



## CLASSICS ARE COOL

By SANDRA PRIEST ROSE

Third-graders in a public school in New York City's largely Hispanic Washington Heights area declared that their favorite part of the year was stories from *The Odyssey* in a children's version. Students of all elementary grades responded to stories of Robin Hood, King Arthur, knights in armor, all of which can serve as a springboard for studying the Middle Ages. The whole class can research the architecture of churches and castles, examine reproductions of illuminated manuscripts and make their own, and learn about the code of chivalry and the contrast of the lives of serfs and court life.

My eighth-graders in a public school in the South Bronx — this was back when the Bronx was being burned down) — were deeply moved when we read together Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet, whose opening line is, "How do I love thee?" I didn't have to ruin the poem immediately. It spoke to their own awakening feelings. They could experience its moving expression of profound love. Would the students have found these on their own? Maybe, maybe not. Why not let them hear and read marvel-

ous tales that should be part of a common body of familiar stories that are a piece of the vocabulary of our background.

So many classroom libraries that I see, particularly in the early grades, consist of overly-illustrated, overly cute, oftentimes dull little tales that do not speak to the adventurous in all of us or to the yearnings for knowledge of other worlds and other fields such as history, science, music and art. It was a wonderful English teacher who introduced me to Chaucer. When I would show fourth- to eighth-graders in my slow-reading class the prologue to "Canterbury Tales" in the Middle



English side-by-side with contemporary English, they would delight in picking out the recognizable old words like "Aprille" for April and

"showres" for showers. Although it was a great way to introduce the origins of words, always it was the rollicking stories that captivated.

Students can have a chance to pick books on their own for recreational reading. My voracious reading of the Nancy Drew series improved my speed and my ability to comprehend rapidly. There are some fine books like the Percy Jackson series. This series would fit so well into a Greek myths whole class project. We don't just want students to select books below their capacity to understand. They need to read books that are a little bit hard for them as something to challenge them and stretch their minds. There is also an important component of a whole class engaged in an exciting study together, be it Greek myths, knights in armor, tales of adventure or studies of ancient civilizations. When the teacher introduces the topics, students can then go off and read supplementary information on their level.

Students always taught me that they recognized when they were being talked down to. They would work hard when the books were worthy of their effort. They instinctively knew when the story was not well told. They proved that classics are cool! #

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