

Now Johnny's parents can't read

"Parents and members of the Silver Lake School Committee think Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, and Charles Dickens are boring," the United Press International article someone left on my desk reported, "so they threw out a summer reading list for honors and advanced students that included their works."

"Isn't that the school you went to?" I was asked.

I couldn't believe my eyes, and I was embarrassed for the high school I graduated from.

"One member of the school committee who voted against the reading list said she 'had not heard of half the books on the list,' according to the *Patriot Ledger* of Quincy," the article said. "The committee member, Karen Haley of Kingston, graduated from Silver Lake two years ago, the paper said."

I thought about the English teachers I had in school and what their reactions would be to this news.

I had one of the best high school English educations possible, and I hated the idea of teachers being handicapped by such an ignorant school committee.

When I was in school I had to read Shakespeare, Dickens, John Steinbeck, and T.H. White, to name a few.

That was when I fell in love with literature. That was when I fell in love with school.

Karen Haley was in school with my younger sister. Priscilla read many of the same books I read, and she fell in love with literature, too.

"The school committee should be forced to read all those books and take a year-long course on them," I muttered to myself, but then I thought, "They would probably be more difficult to teach than the students."

I could imagine them staring blankly at the teacher as she tried to prod them into discussion of a book they obviously merely skimmed through or hadn't read.

Frankly, I was bored to tears by math, physics, biology, and chemistry when I was in high school, and I would have been thrilled had I been told I didn't need to bother with them anymore.

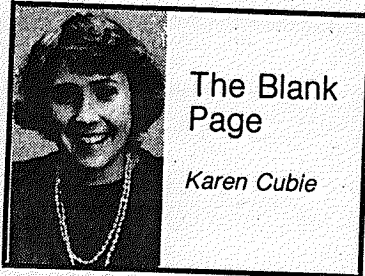
But I never heard of any one throwing out science materials because they were boring, and today I'm glad I was forced to study them.

The major misunderstanding most people have when they think about English is that is merely the study of grammar.

English, or literature as it is usually called in college, is much more than grammar. It is the study of ideas, of human nature, and of the way man thinks and looks at the world around him.

I had very little grammar after junior high.

The advanced placement course at Silver Lake dealt mostly with the exploration and discussion of



The Blank Page

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skills many of my science teachers sorely needed.

The school committee's attitude towards the books on the reading list reflects the attitude our society as a whole has for art, literature, and other liberal arts subjects.

"You're an English major?" I was often asked in college. "What do you want to do with it? Teach?"

Although teaching is a fine profession, it isn't the only skill an English student develops.

An English degree is considered a desirable attribute in public relations, business, and many other professions.

The study of English, history, and other liberal arts subjects teaches students to think — not

just spell; and communicate — not just read.

Another common misconception about English is a good reader is a fast reader.

"JoAnne DeClerq (a parent) of Pembroke, said her son, who is in advanced placement, stopped reading the science magazine *Discover* last summer after he was forced to 'plow' through Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' and 'didn't want to read,' " the UPI article continued.

A good reader doesn't plow through any good book, but reads slowly for comprehension, and tries to savor the mood, flavor, and style of the work.

I have always been an avid reader, but I have never been a fast one.

A good reader reads a work of literature differently from reading a textbook or a scientific manuscript.

A work of literature asks the reader to become involved with it. You cannot really understand a novel, a poem, or a short story if you read only to glean information.

A good work of literature offers the reader a chance to share an experience. It also helps the

reader view the world through different eyes.

One of the books expelled from the high school with the reading list was Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, probably one of the most relevant works of literature today.

Paton's novel is about apartheid in South Africa. Its story looks at the situation from all sides.

It's easy to forget about the problems in such a far-away part of the world, but *Cry, the Beloved Country* opens the readers eyes and brings the struggle of distant peoples close to home.

Not all school committee members favored the elimination of the summer reading list.

"I would not be able to sleep this evening if I didn't tell you how disappointed I am in this," Supt. Paul Squarcia told the committee members after the vote.

"I was absolutely dumbfounded," said committee chairman Sam Erbe. "It seemed to me were throwing the baby out with the bath water."

I hope the school committee realizes its mistake and eventually approves the book list.

Some students are bored by literature, but it's the only reason other students still go to school.

