

Students Get the Word On What to Read

A recommended list of literature for youth—from Melville to Marx—is stirring a national debate.

Every high-school student in America should read *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, the *Declaration of Independence*, the *U.S. Constitution*, the *Gettysburg Address*, *Huckleberry Finn* and the *Bible*. So says a survey, released August 12, of more than 400 teachers, professors, writers, historians, journalists and cultural leaders across the country. The poll was conducted by William Bennett, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a federal agency created by Congress to promote work in scholarly fields.

The survey, which he acknowledges is nonscientific, has created controversy in academic circles and seems bound to stir more this fall when its findings reach school boards and political leaders.

No federal mandate. "Some people think the list of writings we've compiled is a federally mandated curriculum, but it is not," Bennett explains. "We've simply asked a lot of thoughtful people, including teachers themselves, to tell us the barest minimum of works in history, philosophy and literature that every student who graduates from high school should be familiar with.

"From the responses. I'm sure we've caused squabbles at home and arguments in teachers' rooms across the nation. That's exactly what we want to do—stimulate the mind of the country."

Writings also rated high in the survey include Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*; Plato's *Republic*; Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*; Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*.

Strong criticism of the project was expressed by sociologist Daniel Bell of Harvard University. "I don't like the idea at all," he wrote Bennett. "In asking for any number of readings, you are being like a magpie, assuming that the thorns and thistles will make up a cultural nest. They cannot."

Historian Henry Steele Commager of Amherst College also has doubts: "Modern political scientists read 10 times as many books on government and politics as did Madison and Hamilton, but they can't write *the Federalist Papers*. Lincoln's reading was more limited than Wilson's, but he did a better job."

Proponents' views. Many educators, however, support the study. Scott Thomson, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, calls the list "an important yardstick for schools to use in evaluating their own offerings." He predicts that it "will be reviewed at many school-board meetings this fall."

Sharon Robinson, director of instruction and professional development at the National +Education Association, calls the survey "provocative" and adds: "I hope it inspires localities to develop their own lists." Some boards may object to certain works in the survey—The Communist Manifesto, for example.

How popular the endowment's findings will be with high-school students remains a question. Mike Printz, librarian at Topeka West High School in Kansas, warns: "Young people are going to have to be led to those books. They won't come to them alone."

According to Printz and others, most students now read only *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Scarlet Letter*, a Dickens novel and U.S. documents such as the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Gettysburg Address*.

Bolton Lunceford, who teaches English, Latin and drama at the rural Warren County High School in Georgia, regards the list as a tool that may have a greater initial impact on teachers than on students. "I worry about our teachers coming out of schools of education with all that methodology but no content," she explains. "This survey may force teachers to read more."

Bennett, a curriculum consultant to more than 50 high schools before joining the endowment in 1982, says many teachers submitted lists with the notation that not all of their students could comprehend certain selections.

"We're really asking, though, what students should be able to understand," he observes. "As much as anything, the list should serve as a challenge."

By SUSANNA McBEE

Famous Works To Read and Know

Authors and writings cited most frequently in 1984 survey by the National Endowment for the Humanities of important literary works for high-school students to know:

1. Shakespeare, particularly *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*
2. American historical documents particularly Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Gettysburg Address
3. Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*
4. *Bible*
5. Homer, *Odyssey*, *Iliad*
6. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, *Tale of Two Cities*
7. Plato, *Republic*
8. Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*
9. Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter*
10. Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*
11. Melville *Moby Dick*
12. Orwell *1984*
13. Thoreau *Walden*

14. Frost poems
15. Whitman *Leaves of Grass*
16. Fitzgerald *Great Gatsby*
17. Chaucer *Canterbury Tales*
18. Marx *Communist Manifesto*
19. Aristotle *Politics*
20. Dickinson poems
21. Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment*
22. Faulkner various works
23. Salinger *Catcher in the Rye*
24. de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*
25. Austen *Pride and Prejudice*
26. Emerson essays and poems
27. Machiavelli *Prince*
28. Milton *Paradise Lost*
29. Tolstoy *War and Peace*
30. Virgil *Aeneid*

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