Query

From: Joe Mark at Castleton State College

We continue to struggle to find the right reading to assign to first-year student entering Castleton in August. It feels like a variation of the story of the three bears to me: some porridge is too hot and some is too cold but none is "just right."

We've probably generated a list of 15 or 20 books at this point, but to date we've rejected them all. We've set April 15 as our deadline for making a decision, but I'm still thinking that others who have put their minds to this might be able to offer far more exciting and appropriate suggestions.

Might it be possible to inquire among ADP or even all AASCU institutions as to what they have used successfully as first-year reading assignments?

Appendix of Responses

Responses listed by chief academic officer, unless otherwise noted.

We had similar challenges, but settled on a book for our summer reading project for freshman we thought would provide fertile discussion topics and follow up even though it may not appear, at first glance, to be an ideal ADP title.

Each freshman at SUNY College at Brockport participates in the Summer Reading Program. The purpose of this program is to help orient new students to the Brockport academic community by having a common reading experience with fellow classmates and faculty members. First-year students will receive a copy of the book with support materials and additional information about the program in early July.

The reading for Summer 2004 is Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America, Barbara Ehrenreich’s account of what it is like to make a living on the salary of a low paid or "unskilled" worker. Taking jobs as a waitress, cleaning woman, nursing home assistant and Wal-Mart employee in three different cities across the nation, Ehrenreich recounts her efforts to make ends meet.

By bringing the issues of our economy, the income gap, and our large low paying service industries to readers through her portraits of the working poor, Ehrenreich draws a topic often depicted in charts and statistics into compelling narratives.

The summer reading project is a valued tradition at SUNY Brockport that has been reintroduced as a result of our involvement in the American Democracy Project for Civic Engagement, a national, multi-campus initiative that seeks to foster informed civic engagement in the United States. The project seeks to create a greater intellectual understanding and commitment to participate in the civic life of the United States. SUNY Brockport President Paul Yu reflects: “Colleges and universities both have a responsibility, and are in a position, to enable moral and civic learning in their students that will yield sturdy citizens in the future. This is the essence of the American Democracy Project. SUNY Brockport is proud to be one of the first colleges in the nation to participate in this important program."

Students will be asked to react to the book during the Orientation weekend and throughout the semester. They will also take part in discussions, projects and lectures debating noteworthy themes generated by the
book. Professors in all first-year courses will assume that their students have carefully read the assigned book.

For additional questions about the summer reading, (585) 395-5646 or e-mail sarno@brockport.edu

Sharon Vasquez, State University of New York College at Brockport

We are looking at one used at Shaw University "Ethics and Values Reader" published by Copley in Mass.

Dr. Jennifer Doyle, jennifer@coastal.edu, Coastal Carolina University

The place I would look is the books that are being used by colleges in what are called "the common reading experience" or "the summer reading experience". I seem to recall that we were keeping a list of those down at the USC National Resource Center. The researcher who would handle that is Carrie Linder (carriew@gwm.sc.edu/803-777-6225). She is a truly outstanding former student of mine and has been intimately involved in managing the USC common reading experience or as they call it "The First-Year Reading Experience". The web site for the first year seminar reading book list is http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/reading/read.html

Still another avenue for you to pursue counsel on this would be to sign on to the FYE List via the USCNRC web site, if you are not already on that list, some 1600+ subscribers, and post the very same question. I know you will get a lot of replies. Great question. : http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/reading/read02.html

John Gardener, Executive Director, Policy Center on the First Year of College, Brevard College

At Middle Tennessee State University, we'll be using "Naked in Baghdad" by NPR reporter Anne Garrels as our summer reading selection. Ms. Garrels will address all new students at our opening university Convocation, and will join two of our journalism sections for their first day of class.

The book description is as follows:

As National Public Radio's senior foreign correspondent, Anne Garrels has covered conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. She is renowned for direct, down-to-earth, insightful reportage, and for her independent take on what she sees. One of only sixteen un-embedded American journalists who stayed in Baghdad's now-legendary Palestine Hotel throughout the American invasion of Iraq, she was at the very center of the storm. Naked in Baghdad gives us the sights, sounds, and smells of our latest war with unparalleled vividness and immediacy.

Garrels's narrative starts with several trips she made to Baghdad before the war, beginning in October 2002. At its heart is her evolving relationship with her Iraqi driver/minder, Amer, who becomes her friend and confidant, often serving as her eyes and ears among the populace and taking her where no other reporter was able to penetrate. Amer's own strong reactions and personal dilemma provide a trenchant counterpoint to daily events. The story is also punctuated by e-mail bulletins sent by Garrels's husband, Vint Lawrence, to their friends around the world, giving a private view of the rough-and-tumble, often dangerous life of a foreign correspondent, along with some much-needed comic relief.

The result is enthralling, deeply personal, utterly authentic—an on-the-ground picture of the war in Iraq that no one else could have written. As Chicago Sun-Times critic Lloyd Sachs wrote about Garrels's work in Baghdad, "a few choice words, honestly delivered, are worth more than a thousand pictures . . . In your mind's eye, they carry lasting truth."

Please let me know if I can be of assistance in providing additional information.

