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What literature texts are being taught in Years 7 to 9?
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What literature texts are being taught in Years 7 to 9? Judith Kneen, Cardiff Metropolitan University

We have been exploring this apparent area of teacher autonomy, to see what literature is being taught in Year 7 to 9, and to begin to gain some insight into how it is taught. The study has been conducted by researchers from six universities in Wales and South-West England.

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Engaging with literature is a key element of the secondary English curriculum, and this research project sought to find out more about the nature of that engagement for learners in years 7 to 9 (Key Stage 3). We focused on the pre-GCSE years, because teachers still have the main influence on the choices of text taught at this stage. With evidence from the latest PISA results indicating disengagement with reading for many ('more than half of pupils in England agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I read only if I have to"', Videbaek, 2020) it would seem prudent for teachers to consider reading choices very carefully.

Primarily, the study looked at what choices were being made by English departments and teachers about the literature taught in Key Stage 3. The results reveal that the 'diet' of literature experienced by these learners is generally limited and does not exhibit the diversity that we might hope for, considering the wealth of literature available.

The study was carried out by researchers in six universities in Wales and South-West England. We conducted a detailed online survey of schools in ITE partnerships with the universities. With the survey also promoted by the UKLA, over 170 schools from the UK and abroad responded. The survey was followed up by semi-structured interviews with colleagues from nine schools, selected to provide a balance of school types. We focused on exploring their choices and approaches for teaching literature in the early secondary years. The survey and interviews have provided a rich set of data, which reveals some interesting (and challenging) results. Some of the results are shared here, together with some of the key findings. We have highlighted novels here, not because they are more important, but because 'we expend a large amount of class time in English lessons reading and talking about novels' (Bleiman, 2020, p.154).

Prose/novels

These tables provide the most studied prose texts for each year group. The first column indicates the ranking, whilst the second columns shows the frequency (the number of times this text was indicated as being taught), and this is followed by title, author, year of publication, and then whether the author and protagonist are female (F) or male (M).

Top-ranking prose texts

Year 7						
Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	23	The Boy / Striped Pyjamas	Boyne	2006	M	M
2	22	Holes	Sachar	1998	M	M
3	21	Private Peaceful	Morpurgo	2003	M	M

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
4=	20	Boy	Dahl	1984	M	M
4=	20	Skellig	Almond	1998	M	M
6	13	A Monster Calls	Ness	2011	M	M
7	10	War Horse	Morpurgo	1982	M	M
8=	9	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
8=	9	A Christmas Carol	Dickens	1843	M	M
8=	9	Harry Potter series	Rowling	From 1997	F	M

Year8

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	27	The Boy / Striped Pyjamas	Boyne	2006	M	M
2	18	Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck	1937	M	M
3	17	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
4	16	The Hunger Games	Collins	2008	F	F
5	13	Stone Cold	Swindells	1993	M	M
6=	12	Holes	Sachar	1998	M	M
6=	12	Private Peaceful	Morpurgo	2003	M	M
8=	10	Frankenstein	Shelley	1818	F	M
8=	10	War Horse	Morpurgo	1982	M	M
10=	9	Nineteen Eighty-Four	Orwell	1949	M	M
10=	9	Noughts and Crosses	Blackman	2001	F	F&M

Year 9

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	81	Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck	1937	M	M
2	20	A Christmas Carol	Dickens	1843	M	M
3	19	Stone Cold	Swindells	1993	M	M
4	15	Animal Farm	Orwell	1945	M	M
5	14	To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee	1960	F	F
6	13	Lord of the Flies	Golding	1956	M	M
7	12	Frankenstein	Shelley	1818	F	M
8	11	The Curious Incident…	Haddon	2003	M	M
9	9	The Hunger Games	Collins	2008	F	F
10	8	Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde	Stevenson	1886	M	M

Looking at the age of the texts tells us that they tend to grow older with each year group. The most recently published text is *A Monster Calls* (2011) taught in Year 7, and most of the Year 7 texts are twentieth and twenty-first century. By Year 9, we find only three texts published in the last 30 years, with the rest being over 60 years old. Popular nineteenth-century texts at Key Stage 3 are *A Christmas Carol, Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The appearance of *Of Mice and Men* in Years 8 and 9 is no doubt a repercussion of it being removed as a GCSE Literature set text in England. It is the most frequently read text across Key Stage 3 in the survey.

Across these lists, the number of different writers is more limited than might be expected. Twenty texts appear in these top-ranking lists, 50% of which are used in more than one year group. The

most popular authors are Michael Morpurgo, with two texts (Private Peaceful and War Horse) being taught in both Years 7 and 8, and George Orwell, whose *Animal Farm* is taught in all year groups, as well as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Year 8.

Male writers predominate. There is one female author in the Year 7 list and this rises to three in Year 8 and three in Year 9. More concerning, perhaps, is the dearth of female protagonists.   There are no female protagonists in the top-ranking texts for Year 7 and only two in Year 8 and two in Year 9. If female characters are being mostly portrayed as supportive to the main character (e.g. Hermione in Harry Potter novels), or as powerless (e.g. Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*), or as unflattering figures of fun (e.g. Mrs Pratchett in *Boy*), then we must ask what messages we are giving about girls and women to our learners (both boys and girls) through our presentation of them in literature.

The situation is even more extreme in relation to race and ethnicity. Malorie Blackman is the only author of colour to feature in these prose lists. For students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, we must question and challenge the impact of their under-representation in the literature we are teaching.

Below, we have also provided the top-ranking tables for poetry and for plays. Whilst we do not have the space to explore our findings here, you will note how few modern texts and writers are being taught. There are similar issues relating to inclusion and diversity, with few female poets and no female dramatists. John Agard and Maya Angelou are the only poets of colour, and there are no drama texts by writers of colour.

