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CAPS research paper

A study of Literature: Why our parents were better writers

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What's the secret?

The Hunger Games. The Da Vinci Code. Twilight. Fifty Shades of Grey. These novel titles are some of the most well-known in the nation, yet the reasoning behind their success is one for investigation. Take a moment, and come up with a longer list of the most popular contemporary books you can think of. Do they include titles and genres like the ones I already mentioned? Full of vampires, werewolves, sexually explicit scenes, and a lack of admirable sentence structure? My question, upon embarking on my CAPstone journey, is to figure out why exactly the success of literature appears to be based on the most arbitrary of criteria. I would think that the most popular and successful books are the ones that are the most well written and perfectly constructed, with heart-stopping plotlines and exquisitely developed characters. Of course, there is an abundant of these sort of novels, as there is no lack for talented authors. Why is it then, that so many of the New York Times best-selling novels are those containing obsessive love stories about vampires?

For my project, I sought to delve into the path of literature, and what will truly determine a book's success. I am not the first to ask this question, as there have been a plethora of studies and surveys conducted trying to extract this secret of success. As is the procedure nowadays, inevitably a computer must be consulted at some point when attempting to answer widespread, ambiguous questions. These studies have attempted to quantify vast amounts of data on this subject, process it, and make conclusions about the reasoning behind this phenomena. Some have been moderately successful, others less so. The most notable ones have come up with original algorithms attempting to predict the success of a pre-sold novel. This is hardly a unique concept. Predictors of success are seen all over the market, from music to businesses to advertisements. A

song must have x y and z in order to appeal to an audience broad enough to be played on a popular radio station. A billboard must have these colors with this amount of words in this font in order to be noticed by the public. The attempt to analyze and conquer the mind of the public to make a living is almost a field of study on its own. What makes processing and analyzing this sort of data so difficult is the quality of the data itself. How do you quantify thoughts? How do you convert people's desires and oftentimes unconscious opinions into numbers able to be organized and studied?

Luckily, I am not the first person to ask this question. The previously stated studies and surveys pertaining to this topic are integral to my project. The first, and most notable of these studies was one conducted at Stony Brook University. In this study, samples of literature were used to determine specific criteria that makes a book successful. This criteria was then compacted and used to create statistical stylometry that is supposed to be able to predict a specific novel's success once it is released. These statistics, which claim to be 85% accurate, are supposed to analyze a novel's language use and other stylistic criteria in accordance with the desires of the general public. While these statistics are admirable, and upon further examination appear to be accurate, I have identified flaws in this study as well as countless others attempting to do the same. As an individual fiercely loyal to the great classical authors of the literature world (Hemingway, Dickens, Fitzgerald, Ellison. . .) I oppose the idea that their success can be quantified. No computer or mathematical formula could ever hope to overcome the genius that is the exceptional human mind. Yes, computers can now write A-level essays and replicate years of work and study in a mere hour, but they have yet to cross the bridge into human genius. Through attempting to replicate these technological studies, by creating my own program meant to

statistically analyze the quality of writing, I hoped to prove my own program wrong and find instead that there is no such formula to the beauty of the written language.

To begin, I will define what I believe to be the “aesthetics” of quality writing. For my purposes, I am talking about only the elite writers- those who have already mastered written the written language. Grammar rules, spelling, basic word choice and other low-level criteria do not apply to these authors, as they have already surpassed the stepping stones to being good writers. Every book that is currently published and on the market, whether or not a reader believes it to be a quality one, is written by an accomplished author. Only the elite ever make it to the point of having their work published, so one can safely assume that all published authors have a solid base and know how to effectively write. The market of published literature is the olympics of writing. Publishing a book is a process underrated in its difficulty given the sheer mass of published literature. That being said, the standards of quality writing still vary widely cross genre, cross audience, and cross culture. Among the Shakespeare professors of the world, modern chick lit likely will not hold any allure, but plenty a high schooler would rather read just about anything than Shakespeare. Therefore, defining quality literature is extremely difficult. How can one claim that one book is good and another is not when stylistic preferences are so subjective? Yet, some works of literature appear to surpass all differing opinions on what is quality and what is not and are widely accepted as superior. Think *Catcher In The Rye*, think *The Invisible Man*, think *Hamlet*. Whether or not any given particular person sincerely enjoys these books, they likely will be able to appreciate their fame and superiority. Through my project, I hoped to explore the particulars behind what precisely causes certain books to shoot into worldwide sales why others struggle to sell two copies at a local bookstore. However, as my

