

DON'T DISCARD THE CLASSICS

But Be Prepared To Guide Your Students Through Unfamiliar Terrain

BY CAROL JAGO

LIKE MANY other teachers in the early 1990s, I was an indefatigable optimist. I believed in a kind of literary field of dreams. Build the ideal classroom, and they will come. Offer them books, and they will read. Although teachers elsewhere have made such classrooms work, I was having trouble ignoring the fact that many of my 36 ethnically diverse urban scholars were not growing as readers the way I hoped they would. In my own English department, I saw teacher after teacher abandon *Great Expectations* and *Huckleberry Finn*, insisting that second-language learners simply didn't have the reading skills to comprehend these difficult texts. Honors students, of course, continued to be assigned both.

In her disturbing book, *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit raises the thorny issue of what happens to minority and underprivileged students when skills are devalued in the classroom, and she suggests an alternative to child-centered and process methods for minority children:

I do not advocate a simplistic "basic skills" approach for children outside of the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher order thinking and reasoning. Rather, I suggest that schools must provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home. This does not mean separating children according to family background, but instead, ensuring that each classroom incorporates strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines.¹

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How a Story Works

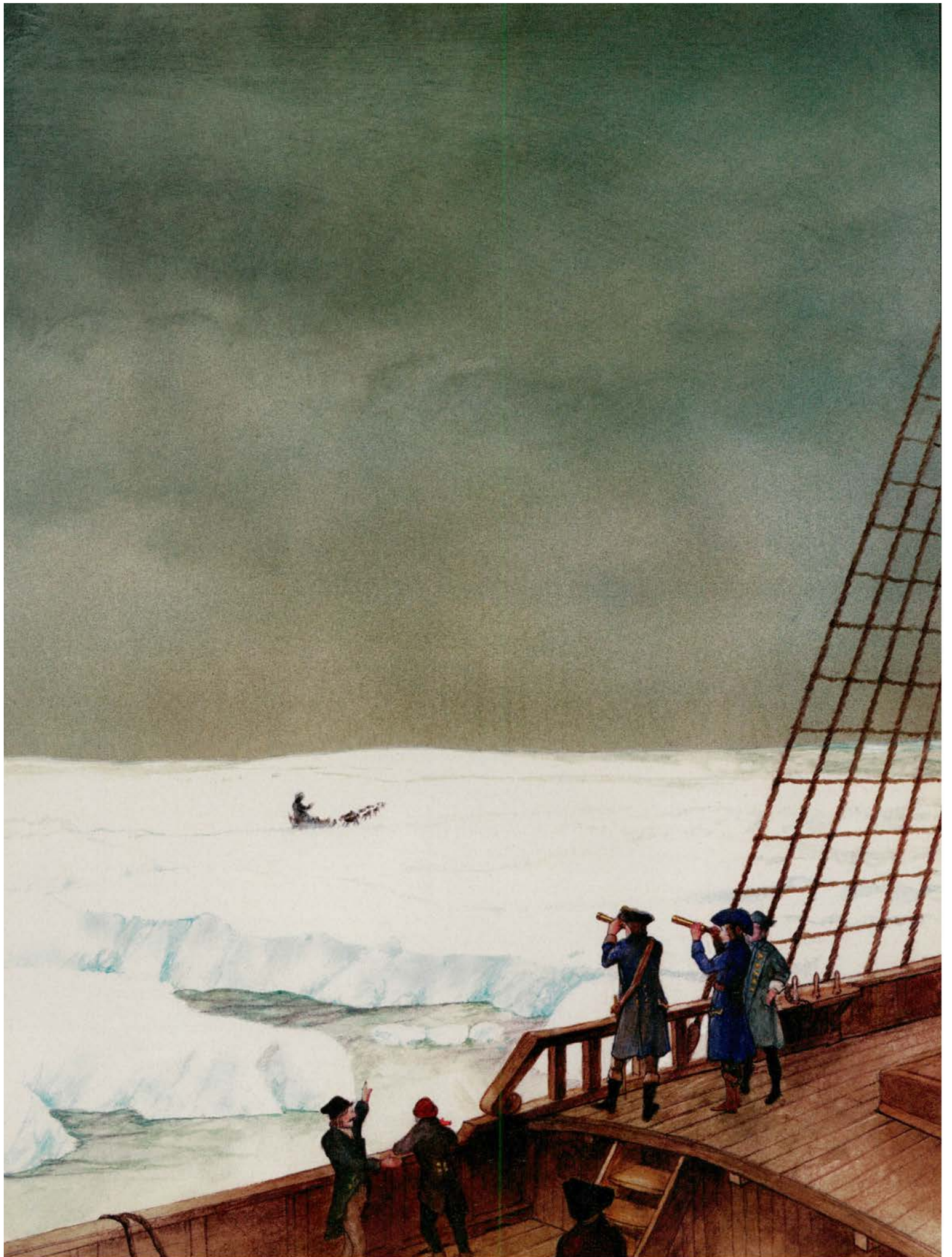
Delpit got me thinking. Maybe the reason non-honors students didn't have the "reading skills" teachers declared necessary for negotiating the classics was that we hadn't taught them very well. I am not speaking here about teaching students how to read but rather about teaching students how stories work. In our urgency to abandon the lecture format, literature teachers may have adopted too passive a role. Clearly we want to continue to make genuine student response the cornerstone of the classroom, but withholding information about how a story works may make it impossible for some students to have any response at all.

