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Enough for All of Us

It seems to be a human trait to look down on others for some reason or another, and what we're reading—or not reading—is one way that happens a lot. Last year, the Center County Library in Center County Pennsylvania posted this meme to Instagram and asked, "What are these three books for you?" Their question and this meme reveal a lot about the way we value some things and malign others. In many communities—especially academic ones—there is a

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Fig. 1: Image of Ken from the Barbie movie standing in between Einstein and Oppenheimer from the Oppenheimer movie. Einstein is labeled: "That science book I plan on reading." Oppenheimer is labeled: "That classic book I pretend that I read." Ken is labeled: "What I'm actually reading" (Center County Library).

clear judgment about what is worth reading and what is not, or what is highbrow and what is lowbrow. Even the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" imply a lot of judgement. In fact, they can be traced back to terminology that comes from phrenology, the pseudo-science of "the study of the conformation and especially the contours of the skull based on the former belief that they are indicative of mental faculties and character" ("Phrenology") that was often used as part of making a claim for white supremacy.

From the beginning these words were used to

include some and exclude all else, but even calling them canon (those works considered

acceptable by the academic and formally educated) and non-canon (everything else) which might be more politically correct, still has clear ideas of judgement of something being better or worse. However, there are many reasons we should let go of these categories and rankings and understand reading as reading and valuable in and of itself.

Samantha Resnick, in her article "Let the Brows Run Wild: A Defense of Lowbrow Literature," explains that

There is highbrow literature: [. . .] written with artistic intentions [. . .]. Highbrow lit intends to make the reader reflect and question, stretch and stride. Some examples are "Infinite Jest" by David Foster Wallace, "The Trial" by Franz Kafka, and "The Stranger" by Albert Camus.

And then, there is lowbrow lit—gross entertainment for the masses. A guilty pleasure. The literary equivalent of binge-watching "The Bachelorette" after running out of episodes from "Keeping Up with the Kardashians."

Here, even Resnick, who is writing to express her love of reading without judgment and to advocate we all do it more, is imposing societal values upon us. "Values are the cultural standards that people use to decide what's good or bad, what's right or wrong" (Crash Course 00:04:40-00:04:46), and her associating the guilty pleasure reading with *The Bachelorette* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, shows how much we have applied these judgments to so many aspects of our society now. Yet, are there still redeeming values to these things?

There are many arguments for the value of what is generally considered lowbrow literature. Many researchers and writers point out that one of the most commonly disparaged genres, fan fiction, is actually very important at this point in society, noting that fan fiction and other online communities open up the chance to share perspectives and voices of historically

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underrepresented groups. Adriana White, an autistic librarian, whose work primarily focuses on neurodiversity in children's books, points out that "comics, manga, and other illustrated books are especially popular with readers who are neurodivergent, English Language Learners, or [those] still developing their reading skills" (12). Furthermore, Gene Yang in his *History of Comics in Education*, "identifies five attributes of comic books that add to the learning experience: motivating, visual, permanent, intermediary, and popular. Based on the authors' experience, the popularity of comic books not only attracts and keeps the students' attention; it also bridges socioeconomic, generational and cultural gaps" (qtd. in Gerde and Foster 247). The value of creating a pathway into reading for those struggling with it, and forms of writing that can "bridge socioeconomic, generational and cultural gaps" cannot be understated. Clearly, there are multiple ways in which we've overlooked the value of a number of different genres.

In addition, it's no secret that comic books, fan fiction, manga, and many other contemporary genres have made their way into classes at universities, and these are more than simply professors wanting to play in class. Virginia W. Gerde and R. Spencer Foster both researchers at universities in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, make a case for comics as valuable ways to learn for college students getting ready to move into the workplace in their article "X-Men Ethics: Using Comic Books to Teach Business Ethics": "Comic books are a modern form of narrative and can be effective in teaching the complexities and social context of specific topics, from critiques of capitalism to faulty products or discrimination in the workplace" (245). They go on to say, "Comic books also serve as an intermediary; students can address emotionally charged topics such as discrimination in the workplace in a unique environment, one removed from them" (247), and end their work, noting that "As a mature literary form, comic books communicate ideas and concerns about universal topics—ethical behavior, the role of

organizations, and the institutions of business and government” (254). Understanding that what we easily dismiss as trivial stories are human stories is probably the greatest strength of anyone who looks beyond **exclusive** classifications of literature and delves into works traditionally looked down upon by the establishment.

At the end of her article, Resnick says,

Sometimes, I just want a story that's juicy. A story that sucks me in, or lets me be lazy. I want to read simply because it is fun.

[. . .]

There is nothing wrong with lowbrow lit. There is also nothing wrong with highbrow lit. Lowbrow, highbrow, low-high-mid brow—the border is blurring, and authors [. . .] are increasingly seen as softly swaying between the two. Readers need to stop shaming other readers for having a healthy appreciation for both.

Looking at recent research and literature, it's clear that many universities, professors, and readers are coming to terms with the idea that even guilty pleasures have things to teach us, but even more than that, perhaps it's time we make a real effort to bring value back to reading simply for the sake of enjoyment, then we might all learn a little more without feeling like we have to hide, ignore, or avoid those things that can make life a bit more fun.

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