

Read Any Great Books Lately?

by Margaret St. Jean, Oak Hill Christian School

80-year-old biologist E.O. Wilson has just published his first novel, *Anthill*,¹ the most recent development in a long career. Though Wilson has won the Pulitzer Prize for his non-fiction articles on the life of the ant, he felt it was important to use fiction as a vehicle for scientific information. Why, after a lifetime of serious science and writing about it factually, would Wilson waste his time on a novel? "People will pick up a non-fiction article and put it down after a little while. But if you can get them interested in a good story, you've got them 'til the end," said Wilson in a recent interview with Diane Rehm on her popular NPR talk show.

Great stories have the power to get our attention and hold it like no other medium. At Oak Hill, we retain a focus that other schools have sacrificed: through the Omnibus curriculum our students still read whole books, from start to finish. No anthologies, no excerpts. The power of a good story to educate while entertaining can move students to discover worlds they have not dreamt of. And, unlike the storytelling power of video, the mind is the stage on which the story unfolds. The student's imagination is essential to the process of storytelling, and it is also possible for students to learn to write by imitating the author they are reading.

Earlier this year, my middle school Omnibus class read Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Though this is hefty reading for this age group, I was delighted with all they learned. In addition to learning

about Dickens himself and the French Revolution, they added to their writing skills. The boys and girls imitated Dickens' "larger than life" style (maximalism) by writing a paragraph of pure, and purely exaggerated, description. They also practiced the art of writing parallelisms in imitation of that famous, and famously lengthy, opening sentence, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ." More than any textbook, the memorable *Tale* has added to the stock of the children's imagination, knowledge, and skill.

Concern is developing that the precocious specialization of American education is actually preventing all students, including the most capable and talented, from being able to think across disciplines. There is some evidence that narrowing to a specific field too early is keeping students from developing mature thought, especially concerning the implications of decision making in their intended field of endeavor.

In a *Washington Post* article² dated Sunday, January 23, 2011, Heather Wilson, former representative of New Mexico in the U.S. House, Air Force Academy graduate and Rhodes scholar, writes about her experience interviewing undergraduates who are Rhodes scholar candidates:

Our great universities seem to have redefined what it means to be an exceptional student. They are producing top students who have given very little thought to matters beyond their impressive grasp

of an intense area of study.

This narrowing has resulted in a curiously unprepared and superficial pre-professionalism.

Perhaps our universities have yielded to the pressure of parents who pay high tuition and expect students, above all else, to be prepared for the jobs they will try to secure after graduation. As a parent of two teenagers I can understand that expectation

I detect no lack of seriousness or ambition in these students. They believe they are exceptionally well educated. They have jumped expertly through every hoop put in front of them to be the top of their classes in our country's best universities, and they have been lavishly praised for doing so. They seem so surprised when asked simple direct questions that they have never considered.

We are blessed to live in a country that values education. Many of our young people spend four years getting very expensive college degrees. But our universities fail them and the nation if they continue to graduate students with expertise in biochemistry, mathematics or history without teaching them to think about what problems are important and why.

Above all, at Oak Hill students are being taught "to think about what problems are important and why" by engaging their minds with some of the best books ever written. My favorite moment with each class is the day we start a new book. Everyone is delighted to dive in. The classroom is filled with kids

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silently and eagerly absorbed in great ideas expressed in prose and poetry crafted by great writers. Perhaps their college educations will not be in the liberal arts; perhaps they will major in a career-specific discipline. But at least for twelve years they lived with the great stories, and had the luxury of time to think broadly and deeply about them.

NOTES

1. Learn more about ants here:
<http://www.amazon.com/Anthill-Novel-Edward-Wilson/dp/0393071197>.

2. Read Wilson's article in its entirety here:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/21/AR2011012104554.html>.



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