

Word Worth®

WORD WORTH

WORLD MAGAZINE OF
IDEAS AND THE ARTS

July & August 2010

Volume X Number 7 & 8

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Student A, one of 76.6 million in the United States, doesn't know very much. Student A is mostly ignored and Student A does not benefit from oversight. In the past few years, education has taken a backseat in Washington. With state budgets in the deep red and an ever expanding federal deficit, talk has turned from educational initiatives to funding cuts. ... but America's statistics are eye-opening. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based economic development organization...

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Confessions of a Reluctant ...

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Student A

The Homogenization of the American Pupil

by Sean Flury

How Student A Compares

Student A, one of 76.6 million in the United States, doesn't know very much. Student A is mostly ignored and Student A does not benefit from oversight. In the past few years, education has taken a backseat in Washington. With state budgets in the deep red and an ever expanding federal deficit, talk has turned from educational initiatives to funding cuts. In 2002, President Bush and Congress passed the "No Child Left Behind Act" (NCLB), using standardized testing in an attempt to bridge the gap between the top and bottom half of secondary school performers. Amidst an economic downturn and the effects NCLB, where does the American student stand? In 2009, a Gallup poll showed that more than three quarters of parents with children in grades K-12 are satisfied with the education that their children are receiving in American schools, but America's statistics are eye-opening. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based economic development organization for countries with a high Human Development Index (HDI), rates the U.S. 16th in secondary school graduation rates, 24th in math proficiency, 24th in problem solving skills, but a shocking 2nd in educational expenditure per student. In light of this data, should the conversation on American education be so focused on increased funding for schools as it has been for decades, or are we missing the point?

Studying our system and education systems from countries in Western Europe and Asia, many of which consistently rank higher than the U.S., we can begin to see the flaws in our system and what changes need to be made not only to benefit future generations of American pupils, but to keep America competitive in an increasingly global job market.

Championing Student A

Politics, on both federal and state levels, play an increasingly large role in what our children learn. Rather than offering curricula based on a student's natural abilities or presenting the option to focus on specific disciplines, new education mandates push for a more homogenized student body and drive teachers and schools to teach only the material required to do well on the standardized tests which determine further governmental funding.

Top- down dictation of education standards at the secondary level may look good on paper or on standardized tests, but the massive loss of opportunity cost seems to be overlooked when legislating new curriculum standards. The inflexibility of government-regulated curricula forces students with no affinity for math and science to take four years of both disciplines in high school in order to pass mandatory tests, rather than focusing on the strengths and interests of a student and helping them exceed at what they're good at. Simply put, the American system of education does not leave any room to consider student individuality.

The No Child Left Behind Act serves as a prime example of top-down governmental dictation. NCLB proposes that schools bridge the gap between the top and bottom students in each class by spending time and effort with students who need the most help in each curriculum. It utilizes standardized tests such as the SOL and Regents Exams to determine which districts are doing better than others. If a district or school is falling behind, it is given five years to make progress or face dramatic changes in the way it's run. Although it helped divert some funding to poor districts, we've seen that it isn't the lack of funding that dictates student performance but the administration of said funding. Overall, NCLB has created more problems than it has fixed. Teachers must focus on the standards set forth by regulated tests, or "teach to the test", rather than give students a broad understanding of a given subject. Along with narrowing fields of study, NCLB has also caused some districts to push students with sub-par test results toward G.E.D. programs. Because many states take G.E. D. students off of school rolls but don't consider them dropouts, schools with unsatisfactory testing results are able to artificially "bridge the gap" between the top and bottom of the class. In New York City alone, G.E. D. enrollment went up from 25,500 in 2002 when the bill was passed to more than 37,000 two years later.

Politics have even invaded our textbooks in recent months. The Texas State Board of Education recently passed a conservative-backed measure to include right-leaning alterations to text books. These proposed revisions include increasing sections devoted to the conservative movement in the '80s and '90s, reducing sections on Latino history and culture (an increasingly large part of Texas' population), touting a more positive look at McCarthyism and the Red Scare, downplaying Thomas Jefferson's role as a founding father (while emphasizing St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and William Blackstone as intellectual founders), and suggesting the inclusion of a statement from Confederate President Jefferson Davis to contrast a speech by Lincoln. These measures come a year after the Texas Board mandated that creationism and the theory of evolution be given equal consideration in classrooms.

The Texas Board of Education may only control the curriculum of schools in their state, but the effects are far-reaching. Because Texas dominates the U.S. textbook market, the size of its print run encompasses most of the textbook market in the U.S., meaning that the Texas Board really dictates the contents of about 80% of the pre-collegiate textbooks in the nation.