One has only to consider Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to see that truly "novel" texts continue to be written. But writers build stories with a common set of blocks, drawing from a stock of possibilities familiar to any experienced reader: A hero/heroine engages the reader's sympathy. A problem develops. A foil appears to allow the reader to see the hero/heroine more clearly. The problem gets worse. Help appears. More complications arise, but the hero/heroine prevails. All is resolved. Sometimes, in the words of the Prince at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, "All are punish'd."

While such story structures may be so familiar to an English teacher that they hardly bear comment, this is not the case for many high school readers. Some of my students have touched only books that teachers put in their hands and have never, in fact, read a single one from cover to cover. One approach to solving this problem is to create a vibrant outside reading program

The first pages of Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein, which consist of letters from an explorer adrift in the Arctic sea, pose a real problem for inexperienced readers.

ILLUSTRATED BY NENAD JAKSEVIC



for every English classroom. Another is to use the classics to teach students how stories work. I do not believe it is a matter of either/or. Students need both.

Let me use Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus* as an example. Now I am quick to admit the weaknesses of the lecture format when used day after day with teenagers. But the first pages of Shelley's novel pose a real problem for inexperienced readers. The story opens with a group of letters written by Robert Walton, an explorer adrift in the Arctic sea, to his sister in London. Without a few words from me about the epistolary format and about how Walton becomes, like us, the listener to Victor Frankenstein's strange tale, many students are lost before they have even begun. The simplest of clues and guiding questions seem to help:

1. What do you notice about the dates of these letters?
2. Why do you think Robert writes to his sister if there is no way to post the letters?
3. What does Robert reveal about himself here?
4. Where does Mary Shelley (through Robert) explain to the reader how the format of her story will now change?
5. Can you think of any other stories or movies that are structured like this?

My questions aim to tease out from students an understanding of how Shelley's story is structured. I think it unrealistic to assume that most of them will figure out the structure for themselves. Victor Frankenstein doesn't start telling the story students thought they were going to hear until page 30. If I don't offer some guidance through the first 29, too many give up.

It also doesn't seem fair to teach novels like *Frankenstein* only to students who instinctively understand how a series of one-sided letters like Robert Walton's works. When my colleagues in the English department urge that we simplify the curriculum for struggling students and replace the classics with shorter, more accessible novels, I know they are motivated by kindness. But the real kindness would be to give all students the tools to handle challenging texts. We aren't being paid simply to assist students who hardly need us. We're being paid to find a way for all students to develop as readers.

So I *tell* my students about how stories work. I *remind* them to pay close attention to who is narrating the story and to whom. Where appropriate, I *point out* foreshadowing. I don't monopolize the classroom conversations, but neither do I hold back when I feel that students are lost.

Connections Beyond the Story

Students had read about half of *Frankenstein*, but they were restless. I can always tell when their reading is losing momentum by the snippets of conversation floating up to my desk. "Nothing happens." "I fell asleep and missed the part where the monster came to life." "Victor Frankenstein just rambles." And most ominous of all, "Boring."

I love this book and thought I had been doing a pretty good job of teaching it, but something was miss-

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ing. The students weren't hooked. I knew they were doing the reading because our discussion the day before about Victor Frankenstein's passion for his research had gone very well, but their hearts just weren't in it.

The lesson I had planned was going to be a close look at how Mary Shelley uses syntax and diction to create the story's tone. But experience told me that I had better think fast if I didn't want to spend the hour asking questions nobody except me cared much about. Rummaging through my *Frankenstein* files, I found a magazine article about cloning that raised the question, "Are there some scientific experiments that should never be conducted?" Handing out copies of this essay to the class, I asked students what they thought.

Hands flew into the air. Students saw at once the connection between the moral dilemma of cloning and Victor Frankenstein's creation. They argued that even the obvious medical advantage of being able to clone new hearts or livers would soon be outweighed by the cloning of super-soldiers. The science fiction buffs in the room had a field day telling tales of genetically engineered races destroying the world. Many students had recently read *Brave New World* and used Aldous Huxley's dystopia as an example of what can happen when scientists rather than humanists run the show.

