

# Classics Are Returning to the Classroom

By NANCY OSTBERG

**EDITORS NOTE:** The following story was written for the Depth Reporting class offered by the School of Journalism. Nancy Ostberg, a recent graduate of the School of Journalism, has tried to find answers for the parents who have been wondering why Junior isn't reading some of the old classics they remember. Her story tells of the fascinating developments in the classic field.

Two janitors open the door of a darkened classroom and wheel a television set to the front of the room. Their footsteps and the sound of the carrier echo down the tiled corridor of the one-story elementary building.

In another section of town, a 10th grade youth on his way to a baseball game tucks a paperback novel into his hip pocket and rushes out to yell, "Batter up!"

Despite flu, domestic demands, and the pressure of a deadline, two teachers pool their resources to develop a series of lectures on literature in depth. Meanwhile, they do not take time out from their regular duties in teaching 11th grade English in an Omaha public school.

These seemingly unrelated events find their meaning in a debate that has been torturing the parental conscience since the evolution of progressive education.

Whether the setting is the informal atmosphere of a cocktail party, the business-like formality of a PTA meeting, or the political harangue of a California election, Mama and Papa have been wondering why Johnny doesn't read the classics that they read when they were in school.

#### New Hope

To these frank and sincere questions, educators are now giving new hope.

Between arguments that classical literature is fossilized and that modern literature is trash, observers point out that there have emerged new concepts in the teaching of English.

Much of the story that

follows has been drawn from Nebraska and Lincoln by way of example, but educators point out that nationwide trends are being established by such leading states as Oregon, Kentucky, Ohio, Georgia, Arkansas, South Dakota, Wisconsin and others.

Remember the two janitors? Would you suspect that the television set they were moving was also bringing culture to the classroom?

During recent years parents and educators have been afraid of what television might be doing to their children. As for the youngsters, the pleasure which they have gained from watching television at home has been transferred to the classroom.

Classroom television is not new, but this is the first year in Nebraska schools that literature for the elementary grades has been included in its offerings. The programs are beamed at the second grade level, but many first and third grade classes also watch.

As their eyes become accustomed to the darkness, the magic of the story teller weaves its spell. On the screen appear not only the Ugly Duckling of Hans Christian Andersen fame, but also the story of Marco and the wonderful things that he saw on Mulberry Street. The latter is a more recent "classic" by Theodore Geisel—also known as Dr. Seuss.

"More and better contemporary literature is making it possible to strike a balance between classic and contemporary literature in the classroom," says Dr. Mary Mielenz, professor of secondary education at the University of Nebraska and a director of the student teaching program.

"Television enables the

children to visualize stories from literature in a very special way," says Delores Dudley, a young Lincoln housewife, now also a television teacher and graduate student. Mrs. Dudley is the female partner of the husband and wife team which is producing the children's literature programs through the facilities of KUON-TV in Lincoln.

Mrs. Dudley, who generates enthusiasm whether she is telling a story to her television audience or sitting for an interview between takes, selects the stories of her script from an approved list of ratings.

"Children this age love animal, seasonal and holiday stories, and this is the kind of program that can supplement the work which teachers themselves are already doing," she said.

Husband Robert, a staff director of KUON-TV, directs the literature programs "because he knows my timing." The Dudleys, who have both had previous television experience, say the teamwork "has worked out fine."

#### TV Council

The Nebraska Council for Educational Television is sponsoring the programs.

Is this an isolated example of classics in the classroom? Perhaps it is at present because the facilities of KUON-TV are limited to the Lincoln area. But a bit of recent history may provide the key to the future.

Within recent months five new exclusive educational television channels have been approved for Nebraska by the Federal Communications Commission, and discussion is currently under way on the establishment of regional education television network facilities.

During its current session the Nebraska Legislature is also slated to study pro-

posals that would greatly enlarge the state's educational television program.

Televised literature, however, is designed to supplement rather than take the place of written literature in the grade schools.

Miss Edith Pembroke, coordinator of reading for the Lincoln public schools, noted that while Greco-Roman classics have seldom been included in the elementary books, the American heritage of literature has always been included.

