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ARTS & LIFE

Out with the old

Schools replace classics on reading lists to interest kids

James F. Sweeney | *Plain Dealer Reporter*

Dickens, Twain, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Shakespeare.

Anyone who went through high school from the 1950s through the 1980s is likely familiar with at least some works by the above authors.

Now try these names:

Konigsburg, Johnson, Kadohata, Stolz, Oppel. Don't recognize them? They're authors of books on the recommended reading list for Cleveland public high school students, a list without Faulkner, Steinbeck or any other literary giants.

The books on Cleveland schools' list are, for the most part, award-winning works written specifically for teenagers.

Across the country, high schools are replacing standards such as "A Tale of Two Cities" and "The Great Gatsby" with works by lesser-known authors. The goal is to encourage students to read, something teachers and administrators say is increasingly difficult.

"It's a huge trend right now," said Suzanne Forman, a high school English teacher in Missouri on leave with a consulting firm that works with school districts to improve their literacy programs. "They will read [contemporary books]. Kids just aren't going to relate to Dickens."

Teenagers aren't reading, and educators are worried. The percentage of 17-year-olds who said they never or hardly ever read for fun was 19 percent in 2004, up from 9 percent 20 years earlier, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Books compete with video games, television and movies for students' attention. A study this year by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found third-to-12th graders spent almost four hours a day watching television and DVDs compared with 43 minutes of reading.

"To get students interested in reading, it's necessary to give them a hook," said Rebecca Lowry, chief academics officer for the Cleveland district.

That's why the district has on its list "Bucking the Sarge," about a 14-year old's rebellion against his mother, and "So B. It," about a girl coping with her mentally disabled mother.

Some Districts mine best-seller lists for material. "The Red Tent," "The Kite Runner" and "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," all written for grown-ups, have made their way onto lists.

Mary Campbell Gallagher, a New York-based author of articles on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, said a background in the classics is essential to making sure graduates become "part of the great conversation" of culture and ideas.

There is nothing wrong with reading lighter works as long as they're followed by the classics, she said. But that seldom happens.

She sees hope in the recent addition of a writing section to the SAT. Teachers will have to assign students more and better literature if they are to do well on the test, she said.

"What they read is going to have to be more challenging than the high school equivalent of Dick and Jane," she said.

A good teacher is necessary for

students to get the most out of any work, educators said. Putting a story into historical and cultural context and translating old-fashioned language into modern usage can make even Herman Melville seem relevant.

Some districts pair classics books with their film adaptations to help students.

A random sampling of Greater Cleveland high schools found wide discrepancies in what students are reading.

Hawken, a private prep school in Gates Mills, has the most challenging reading list of the schools surveyed. Ninth-graders read Homer, Thucydides, Confucius, Sophocles and Shakespeare. Upperclassmen follow with Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Truman Capote, Dickens, more Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Thoreau and Toni Morrison. Literature can be a mirror, reflecting readers back to themselves or a window into other worlds and cultures, said Steve Weiskopf, chairman of Hawken's English Department. The school relies on the classics to be a window.

"We want the kids to understand the fundamental roots of culture around the world and think beyond themselves a little bit," he said.

Some districts have largely resisted the trend toward contemporary works. Students at Mentor and Magnificat high schools might be able to borrow copies of "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Jane Eyre" from their parents for required reading.

A working knowledge of the standards is necessary to understand later works that reference them,

said Judy Zaczkowski, Mentor's curriculum director.

"Even though we're reading the classics, we're still connecting kids with real life," said Colleen Neville, chairwoman of Magnificat's English department.

The classics are classics for a reason, said Scott Quade, chairman of the English department at Medina High School.

"Would we study art without looking at Van Gogh? Would we study music without listening to Mozart?" he wrote in an email.

Shaw High School in East Cleveland, which is virtually all black, emphasizes works by black authors. Eighteen of 38 books on the regular reading list and 11 of the 16 on the summer list are by black authors, including Maya Angelou, August Wilson and Richard Wright. The rest are standards by Shakespeare, Fitzgerald and Dickens.

"We think it's very important for African-American students to be introduced to these [works]," said Cheryl King, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, "It's portraying someone who looks like them."

The reading list at Cleveland Heights High School is a mix of old and new, including a selection of works by contemporary black authors in addition to the standards.

"Those titles have to live in our schools so kids don't just see classics as written by dead white men," said Helen Hirsch, district literacy coordinator. "We have to realize there could be a new classic that wasn't a classic [before]."