

NINTH GRADE READING LISTS: 1922 VS. TODAY

by Annie Holmquist, *Intellectual Takeout*

2015–16 SAN ANTONIO HIGH SCHOOLS		1922 TEXAS HIGH SCHOOLS	
Book	Reading Level	Book	Reading Level
<i>The House on Mango Street</i> , Cisneros	4.5	<i>Captains Courageous</i> , Kipling	8.0
<i>Artemis Fowl</i> , Colfer	5.0	<i>Silar Marner</i> , Eliot	9.7
<i>The Chocolate War</i> , Cormier	5.4	<i>The House of the Seven Gables</i> , Hawthorne	11.0
<i>Freak the Mighty</i> , Philbrick	5.5	<i>The Deerslayer</i> , Cooper	11.2
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , Lee	5.6	<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> , Cooper	12.0
<i>Beloved</i> , Morrison	6.0	<i>Ivanhoe</i> , Scott	12.9
<i>Harry Potter Series</i> , Rowling	6.7 (Average)		

Having recently dug up a curriculum manual¹ for Texas high schools from 1922, I decided to explore this question (i.e., “Is it possible that falling scores [in NAEP Reading] are the result of diminished rigor in the high school curriculum?”) by comparing its ninth grade reading recommendations with those the San Antonio Independent School District recommended for the 2015–16 school year.²

Both syllabi included recommendations for poetry, fiction, short stories, drama, and non-fiction. Both syllabi implied that the books on the lists were simply suggestions, which might not necessarily be used in their entirety.

To give an idea of the difference between the two, I plugged the fiction titles from both lists into a text analyzer³ which measures reading difficulty. The results? Reading material in today’s freshman literature classes

measures around a fifth-grade level. In 1922, however, freshman literature fare often measured at an eleventh or twelfth grade level.

When we see how the difficulty of reading material has declined in the last one hundred years, is it any wonder that high school reading scores have been trending downward over time?

Notes:

1. Texas High Schools Course of Study, The Department of Education, State of Texas, July, 1922. From the National Archives, accessed online at <https://archive.org/stream/texashighschools01texa#page/n1/mode/2up>.

2. San Antonio ISD Curriculum Resources, High School English Curriculum, 2015–16 School Year. Accessed online at https://www.saisd.net/admin/curric/curricms/curriculum/high_school/hs_english_curriculum.html.

3. AR BookFinder. See <http://www.arbookfind.com/UserType.aspx>.

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