project became more and more involved, I began to shift my focus from examining the reasoning behind marketing sales and more about if this shift is actually a result in a modern standards of literature.

Defining Success

As excited as I was to design a project that would combine computer science and literature, two of my passions, I eventually realized that this was not the path I wanted my research to take. As I researched more and more of the studies that were supposed to be the brunt of my project, I veered farther and farther away from their messages. It was too mathematical, too statistical. I hated how they tried to quantify books that I've read and love into numbers that supposedly determine their quantity. One of the most famous of these studies, one completed at Stony Brook University, grouped "quality books" and "successful books" together. According to their study, the best books were the ones that sold the most copies, which counters the basis of my argument: the success of books is not at all reflective of their actual quality. Ironically, as I learned more and more about these studies, I lost more and more respect for the statistical analysis they provided. Statistics, while an extremely useful and incredibly complex field, should not be applied to such a subjective and humanistic product as books. For example, it's much easier to use statistics to determine what makes kitchen appliances or computers successful. One can separate the specific manufactured qualities of each, record how many of each were sold, and then run some number-crunching programs to figure out which qualities cause the appliances to sell better. However, it seems absurd that such surface-level mathematics should attempt to be applied to books. One can attempt to identify the specific qualities of literature that make it

“good” and “marketable”, (I will explain more about how I attempted to do so in a later section) but the subjectivity of the entire field prevents this from being truly possible. It seems obvious that the common question “what type of books do you like?” would indicate this subjectivity. If there was one specific set of criteria that indicates the quality of a book, then everyone would have the same preferences and the literature market would be monopolized by a very select few authors who happen to be adept at creating books with such criteria. Or, perhaps the scenario could occur where there would be no fewer published authors, but they would all adopt the specific writing style that “sells”. There would be no diversity in bookstores, and book discussions and English classes would be virtually extinct. Let us consider this scenario. If these studies were completely accurate, then according to my findings, the only quality books are the ones that follow the rules in these tables: (Provided by information from Stony Brook University)

Less successful literature includes the following:

CATEGORY	UNIGRAMS
Negative	never, risk, worse, slaves, hard, murdered, bruised, heavy, prison,
Body Part	face, arm, body, skins
Location	room, beach, bay, hills, avenue, boat, door
Emotional/action verbs	want, went, took, promise, cry, shout, jump, glare, urge
Extreme Words	never, very, breathless, sacred slightest, absolutely, perfectly
Love Related	desires, affairs

More successful literature includes the following:

CATEGORY	UNIGRAMS
Negation	not
Report/Quote	said, words, says
Self-Reference	I, me , my
Connectives	and, which, though, that, as, after, but, where, what, whom, since, whenever
Prepositions	up, into, out, after, in, within
Thinking Verbs	recognized, remembered

To put these tables into perspective, consider the following four passages from four different novels::

1)"No," she said, crying, "I don't want him to go. I would rather go myself in his place, if I could. I don't want to save the country. Them Japanese could take it and keep it, so long as they left me and my family and my children alone. But I remember my brother Marsh in that other war. He had to go to that one when he wasn't but nineteen, and our mother couldn't understand it then any more than I can now. But she told Marsh if he had to go, he had to go. And so, if Pete's got to go to this one, he's got to go to it. Jest don't ask me to understand why."

