

The Constancy of the School “Canon”: A Survey of Texts Used in Grade 10 English Language Arts in 2006 and 1996

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Abstract

This article reports on a 2006 survey of texts used in Grade 10 English language arts classes in Edmonton, Alberta. The survey uses the same instrument as a previous 1996 survey and provides comparative data from a section of the same pool as participated in 1996. In terms of the most popular titles, there has been very little change during that decade. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet* continue to be the most widely taught texts by a considerable margin. Texts taught in only one class show more variability. Reasons for the striking constancy of the title list are considered.

Introduction

The power of literature is such that it is difficult to think about the English curriculum without thinking at the same time about the texts that are used to teach the curriculum (Reed, 2003, 62).

In English language arts classrooms in Canada, teachers have considerable autonomy in deciding what texts to use with their classes.

The role of those selected texts is undoubtedly important, not only as part of the educational process, but also as a means of cultivating students' appreciation of reading and literature. “Texts teach what readers learn,” said Margaret Meek in 1988 and Reed, above, reminds us that in many ways the texts *are* the curriculum in English language arts classes. It is, however, difficult to gain a clear sense of what texts are being used, whether in many classrooms or in just a few. It is even more challenging to gain a sense of how such selections may change over time.

This article reports on a comparative study of Grade 10 English language arts classes in Edmonton, Alberta, where a snapshot of teacher-selected texts was taken on two occasions, a decade apart. The first survey was conducted in the spring of 1996 and included 21 of the 22 schools in the Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic School Systems (Altmann, Johnston, & Mackey, 1999, 1998; Altmann, Johnston, Mackey, Schlender, & Cole, 2001). The second survey took place in the spring of 2006 and received returns from 12 of the 14 schools canvassed in Edmonton Public Schools (Edmonton Catholic Schools declined to participate in the second survey). The first survey produced findings from 94 classes, the second, from 69; in both cases, teachers described the materials used in a wide range of courses (mainstream, advanced, non-academic).

The purpose of this research is to provide a description of what texts are being used in Grade 10 English language arts classrooms, to identify trends in selection of texts, and to speculate on what informs those trends. We attempt to show and tell what has been consistent or has changed in teacher selection of materials/texts across the decade. This article supplies lists and numbers but these quantitative measurements naturally oversimplify a rich and complex picture. To look at the actual forms---filled in by hand or with typed lists attached, with notes apologizing for haste or wishing us well in our study, describing classes that are often large and contain students with a variety of special needs and/or a range of first languages---is to get a small sense of the pressures and pleasures of everyday life in Edmonton's high school English classes. That enormous and lively variety cannot be fairly represented in this study, but it needs to be held in mind as the essential context within which these texts are presented every day by their teachers.

It is important to note that this is a study of materials, not of curriculum priorities or of classroom experience. The data are only descriptive, and do not provide any firm answers about how these texts are used in the context of the classroom, nor do we have information about why or how they were chosen. In our view, the list of titles in use is of interest in its own right. Although we suggest some possible reasons for trends observed in this study, this article focuses chiefly on the materials themselves, and on the comparisons between 2006 and 1996. Given how little comparative material of this nature exists, our main aim in this article is to focus on the titles selected by teachers and to explore some of the similarities and differences in comparison to the 1996 findings.

Background Reading

The reports published on the earlier 1996 survey gave some indication of the paucity of national and international information about high school curriculum materials (Altmann *et al.*, 1999, 1998). Applebee (1993) was a major source of American information; the Canadian information, while suggestive, was seriously dated (Cameron, 1989; Dias, 1992; Gambell, 1986; Tomkins, 1986).

It is pleasing to note that two major Canadian studies in the first decade of the 21st century have built upon the evidence of our 1996 survey. The Canada Council for the Arts commissioned the Writers' Trust of Canada to produce a research study of the use of Canadian literature in high schools and their report appeared in 2002. In 2003, Brenda Reed of Queen's University produced a masters thesis, *Curriculum Decisions about Teaching Literature in High Schools*. Her Ontario-based survey produced smaller numbers than either of the Alberta surveys, but it is augmented with very valuable and interesting interviews with teachers about how and why they made particular decisions. We will return to both these studies later in this article.

Stallworth, Gibbons and Fauber (2006) offer a small American snapshot of text selection that will also be revisited later.

Methods

The second survey replicated many of the questions of the first in order to make comparisons more useful (see Appendix). On both occasions, teachers completed a paper survey, in which they answered questions about their text selections and provided lists of course readings. Research assistants at the University of Alberta filled in further details

related to these texts, such as: place and date of publication; nationality, gender and date of birth of the author; information about the protagonists; and so forth. We also asked teachers in both surveys to supply some background information about the demographic makeup of their classes, but it is important to emphasize that what follows in the results is information derived from teachers' perceptions; we did not make any efforts to confirm or contest their descriptions.

Although Catholic schools did not participate in the second survey, we cannot ascertain whether this difference had any effect on the results, since the first survey did not distinguish between returns from the two school divisions.

It is not possible in the space constraints of this article to do justice to the full information that teachers generously offered. We will provide some general sense of the overall profile of the data set, look more closely at the most popular titles, and explore ways in which the "long tail" of titles that were each cited only once offers a different perspective. Where comparisons with 1996 are deemed to be significantly different, evidence from the earlier survey will be brought into play.

The teamwork that made the 2006 project possible involves four researchers. Leslie Vermeer developed and administered the survey based on the 1996 questionnaire, and the high percentage of school returns is one consequence of her dedication to this aspect of the project. Dale Storie researched the background information relating to the texts and created all the initial tables as well as working on the final draft of the article, and Elizabeth DeBlois worked on the final presentation of the data in usable form. Margaret Mackey's contribution was overall supervision, analysis of the data, and the initial composition of this article.

The earlier, 1996 survey was completed by Anna Altmann, Ingrid Johnston, and Margaret Mackey, who wrote the associated articles together (see Altmann *et al.*, 1999, 1998; Altmann *et al.*, 2001).

As these two studies were compared, every effort was made to standardize the process of supplying complementary data. Wherever it was available, the 1996 supplementary information about authors, protagonists, and so forth, was simply plugged into the 2006 findings. Given the very unwieldy nature of the two large data sets, however, some discrepancies arose, and these are flagged where relevant.

Results

Classroom Demographics

Sixty-nine classes from 12 out of 14 public schools responded to the 2006 survey, compared to the 1996 survey, in which 94 classes from 21 of the 22 public and Catholic schools in Edmonton responded.

Non-academic classes were less well represented in the 2006 findings, while the advanced programs (e.g., International Baccalaureate [IB], Advanced Placement [AP]) featured more significantly than in 1996. In both surveys, the proportion of regular English 10 classes stood at roughly half the total.

Table 1

Comparison of Mainstream, Advanced, and Non-Academic Classes in 1996 and 2006

	1996		2006	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Mainstream English	43	46%	34	49%
Advanced English (IB, AP, etc)	16	17%	19	28%
Non-academic stream English	35	37%	16	23%
Total Number of English10 Courses	94	100%	69	100%

The 2006 survey included a multiple choice question that allowed teachers to choose which descriptions most closely represent their classes' demographics. Table 2 presents the teacher descriptions of these classes. In a follow-up question, 160 students were reported to have special needs.