My role as teacher shifted from Grand Inquisitor to traffic controller. "First Allen, then Melinda, then Andrew. We'll get to you, Joe. Hold on." The hardest part was making sure students were listening to one another rather than simply waiting their turn to expound. I complimented those who began their comments with a reference to something someone else had said. This helped. When the conversation turned to the question of whether science might someday make religion obsolete, I thought the windows might explode from the passionate intensity of my students' arguments. They had so much to say.

At the bell, the room erupted into a dozen conversations. A handful of students bolted to the bookshelf where I had copies of *Brave New World*. I collapsed at my desk, reasonably certain that the big ideas in Mary Shelley's novel had finally come alive for these readers. The rest of *Frankenstein* should make better sense

now. And to think that some people consider teaching literature genteel, scholarly work.

I resolved that tomorrow we would review our rules of classroom discussion:

- Students must talk to one another, not just to me or to the air.
- Students must listen to one another. To ensure this happens, they must either address the previous speaker or offer a reason for changing the subject.
- Students must all be prepared to participate. If I call on someone and he or she has nothing to say, the appropriate response is, "I'm not sure what I think about that, but please come back to me."

Yvonne Hutchison, a master teacher at one of the most challenging middle schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, helped me create this set of coherent guidelines for classroom discussion. She asserts that we must assume that all students have important things to say but that many are unfamiliar with the rules of scholarly discourse. A few students seem to know these rules instinctively. But if we want all students to participate in civil classroom discussion, we need to teach them how.

Student-run Discussions and Projects

One method that has worked for me has been to put student desks into a circle and call the day's lesson a "seminar." The word itself seems to lend an air of importance to the discussion. I then do the following:

1. Tell students that everyone must participate at least once during the seminar.
2. Explain to students that no one needs to raise a hand to be called on, but all students should be sensitive to each other, noticing when someone seems to have something to say but may be too shy to jump into the conversation. I give them the words they might use: "Luke, you look as though you disagree. What are you thinking?"
3. Teach students how to deal with the compulsive talkers in their midst. Pointing out how even motor-mouths must at some point inhale, I tell them that this is the moment when others can politely interrupt.
4. Tell students that silence is a part of the seminar, too. It means people are thinking. If the silence goes on for too long, they might want to open up *Frankenstein* and see if there is a particular passage they would like to ask one another about. They might want to read the passage aloud.
5. Let students know that I will be sitting outside their circle and that I must remain silent until the last five minutes of class. I will be taking notes of things I observe during the seminar and will be sharing these with them. My comments will not be about the content of their discussion but rather about how students have conducted themselves. I focus on the positive behaviors, the subtle ways in which students help one another join in the discussion.

Last fall, after students had finished reading both *Be-*

owulf and John Gardner's *Grendel* (the Beowulf story told from the point of view of the monster), I told students that instead of taking a test or writing a comparison/contrast essay about the two books, we would hold a seminar. Since this was to take the place of a formal assessment, everyone would have to speak up and participate.

Melinda began: "The last line in *Grendel* made me think again about how I felt about the monster. I mean the whole book sets you up to sympathize with him, but look how he finishes: 'Poor Grendel's had an accident. *So may you all.*' That's really mean and malicious."

"I agree. It's blood lust," remarked Joe. "This is an evil monster who deserved to be killed." But Nicole saw it differently. "Wait, look at how he was treated in his life, no mother he could talk to, Beowulf out to get him, no friends, no one to teach him how to behave."

Jorge interrupted, "Grendel was just something in the hero's way, something for the hero to slay so he could win fame and have lots of people sing about him."

"That's how it was in *Beowulf*," Nicole continued, "but in Gardner's book you could see how the monster felt. You knew what he was thinking. In a way, I think Grendel was trapped in a role. I feel sorry for him."

The conversation continued in this vein for the next 40 minutes. Students listened to one another, probed each other's observations, pointed to the text. When it was over, I let them know that this was as good as the study of literature gets. All the other activities and exercises we complete along the way are simply preparation for just this kind of conversation among readers about texts.

Scaffolding for Diction and Syntax

These students were caught up in the lesson. I can't remember anyone asking me for a grade on the project. The quality of their production was recompense enough. They saw their work and knew it was good. But I don't believe most of these students would have been able to move beyond the text with such confidence without considerable instructional scaffolding along the way. Young readers are unused to negotiating sentences like this:

I was hurried away by fury; revenge alone endowed me with strength and composure; it mounded my feelings and allowed me to be calculating and calm at periods when otherwise delirium or death would have been my portion.

The help students needed was simple enough to provide: "See all those semicolons? For a minute, pretend they are periods. Does the passage make sense to you now? Why do you think Shelley chose to string those ideas together? What effect does the longer sentence have on you as a reader? How is this different from the effect created by a series of shorter ones?" I drew students' attention to the way in which punctuation is often a guide to negotiating complex syntax. We needed to unpack only a few sentences like this before students found that they could manage Shelley's syntax on their own.

Diction was another challenge. Borrowing the idea
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