2) Then all was quiet. Steadying his hands, the initiate raised the skull to his mouth and felt his lips touch the dry bone. He closed his eyes and tipped the skull toward his mouth, drinking the wine in long, deep swallows. When the last drop was gone, he lowered the skull. For an instant, he thought he felt his lungs growing tight, and his heart began to pound wildly. My God, they

know! Then, as quickly as it came, the feeling passed. A pleasant warmth began to stream through his body. The initiate exhaled, smiling inwardly as he gazed up at the unsuspecting gray-eyed man who had foolishly admitted him into this brotherhood's most secretive ranks. Soon you will lose everything you hold most dear.

3)The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street in the suburb of Saint Antoine, in Paris, where it was spilled. It had stained many hands, too, and many faces, and many naked feet, and many wooden shoes. The hands of the man who sawed the wood, left red marks on the billets; and the forehead of the woman who nursed her baby, was stained with the stain of the old rag she wound about her head again. Those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask, had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth; and one tall joker so besmirched, his head more out of a long squalid bag of a nightcap than in it, scrawled upon a wall with his finger dipped in muddy wine lees—blood.

4)“I am somewhat of a meliorist. That is to say, I act as an optimist because I find I cannot act at all, as a pessimist. One often feels helpless in the face of the confusion of these times, such a mass of apparently uncontrollable events and experiences to live through, attempt to understand, and if at all possible, give order to; but one must not withdraw from the task if he has some small things to offer - he does so at the risk of diminishing his humanity.”

All of these passages are from books of completely different genres written in various time periods. Based on these passages alone, (and if you recognize one, pretend you don't) attempt to

discern your favorite and your least favorite. As in, based on these passages, which book would you prefer to read? If you can, rank them in order from favorite to least favorite.

Personally, my ranking is as follows:

1, 4, 2, 3.

The titles of the books they come from (in order of my ranking) are *Two Soldiers* by William Faulkner, *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud, *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown, and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. This ranking, for me, is based on criteria that comes from my own personal reading habits. When reading, I tend to value quality dialogue highly, as I find that much of the time the dialogue in a novel is its weakness. As for the non-dialogue passages, honestly my opinions were based on rather arbitrary criteria such as the fact that I was somewhat creeped out by the third passage.

If your ranking system is anything related to mine, you'll find that this whole exercise is rather pointless and does nothing to truly dictate the quality of the novels containing the passages above. Yet, this is precisely what the aforementioned studies are doing, albeit more mathematically. Many of them take samples from assorted novels, usually a bit longer than the length of the passages above, and run them through their statistical programs to come up with numbers dictating the book's value. Obviously, the issues with making these sort of claims, is that they completely disregard the subjectivity and arbitrary nature of their reader's preferences.

Based on these programs, *The Two Soldiers* and *The Lost Symbol* are less successful because they contain (or do not contain) certain specific stylistic elements that are required for more successful novels such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *The Fixer*. The only way I can see this

to be in any way accurate is if subconsciously the human mind is prone to being attracted to literature that contains these stylistic elements. Perhaps I am genetically hardwired to believe that books containing words such as “recognized” and “remembered” are innately better than books with the words “murdered” and “cry”. However, for the purpose of my project, I’m going to assume that this is an inaccurate argument, as these words are products of the human mind to begin with and the English language is in no way innate.

However, there is no denying the fact that a certain selection of novels seem to be far more appealing to the general public than others. If not for a specific set of criteria based on writing style, then why are *The Hunger Games* and *Romeo and Juliet* so much more well-known than Shakespeare’s other countless unheard-of plays? Is it because they’re simply better books? What makes them more appealing than millions of other novels published by struggling yet talented authors? Here is where we get into the psychological aspects of reading preferences.

Psychology of reading: Do we really like what we like?

As someone who considers herself to be somewhat of a literature purist, I have always scoffed at half of the novels on bestselling bookshelves. I am an avid supporter of the classics, and I eagerly look forward to the Shakespeare units in English class. Even books that no matter how hard I try I cannot enjoy (even purists are not immune to boredom-inducing old English) I still support and wish were more widely appreciated. However, I still hesitate to pick up a book without a recommendation. If I were truly a literature purist and was devoted to finding the specific novels that fit my fancy, I’d devour everything in sight and weed out the diamonds in the

ruff. Instead, I'll ask a friend for a book recommendation. As part of my project, I wanted to figure out if most of the reason behind the popularity of books was because of culprits like myself: people who simply latch onto the favorites of other people and do not seek out hidden gems that haven't become popular yet.