That sound you hear is Howard Zinn rolling in his grave.

Saving Student A

Proponents of education reform often cite Western European systems as a model for change. Belgium's students have consistently been ranked in top 10 in OECD's math and problem solving categories (6th in math and 7th in problem solving in 2003) yet they spend almost \$5,500 less per student per year than the U.S. does. The differences in the education systems of the U.S. and Belgium start at a very fundamental level. In the U.S., everyone pays a school tax to the district that they live in no matter if their children go to public schools or private. This creates a few basic problems. Parents who don't find their district's education standards acceptable have few choices. Considering the high cost of private schools or the cost moving to another school district with better schools (normally in more expensive neighborhoods) on top of compulsory education taxes, children in poor neighborhoods have especially few options. Not only does this impede social mobility in our country in the long run, it also creates an accountability problem for schools who receive basically the same amount of funding even if a large percentage of their students decide to go elsewhere. This creates what amounts to a government-run monopoly on pre-collegiate education.

Belgium has a significantly different system of education than that of the United States. Belgium's legislature has only a few national competency requirements in place but leaves most curriculum choices up to the school district and the individual students. Belgium has three different types of schools that parents can choose to send their children to: schools owned by communities, subsidized public schools owned by provinces or municipalities, and subsidized free schools run by a branch of the Catholic Church. Belgium uses a type of voucher system that diverts tax dollars based on attendance at each school, creating competition between schools to provide better education and attract more students and therefore more funding. The implementation of secondary education is also much different than here in the United States. Belgian secondary school consists of three cycles, each cycle increasing the options students are presented with to focus their curriculum. While first cycle students only get to choose a few hours of their day with mandated courses occupying the rest. Second and third cycle students are given the option of curriculum specializations such as Math-Science or Sociology-Language. Mandating core curriculum but allowing increased options for specialization help to push the best students in each field to excel with like-minded peers while providing options for students lacking direction.

What's Next For Student A?

Student A has a long road ahead of him. Building from NCLB, a new initiative named "Race to the Top" uses federal discretionary grants to reward districts who improve test scores and relies heavily on school test data to determine success or failure. Race to the Top hopes to create a national standardized testing system and reward teachers based on student performance data. Rather than relying on human judgment and developmental progress updates, the initiative only serves to further force a wide range of individuals to conform to rigorous academic regulations. Race to the Top also proposes budget cuts to schools who do not meet the standards it sets out. One glimmer of hope in the initiative is seen in its attempt to establish, across the

country, more charter schools which create competition within districts and generally help to improve education quality.

We have a lot of work to do. Student A needs help. Rather than building off an obviously flawed model, our lawmakers need to study working models that promote competition in the field of education. We need models that demand the betterment of Student A, rather than ones that simply expect it. This isn't a choice.

America needs to fix its education system or face the long-term consequences. Dropping out of high school, getting a factory job, and buying a trailer isn't the American Dream. Student A deserves better.

- <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Stossel/story?id=1500338>
- <http://www.saratogafalcon.org/content/us-education-falling-behind-those-other-countries>
- [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ynews/20100315/ts_ynews/ynews_ts1253?om_rid=DKrZBL&om_mid=BLn3R8B8GcIg\\$o&](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ynews/20100315/ts_ynews/ynews_ts1253?om_rid=DKrZBL&om_mid=BLn3R8B8GcIg$o&)
- <http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=7708>
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- <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122432/Parents-Rate-Schools-Higher-Americans-Overall.aspx>
- <http://www.4uth.gov.ua/usa/english/educ/files/spending.gif>

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Confessions of a Reluctant **HARRY POTTER** Fan

Or How I Learned to Appreciate the Snark and Bil l ow

by Marie O'Donnell

It all started off so innocently. I never set out to become a resident of the “Potterverse,” the world of everything Harry Potter-related. I definitely never expected to become a devoted fan (called “Fangirls”) of the snarky Potions’ Master, Severus Snape.

I’m a mature woman, with grandchildren, even — which was the excuse I used to read the first “kid’s” book about the boy wizard and his adventures. The last thing I expected was to become someone who gets as thrilled over the release of a book or movie as a 16-year-old anticipating getting their drivers’ license.

Yet, after I had caught up with the books already released, there I was, putting in my pre-orders on Amazon so I would have my copy of the upcoming book delivered the day it was released in the stores. (I just wasn’t quite up to dressing up and waiting in line at one of the “book release” parties held at various book stores...even **I** have my dignity –cough, cough.)

In my own defense I have to say it kind of snuck up on me. I had just finished reading several Kay Scarpetta novels and was looking for something “light.” I’d heard of the “Harry Potter Phenomenon,” but wasn’t interested at first, considering it a passing fad. Children’s books. Kids reading again? Hah! That wouldn’t last long.

