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Barbarians in the Ivory Tower: American Writing Lives

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Wednesday, August 31st, 2011

Joseph Epstein's recent essay "What Killed American Lit." in the Wall Street Journal purports to be a review of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, but Epstein turns it into his soapbox and begins with a false premise – that American literature is dead and no one wants to read it anymore. I am a former English major and current professor of literature (among other subjects). My students have shown deep interest in reading novels – and even poetry. They love exploring works that speak to them, their experiences, their lives. Of course, literature can be taught badly. It is the responsibility of professors (and English teachers outside of college) to instill a love of reading in students. I was very fortunate – I had some wonderful English teachers and professors. I also had some very bad ones who made reading a chore and who did not help me to understand why I was reading certain books. I had one professor who announced on the first day of class that his syllabus did not contain works by women or people of color because "none of them ever wrote anything worth reading." We then spent a month reading Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*. This professor did two things: 1) lied about the merit of certain works by women and people of color; and 2) made me so angry that 20 years later I still hate Herman Melville.

Epstein also claims that "In today's university, no one is any longer in a position to say which books are or aren't fit to teach; no one any longer has the authority to decide what is the best in American writing." Professors make these decisions this all the time whenever we design a syllabus for a literature course. Each of us weighs the pros and cons of a variety of texts, how they work together, what they tell us about ourselves (our past, our world), and their literary "merit" (such as use of language and metaphor). To suggest that there are no viable criteria for selecting books to teach is simply untrue. Each professor may choose certain books for different, and multiple, reasons. We may not agree with our colleagues across the hall or across the country about which books should be taught and why. But we do make conscious decisions about our syllabi – what to include as required readings, what gets listed as recommended, what is left off entirely. We are also highly educated and have been taught the breadth of US literature. We don't just pick the first 5 books to pop up in a Google search. And I don't think anyone is suggesting that the Twilight series is of equal literary merit as Faulkner, O'Connor or Cather.

The most offensive part of Epstein's article is the not-so-veiled assertion that the literature being produced by marginalized groups (women, racial/ethnic minorities, disabled people) might not be "real" literature. Epstein says: "With the gates once carefully guarded by the centurions of high culture now flung open, the barbarians flooded in, and it is they who are running the joint today."

The author, in my opinion, is clearly uncomfortable with the fact that "US literature" includes

works by these “barbarians” — that the “barbarians” might actually have something worthwhile to say and are able to say it in “high art” fashion. Yes, they have crashed through the gates (as writers, critics and professors) – and we are all the better for it. In the end, while Epstein claims to see value in providing “context” for literature, he seems to stop at allowing that context might include things like race, class, gender or sexual orientation. To him, this is multiculturalism gone mad, where an “equivalence of value to the works of all cultures, irrespective of the quality of those works, finished off the distinction between high and low culture, a distinction whose linchpin was seriousness.” Ridiculous. Consider Nobel Prize winning “barbarian” Toni Morrison – would Epstein (and others like him) actually suggest that she has nothing to offer English students, that she creates “low” art or is without “seriousness”?

Epstein is right to critique *The Cambridge History of the American Novel.* The essays are so full of jargon that they aren’t really saying anything to anyone (except fellow academics). But this is not a problem with English as a field of study — it is a problem with academia generally. Try to read a journal in the physical or biological sciences. You will quickly realize that jargon is not exclusive to English departments. All academics are trained to use language that normal people do not use. We also have to use this language in order to prove our academic chops and be published in academic settings (such as *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*). I wish this would change. Imagine if students could actually understand what literary critics write, and then understand why people like me became literature professors and scholars in the first place.

This is the real problem with English departments and English as a discipline: We have failed to transmit the passion, the beauty, the magic of language to our students. We are the true barbarians.

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