Peer pressure, obviously, is a powerful source that seeps into every aspect of decision-making life. From deciding whether or not to drink at a party to where to go to college to buying a house, peer influence affects more than one might think. It is only natural that in a world containing millions upon millions of titles to choose from, we require some method of weeding out the good and the bad. Thus "best-selling" lists were born. These lists are easy to consult, and one doesn't have to worry about possibly wasting one's valuable time on a bad book because it has already been critically acclaimed to be a good book. It is easy to remain completely in the safe world of best-selling lists, as these are the most reliable recommendations out there. However, making it onto one of these lists is no small feat. Unfortunately, as one can easily see by reading quickly through a list of bestselling titles, the most popular and most highly recommended books are not necessarily based on the books "merit."

One day, Oprah decides to advertise on her show a new book she picked up on a whim at a cute little bookstore cafe while traveling across the country. Bam. Thirty million copies sold, because Oprah is smart and everyone wants to be like her. But Oprah is no English teacher, and perhaps her taste in books is less than stellar. Regardless, that novel is now being sold nationwide and is a commonly displayed at libraries everywhere. Or, a different, but more common scenario may occur. Oftentimes, a book has an original and extremely appealing subject matter and thus attracts a widespread audience. Case in point: *The Hunger Games*. According to

forbes.com, the trilogy's success is not because of their sophisticated word choice or Hemingway-esque writing style. The reason behind their popularity is because dystopian novels happen to be the new fad, and children being forced to kill each other is extremely appealing. Forbes has many theories as to why this is the case, (and are supported by various professional book reviewers) but namely, this is the first generation where young people are genuinely concerned about their future and the future of the earth itself. Therefore, dystopian novels mirror their uncertainty and dramatizes adolescents' fear of the future. The Hunger Games brilliantly encapsulates this fear and provides a thrilling scenario where young people can imagine the doom of their country. No surprise, the novel quickly rose to be the most popular book of the year, and even made its way to being a required reading for Newton North. It's edgy. It's engaging. And, most importantly, it's easy. Rarely have I picked up a book so easy to read and follow. A reader will be hard-pressed to find long, flowing, eloquent description characteristic of the Dickens' and the Austens of the world. Consider the following quote:

“And it's not about the sponsors. And it's not about what will happen when we get home. And it's not just that I don't want to be alone. It's him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.”

and this one..

"Handsome lad like you. There must be some special girl. Come on, what's her name?"
says Caesar.

Peeta sighs. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping."

Sounds of sympathy from the crowd. Unrequited love they can relate to.

She have another fellow?" asks Caesar.

I don't know, but a lot of boys like her," says Peeta.

So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?" says Caesar encouragingly.

I don't think it's going to work out. Winning...won't help in my case," says Peeta.

Why ever not?" says Caesar, mystified.

Notice the short, choppy sentences. They're easy to follow- no room for interpretation, no chance to be confused, and no time to consider any hidden meanings. Everything is laid out right away, and the reader is easily carried along. This is the second essential factor that rocketed The Hunger Games into fame: ease.

Books like The Hunger Games are fundamentally different from the books read in school, and this is what causes them to be so popular. If The Hunger Games was read and analyzed in school instead of Hamlet, there would no doubt be far more engaged and interested students. Why then, are these types of books not encouraged in school? Isn't the point to get children to read? Any English teacher will answer you no, that that is not necessarily the point. Books like The Hunger Games can create meaningful discussion, sure, but not to the level that The Scarlet

Letter or Catcher In The Rye can. If there is symbolism, it is discreet and likely passed over while reading. There are thought-provoking messages, but they are laid out quite obviously, and take away any of the guesswork and interpretation that Holden Caulfield forces upon his readers. Traditionally, these analytical skills have been deemed important enough to require students to learn them through required reading. It may seem obvious that the books students respond the least positively to are the ones that require the most work and interpretation. Using this concept, I decided to analyze the particulars behind why this is the case and if this was always the case.