Then, like I said, under the guise of “checking out” the books before I bought one for my oldest grandson, I picked up a paperback copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. It wasn’t a large book, and when I sat down to read it I figured it would just be a nice, relaxing few days.

Then, before I knew it...zap! I was hooked. From the time Harry went to Diagon Alley (a place in London that non-magic folk, called “Muggles,” can’t see) to get all of his school supplies, I had suspended belief and was walking along with him and Hagrid, the twelve-foot-tall grounds-keeper from Hogwarts’ School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who was escorting Harry.

It was complete escapism, and I loved it. A chance to get away from RL (what Potter fans call Real Life). It was also the book that introduced one of Harry’s adversaries, Professor Severus Snape, who makes the most poetic introduction to his Potions class imaginable. I was a Snape fan from that moment on, no matter how much he “snarked,” or how badly he treated Harry. Anyone who so eloquent had to be OK. Besides, he wore black wizards’ robes which “billowed” when he stalked through the castle.

I finished the book in a day or so, and was soon purchasing *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and, shortly after that, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, a book which I consider one of the turning points of the series. In PoA, Harry is older and the plot starts to get darker and more complicated.

I caught up with the books already in print with *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, and made sure to have my pre-orders in quickly so I didn’t have to wait any longer than necessary to receive *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, or *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Each book was bigger and better than the last, and, when I had read the last page of *Deathly Hallows*, I felt that I was leaving old friends behind.

I also discovered several websites where Potter fans congregate to discuss their favorite books, favorite characters, translation of the books to film, and right now, what we are hoping for in the *Deathly Hallows* movies.

I was surprised to find the diversity of people who populate the Potterverse. I thought, when I first went on one of the forums it would be mostly children...silly me.

There are some children, usually in their mid to late teens, but, the majority of those posting on the various threads are adults. These are not people who have nothing else to do with their time, either. While some are free-lance writers and enjoy practicing their skills writing “fanfic,” or stories they’ve created using the HP characters, most are average, everyday people with jobs and lives. A majority that I’ve chatted with on the site that visit the most are college graduates, many with Masters or Doctorates. There are teachers, from grade school up through college professors. There are businessmen and women, students, homemakers, artists, people in the military, and people from just about every other walk of life.

I've gotten so many different viewpoints on the books from the discussion threads that I've now read the series through five times and each time I've found something that I missed during my previous readings: a new way of interpreting a statement or a different way of looking at a scene. It's like a book club on line. And, I found out very quickly that each character's fans take their heroes very personally, and the discussion groups can become very heated.

What we all seem to have in common, though, is the love of a good story well-told, and an appreciation for courage, loyalty, perseverance, friendship, and love. Those are the things that bind the characters in the books together, and the fans.

While the websites add to the books, it is the characters and their stories that have burrowed their way into my heart. After living with them for almost ten years, they seem a bit like family. And to think, I didn't even want to meet them at first. What a loss that would have been.

For anyone who hasn't read the series, I would highly recommend it. For those who have seen only the movies – you might want to read the books, because the movies, while good, can't really do justice to the intricacies of the plots like the books can.

And, if there are any other “mature” Harry Potter fans out there (especially if you're a Snape fan in particular), I hope that the Potterverse has given you as much pleasure and entertainment as it's given me.

Now, let's all head down to the Three Broomsticks. The butterbeer is on me!

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SELECTED POEMS BY ROBERT COATS

Robert Coats, PhD has over 35 years of experience focusing on the hydrologic and ecological effects of land management on aquatic ecosystems. This work has concentrated in two areas: wetlands and forested watersheds. In both areas, he has drawn on his background in hydrology, ecology, and soil science. His long-term research interests are focused on nitrogen cycling and biogeochemistry at the watershed level. For a number of years, he has developed a passion for writing poetry.

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Gathering Black Walnuts

My father in faded khaki against
the slate November sky, knocking
down wild black walnuts and I
a small bundled boy standing
among brown leaves beneath,
hunting and bagging the pungent globes.

Like peasants in the forest
we shoulder our
sacks of acrid treasure,
trudge homeward through
fading autumn light
to a bright kitchen.

On the newspapered floor
we husk them, pounding
each nut through a hole in a board,
tossing them into a wire basket to ripen
and staining our hands yellow-brown.

Today as I pruned the high crown
of our backyard walnut
my son came out to watch.
I paused to shift my balance.
He smiled up at me and I
remembered.

