

Is reading the classics a waste of time?

By Holly Lisle

(This essay written in response to the Is reading the classics a waste of time? thread in the Forward Motion Community, also appears there.)

For writers, reading the classics – the stories that have lasted for centuries because they were good, powerful, and in many ways timeless stories – is essential.

What's important is to avoid drawing the wrong conclusions from reading them.

Shakespeare's brilliant use of metaphor and his heart-rending tragedies have a place in every writer's mental database. His use of iambic pentameter, however, is a dated technique that, while beautiful, is not going to win readers for any new writer who attempts to emulate it.

Dickens created some of literature's immortal characters – people who found courage to get through unthinkable hardships, people who made great sacrifices for others that still boggle my mind. I remain, nearly thirty years after I read it, stunned by the conclusion of **A Tale of Two Cities**, in which a hero is born by dying. But Dickens' verbosity, and his frequent sloooooow pacing, are not habits that today's writer needs to copy.

Cervantes gives us Don Quixote, his sidekick, Sancho Panza, his poor old horse, Rosinante, and his would-be love, Dulcinea – and creates in Don Quixote a man who manages to be the butt of jokes, the tragic fool for love, and the noble hero all in one body. In all of literature, there's no one else like him. But the book is long and wordy and, again, written at the pace of another age. I read it when I was fifteen years old and in

the middle of my Dickens phase, so I was ripe for it. I loved it so much I read it first in English and then in Spanish (with a big fat English/Spanish dictionary at my side), and I will never forget the story Cervantes told. But I lived in a place with no TV, no radio, and streets paved in cobblestones, where the mule and the donkey were still the primary method of transporting produce – I was getting the book, in essence, in the setting for which it had been written. That slow pace and wordiness wouldn't work for modern authors.

Chaucer was one of the fathers of modern literature. He was also funny as hell. He told marvelous stories, created characters that personify and humanize an age long lost. (Who could ever meet the Wife of Bath and not love her – or remember her forever? The Miller? The Knight's Priest?) Chaucer's a trip to read in the original Middle English, and if you can find a good prose translation of the Canterbury Tales, he's a blast to read in current English, too. But, clearly, no publisher today is going to look at anything that starts out "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote, the droughte of Marche hath perced to the roote..." So take Chaucer's frequently dirty mind, bawdy humor, risque stories, and kinky characters, and skip writing in Middle English, or, for that matter, in almost every case, in verse.

And what about poetry? Wordsworth, Longfellow, Shakespeare again (his dark sonnets remain some of my favorite verse in the language), Whitman, Poe (who is also breathtaking in prose) and so many more – offer demonstrations on image and metaphor, getting the most point across in the fewest words, and using exactly instead of almost the right word. Every prose writer can benefit from both reading and writing poetry.

The true classics – the books that people have been picking up and reading for hundreds or, in the cases of Greek mythology and the like, thousands of years – are classics for a reason. The stories endure. The characters endure. But writers need to learn to winnow out what endures, separating it from the chaff

of styles and formats that no longer appeal to the modern reader.

The Wife of Bath could walk into a modern novel as its heroine – Chaucer’s original Liberated Woman, set loose to riff on men on one hand and jump their bones for the sheer fun of it on the other – and modern readers would love her as much as have readers from centuries past.

But she won’t walk into a novel of yours unless you’ve met her.

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