As it turns out, there is an entire community of literature purists out there who seek to elevate the success of the authors whose books are quality but have yet to reach the masses. These are the quiet novels sitting in the corner shelves in suburban bookstores, accumulating dust, because the author doesn't have the money to print millions of copies. There are people, like German publisher Michael Kruger who dedicates his life to spreading the awareness of quality literature. As I researched more and more about him and people like him, I discovered something interesting: the reason behind the disproportionate number of sales of "good" and "bad" books is not because people are too lazy to seek out true quality. It is because we actually enjoy the bad quality. This appears to be pretty straightforward- bad quality writing is easy to read. However, the question arises of whether or not this is a new development. Has the enjoyment of less than stellar writing increased in recent years, or has this always been the case? I thought that perhaps studying the difference in reading habits in English teachers and their students could help shed some light on the question.

A Juxtaposition of Teachers and Students

As much as I admire and respect my current and past English teachers, I was wary to believe that they truly are as passionate about all the Shakespeare plays they pretend to be. I didn't quite believe that there is such a polar difference between students and English teachers, where for some reason young people can barely get through a chapter of Hamlet but teachers appear to read a whole play during afternoon tea. I decided to get true perspectives from both, and go from there. I first surveyed the English faculty at North and South. I asked questions about their favorite passages and characters, what they value most in a book, what do they consider the most important when teaching a work of literature, whether or not they read the books they teach for fun, and a number of others. My responses were hardly surprising.

According to my survey, the English faculty is a bunch of Shakespeare, Morrison, Dickenson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald lovers who for the most part read the books from their classrooms all the time for leisure. Their favorite monologues were the beautiful and heart wrenching pleas of Ophelia and Lady Macbeth. Their favorite passages included the complex character development of Junot Diaz and John Steinbeck. It was as if each teacher was replying to questions asked by an interviewer, but the responses were anonymous and honest. These are true literature lovers who are passionate about quality books. I was almost disappointed that there were no secret Shakespeare-haters. (Although one bold fellow admitted that he did not read Dickens for fun.)

After surveying the English faculty, I was wary to survey the students. I wanted more than the cliché "I'd like to read more but I don't have time," or the traditional "I like to read, but I hate the books we read in school." Instead of sending out a survey, I decided to hold a focus

group. I wanted the students to analyze their own responses in an open conversation to try to figure out why things are the way they are. I asked them questions about their reading habits and books they liked. (to reference my focus group materials, refer to Appendix I) I actually got quite a variety of responses, but in the discussion that followed, a few points were universally agreed upon. The main issue people had with reading was their lack of ability to focus. With distractions such as netflix and computers and social media, books simply are not stimulating enough anymore to engage short attention spans. I received responses such as, “*Focus [is the most difficult part of reading], I am used to doing more than one thing at a time and quickly moving from one thing to another, so just sitting and reading is difficult,*” and “*since I play a lot of video games, I crave the stimulation of many senses because so much happens when I am playing [video games].*”

Now, this is hardly a novel discovery. However, it did raise a few questions I hadn't thought about before. What about people who didn't have access to these sorts of distractors? Do they read more or less, and thus are they better writers? (Numerous studies have proven a strong correlation between quality of writing and the amount an individual reads. This is considered common knowledge.) However, the issue exists of locating individuals who *don't* have access to the aforementioned distractors. With this in mind, I decided to consult the generation before me. Another student in my focus group stated that “*To me, people are more antsy/anxious than in other generations- this could cause them to not stay focused*”. Clearly, people realize there is a difference in reading habits from when their parents were their age. Who better to study than an entire generation of people that grew up without any of the technologies we are so fortunate to have?