Maryland Deals with Brown vs. Board of Education

They lived apart in a flimsy war-time tract on Seven Locks Road. Their mothers were our maids, their fathers we saw fishing for carp in the canal that passed near the swimming pool I didn't notice was for Whites only.

Oh, we were hot-shit Korean War fighter pilots on our Schwinns and J.C. Higgens, until the day those kids came flying down the hill, open shirts streaming behind, guns across their handle bars, and my mouth filled with cotton as I fled home.

Then the golden rod was blooming and I met Henry near the brick school he never knew, and he told me they were just BB guns and we talked about starting junior high, how you be lucky you don't get Miss Jones for English, all the kids say she's mean.

Standing around that first day in the big schoolyard waiting for the bell, nervous as the grownups but for different reasons, and it rang and we herded ourselves into the hallways, I found my homeroom and met Romulus Meekens, who told me he hopped the freight train to school and maybe it was true, maybe it wasn't, but I was thinking: I never knew. Jesus, I just never knew.

Mulberry

My father hauled planks of oak
from a peckerwood mill, wood so hard
he had to drill holes for nails
to build us a hide-out in the mulberry
tree with crotches soon polished
to golden-brown by bare feet,

a fort with inner-tube strips
nailed in forks to fire rocks
at attacking armies, a room to
play doctor with the girl next door,
her mother always calling her
just when it was getting good.

A place to sleep on muggy summer nights,
rise and prowl the deserted streets,
to wake at dawn in the cool
damp-wood smell, to the churk of
robins come to gobble the purple fruit,
to bell-clear liquid notes
of a wood thrush in deep honeysuckle.

Reclaiming Axes

Cleaning out the in-laws' place
I find an axe the old man left out by the woodpile:
blade rusted, edge nicked, handle checked,
eye slightly spread from pounding.
A 36-inch Craftsman with 4 lb. head, like the one
our father taught my brother and me to use.

*We piled into the jeep, headed
up McGee Creek on a narrow road
known only to shepherders and prospectors,
tall grass between the ruts.
In an aspen grove, the way blocked by
beaver-felled trunks,
he showed us how to chop.*

Home in the shop, I sand and oil the handle,
strip rust with emery cloth and naval jelly
grind the blade on a rumbling
hand-cranked wheel.

*The wide stance, feet planted, knees flexed,
a full-arc swing that begins
below the waist, your right hand
sliding on the shaft as the head descends.
Shift weight, lean into the stroke
and the blade bites, angling
deep into creamy wood.
Then the back-hand blow that
clears the kerf, sends chips flying.*

File out the last nick, hone off
the wire edge with oilstone,
tighten the head by setting
the eye-wedge deeper.

That was the summer

*we camped at the old Rio Tinto mine,
cut poles of cottonwood to pitch our
A-frame tents guyed to pegs we drove
with the side of the blade,
so's not to spread the eye.*

*At dusk the nighthawks
whirred and zizzed the brittle desert air.*

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Kick the Can

In the days before television,
before moms were fearful, when
oak leaves turned from scarlet
to brown, rattled in the north wind,
It was time.

We'd round up the neighbor kids,
fish a can from the garbage
(No. 10 is best), chalk
a circle on the road for base,
set the can at its center.

All right feet in a circle, I'd
chant the old quatrain:

*“Engine, engine, number nine
going down Chicago line
If the train runs off the track
do you want your money back?”*

Tapping each sneakered toe in turn.

David, Billy or Lex would give
the can a good running kick--
we'd scatter and hide,
leaving IT to retrieve the can,
close eyes and count.

I was master of the Long Sneak,
into the woods, along the creek,
circling around three blocks away,
wriggling under fences to reach
my favorite hiding place,
the last kid free.

When IT ventured too far
from base, his back to me,
I'd make my move,
the prisoners cheering,
IT yelling "onetwothree on Robert"

but I'd beat him to the base,
fetch the can a good kick,
the kids running and screaming,
the can clattering clattering
down the years.

Ten Year Old Hero

Me and Eddy were down by the creek, cutting
bamboo spears for a war,
heard a loud crashing in the bushes,
and Eddy goes, “Hey, it’s a horse!”,
but I saw horns and a big gray hump,
and said “that’s no horse, that’s a Brahma bull!”

So we lit out for the fallen-tree bridge,
stayed there ‘til we felt safe enough
to run home, tell my mom, who believed us,
and called the sheriff.

Cops, cowboys with
pickups and horse trailers
swarmed the neighborhood,
tracked and corralled the beast,
returned him to the rodeo.

We got our names in the paper.
Back in school, lunch-time
brown-eyed Jennifer asked me:
“How does it feel to be a hero?”
“Oh”, I said, “it’s no big deal”.

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