Debra Sells, Associate Vice President, Academic Support Services, Middle Tennessee State University

Towson's program has been a joint effort between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs since 1999. A committee composed of Student Affairs professionals and English Dept. faculty read 6-8 books and then choose one based on literary quality, breadth of application to a wide range of thought and disciplines, appeal to young minds and cost of the speaker. Cost is a significant variable in the choice. While the selection is not required we make every attempt to have freshmen composition faculty require the book for their students and we distribute the book to all First Year Experience faculty so they can encourage their freshmen advisees to buy and read the selection. We also try to use...
the reading as a way to encourage faculty and students to engage in events outside of class together that are both social and involve some scholarship. We hope this process begins with the author's lecture in early October. The books we have chosen are listed below with my assessment of their impact on our freshmen and the quality of the author's presentation.

1999 - Tuesday's With Morrie by Mitch Albom - not great literature and not great speaker. I think it falls into the realm of "It was a dark and stormy night..."

2000 - Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt - excellent book, superb speaker, really communicated the art of writing, marvelous story teller, lives in NY and affordable.

2001 - The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien - excellent book, superb speaker, very, very effective in communicating the writing process, based on his own experience in Vietnam and spoke just after 911. Many of our students are from NY and others near D.C. A very powerful evening.

2002 - Nickled and Dime by Barbara Ehrenreich - good book, speaker OK, stirred some controversy on campus as some faculty and students thought her disingenuous since she did have other choices for her life and was simply "playing at" being exploited for the purpose of writing a book.

2003 - Stirring the Mud by Barbara Hurd - book very provocative in a back door or "aha!" way, but perhaps too subtle for the average 18 year old. Author lives and teaches at Frostburg State University in Maryland so had local appeal and was less expensive.

2004 - Kindred by Octavia Butler - for fall 2004 so we will have to wait and see.

I do hope this helps. Please do not hesitate to contact me should need more information.

Maggie Faulkner, Towson University

Dr. Nadene Keene has taken Composing a Civic Life as the core reading for her freshman rhetoric class this coming fall.

Stewart Green, Indiana University, Kokomo

At Kennesaw State University, we solved this issue by creating our own text for KSU 1101, Freshman Seminar. This book is written by a number of KSU faculty members from different disciplines. It's title is: Making Connections, Achieving Success, Understanding Others: The First-Year Experience at Kennesaw State University. The text is published by Kendall/Hunt and is the faculty are now working on the 4th edition.

Lendley Black, Kennesaw State University

At the University of Central Florida, we've initiated the Connecting the UCF Community "common theme" across the disciplines to encourage a campus-wide conversation. This year, the theme is Social Justice and Cultural Change: Brown v. Board of Education. Because we, too, had difficulty finding "just the right" text to ask all freshmen to read, we ended up appointing a committee to compile excerpts from various essays and documents that would address this landmark Supreme Court case.

These excerpts, which included the original Supreme Court decision, a memoir, magazine and news articles, and a segregationist's letter to President John F. Kennedy, were compiled in the UCF Common Reader, which was distributed to freshmen composition, communication, and history classes. Any faculty member who wants to use the common reader in his or her curriculum only has to request a number of copies and they are available. The common reader is also available online through the library.

In addition to the common reader, co-curricular programming has been extensive, including a speaker series featuring prominent names in the field of civil rights, a movie series, theatre productions, dormitory "conversations" led by faculty members, and a one-day symposium remembering Orlando's school integration process.
In March 2005 we will have Charlayne Hunter-Gault, one of the authors whose essay was excerpted in the UCF Common Reader on our campus. Having such a speaker talk with our students literally "brings to life" what they've read in their common reader.

*Linda S. Hargreaves, Program Coordinator, Undergraduate Studies, University of Central Florida*

Our freshman experience book last year was The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother by James McBride. All freshmen read the book before the beginning of the fall semester, wrote an essay to be turned in the first week of classes, and had the opportunity to hear/meet the author at freshman convocation. The book was also used in several classes fall semester. It is a terrific book.

If anyone wants more information, the real "gurus" are Dr. Jim Wohlpart (wohlpart@fgcu.edu) or Dr. Alice Brunner (abrunner@fgcu.edu).

*Linda Summers, Florida Gulf Coast University*

For our summer reading books, we've had good experiences with "Praying for Sheetrock" by Melissa Fay Greene and "The Scalpel and the Silver Bear" by Lori Arviso Alvord. This summer we're using "The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera" by J. Joaquin Fraxedas. Our program is a little different - we bring the author to campus to meet with and speak to the entering class, so we pick not only the book but an author who we think the first-year students will find engaging. We've had other good authors in the series, but the content of these three books are probably more relevant to the theme of college transition than some of the others we've chosen.

*Bruce Harshbarger, Georgia College & State University*

I do not have a particular book to recommend and I am just now forming a committee to create and implement a first year readings. However, two years ago I did a "Pilot Readings Project" at SJSU and used readings by our SJSU president, profs and students (one of the "testimonials" written by a Peer Mentor was actually the reading the students like best) -- Was a nice way to introduce students to the excellence and ideas of writing and thought by SJSU role models.

Jill Steinberg, Director, Peer Mentor Program, San Jose State University

This pertains to our required course for all freshmen, COR 100: United States Institutions, Ideas, and Issues. Accompanying the textbook, "These United States," (compiled by our faculty with readings from seven textbooks and published by Prentice-Hall), is a document set that includes seminal documents in U.S. history. The table of contents of the document set are attached to the end of this digest.

*David Podell, City University of New York, College of Staten Island*

For more information, please contact the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU):

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