Table 2
Class Demographics as Described by Teacher

Class Demographics	Number of Classes
Average socio-economic group	40
Have access to a computer at home	40
Specialist population	21
Have students who work part-time	16
High socio-economic group	14
Lower socio-economic group	12
Recent immigrants	8

The total recorded number of students studying the materials cited here is 1830, but two classes did not report numbers. Based on the numbers that were provided, classes ranged in size from 15 to 65 (one example of each of these extreme numbers), and the average class size was 27. These classes tally 912 boys and 897 girls (but three classes did not provide a gender breakdown).

The linguistic mix in these classes is very rich. 133 of these 1830 students were cited by their teachers as being French speakers. 372 spoke a language other than English or French. Students speaking a total of 26 languages other than English or French were

distributed across 39 of the 69 classes. For 226 students, English was not their mother tongue. 30 classes listed students speaking a total of 23 first languages, shown in Table 3. The list of languages spoken in addition to English and the set of first languages other than English of these Grade 10 students illustrates the multicultural spread of contemporary Edmonton.

Table 3

Languages Spoken by Students in Grade 10

Languages	Number of occurrences
Albanian	1
Arabic	14
Cambodian (Khymer)	1
Chinese (Cantonese)	7
Chinese (Mandarin)	14
Chinese (unspecified)	9
Farsi	1
German	9
Hebrew	1
Hindi	5
Italian	1
Jamaican Creole	1
Japanese	1
Korean	4
Polish	2
Punjabi	6
Russian	1
Serbian	2
Somalian	2
Spanish	8
Sudanese	1
Tagalog (Filipino)	3
Ukrainian	4
Urdu	2
Vietnamese	4
Other	2

Naturally, fewer students are recorded as speaking a language other than English as their *first* language, and the difference in numbers between Table 3 and Table 4 is accounted for by bi- or multi-lingual students, whose mother tongue is English.

Table 4

First Language of ELL Students

Language	Number of occurrences
Arabic	11
Chinese (Cantonese)	3

Chinese (Mandarin)	10
Chinese (Unspecified)	7
Farsi	1
German	1
Hindi	2
Italian	1
Jamaican Creole	1
Japanese	1
Korean	4
Polish	1
Portuguese	1
Punjabi	4
Russian	1
Serbian	2
Somalian	1
Spanish	3
Sudanese	1
Tagalog (Filipino)	3
Urdu	1
Vietnamese	2
Other	2

Teacher-Approved Texts and Literacy Activities

We asked whether students were allowed to read materials of their own choosing. 46 answers were affirmative and 13 were negative. Of the 46 teachers who gave “yes” answers, 9 allowed completely free choice, while 29 said they did not, and the rest did not specify. 40 said they allowed choice within certain limitations, while 5 said no. The limitations were highly varied, from the cryptic “Depends” to various assessments of appropriateness. Here are some sample comments about that slippery category of “appropriate”:

- Age appropriate
- Appropriate in length and content
- Appropriate in MY classroom, high school reading level
- As long as I feel it’s school appropriate, it’s fine
- Could be length, genre, or tone limited. Depends on the assignment
- Genre, length, complexity and difficulty level
- It can’t be grossly inappropriate for school.
- Length, maturity level
- No foul, profane, explicit language
- Nothing of a sexual nature. That would get the student in trouble, or me fired!
- Nothing too graphic or racist

Other teachers specified format (ruling out graphic novels until at least two regular novels had been read, for example, or banning all or some magazines). 13 respondents offered a

pre-selected list. We may question whether these practices can be fairly described as forms of completely free reading; possibly, “guarded reading” would be a more accurate description.

45 teachers allowed in-class reading time; 11 said they did not, and others did not answer this question. The time allowed varied from 10 – 20 minutes every class (with linked assignments at the end of the semester) to about 1/3 to 1/4 of “some” classes.

10 teachers allowed students to view films of their own choosing, while 47 said no. Only 1 allowed completely free choice and only 1 offered a pre-selected list. “Appropriateness” figured similarly in the answers.

27 teachers allowed students to view digital materials (e.g., websites) of their own choosing. 31 said no. The comments focused on the need for digital material to be relevant to the work in hand, and, to a lesser extent, on the need for students to learn to evaluate websites. Five teachers commented that the school restricted access to some websites.

We also asked our respondents to describe any way in which students made use of computers beyond basic word processing and got a much richer and more interesting response, with a total number of 83 positive replies (9 said “nothing,” and 14 indicated some computer use but gave no details). The question was open-ended so the answers appear in the teachers’ own words.

Table 5

Use of Computers for Grade 10 English Work

Computer Activities	Number of Occurrences
Internet research – unspecified	16
Yes, but no further data supplied	14
Internet research related to project or text	14
Powerpoint presentations	13
Nothing	9
Word processing	8
Find images	6
Internet research – history or biography	5
Internet research – poetry	3
Create study games	2
Exams	2
Web quests	2
Use library electronic resources	2
Photo and video editing	2
Bibliography development	2
Storyboarding	1
Create webpages	1
Internet research – music lyrics	1
Burn CDs	1
Thought Webs	1
Create interactive fiction	1

Texts Selection Statistics

The 2006 survey collected a total of 757 citations of titles, with 363 unique texts reported. In 1996, 1,812 records were processed, with 765 separate titles listed. The figures below show the distribution of genres in both 2006 and 1996.

Figure 1 shows the top categories in a data set that was divided into 22 categories in the 2006 analysis, as opposed to 17 categories in 1996 (the top categories for 1996 are presented in Figure 2). The following headings have been added to the 2006 list: fable/fairytale, graphic novel (but see below), memoir, newspaper article, non-fiction, painting, photograph, song lyric, speech, and website/database. The categories of photo essay, picture book, novel excerpt, and music/miscellaneous appeared in 1996 but not in 2006. Not one of these shifting categories, however, contained as much as 2% of the total number of texts represented.

The large categories --- novel, play, film, poem, short story --- remained strikingly stable.

One title was categorized as a graphic novel in the 2006 survey, but it seems likely from the title that it actually was a newspaper supplement from the local paper, laid out in graphic format. If that is the case, then no true graphic novels appear on the list at all. No form of digital game is listed as a title. There are 9 citations of television programs, but only 6 titles are listed (there are 4 mentions of *The Simpsons*). Finally, teachers cited only 7 uses of a website or a database in their answers to the survey.