To get a more varied pool of results, I consulted adults in all fields of work. I asked them all one basic question: “as a kid and teenager, did you read for fun?” My parents said yes. My neighbors said yes. The lady at Supercuts said yes. The electrician that came to my house said yes. Those who could talk for longer provided more interesting responses. According to my mother, who grew up in rural Georgia with four siblings, often had no entertainment other than books. She’d read because she had nothing better to do. Interestingly, her response was similar to many of the other adults I consulted regardless of the circumstances of their childhoods. Our electrician grew up in Chicago, and also read books because oftentimes there was nothing better to do. In all, I got the general sense that my parents’ generation’s relationship to books mirrors that of current high schoolers’ relationship to social media.

Because of their much more positive view of childhood reading, my next task was to figure out if the writing of the past generation (and generations before) was obviously and significantly better. I dug out boxes and boxes of my old elementary and middle school papers, and bugged my parents and a few family friends until I acquired some of their old saved schoolwork as well. This is when my project took a very humbling turn.

I have always considered myself to be a good writer. My English teachers have always considered me to be a good writer. However, in comparison with school-aged children fifty years ago, my writing is frankly mediocre. Thanks to google docs, I found an essay I had written in seventh grade on the play *Twelve Angry Men*. My teacher thought it was so good that she gave me an A read it outloud to the class. For reference, here is an excerpt from it:

He clearly does not think much of people living in the same conditions as the accused boy. Being from the slums or from the Upper East Side, the possible criminal should have the

same chance to be proven innocent. By stereotyping everyone of the slums, Juror Ten is depicted as showing bigotry as well as prejudice. There are no hard facts that explain anything to support his claim. Being from the proven innocent. Disregarding this, Juror Ten states prejudice claims in an effort to influence the other jurors of his stereotypical views. The playwright is showing the reader of the personalities of each juror, and therefore giving hints as to why each person has their opinion, and if they will ever be convinced to change their vote.

Obviously, this sample is far from perfect, but I would argue it appears to be relatively typical of a middle schooler. Now, in eighth grade, my mother was required to read and analyze Paradise Lost. I read Paradise Lost in school as well, but not until my sophomore year of high school. Her handwritten essay from when she was thirteen or fourteen years old contains the following excerpt:

Satan, the opposite of God, dares to claim that God is not this perfect celestial being, and that his resentment of Him is justified. In these lines, Satan displays the conflict between man and God, and communicates his extreme hate toward his creator. Satan is constantly rebelling against God, and sinning against His wishes, causing him to lose favor with God.

She received a B on the assignment.

English Education Over Time

Perhaps this was not as indicative as I thought. Perhaps my mother was simply exceptional for her time. I called my grandmother one day, and asked if she had any textbooks or materials that she used when she was in school. I wanted to compare her literature education with mine, to see if our current standards truly have been lowered. She sent me a book titled: *Grammar School Reader: Book One* by William H. Elson and Christine Keck. It was published in 1911, and my grandmother had used it in her fourth-grade classroom. For context, she had grown up in a small rural town in Georgia of about 300 people. Her segregated school's population was under one hundred, and her teachers were less than extremely qualified. Yet, the difficulty of what she was expected to master is frankly mindblowing. In fourth grade, I was prepping for MCAS. In fourth grade, my grandmother apparently was reading Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Longfellow. I honestly couldn't name a single work by either of those two until a year or so ago.

In all, the textbook contains seventy stories and poems, none of which are easy, and is designed to be read and analyzed in under one school year. The book is formatted in a way such that after the story or poem is printed, there are a few pages of grammar and vocabulary exercises as well as analytical and thought-provoking questions. While eight-year old Polly Powell was analyzing why the blind men were in the wrong in the poem *The Blind Men And The Elephant* by John G. Saxe, I was learning how to regurgitate a single passage into a hamburger-style paragraph. Not only that, but I still have yet to have spent any quality time on grammar in school. There were a couple units here and there where I memorized a few rules and indicated which sentences had subjects and prepositions. These units were painfully boring, and held little lasting impressions. This fourth grade reader combines exciting tales such as Robin

Hood, and asks character and plot-based questions as well as integrates grammar practices. They even tell the students to re-create their own stories using the rules and mimicking the style of writing. Think about it: A fourth grader writing a story that mimics the style of writing of *Robin Hood*.

