprising students, faculty, and staff, I can be quite persuasive, and I just might carry the day. But I've learned over the years to defer to the wisdom of the committee, which has been a remarkably successful strategy. Besides, we now vote via secret ballot, so I've lost even the inadvertent pressure that I used to exert without realizing it when I could see who was voting for which book.

The fact is that we are not just choosing a book; we are constructing a community of readers and a program of events. The author's visit adds star power—and while I

didn't need to get autographs from James Joyce and Charles Dickens to become a devotee of their works when I was in college, if I could have, I certainly would have.

The bottom line is that the hard-working faculty and staff who run freshman common reading programs never intended to be arbiters or guardians of high culture. Most of us have instead hoped to draw new students into a community of readers by offering books that required just enough work--but not too much--for what in most cases is spare time reading, not assigned reading attached to graded essays or exams. Sure, we could have picked *The Iliad* or *Daisy Miller* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And some of our entering freshmen might even have completed reading one of those books successfully over the summer. But students capable of reading—really reading—most of the impressive titles on the [recommended list of NAS Beach Books](#) don't need to be invited to join the community of readers. They already live there, and likely always will.

Faculty who aim to reach students like themselves could certainly do worse than follow the advice NAS offers. But those of us who want to reach the far broader collection of students who are *not* likely to pursue PhDs will continue to follow our different routes.

Though the 2014 edition of the NAS Beach Books report is still under wraps as I write (and I haven't read it), I'm told that it will suggest there is an alliance between publishers, authors, and college common reading programs that aims to advance a particular kind of book. Such an alliance seems highly unlikely, particularly considering that the aims of the three parties to it would be at odds with one another. Publishers want to make money. Authors want their own books to succeed. College common reading programs want to select books that their freshmen will read and engage with. Some authors, of course, do set out to write for their readers. (Dickens certainly did that, and was spectacularly successful.) But there are many kinds of readers, and college freshmen, while visible, are hardly the largest group. Nor are college freshmen a homogeneous group: they are at least as different as the colleges they attend. There is no alliance. There are market forces, and laws of supply and demand; and there is the sensible notion that if a book worked remarkably well at one college last year or the year before, it might work well at one's own college this year or next. But there is no cabal of nefarious players aiming to restrict the list of available books to a narrower, shallower few.

Freshman Common Reading programs perform admirable work: they persuade reluctant readers to read; they advance literacy as a public and private good; and they educate students to understand that books can have profound influences beyond the confines of their covers. For evidence of this last, you have only to look at the faculty/staff resource pages I've assembled for each of the books at Cal State Northridge. Here, for instance, is the page for last year's *Garbology*: <http://www.csun.edu/afye/Garbology-for-Faculty-and-Staff.html> It's not selling anything; it doesn't pander; it's not designed to within an inch of its life by a web marketing specialist. But I think the page is very clear about showing how the book

we picked is a matter for serious intellectual and artistic consideration. That, of course, is just a webpage at my own campus. Go out and Google for others; you'll find many that are astonishingly rich and—dare I say it?—scholarly in their approach to the books they celebrate.

Freshman Common Reading programs are not fiendish plots devised by liberals and/or anti-intellectuals to bamboozle the public or warp young minds. Rather, they are energetic, creative, and successful programs meant to demonstrate, persuade, and inspire people to see books as the centerpiece of college intellectual life. See for instance our invitation to this year's freshman class at <http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/common-read>. I invite the membership of NAS to ally itself with what we do. I have met the enemy, and he is not us.