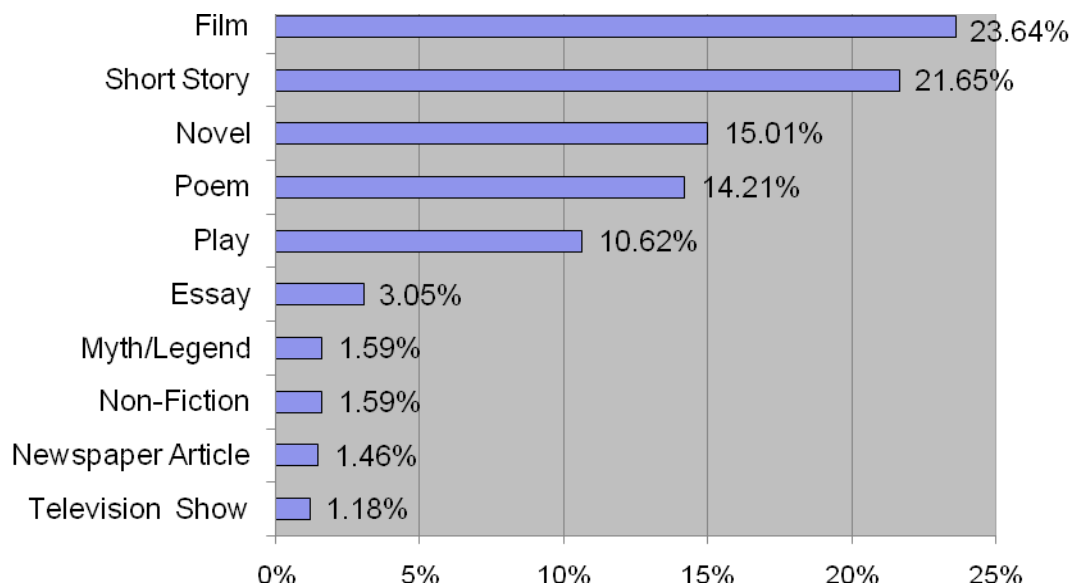


Figure 1. Top Genres in 2006.

Note. Categories less than 1%: Memoir, Undetermined, Website/Database, Fable/Fairytale, Bible, Documentary, Graphic Novel, Painting, Photograph, Song, Song Lyric, Speech.

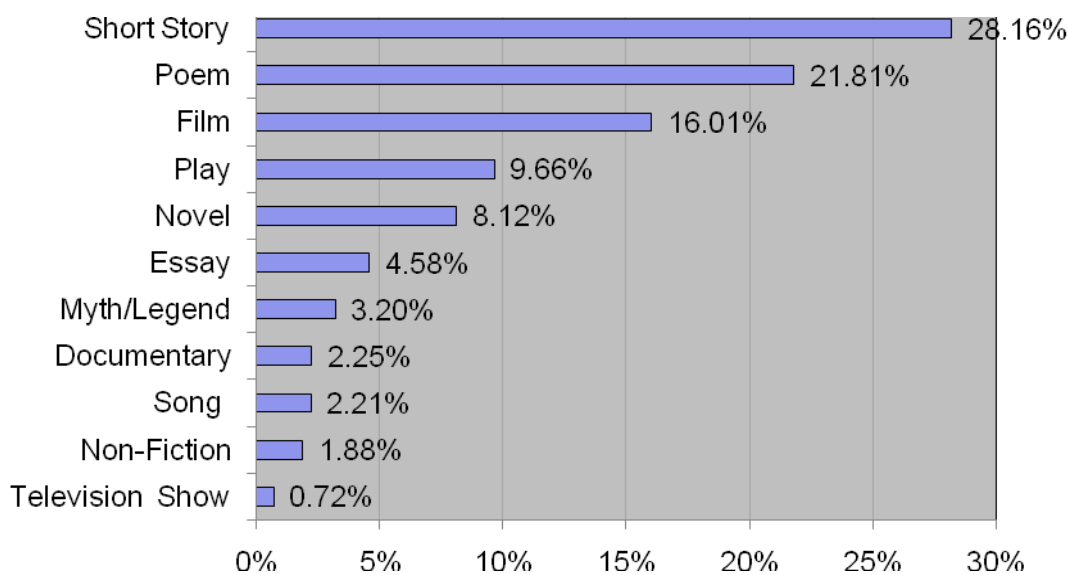


Figure 2. Top Genres in 1996.

Note. Categories less than 1%: Novel Excerpt, Undetermined, Bible, Photo Essay, Music/Miscellaneous, Picture Book.

The Popular Titles

In terms of the texts selected by the teachers, there are some very clear patterns. The 2006 data set manifests a pronounced bias towards print (537 citations), with video or DVD making the only other strong showing, though a long way back (191 citations). This tally, however, deals only with texts named by the teacher; it takes no account of the kinds of material brought into the classroom by students.

Table 6

Material Format

Reported Format	Number of Occurrences
Audio recording	11
Print	537
Video/DVD	191
Digital/Web/Database	10
Undetermined	3
Artwork	1

The vast majority of titles cited fall in five main categories: novel, play, film, poem, and short story. The following figures show the most popular ten titles in each of these five categories in 2006.

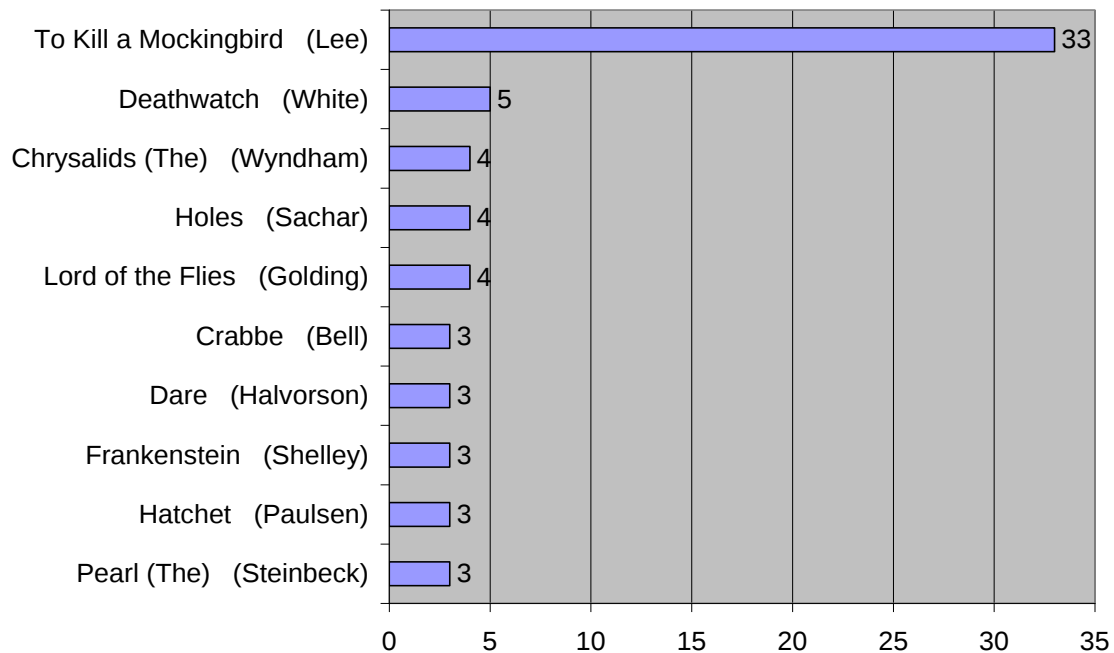


Figure 3. Top Ten Novels in 2006.