Conclusions

The data we have shared here raises three particular areas of significance about the texts that were commonly taught in the schools we surveyed:

1) the paucity of female writers and protagonists
2) the lack of authors and characters of colour
3) a tendency for dated texts.

We are not suggesting wholesale change of the content of school stock cupboards. Departments have financial constraints and we also recognise why many of these texts are popular and worth studying. However, having a keen awareness of the literature 'diet' being provided for learners across Key Stage 3 must be an important part of department planning. Asking questions about how we create an engaging, exciting and inspiring literature curriculum which is also diverse and inclusive curriculum and diversity, should help shape a clear vision for the teaching of literature.

We hope this research sparks discussions amongst teachers and within departments about what literature is taught and then perhaps how it is taught. We have provided an audit for departments, to capture what literature is being taught and prompt discussions and planning about this important area of English teaching.

The audit document can be found here: https://ukla.org/wp-content/uploads/KS3-literature-audit.pdf

Top-ranking poetry texts

Year 7

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	17	Beowulf	Anon	c. 1000	?	M
2	14	The Tyger	Blake	1794	M	M?
3	13	Canterbury Tales	Chaucer	1387/1400	M	M
4=	11=	Jabberwocky	Carroll	1871	M	M
4=	11=	The Highwayman	Noyes	1906	M	M
6	10	The Eagle	Tennyson	1851	M	M
7	9	The Raven	Poe	1845	M	M
8=	8	Dulce Et Decorum Est	Owen	1917	M	M
8=	8	The Lady of Shalott	Tennyson	1833/1842	M	F
10=	2	Blackberry Picking	Heaney	1966	M	M
10=	2	Rime / Ancient Mariner	Coleridge	1798	M	M
10=	2	First Day at School	McGough	?	M	M

Year8

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	24	Dulce Et Decorum Est	Owen	1917	M	M
2	12	The Raven	Poe	1845	M	M
3=	7	Rime / Ancient Mariner	Coleridge	1798	M	M
3=	7	The Tyger	Blake	1794	M	M?
5	6	Canterbury Tales	Chaucer	1387/1400	M	M
6=	4	Beowulf	Anon	c. 1000	?	M
6=	4	The Lady of Shalott	Tennyson	1833/1842	M	F
6=	4	Who's for the Game?	Pope	1917	F	F
9=	3	Ode to Autumn	Keats	1819	M	M
9=	3	The Eagle	Tennyson	1851	M	M

Year 9

Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	38	Dulce Et Decorum Est	Owen	1917	M	M
2	8	The Raven	Poe	1845	M	M
3	4	Remains	Armitage	2015	M	M
4=	3	Rime / Ancient Mariner	Coleridge	1798	M	M
4=	3	The Tyger	Blake	1794	M	M?
4=	3	Half-Caste	Agard	2005	M	M
4=	3	The Soldier	Brooke	1914	M	M
4=	3	Who's for the Game	Pope	1917	F	F
4=	3	Still I Rise	Angelou	1978	F	F
4=	3	Porphyria's Lover	Browning	1836	M	M

Top-ranking drama texts

	Year 7					
Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	36	MND	Shak'peare	1595-96	M	F/M
2	25	The Tempest	Shak'peare	1611	M	M
3=	12	Macbeth	Shak'peare	1606	M	M
3=	12	Romeo and Juliet	Shak'peare	1595-96	M	F/M
5	10	Frankenstein (adapted)	Pullman	1990	M	M
6	6	Much Ado About Nothing	Shak'peare	1598-99	M	F/M
7	4	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
8=	2	Hamlet	Shak'peare	1599-1601	M	M
8=	2	Julius Caesar	Shak'peare	1599	M	M
8=	2	Merchant of Venice	Shak'peare	1597	M	F/M
8=	2	Richard III	Shak'peare	1592	M	M

	Year8					
Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	18	Macbeth	Shak'peare	1606	M	M
2	16	Romeo and Juliet	Shak'peare	1595-96	M	F/M
3	14	The Tempest	Shak'peare	1611	M	M
4=	11	A Midsummer Night's Dream	Shak'peare	1592	M	F/M
4=	11	Much Ado About Nothing	Shak'peare	1598-99	M	F/M
6	7	Frankenstein (adapted)	Pullman	1990	M	M
7=	5	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
7=	5	Our Day Out	Russell	1977	M	F/M
9	4	Twelfth Night	Shak'peare	1601	M	F
10	3	The Curious Incident… (adapted)	Stephens	2013	M	M

	Year 9					
Rank	Freq	Title	Author	Year	Author	Protag
1	38	Romeo and Juliet	Shak'peare	1595-96	M	F/M
2	28	Macbeth	Shak'peare	1606	M	M
3	11	An Inspector Calls	Priestley	1945	M	M
4	8	Much Ado About Nothing	Shak'peare	1598-99	M	F/M
5	7	The Tempest	Shak'peare	1611	M	M
6	5	Our Day Out	Russell	1977	M	F/M
7=	3	Dracula (adapted)	Calcutt	2003	M	M
7=	3	Blood Brothers	Russell	1985	M	M
9=	2	A View from the Bridge	Miller	1955	M	M
9=	2	The Crucible	Miller	1953	M	M

9=	2	Hamlet	Shak'peare	1600	M	M
9=	2	Importance/Being Earnest	Wilde	1895	M	M
9=	2	Journey's End	Sherriff	1928	M	M
9=	2	Julius Caesar	Shak'peare	1599	M	M
9=	2	Merchant of Venice	Shak'peare	1597	M	F/M
9=	2	Richard III	Shak'peare	1592	M	M

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