Needless to say, I was humbled. And disappointed. My grandmother, at age eight, was probably a better reader and writer than I was in Middle School. However, there is one more piece of evidence I discovered to help prove my point that literature education has dramatically decreased in quality, and our current standards for reading and writing are at an all-time low.

William Henry Powell, Sr. was a man who grew up in the early 1900s, once again in rural Georgia. He happens to be my great-grandfather, but all I know about him is that he wrote a book about the famous Savannah River and his love of fishing. William Powell attended school up until twelfth grade, when, as was a common practice at the time, he dropped out of school to help with his family farm. His family were hardly supporters of education, and viewed school as simply something to get through before he could come home and help them sell food to survive. There were no SAT classes, no scolding over receiving a C, and no talks of college. He received no college degree, and the last time he attended an educational class was when he was seventeen years old. Yet, for some reason, he decided to write a book sometime in his twenties. Keep in mind that this is a man who was less educated than most of the students at Newton North High School. Here is an excerpt from his book:

“My thoughts turned from the future to the past. I regretted the passing of the picturesque old steamers that plied this stream and of the hardy crews who manned them. There was a tear and a smile as memories crowded in of my father who spent most of his life as a member of one

of those crews. I remembered many of the boats and their names: Ethel, Swan, Merkerson, Louise, Two States, Augusta, New Dublin, and Katie, for which my little fishing boat was named. I can still hear the sounds of their melodious whistles as they echoed over the country side and I could see the people gathered at the landings to “meet the boat” for this was the only connection with the outside world. No one worried or hurried as we do now. Time meant little and fixed schedules even less. If the boat came in the morning, that was fine; if it didn’t steam in until afternoon, it was just as well; and even if its arrival was delayed until the morrow, nobody pulled his hair.”

It is not just the quality of writing that makes this such a stunning example. His incredible insight and ability to turn simple observations into engaging memories, while keeping the reader interested is uncharacteristic of someone with a seventeen year old’s education. He wrote one hundred pages of this, without any assignments or deadlines. Naturally, I assumed he was a prodigy of sorts and was not one’s average adult writer. While of course he might have had some secret talents, after consulting with my family and old family friends in Georgia who had known his family, he had apparently been a very average student. In fact, and I’m not sure whether or not I believe this, rumor has it that he failed English class at one point. The explanation for this is simple: even in his mediocre high school with an unsupportive family, the standards for his writing were exponentially higher than what they are now, allowing him to be an accomplished writer worthy of publishing without even a college degree.

So What?

I hope that I have been able to convincingly show you how the quality of grade-school English education has taken a hit. However, in order to come to true conclusions from this claim,

one must look at the big picture. Yes, students nowadays have lower standards for quality writing. However, is this necessarily a bad thing, or does it make sense for the time and circumstances we live in?

Referring to my previous sections about defining good writing, and how our definition of good writing has changed over the years, it appears that the quality of English education simply reflects that change. Other parts of our society, such as our technological and scientific advancements are experiencing groundbreaking breakthroughs. Perhaps science and technology is emerging as the more dominant and important aspect of education, and it is time for literature and writing to take a backseat. Perhaps our current writing standards are merely reflective of the fast-paced, rapidly changing and improving post-modern world we live in, and that this is simply the way things are. Perhaps the introduction of my grandmother's fourth-grade textbook that reads, "Reading holds a commanding position in the school course. It lies at the foundation of all other studies and is fundamental to advancement in them. Whatever makes for good reading makes for progress in all other branches," is no longer applicable. After all, who needs to write like Hemingway when the only thing that matters is accurately conveying one's ideas about the latest and greatest scientific discovery?

