



Literature that matters?

I started reading at the age of four, first taking myself through the alphabet, then children's books, young adult literature and finally – my parents' book shelves. Nothing was really off limits in my childhood home and growing up, I read everything I could lay my hands on. Everything from P.G. Wodehouse to Vilhelm Moberg to Sidney Sheldon. Everything that offered a story I could immerse myself in, annoyingly lost to the outside world for a while, had you asked my parents. It is true that my mother used to be an elementary school teacher, but I like to think that this was not what propelled me into the realms of literature. I like to think that I was fascinated by words, settings and characters. Stories. I like to think that I was and still am an avid reader.

Nowadays, as a teacher with students who read in my English classes, I can also appreciate the many beneficial side effects reading offers. Not only does it help students expand their vocabulary range, activate their brains, and practice concentration; I also think they can become better at empathizing with people around them through the characters and gain an understanding of the world we live in. The last reason was what came to mind after having devoured three really good books this summer.

Starr is the main character of *THUG Life* (Angie Thomas, 2017). She is 16 years old, of Afro-American descent, and lives in the poor black neighborhood Garden Heights with her family. Since Starr's parents want a good future for her, she attends a private school for mostly white people. Here, Starr becomes a different version of herself – a version that is “no ghetto” because being too black would be a problem. At home, however, she cannot be too white, and Starr must balance between these two worlds. On their way home after a party, Starr and her childhood friend Kahlil are pulled over by a white police officer and despite them not causing any trouble, Kahlil ends up shot and dies on the street. The shooting is what sets the entire plot in motion and causes an inner conflict in Starr. The black community wants her to speak up; the police want her to remain silent. Whatever decision Starr makes, it will inevitably jeopardize relationships with white friends, black friends and her own family. This book had me by the throat after just a few chapters and even though it features many stereotypical elements that one would expect to find in this genre (gang criminality, drug lords, rap music to mention a few), they are quickly overshadowed by a narrative that reflects the raw reality of racism in today's American society. Read it!

In *Moxie* (Jennifer Mathieu, 2017), a book that captures the #metoo movement between two covers, we are introduced to another strong young woman, Vivian Carter. Viv is sick of the boys at her school who seem to get away with anything sexist and of the teachers who do nothing to stop them. Inspired by her mother, a former follower of the feminist punk rock group Riot Grrrl, Viv decides to secretly produce a zine to be distributed at school, encouraging others to draw hearts and stars on their hands to show that they too have had enough, because “Moxie girls fight back.” Viv never anticipates what this first call to action will lead to, but encouraged by the attention Moxie receives, more zines follow addressing

both girls' dress codes and boys' t-shirts with sexist quotes. When other girls initiate Moxie activities, she realizes that the movement does not belong to her anymore, but to all the girls at school. This book throws you into the conflict directly and the chapters are mixed with replicas of what the zines look like, which is a nice touch. At first glance, the plot may seem simple, however, it gains depth when the movement grows and the girls at school start talking about feminism and what it means to be a feminist. I believe this is a novel that students can easily relate to (too easily?) and the many rising actions lead to an unexpected climax. Read it!

Simon is gay but has not come out yet, not to anyone. In the opening scene of *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Becky Albertalli, 2017), Simon learns that the e-mail he has sent to Blue, whom he finds adorable, has been read by a classmate at school. Simon forgot to log out after having used a computer in the library and now, the very same classmate threatens to reveal that Simon is gay, unless he puts in a good word for him with Abby, a girl at school. Being blackmailed into coming out when he is not ready for it or putting an end to potential rumors but in doing so risking what could be with Blue... Simon is definitely caught between a rock and a hard place. This novel is about coming out and identity, about accepting who you are. I found myself smiling so many times when reading it, but despite the feelgood vibes there is a serious core and Simon's emotional rollercoaster ride feels real. Read it!

After having finished these books I knew two things: I wanted my English 6 students to read them and I did not want them to analyze characters and conflicts this time. With highly relatable themes, such as racism, sexism and LGHBTQ issues, I decided that the assignment would instead invite my students to connect their books to what they can see happening in society. In other words: discuss how the themes of these books are reflected in real life through newspaper articles, TED talks and the students' own experiences, all neatly presented in a reflective essay. This turned out to be a rather extensive seven-week-project called *Literature that matters?*. I will present the assignment in broad strokes here but for complete instructions and additional material, please visit the web page for English (www.spraklararna.se). Feel free to use the material and adapt it to your students as you find appropriate.

I introduced the books by reading a suitable passage from each novel, and then briefly summarized parts of the plot, similar to the book presentations above. To clarify what I meant by connecting the book to **real life** but also to create interest, I showed screenshots of headlines that pertained to each book respectively, for instance: "In 15 High-Profile Cases Involving Deaths of Blacks, One Officer Faces Prison Time" and "Colorado Democrats Just Nominated An Openly Gay Governor". Besides articles and talks, the



students were to choose 2-3 quotes from their novel to illustrate the theme. This was introduced from the very beginning, so they could consider suitable passages while reading.

We have two classes a week in this course. The short Monday class was spent reading and the long Wednesday class was devoted to discussions. We decided on the deadlines together for reading 30, 60 and 100% of the books and in their book groups, the students were then asked to summarize and react to what they had read so far and together understand the plot, discuss possible themes, compare quotes, identify the elements of fiction, and make predictions of what would come next. For the weeks in-between the reading deadlines, the students discussed and shared their articles and TED talks. I encouraged them to keep a reading journal to write down important thoughts or ideas after each discussion.

As we came closer to the grand finale, after almost seven weeks of hard work, the novels, articles, TED talks and personal experiences were to be condensed into reflections. I handed out a preparation sheet that my students completed with information they would need for the essay test: source information for the book, the articles and the talks, quotes and page numbers, and relevant thoughts to remember from their reading journals. To the exam, which was written in a program for digital tests, they could bring their preparation sheet and their book. Since this project comprises many sources, I wanted the test instructions to be as clear as possible, both regarding structure and content. I therefore included prompts such as “In the first paragraph, summarize the plot briefly...”, “In the third paragraph make references to at least one relevant thought from one article and one relevant thought from a TED talk...”. The last prompt asked the students to take a stand and discuss whether this kind of literature matters in society or not and why, hence the name of the project.

As I am writing this article I have read almost all the essays and in retrospect I feel content that I decided to try a new approach to literature. Not only because my students rose to the challenge, but also because their essays are interesting, and they allow me to see a different side of my students, a side that makes me proud. There are so many wise thoughts, optimistic visions and mature insights in these reflections and that gives me hope – hope that their combined realizations and aspirations will lead to a better world. Today, it feels more important than ever before. Literature does matter.



Carolina Clarin,
vår representant för
engelska, språkspanar
och rapporterar.