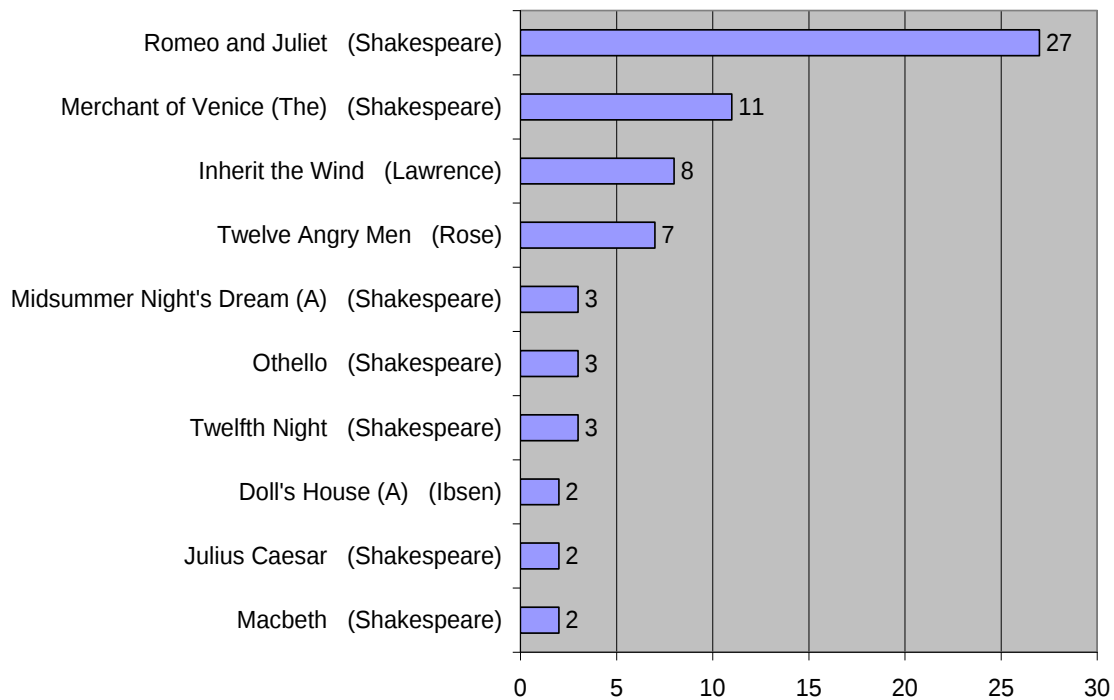


Figure 4. Top Ten Plays in 2006.

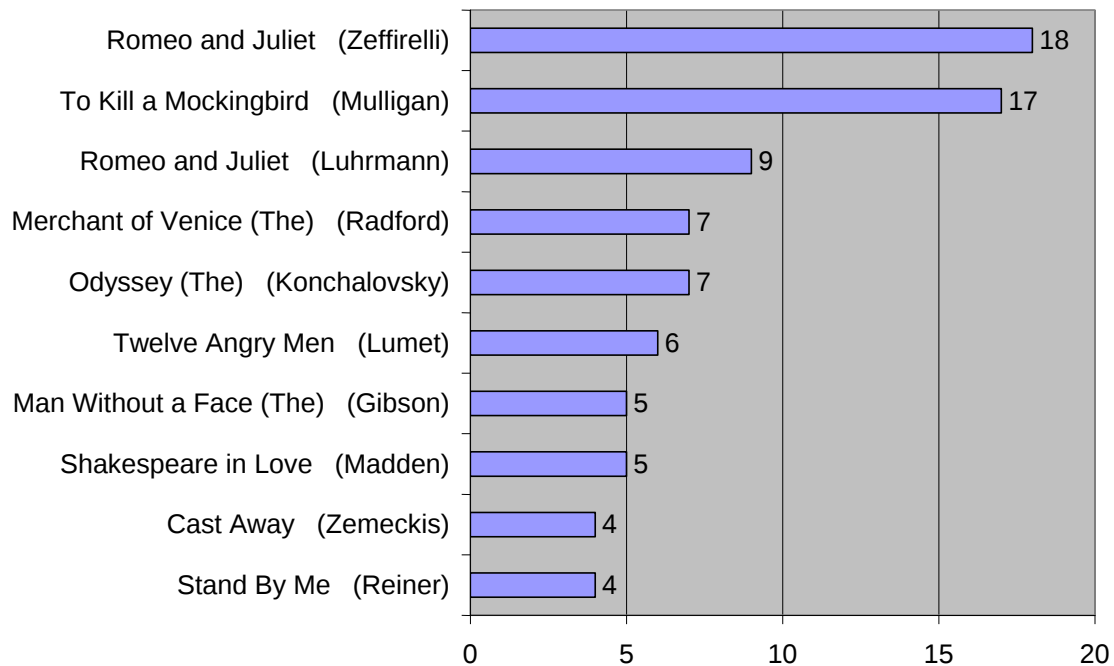


Figure 5. Top Ten Films in 2006.

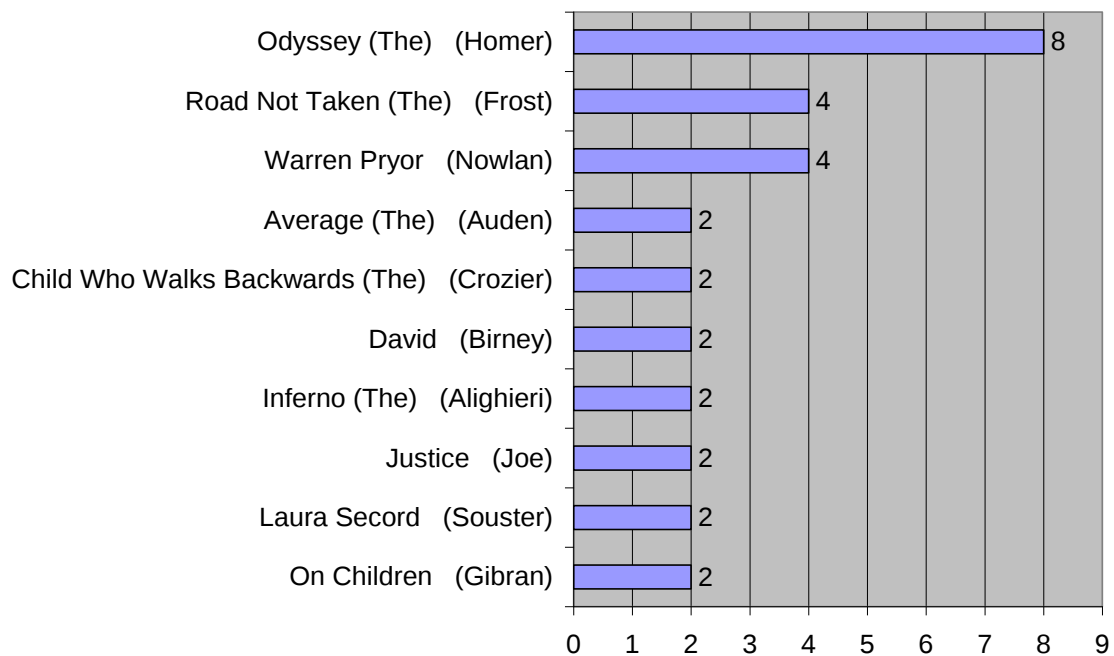


Figure 6. Top Ten Poems in 2006.