Hopefully, one is able to discern my own opinion about this issue, but even my opinion wavers. I am still a steadfast literature purist, and I still hold my *Romeo and Juliet* and *Catcher In The Rye* dear. After completing this research project, I am simultaneously appalled at how my writing compares to that of older generations, and determined to overcome my lowered standards. Hopefully, the reader will be able to recognize how much our English education has changed, and how this has contributed to widespread acceptance of low-quality writing. Study

upon study has attempted to pinpoint why we like the books we do based on stylistic criteria, but they fail, not because they are badly-conducted studies, but because good writing style is no longer valued. It is up to the reader to decide if this is simply a necessary evil in our evolving world based in science and technology, or if it is a true societal flaw. Will you accept that “good books” lack good writing? Will you continue to let your elementary school aged children read Captain Underpants instead of Robin Hood, because it's “better than nothing?”

Upon embarking on this CAPstone journey, my original question was centered around statistical studies online that tried to determine the true quality of a book based on statistics revolving around writing style. Obviously, my focus shifted into much more than simply analyzing a few computer programs. Now, the research I am most proud of are my analyzations of the shift in English education over the past century. I had wanted to use statistical analysis to prove why we value such low-quality literature nowadays, but my conclusions veered far off the path of statistics. The answer I had been looking for is what I have been experiencing the past thirteen years of my life: incredibly low standards for writing. I still consider myself a good writer in comparison to other students my age. I no longer consider myself a good writer. This is a rather depressing note to conclude my research paper on, but I implore the reader to view this not as a sad criticism of the flaws in our education system. I am not trying to criticize any teachers or principals or publishers or writers. I am simply letting you know of a change I have observed. Whether or not this change is positive, negative, or simply necessary is up to you. However, next time you see Captain Underpants in an elementary school library, consider complaining.

By: Lauren Benson

Appendix 1: Focus Group Materials

Welcome! Thanks for coming to my focus group!

Please read the following phrases from popular works of literature, and see if you can figure out the book or author they come from. *No judgement! :)

1) Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Book/Author: _____

2) “Even more, I had never meant to love him. One thing I truly knew - knew it in the pit of my stomach, in the center of my bones, knew it from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, knew it deep in my empty chest - was how love gave someone the power to break you”

Book/Author: _____

3) “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for at one time having been ashamed.”

Book/Author: _____

4) Firstly, I don't make love. I fuck... hard. Secondly, there's a lot more paperwork to do, and thirdly, you don't yet know what you're in for. You could still run for the hills. Come, I want to show you my playroom."

My mouth drops open. *Fuck hard!* Holy shit, that sounds so... hot. But why are we looking at a playroom? I am mystified.

"You want to play on your Xbox?" I ask. He laughs, loudly.

Book/Author: _____

5) "Get busy living or get busy dying."

Book/Author: _____

Thanks!!

Now. . . . please write True or False next to all of the following statements:

Note: answers are confidential

- 1) I wish I had more time to read on my own
- 2) I honestly enjoy chick lit and romance novels
- 3) I find reading to be an outdated pastime
- 4) Science and technology should be promoted in school---not reading books
- 5) I genuinely enjoy the books we read in school
- 6) I get really anxious when told to read out loud
- 7) I consider myself a good writer
- 8) I try to mimic my writing style after some of my favorite books
- 9) I care about improving my writing skills

- 10) I have, at some point in my life, kept a diary/journal/whatever you may call it
- 11) I read Fifty Shades of Grey. And liked it.
- 12) I pretend to enjoy cool and hip books, but I don't actually.
- 13) I just can't appreciate authors like Shakespeare whose writing takes way too long to analyze and figure out.
- 14) I prefer to read books written by authors of the same sex as me

Next, please answer the following open-ended questions. (Complete sentences not required)

- 1) If forced to choose a book for pleasure-reading, what sort of qualities would you look for? (i.e. genre, author, length)

2) What is the most difficult part of reading for you? For example, for many people, it is very difficult to stay focused long enough to read an entire book. Why do you think that is?

3) Would you consider yourself a technology-oriented person, or do you prefer the arts and literature?

4) How do you think students' relationships to reading and writing can be improved?

****Any other thoughts? If you'd like, feel free to list some of your favorite books/authors! Or, list some very strong adjectives describing your hatred of reading. ****

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