The sonnet has a lot of competition these days. Genres have proliferated—we have graphic novels, rap, realistic fantasy, music videos, and novels in verse sitting alongside the explosion of informational books, interactive books, and the to-be-expected range of fiction. Even media have changed—the three-channel, rabbit-eared television is now a 253 channel high-definition flat screen, the radio has gone nano, and the book has turned Kindle. Information and entertainment comes from computers, iPads and iPods, cell phones, YouTube, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, Facebook, Twitter, and, well, wait a moment and new technology will have arrived. It may seem that literature and its reading are dwindling in significance as we move into the second decade of the 21st century. The penned letter has been challenged by the text message; the manual typewriter has been replaced by the touchscreen computer; and literature is being replaced by . . . .

Connecting Point-and-Click Kids to the Power of Novels

Reading Literature as a 21st Century Skill

By Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst
But perhaps it isn't being replaced. One writer, Matthew Wilkens, estimates that “it seems pretty safe to say there are around 100,000 new English-language works of long-form prose fiction published globally each year.”* He acknowledges that that’s a rough estimate but even if the actual number is half that, it’s still a lot of novels. Someone out there is reading literature, so, even if the sonnet is losing ground, the novel seems to be holding its own. We should still teach it. We should even teach the sonnet.

As we have talked with teachers about NCTE’s definition of twenty-first century literacies, we’ve talked about the importance of collaboration; of managing, analyzing, and synthesizing multiple streams of information; of learning to solve complex problems for global communities; of developing proficiency with the tools of technology, of attending to the ethical responsibilities required in online environments. And more and more we’ve reminded ourselves and others of the critical role literature plays in this bold new world.

That might seem odd. At a time when it appears paramount to prepare students to read short, informational texts, to know when to hit the hyperlink to jump to another site, to know how to synthesize the video pop-up with the music and the scrolling sidebars with the colors on the screen and the multiple fonts, to understand how to challenge the author of a website when that author is basically invisible, we’re suggesting that students also need to know how to read the novel.

Seems very 20th century. Early 20th century. We aren’t surprised when students sometimes ask why.

Our reason for teaching literature, however, isn’t its popularity. The novel (if perhaps not the sonnet) is going to survive even without our help. More important than the novel’s popularity is what it teaches the student. The reading of literature invites students into an important conversation. Literature, and we include in that category the excellent novels, are helping prepare them for the demands of the 21st century.

That thinking the novel provokes and sustains can lead to clarification and sustained conversation. As students discover that the society in *The Giver* is perhaps less utopian than its citizens seem to believe, they have the opportunity to discuss its virtues and its flaws. It is safe and peaceful. People do seem content. It’s harmonious and orderly. Do your young readers like that? Do they value safety highly enough to accept what they may see as its flaws. On the other hand, it is constraining. It does make all the significant decisions for individuals. It leaves almost nothing for chance or personal choice. Could they live with that? Would they fight against it? What would they do in Jonas’s circumstances? All of those issues are up for discussion.

And that conversation can lead to clarified understanding, our own understanding, which really means it helps us learn more about ourselves, more about the person next to us, more about the world in which we live. True, Brian is a fiction character and his survival is entirely in Paulsen’s hands. Jonas is an invention, an image and a voice that emerges from print on the page, and his society with all of its good and bad is imaginary. But the concerns are real. The student reader has to struggle to survive in whatever his circumstances may be. They won’t be identical to Brian’s, but they’ll call for similar courage and resolve and wit. Jonas’s society is a fiction, but the reader is also in a world that limits his choices and imposes its will upon him. The fictional world teaches us about the real world.

Literature offers our students the chance to think not only about the characters they meet in the pages of the books, but also about their own lives. At a time when our own lives are bumping up against those of people across the globe, at a time when the world is not only flattened, but also smaller, at a time when, more than ever, we want students considering situations from another point of view, experiencing things they have never before experienced, developing empathy, developing the stamina to read critically texts longer than a few clicks of the computer screen, at a time when we want students to think for themselves, then we must give them texts that provide characters worth empathizing with, ideas worth wondering about, settings worth traveling to, and themes worth exploring. When we do that, then we are helping prepare them for the demands of the 21st century.

Kylene and Bob explore these thoughts and offer strategies for connecting point-and-click kids to novels in their firsthand project titled *Book by Book* (Heinemann, 2011).

To continue to engage with Kylene and Bob on this topic, go to www.Heinemann.com/pd/journal.

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* http://workproduct.wordpress.com/2009/10/14/how-many-novels-are-published-each-year