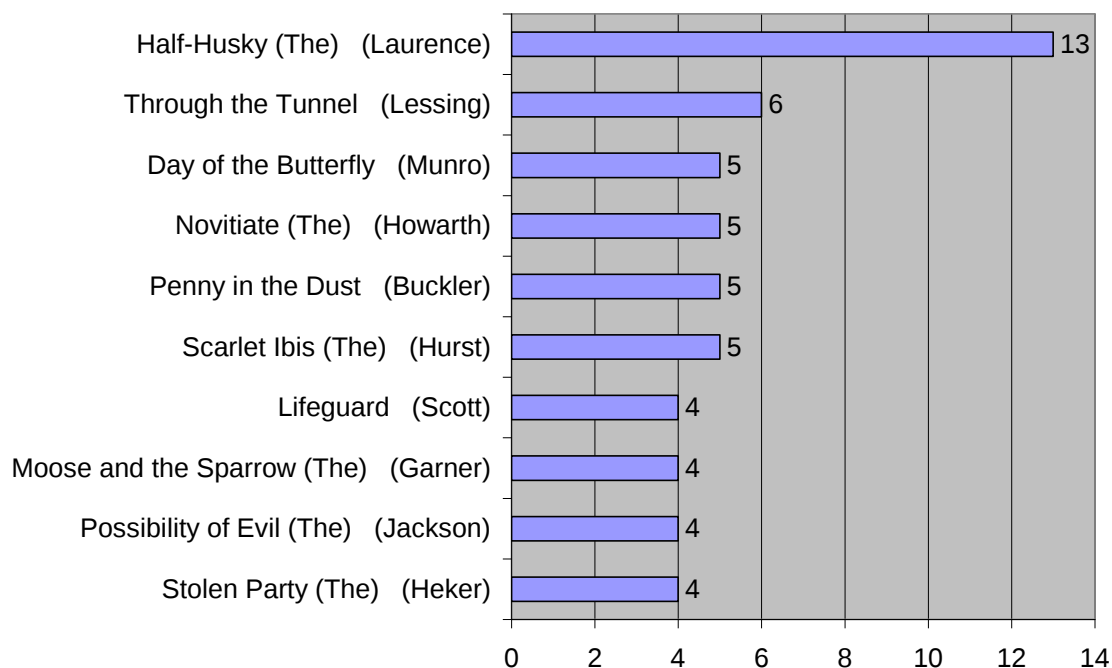


Figure 7. Top Ten Short Stories in 2006.

Not only did the proportion of materials belonging to these five main text categories remain very high, but it is also very striking that the titles themselves did not change much between 1996 and 2006. The following table, for example, lists all the novels that were cited by three or more teachers in each of the two surveys (the title is followed by the date of publications and the number of citations is listed in brackets).

Table 7

A Comparison of Top Novels in 2006 and 1996

2006 survey	1996 survey
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , 1960 (33)	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , 1960 (35)
<i>Deathwatch</i> , 1972 (5)	<i>Deathwatch</i> , 1972 (10)
<i>The Chrysalids</i> , 1955 (4)	<i>The Chrysalids</i> , 1955 (9)
<i>Holes</i> , 1998 (4)	<i>Children of the River</i> , 1989 (9)
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> , 1954 (4)	<i>Lord of the Flies</i> , 1954 (8)
<i>Crabbe</i> , 1986 (3)	<i>Hunter in the Dark</i> , 1982 (7)
<i>Dare</i> , 1988 (3)	<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> , 1885 (5)
<i>Frankenstein</i> , 1818 (3)	<i>Who Has Seen the Wind?</i> , 1947 (4)
<i>Hatchet</i> , 1987 (3)	<i>Animal Farm</i> , 1946 (3)
<i>The Pearl</i> , 1947 (3)	<i>Crabbe</i> , 1986 (3)
	<i>Hatchet</i> , 1987 (3)
	<i>Waiting for the Rain</i> , 1987 (3)
	<i>Z for Zachariah</i> , 1974 (3)

The most frequently listed novel titles tend to be relatively older publications. Of the 66 citations of novels used three or more times in the 2006 study, 53, or 80%, were of novels published at least 25 years previously. Of the 102 citations in this category in 1996, 64 (63%) were at least 25 years old. However, *Deathwatch* was published 24 years prior to the 1996 survey; adding it would increase the total citations of older novels by another 10 (73%).

The same deliberate looking back occurs even more strongly in the list of plays. Of the 68 citations of the top ten plays, 27 list *Romeo and Juliet*; and the various Shakespeare plays combine for a total of 51 (75%). The most recent play in the list of titles cited most often is *Inherit the Wind* (1955), closely followed by *Twelve Angry Men* (1954). Edmonton is a very active city in theatrical terms, with a lively Fringe Festival and with the conventional theatres featuring many new plays every year, some written by teenagers. Yet no title in this list of the most popular classroom plays is less than 50 years old.

Another relationship that emerges from the data is that between the novels, plays and films taught. In 2006, teachers provided a total of 171 citations of film titles. More than one-third (64) of these citations represent just two categories: films with a Shakespeare connection, plus 17 citations of the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 41 movie citations were films of Shakespeare plays (28 of *Romeo and Juliet* alone). There are 5 citations of *Shakespeare in Love*, and 1 of *West Side Story*, whose links to *Romeo and Juliet* are well known. These numbers clarify the very close connection between the use of film in these classrooms and the study of a small and constant set of popular novels and plays.

The most popular short stories are relatively contemporary, breaking the pattern seen with other genre top tens in the survey. Here the dates range quite widely from 1955 to 1999 (the query about the dating of “The Novitiate” arises from the lack of acknowledgements in *Connections: Book 1, Imagining*, which suggests that the story was written for the anthology itself and first published in 1990).

Table 8

Most Popular Short Stories and Date of Publication

Short Story Title	Author	Publication Date
The Half-Husky	Margaret Laurence	1970
Through the Tunnel	Doris Lessing	1955
The Day of the Butterfly	Alice Munro	1968
The Novitiate	Jean Howarth	1990?
Penny in the Dust	Ernest Buckler	1968
The Scarlet Ibis	James Herbert	1960
Lifeguard	Barbara Scott	1999
The Moose and the Sparrow	Hugh Garner	1966
The Possibility of Evil	Shirley Jackson	1965
The Stolen Party	Liliana Heker	1994

An explanation of why these particular stories are the most popular may be linked to what anthologies are available in any given school. Many Grade 10 teachers will recognize the titles listed here.

Table 9
Anthologies in Use

Number	Anthology Title	Pub. Date	Country of Pub.
25	Sightlines 10	2000	Canada
23	Crossroads 10	2000	Canada
15	Literature and Media 10	2001	Canada
3	Best Poems: Middle	2001	United States
3	Connections I: Imagining	1990	Canada
3	Echoes 2	1984	Canada
3	Scope Magazine	NA	United States
3	Sunlight and Shadows	1974	Canada
2	Early September	1980	Canada
2	Elements of English 10	2000	Canada
2	Inside Stories	1987	Canada
2	Kaleidoscope	1972	United States
2	Poetry Alive	1991	Canada
2	Sunburst	1982	Canada
2	Through the Open Window	1983	Canada
1	Breaking Free: A Cross-Cultural Anthology	1995	Canada
1	Images 11	Undet.	Undetermined
1	Imagine Poetry	1993	Canada
1	Inside Poetry	1987	Canada
1	Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry & Drama	2004	United States
1	Media and You 10	1991	United States
1	Poetry in Focus	1983	Canada
1	Responding to Literature	1996	United States
1	Straight Ahead	1990	Canada
1	Studies in the Short Story	1988	United States
1	Themes on a Journey	1989	Canada
1	World Literature	2001	United States

The anthologies are markedly more Canadian in origin than most of the other categories investigated here, with 18 Canadian titles versus 8 American, and one that could not be determined. The top three titles, accounting for 63 listings, are all Canadian. Of course, the fact that the anthology originates in Canada does not (and probably should not) mean that all the contents are Canadian.