"We are adding to and emphasizing the American heritage," she said.

Colorful library books and supplementary readers cross over into the classics. They may lose a little in the process of simplification, but the plot is still the same, says Miss Pembroke.

What sixth grader—or high school student for that matter—wouldn't find the adventures of Beowulf enjoyable if they were printed in large type and accompanied by drawings of dragons and castles. Beowulf, Paul Bunyan and Feboild Feboildson, the latter by Paul Beath of Gothenburg, Nebraska, can all be found in a typical sixth grade reader.

In the lower elementary grades you will still find "The Three Bears," "Jack and the Bean Stalk," and other favorites such as "Cinderella."

The budding love affair with books does not end with reading. Elementary teachers also employ such delightful snares as simple dramatization, drawing pictures to illustrate the story, oral entertainment and modeling in clay.

Critical evaluation is a key concept. For Johnny it means developing a sense of observation by recording which books he is reading and how well he likes them. For the curriculum planners

it means checking every book that is ordered with up-to-date listings of basic book collections.

To the latter Miss Pembroke gives much of the credit for the increased emphasis on quality literature, adding that "with the avalanche of books that are now available, it is necessary to have a quick and authoritative means of selection."

Older students are being led to the classics by still another lure. This time the bait comes in a tiny 6" x 4" package with a colorful cover.

Until recent years the contents of such a package would almost surely have been one of three categories: lurid sex, grotesque mystery or shoot-'em-up western. But by 1959 the "quality paperback" had begun to penetrate the educational market.

Remember the baseball player with the paperback novel in his hip pocket? Few library books could compete with that rough treatment. Nor could the library book be so inconspicuous as to avoid cries of "bookworm!" and "teacher's pet!"

What's more, teachers who assign paperback classics are finding that students like to own the books they study. Not only is it an inexpensive way to build a home library, but the child is no longer penalized for daring to mark up the book.

Although recent historians point out that the paperback book was published as early as pre-Civil War days, it took two events of the past quarter-century to put the paperback classics

into the supermarkets and bookstores.

But while the quality had improved, the image had not. As late as 1960 the New York Herald Tribune, in an article by education editor Terry Ferrer, noted that "the paperback revolution has not yet had a major impact on the American textbook field."

"Teachers who instruct with paperbacks are enthusiastic about the relatively low price, the appeal to youngsters and the potential for bringing culture into the school."

"But more numerous are those who are unaware of the number of paperback titles available and those who still believe paperback books are lurid and trashy with objectionable covers," Ferrer wrote.

But by March, 1962, the trend had become more positive and the American Book Publishers Council meeting in Michigan was able to report:

"That they were now experiencing an orderly expansion of paperback sales to schools;

"That educators on both the secondary and college level were reporting an increased classroom use of paperbacks;

"That school libraries were starting to incorporate paperbacks into their offerings;

"That nonfiction and serious paperbacks were increasing in number while third-rate mysteries, westerns and romances were decreasing; and

"That more than 1,000 high schools from Buffalo to Los Angeles were sponsoring in-school paperback

stores for the benefit of student readers.

A number of national educators were reached by telephone in connection with recent developments on the return of classics to the classroom. Among them was Dr. Alexander Frazier, director of the Center for School Experimentation at Ohio State University, who noted that many Ohio schools are developing their entire curriculum around paperback books.

In the junior high school program in Lincoln, Nebraska, teachers are given the option of supplementing the traditional anthology of literature with a paperback novel of their choice from a select list of titles. Included are such works as "The Red Badge of Courage" and "Huckleberry Finn."

"Each teacher knows which novel she can teach the best and which will be the most appropriate for her particular class," explains Dale Rathe, the junior high school coordinator for the Lincoln schools.

Rathe reports that teachers as well as students are enthusiastic about reading the novel in its entirety with at least one of his teachers being greeted by the exclamation, "We're going to learn something new this year!"

Rathe attributes students' interest in the classics largely to one factor: students know they are reading works that other persons are reading and discussing, have been reading and discussing, and will continue to read and discuss.

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