

Enough with depressing reading lists

By MARY COLLINS

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MY 14-YEAR-OLD daughter just completed another cycle of required summer reading, and the tally of distressing plots continues to mount.

She first complained about the number of sad, even sinister, story lines two years ago. But this summer the problem became a crisis. Normally an avid reader, she began to shy away from any form of fiction for fear it would focus on some rape, murder, emotional abuse, or other horrible outrage.

At first I brushed off her complaints. OK, so Huck Finn's father is an abusive drunk, and a black man in "To Kill a Mockingbird" is falsely convicted of a crime. While disturbing, I argued, these narratives capture certain elemental truths so effectively that they've been on summer reading lists for generations.

Then I realized she wasn't referring to these classics, but to a whole new crop of young adult fiction that I had never heard of. So I asked her for some plot summaries. A sampler:

White people purposely burn an entire town of black people. Many survivors have no ears or mouths.

A girl, age 12, growing up in the Middle East, marries a man in his forties who has several wives. The older wives resent and torment the young girl.

A town holds a lottery. At first it seems like an innocent exercise, but the author slowly reveals that the winner of the lottery will be sacrificed.

We all know that somewhere in the world there is a 12-year-old being forced to marry a middle-aged man whose other wives will abuse her. We all know that some whites committed atrocities upon some blacks throughout history.

But the humanity presented in the plots of my daughter's required reading spends 90 percent of its time hacking one another physically and emotionally.

"It's sadistic." That's my daughter's summary, which is more concise than mine.

And it's lazy.

It's easy to develop dramatic tension if a ship wrecks or a man attacks a girl, but what of the slowly unwinding dramatic tension of an Alice McDermott novel ("Charming Billy" comes to mind)? What of the astounding linguistic dance in Marilynne Robinson's "Housekeeping," which has almost no plot and certainly no shipwreck?

Fearful that these titles might prove too abstract and difficult for my daughter, I decided to try some humor and handed her David Sedaris's "Holidays on Ice." She brought it into class as part of her volunteer reading and quickly turned other stu-

dents on to this New Yorker writer, whose tale of working as an elf at Macy's during the Christmas season is a wonderfully well-crafted and whimsical romp.

Of course, there is a strong push in many middle and high schools to use novels that work across the curriculum. Examining the life of a 30-something man working as an elf at Christmas in New York City isn't going to provide much help to the history teacher, who, understandably, wants to spend more time exploring the causes of the Civil War and the horrible treatment of slaves.

Well-written books don't need a twisted plot.

But as my 14-year-old points out, classics like "To Kill a Mockingbird" showcase a fantastic control of the language and raise complex racial issues, but they don't hit the reader in the gut with gruesome details. My daughter also suggested "The Life of Pi" to her friends, because it uses symbolic violence, which makes it easier to create some emotional distance between her and the struggles of the central character.

The string of searing plot patterns has resulted in some very peculiar unintended consequences. Most of the students I spoke with from my daughter's middle school claimed that the readings made them feel inadequate because they never "experienced these horrible things."

"It becomes awkward," one student said, "because you're constantly made to feel spoiled or privileged."

I also noticed that no matter what movie we watch, even a comedy, whenever the tension begins to rise, my daughter assumes that someone is about to be hurt in some drastic manner - because that's the narrative pattern she encounters in her reading.

I was relieved to see that the summer reading list for her new high school included Bill Bryson's "A Walk in the Woods," a witty account of a man's attempt to right his life and hike the entire Appalachian Trail (with an overweight partner who has a penchant for Little Debbie cakes). Students could also read Mark Twain. The list seemed to be a thoughtful mix of classics and newer titles that didn't reach as far over the shock line as, say, the slave novel "Day of Tears."

But then we received a letter informing us that the entire school - teachers, administrators, and all students - would be reading Ronald Wright's "A Short History of Progress." I have not personally read this book so I don't know the precise story line, but the cover blurb says: "If you read one book about impending doom this year, make it this one."

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