

they ever know the rest of the world?"<sup>11</sup> Her question encourages students to "stretch" themselves by reading texts on a college-bound list, especially after reading texts in class by the same authors.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

It may be unethical for teachers to choose not to initiate our students into this country's civic culture by denying them a foundation of historical and cultural knowledge. By reading a sequence of texts that are connected to each other in different ways, and by practicing close reading and learning the connections among these texts, they build bridges across the isolated fragments of their background knowledge for future understandings as literate citizens.

Given how fragmented my students' previous learning experiences were, every year since 2002 I have used culturally and historically significant texts in my literature curriculum to teach the skill sets outlined in Arkansas's standards. Some choices were met with skepticism, with questions from colleagues like "Aren't there newer texts you could use, texts that students might better be able to relate to?"

Today many teachers are lured by an unproven claim that students will engage if the content relates to them. What gets forgotten with the notion that students need literary content relevant to their interests is the broader purpose of teaching literature. And part of this humanistic purpose is helping students to understand the metaphors and other images created by literary works that have influenced later writers and speakers of the language they use.

A student came to me positively vibrating with excitement because he understood not just the literary allusion to "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox" in a sports program about a player being delighted to be back in that "briar patch" but also the extended metaphor. Another student told me that when the narrator of a film on genetics in her science class asked "What kind of brave new world are we creating?" she felt "smart" because she had read *Brave New World*—my suggestion for independent reading after the class had read "Harrison Bergeron"—and understood what the narrator was implying.

Students should understand how the human relationships embodied in the literature they read may be found in their own lives or in the lives of others they know or come to know. But they first have to be able to read that literature. And with a broader and deeper foundational knowledge, students can on their own more quickly make connections among the texts they read, without a teacher's help.

*Jamie Highfill teaches English at Woodland Junior High School in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and co-directs the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project. She has published several teaching lessons in Spark the Brain, Ignite the Pen (second edition). Her students are regularly among the highest scorers on the state's standardized tests. In 2011 she was named Arkansas's Outstanding Middle Level Language Arts Teacher.*

### NOTES

1. E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), xiii.
2. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 111.
3. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 112.
4. E. D. Hirsch, *The Knowledge Deficit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 16.
5. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 27.
6. Burton Bernstein, *Thurber: A Biography* (New York: Arbor House, 1975), 361n.
7. Henry David Thoreau, "Sunday," in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde, William Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
8. Daniel Willingham, *Why Students Don't Like School* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 45.
9. George Meredith, "Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit," *The New Quarterly Magazine*, April 1877.
10. Carol Jago, *Classics in the Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2004).
11. Jago, *Classics in the Classroom*, 12.