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## In Defense of 'Depressing' Books

**By Laurie Uttich**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, May 20, 2015

As a creative writing instructor who assigns a lot of reading, I have at least a few introductory students each semester who complain about the material. It's not that it's too difficult or too dense. It's that it's too depressing. "Can't we read *something* happy?" someone will invariably ask.

And, invariably, I will shake my head and respond, "Unfortunately, it's just going to get worse."

This surprises many of my friends. I'm a glass half-full kind of person — in fact, I'm just grateful to *have* a glass and more delighted there's something in it — but I rarely read feel-good books...and I never assign them.

If students push me for a reason, I point them to a section in my syllabus that quotes author Tobias Wolff who wrote: "I have never been able to understand the complaint that a story is 'depressing' because of its subject matter. What depresses me are stories that don't seem to know these things go on, or hide them in resolute chipperness; 'witty stories,' in which every problem is the occasion for a joke; 'upbeat' stories that flog you with transcendence. Please. We're grown-ups now, we get to stay in the kitchen while the other grown-ups talk."

Yes, we get to stay in the kitchen now, but why I think it's important that we do stay there is something I struggle to articulate. I suppose it comes down to this: I want reading to impact my students in the same way it impacts me. And for me, a "great" book (or essay or poem or short story) goes beyond entertainment and escapism — although it often accomplishes that, too — and teaches me something about being human.

It awakens (or reawakens) in me the understanding of what it means to suffer, to love, to fail, to hope, to live, to die. It reminds me of one truth I hold to be absolute: the commonality of the human condition. We all bleed. We are all one. We are not alone.

I recently read Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*. It's a beautiful, painful book of narrative nonfiction that details the lives of some who live in a makeshift settlement near the Mumbai airport and its surrounding luxury hotels.

Much of it is excruciating to read and I'm haunted by many in the book, especially by Abdul, a young boy who supports his family by selling garbage to recycling companies. I was, of course, already distantly aware of India's extreme poverty and economic inequality, but I was unaware of its complexity and its reach. And, as Boo has said in interviews, "Seeing what's wrong — seeing it clearly — seems to me a crucial part of beginning to set it right."

But, for me, hearing Abdul's story impacted me more than learning about Mumbai. There's a section in the book when Abdul reflects about what sort of lives "count," and I immediately thought about the people we marginalize in the United States. And I worried that I might not be doing enough to ensure those voices are heard. How can I select readings and create assignments for those who may feel marginalized in my own classroom? Are the works I select diverse enough? What am I missing? *Who* am I missing? What more can I do?

Franz Kafka wrote, "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us," and I suppose that's what I want for myself and for my students. I want to read a book that breaks through to something that's dormant within me. I want it to challenge me to see more clearly, to actively seek solutions, to be better, to *do* better. I want a book that has the potential to change my life in a series of small, important ways.

I want the same for my students. I want the same for all of us.

This isn't to say that enjoying a "beach book" is some sort of character flaw. Of course, it's not. Sometimes, we need a place where everything ends just the way we want it to. The world can be hard and scary. Sometimes, we need to be lifted; not enlightened. Let a book bring us comfort, if only for just a moment. Eat popcorn now and then. Forget about the broccoli.

But it worries me when this “easy answer” formula becomes a sort of standard for the only kind of books we want to read...especially when it’s only what we want our children and students to read.

So often we try to protect young people, but the joke is on us, right? As author Sherman Alexie writes, “There are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books — especially the dark and dangerous ones — will save them.”

Reading the hard stuff can make you ache, but it can also feed you. Even in the slums of Mumbai, Boo’s story brims with hope for humanity and inspires us with its tales of resilience. In fact, I can’t think of a single “depressing” book I’ve read or assigned that hasn’t encouraged me in some way.

So go ahead: Read a book that’s certain to depress you. And then let it shape you.

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