The Single Listings

It would perhaps be reasonable to expect the sample of texts taught by the largest number of teachers to form a relatively conservative list, and indeed this turns out to be the case. The list of titles chosen once, by a single teacher, might offer a more eclectic range.

The following two tables show the novel titles listed only once, first for 2006 and then for 1996. They are organized by date of publication, beginning with the newest and working backwards. There are 24 titles listed once only in 2006, and 31 listed in 1996; however, the publication date of *The Bodyguard* by Joe Claro, included in the 1996 list, has not been established so it will be omitted from the analysis that follows. It is worth noticing that only two titles appear on both lists: *Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind* by Suzanne Fisher Staples, and *Rumblefish* by S.E. Hinton (both young adult novels). The availability of sets of books in the stock cupboard is clearly not the only factor at work, or we might expect to see more duplication.

Table 10

Novels Listed Once in 2006

Title	Author	Pub. Date
<i>Red Sea</i>	Tullson, Diane	2005
<i>Blue Moon</i>	Halvorson, Marilyn	2004
<i>Mystery of the Frozen Brains (The)</i>	Chan, Marty	2004
<i>Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i>	Haddon, Mark	2003
<i>Lost and Found</i>	Shraff, Anne	2001
<i>Offside</i>	Beveridge, Cathy	2001
<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	Rowling, J.K.	1997
<i>Tuesday Cafe (The)</i>	Trembath, Don	1996
<i>Shabash!</i>	Walsh, Ann	1994
<i>Freak the Mighty</i>	Philbrick, Rodman	1993
<i>Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes</i>	Crutcher, Chris	1993
<i>Forbidden City</i>	Bell, William	1990
<i>Bull Rider</i>	Halvorson, Marilyn	1989
<i>Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind</i>	Staples, Suzanne F.	1989
<i>Alchemist</i>	Coelho, Paulo	1988
<i>Hunter in the Dark</i>	Hughes, Monica	1982
<i>Shoeless Joe</i>	Kinsella, W.P.	1982
<i>Rumblefish</i>	Hinton, S.E.	1975
<i>Tuck Everlasting</i>	Babbitt, Natalie	1975
<i>Princess Bride (The)</i>	Goldman, William	1973
<i>Fellowship of the Ring (The)</i>	Tolkien, J.R.R.	1954

<i>Hobbit (The)</i>	Tolkien, J.R.R.	1937
<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	Twain, Mark	1884
<i>Hunchback of Notre Dame (The)</i>	Hugo, Victor	1831

Table 11
Novels Listed Once in 1996

Title	Author	Pub. Date
<i>Giver (The)</i>	Lowry, Lois	1993
<i>Shabanu Daughter of the Wind</i>	Staples, Suzanne F.	1989
<i>Dare</i>	Halvorson, Marilyn	1988
<i>Honorable Prison (The)</i>	de Jenkins, Lyll B.	1988
<i>Log Jam</i>	Hughes, Monica	1987
<i>Dragonsbane</i>	Hambly Barbara	1986
<i>Tunnel Vision</i>	Arrick, Fran G.	1980
<i>Rumblefish</i>	Hinton, S.E.	1975
<i>Riverrun</i>	Such, Peter	1973
<i>Grendel</i>	Gardner, John	1971
<i>Contender (The)</i>	Lipsyte, Robert	1967
<i>Why Shoot the Teacher?</i>	Braithwaite, Max	1965
<i>I Am David</i>	Holm, Anne	1963
<i>West Side Story</i>	Shulman, Irving	1961
<i>Call of the Wild (The)</i>	London, Jack	1959
<i>Walkabout</i>	Marshall, James V.	1959
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Achebe, Chinua	1958
<i>My Family and Other Animals</i>	Durrell, Gerald	1956
<i>Snowbound</i>	Wildsmith, Alan	1955
<i>Old Man and the Sea (The)</i>	Hemingway, Ernest	1952
<i>Pearl (The)</i>	Steinbeck, John	1947
<i>Human Comedy (The)</i>	Saroyan, William	1943
<i>Heart is a Lonely Hunter (The)</i>	McCullers, Carson	1940
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	Steinbeck, John	1937
<i>Murder on the Orient Express</i>	Christie, Agatha	1934
<i>Peter Pan</i>	Barrie, J.M.	1928
<i>Great Gatsby (The)</i>	Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1925
<i>Invisible Man (The)</i>	Wells, H.G.	1897
<i>Brave New World</i>	Huxley, Aldous	1885
<i>Little Women</i>	Alcott, Louisa May	1868
<i>My Bodyguard</i>	Claro, Joe	?

To probe these lists further we did a simple tally, working back in decades from the date of each survey. In 2006, of the 24 titles, eight (34%) were 10 years old or newer.

Nine (38%) were between 11 and 20 years old. Nine (38%) were more than 20 years old with seven of those being more than 30 years old.

In 1996, the set skewed older overall. Of the 30 titles that could be dated, and omitting *My Bodyguard*, six (20%) were 10 years old or newer. Only one was between 11 and 20 years old. 4 were between 21 and 30 years old, and the remaining 19 (63%) were more than 30 years old.

It is clear that teachers working with a novel title chosen only once in this survey selected substantially newer material in 2006 than in 1996. 17 out of 24 singular titles (71%) were 20 years old or less in 2006. 7 out of 30 such titles (23%) fell into the same category in 1996. The contrast with the list of most popular novels is very striking, because the commonly cited titles skewed much older overall.

There is no information about how these books were taught, so there is no way of knowing if a full class set was used for each title, or if some titles represent a set of choices for students.

A Snapshot of the Entire Data Set of Chosen Texts

If we look at the complete data set, we can elicit an interesting profile of Grade 10 work (though, of course, any single class may not match the trends in any particular detail).

Of the 757 citations in all genres provided by teachers in 2006, 50 (7%) listed a title that was published in 2000 or later. 116 (15%) were published during the decade prior to the survey, that is, in 1996 or later. 110 (14%) titles were published between 1986 and 1995. Another way of looking at these numbers is to say that about 36%, just over one-third, of the titles used were published during the lifetime of the very oldest Grade 10 students.

The complete data set also offers some perspective on the cultural profile of texts used in Grade 10 English language arts. The gender division of authors was heavily male, with 605 males and 252 females. The gender of 70 authors could not be determined and in 5 cases the issue was deemed not applicable (because of issues such as anonymity). The total equals more than the complete number of texts because of cases of multiple authorship. In texts where the gender of the protagonists was relevant and could be ascertained, the balance also tipped towards male; 319 males and 171 females were tallied.

The geographical setting of the text is sometimes relevant, and the table of the top five of such settings is informative (what is meant by “Italy” in this sample may possibly be strongly affected by the large number of citations of *Romeo and Juliet*, but the number of authors listed as Italian is also relatively high, so that may not be the complete explanation). Similarly the number of Greek settings is influenced by classic myths and other texts. The number of Canadian settings is relatively small, representing 38% of the American total, for example, and 18% of the total top five settings.

Table 12*Top Five Geographic Settings Grouped by Country*

Country	Number of Occurrences
United States	183
Italy	86
Canada	70
Fantasy World	27
Greece	23

A similar pattern comes across even more strongly in the data about the author's country of origin. The range of nationalities represented is impressive, taken as a totality, with 28 different countries featured on the list. Out of a total of 902 citations of authors, however, 146 list an author whose country of origin is Canada, just over 16%.

