

What Do We Mean by “Common” in a Common Reading?

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A Common Core for All of Us

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Jennifer Finney Boylan

I COULDN'T get a cab. A sketchy-looking guy hunkering around the entrance of the Grand Hyatt in San Diego showed me his bicycle. “Climb on, lady,” he said. “I’ll take ya.”

I thought it over. “O.K.,” I said.

So that was how I arrived — balanced on the back of a bicycle seat — at my destination, a restaurant where I was meeting two writer friends, Colum McCann and Sheri Fink. I gave the man 10 bucks, and asked him for his name, which he said was Cuckoo.

“Cuckoo?” I asked.

“In the best way of all,” he said, and then rode off.

Colum and Sheri were drinking mojitos. Sheri looked at me as if I’d arrived by spaceship. “You do have all these adventures,” she said.

We’d come to San Diego to participate in the Annual Conference on the First Year Experience, a convocation held every February at which publishers pitch

various authors’ books for adoption by colleges and universities as part of freshman reading programs. If your book is chosen, it can mean thousands of copies sold.

The emerging canon of such “common reads” leans toward issues of diversity and culture. “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” a novel by Mark Haddon about an autistic teenager, is a popular choice, as is Khaled Hosseini’s “Kite Runner.” But these books can be controversial — when the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill chose “Approaching the Qur’an,” by Michael Sells, in 2002, it had to go to court to defend its selection. The next year, it was criticized again for choosing Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America.” All of this raises the question: What are colleges seeking from such books? What is this common language we want our college students — not to say citizens — to share?

This question is also playing out in the debate over the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in education, now fully adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. The original goal of the program (coordinated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers) seemed uncontroversial: to establish consistent educational goals nationwide. These goals include teaching our children to be good writers and readers, competent in mathematics and quantitative reasoning, and conversant with social studies and science.

It’s hard to argue with that. And yet discontent with the Common Core is spreading, especially among Republicans. A few Republican governors are now so intent on distancing themselves from the Common Core’s presumed progressive bias that they’re changing its name. In Florida, it’s now called the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards, and in Arizona, Gov. Jan Brewer renamed it Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards.

“We don’t ever want to educate South Carolina children like they educate California children,” said Gov. Nikki Haley of South Carolina, presumably because doing so would result in children in the Palmetto State riding longboards and listening to the Grateful Dead.

On the other hand, you have the Common Core supporter Bill Gates, who suggests, “It’s ludicrous to think that multiplication in Alabama and multiplication in New York are really different.”

I suspect that this debate is not really about multiplication. What we’re arguing about is what we want from our children’s education, and what, in fact, “getting an education” actually means. For some parents, the primary desire is for our sons and daughters to wind up, more or less, like ourselves. Education, in this model, means handing down shared values of the community to the next

generation. Sometimes it can also mean shielding children from aspects of the culture we do not approve of, or fear.

For others, education means enlightening our children's minds with the uncensored scientific and artistic truth of the world. If that means making our own sons and daughters strangers to us, then so be it.

My friend Richard Russo, in a commencement address 10 years ago at my college, Colby, noted that "it is the vain hope of middle-class parents that their children will go off to college and later be returned to them economically viable but otherwise unchanged." But, he said, sending "kids off to college is a lot like putting them in the witness protection program. If the person who comes out is easily recognizable as the same person who went in, something has gone terribly, dangerously wrong."

Whether educating our children means making them like us, or unlike us, was the subtext in San Diego as the assembled deans and professors considered the prospective "common reads." Among a certain cohort there was wild enthusiasm for Alexa von Tobel's "Financially Fearless," an introduction to the field of financial planning. Another sort of reader entirely seemed to be drawn to my book, a memoir of transgender experience. (I did see one dean look at my book, with its subtitle: "A Life in Two Genders," and then run, as if her clothes were on fire.)

It occurs to me that what enemies of a Common Core — by any name — have come to fear is really loneliness. It's the sadness that comes when we realize that our children have thoughts that we did not give them; needs and desires we do not understand; wisdom and insight that might surpass our own.

Maybe what we need is a common core for families, in which mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, all read the same book, and sit down at the table to talk about it. Having a language in common doesn't mean we have to agree with one another. It simply means that we — as a family, a college or a country — can engage in a meaningful conversation about the life of the mind.

That's what I call cuckoo. In the best way of all.

Jennifer Finney Boylan is a contributing opinion writer, a professor at Colby College and the author of "She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders."

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Some Questions to Consider

1. What is your campus's definition of "common" within your common reading program?
2. What opportunities does that definition bring to your campus?
3. Has your campus experienced challenges due to misunderstandings of the definition?
4. How might your campus better communicate your definition of "common" to your internal and external audiences?
5. How might your campus demonstrate the effectiveness of that approach?

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