Table 13*Author's Country of Origin by Number of Occurrences*

Country	Occurrences
United States	322
United Kingdom	189
Canada	146
Undetermined	93
Italy	21
Australia	16
Greece	16
Germany	15
New Zealand	9
India	8
France	7
Russia	7
Argentina	5
South Africa	5
Switzerland	5
Sweden	4
Columbia	3
Afghanistan	2
Chile	2
China	2
Japan	2
Lebanon	2
Nigeria	2
Norway	2
Not Applicable	2
Brazil	1
Pakistan	1

Sri Lanka	1
Taiwan	1
Vietnam	1

The cultural background of protagonists (rather than authors) was also ascertained and here it is once again worth providing the full tally, rather than just the top sample. Descriptors are extrapolated from the texts. Not all texts involve actual human protagonists, of course, but the ratios are interesting nevertheless.

Table 14

Culture/Perspective of Protagonist(s)

Culture/Perspective Number of Occurrences

Afghani	2
African American	15
African, Black	6
American	205
Animal	7
Arabic	3
Belgian	1
British	54
Cambodian	2
Canadian	66
Chinese	2
Chinese American	2
Chinese Canadian	2
East Indian	1
European	5
European, Jewish	2
French	6
Greek	24
Inuit	2
Irish	6
Islam	1
Italian	83
Japanese	2
Jewish Canadian	2
Latin American	6
Maori	1
Mexican	3
Mexican American	1
NA	76
Native American	5
Native Canadian	7
Norse	1
Norwegian	2

Not Specified	69
Roman	2
Scottish	2
Sikh	1
Undetermined	76

It must be noted that the totals for Canadian and American characters often represent an unmarked, mainstream version of these nationalities. In many texts, it is likely either that these characters are white, or that their non-white status is not an issue in the story. In contrast, a smaller number are categorized more specifically under the following headings (in alphabetical order): African American, Chinese American, Chinese Canadian, Jewish Canadian, Mexican American, Native American, and Native Canadian. When these numbers are amalgamated, it leads to a total of 228 American protagonists and 77 Canadian protagonists; another way to describe those numbers is to say that there are approximately one-third as many Canadian protagonists on this list as American.

A total of 35 different cultural identifications is tallied; unfortunately it is difficult to compare with the 1996 figures because a much finer-grained breakdown of backgrounds was used in that earlier analysis, when a total of 52 categories was identified. Some of this difference may simply reflect the larger data set of 1996. The most that can be said safely is that there has been no major increase of cultural backgrounds in the past ten years, but the 1996 figures already showed a very international trend. The numbers in some instances are very small, but a range of international perspectives is certainly being offered, even though this varied list of national backgrounds is vastly outnumbered by the Big Three of American, Canadian and British entries.

Discussion

The decade from 1996 to 2006 was a time of rapid transformation in contemporary media. However, such changes are reflected only to a limited extent in our findings. It comes as little surprise that traditional print genres such as novels, poetry, plays, and short stories still form the core of the curriculum, with film serving as the main non-print medium. Computers and the Internet are used in the classroom, but in a traditional role of tools to support learning rather than as texts in their own right.

What is more surprising is how stable many specific titles have remained over time. Although the “long tail” of single use shows a fascinating international range, the multiple entries at the popular end of the scale definitely demonstrate a more conservative trend towards older, well-established texts. For reasons of space, this discussion will mainly focus on questions involving the reproduction of a “school canon.”

One obvious source of these titles is the provincial list of authorized list of novels and nonfiction for high school. These titles may be taken as recommendations but teachers are not bound to use them. There is certainly overlap between Alberta Education’s list and the one uncovered in this survey, but not enough to explain the phenomenon of the top ten titles in use in the schools in completely satisfactory ways. Here are the titles authorized in Alberta in 2005 and still operational on the Alberta

Education website, along with date of publication; it is easy to see where most of the top ten titles originated.

Table 15

Alberta Education's Authorized List for English 10-1, 2005

Title	Publication Date
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	1884
<i>The Alchemist</i>	1998
<i>Animal Farm</i>	1945
<i>The Book of Small</i>	1942
<i>The Chrysalids</i>	1955
<i>Dragonsbane</i>	1985
<i>The Education of Little Tree</i>	1976
<i>Fateless</i>	1975
<i>Girl with a Pearl Earring</i>	1999
<i>My Family and Other Animals</i>	1956
<i>A Night to Remember</i>	1955
<i>October Sky</i>	1998
<i>Oliver Twist</i>	1838
<i>Random Passage</i>	1992
<i>Rebecca</i>	1938
<i>Rick Hansen: Man in Motion</i>	1987
<i>Silas Marner</i>	1861
<i>Something Wicked This Way Comes</i>	1962
<i>Thinking like a Mountain</i>	2000
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	1960
<i>Touch the Dragon</i>	1992
<i>Waiting for the Rain</i>	1987

Table 16

Alberta Education's Authorized List for English 10-2, 2005

Title	Publication Date
<i>Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman</i>	1971
<i>The Blue Sword</i>	1982
<i>The Cage</i>	1986
<i>A Child in Prison Camp</i>	1971
<i>Children of the River</i>	1989
<i>Crabbe</i>	1986
<i>Dare</i>	1988
<i>Deathwatch</i>	1972
<i>Dove</i>	1972
<i>Fish House Secrets</i>	1992
<i>The Great Escape</i>	1950
<i>Hatchet</i>	1987
<i>Hunter in the Dark</i>	1982
<i>In the Land of White Death</i>	1917

<i>Lyddie</i>	1991
<i>Never Cry Wolf</i>	1963
<i>On the Lines</i>	1993
<i>The Pearl</i>	1945
<i>The Road to Chlifa</i>	1992
<i>Speak</i>	1999
<i>Terry Fox</i>	1981
<i>War of the Eagles</i>	1998
<i>Whiteout</i>	1988
<i>Why Shoot the Teacher?</i>	1965
<i>Yuletide Blues</i>	1991
<i>Z for Zachariah</i>	1974

Overall, however, the Alberta Education list is much newer than the titles in the top ten. The following table presents three columns of information. The first lists publication dates from the Alberta Education list; the second lists the number of authorized titles from each particular year of publication, and the third presents the number of titles represented in the top ten list.

Table 17

Publication Dates of Authorized Titles and Top Ten Titles

Publication Year	# of AB Titles	# of Top Ten Titles
2000	1	
1999	2	
1998	3	1
1993	1	
1992	4	
1991	2	
1989	1	
1988	2	1
1987	3	1
1986	2	1
1985	1	
1982	2	
1981	1	
1976	1	
1975	1	
1974	1	
1972	2	1
1971	2	
1965	1	
1963	1	
1962	1	
1960	1	1
1956	1	
1955	2	1

1954		1
1950	1	
1945	2	1
1942	1	
1938	1	
1917	1	
1884	1	
1861	1	
1838	1	
1818		1

Altogether six authorized titles were published after the cut-off date of our previous survey; and a total of ten of Alberta Education's titles come from the 1990s; but only one (*Holes*) was taken up by multiple teachers. Many of the newer titles on the Alberta recommended reading list are young adult novels (though it also has to be said that some young adult titles do remain on the list for a very long time). *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *Frankenstein* (1818) made it to the top ten without authorization, but no newer titles appeared in this way.

It would be very interesting to find out more about the explanation for this bias towards older texts. "Newer" certainly does not automatically mean "better," but "older" is not a guarantee of quality either. A newer title does suggest a slightly different teaching stance, in that the teacher will be less likely to be operating out of very deep familiarity with the material, and more likely to be experiencing some sense of risk. The attitude of students may also differ if they consider their texts to be contemporary with themselves. On the other hand, some readers react positively to the knowledge that they are reading titles long famous as part of the high school experience.

It may be fruitful to explore the extent to which English teachers may feel a cultural or social duty to teach classics from an earlier era or material they are confident is being taught elsewhere. Do they assume that students may read contemporary works on their own but need introducing to works of an earlier time? Do they believe that it takes time for classics to be established, that contemporary literature does not belong in the high school classroom? Is it a simple question of what's available in the stock cupboard or what they believe will be popular with students? Alternatively, are teachers not comfortable with teaching newer material for a variety of possible reasons? Does the threat of parental or government pressures make older, more established titles seem safer? Is repeat use of favourite and/or popular titles one source of constancy in the flux of these Grade 10 classrooms with their changing populations? Is it possible (as was suggested by one group of teachers who looked at these findings) that teachers make more conservative selections for work in Grade 10 as they settle their students into high school? It would take a different study to answer such questions but it is a study that begs to be carried out. Clearly some powerful impetus is at work.

Alberta is not the only jurisdiction to teach this very small set of titles. Two recent surveys produce lists that are striking in their similarity.

Brenda Reed's 2003 list of most frequently cited novels in Grades 10 and 11 in Ontario Public and Catholic District School Boards has a very familiar ring to it.

Table 18

Most Frequently Cited Novels in Reed's Ontario Survey (Reed, 2003, p.101)

Times cited	Novel title	Publication date
11	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	1954
5	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	1960
4	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	1937
4	<i>Brave New World</i>	1932
3	<i>Great Expectations</i>	1860
3	<i>Holes</i>	1998
3	<i>The Chrysalids</i>	1955

Stallworth, Gibbons and Fauber in 2006 produced a study of 142 English language arts teachers from 72 public secondary schools in Alabama. They supply a "Top 10" table of the most frequently mentioned titles in two years; again the list is very recognizable, though it does add a few American staples to the mix.

Table 19

Top 10 Most Frequently Mentioned Book-Length Titles in Alabama Survey (Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006)

2002-2003 school year

To Kill a Mockingbird
The Great Gatsby
The Scarlet Letter
Romeo and Juliet
Julius Caesar
The Crucible
Macbeth
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Animal Farm
A Separate Peace

2003-2004 school year

The Scarlet Letter
The Great Gatsby
To Kill a Mockingbird
Julius Caesar
The Crucible
Macbeth
Romeo and Juliet
Wuthering Heights
A Raisin in the Sun
 (3-way tie) *Lord of the Flies*
Our Town
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Reed quotes an interview with a Grade 11 teacher in Ontario that offers some insight into the selection process at work in one school. Mary worked at a Catholic high school where decision-making was collective, and her account of her school's selection process is particularly helpful in this discussion, as she makes the strong case for a list that does not rapidly change. Although Reed describes a procedure that might well lead to a relatively conservative set of titles, she is clear that the situation is more complex than such a description might indicate.

As Mary filled in the pieces of the decision-making process in her school over the course of five interviews, my understanding of the process changed from an initial idea that the process was quite straightforward and static, to an understanding that the decision-making process in this school is a complex system of thoughtful,

seriously considered decisions that has grown out of and is rooted in years of decisions that have sometimes succeeded and sometimes not. The successful decisions have been built on in this school, over at least half a century, so that the literature taught in the school today is based on a series of decisions that have been refined and modified until the selection of texts is considered to be a good body of literature for the teachers, the students, and the curriculum in the school. Texts that are ultimately unsuccessful in the classroom are removed from the list of readings, and the decisions about why this was done become a part of the collective memory of the English Department. (Reed, 2003, p.132)

Reed suggests that the conservative list is a sign of success rather than retrograde:

The fact that many of the texts that are currently taught in Grade 11 in Mary's school have been taught for the past 50 years does not indicate that the curriculum is stalled in the past. If texts have not changed for many years it is because they continue to be successful texts in the classroom, if by successful we mean that they continue to be enjoyed by most students, they continue to connect to the curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education, and they continue to be thought highly of and enjoyed by the teachers who teach them. (p. 133)

Reed's list of reasons for retaining titles is positive within the limits of the discussions that govern this retention. It may be interesting, however, to look a bit more closely at the runaway winner on the Alberta list, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where some early hints of change may be in the offing. Despite its undeniable extreme popularity and extraordinary longevity on such lists, a recent debate in Ontario raises some new questions about whether it remains an appropriate choice for the multicultural classroom in the 21st century. When, in the summer of 2009, a single Brampton parent challenged its use of racist language, the Education Minister Kathleen Wynne suggested the time might have come to replace it with a Canadian title. "I see it as a great opportunity to find a Canadian novel to put on that course's reading list," she said. "I'm not thinking of a particular novel ... we have terrific Canadian authors who have written about very difficult issues." (Peat, 2009)

The discussion that followed this suggestion brought new voices into the debate. One of the most eloquent was the prize-winning African-Canadian author Lawrence Hill (2009) who wrote in the *Toronto Star*:

Let's give *To Kill a Mockingbird* its due. It's a well-told, energetic, believable story. It concerns itself with issues of wilful blindness and social injustice. . . .

But I, too, have a problem with the novel, or rather, with its overuse in our schools. Over and over, I have seen *To Kill a Mockingbird* handed to Canadian high school students as the one and only book they will be asked to read in class about racism, segregation and the experiences of black people. Certainly, it is the only such book that my own two daughters were asked to read in high school.

Why is this unacceptable? For one reason, the book doesn't even focus on black people. It presents the lives of white people, and how they behave --- some well, and others badly --- in a racist world. . . .

If we want at least some of our literature to engage us in discussions about the experiences faced by Blacks, shouldn't they appear in the books? Should they not be central characters, at least from time to time?

And there is another problem with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It has nothing to do with Canada. It explores racism in small-town Alabama a half-century ago. By giving only this novel to our high school students as a book about racial injustice, we perpetuate the great Canadian myth: that only our dastardly neighbours south of our border practiced slavery and segregation, and that only they had to fight for a better world (Hill, 2009, n.p.)

Teachers who consult only with each other about what makes a successful Grade 10 title need to ensure that perspectives such as Hill's are not inadvertently excluded from the discussion --- particularly in schools where the staffroom is not as multi-ethnic and multicultural as the classroom.

The issue of Canadian titles is raised in this debate, and there seems little doubt that it would be possible and probably desirable to include more Canadian authors in Grade 10 than currently appear in this survey. The 2002 report on the use of Canadian literature in high schools suggested, "Currently, teachers and students are not adequately encouraged to read Canadian literature," (Writers' Trust, 2002, p. 69), and this survey certainly does not challenge that judgment.

Conclusions

Space constraints have limited presentation of the broad data set in this article but some patterns seem clear-cut. On the basis of two surveys a decade apart, the change in the most popular titles being taught in Edmonton Grade 10 English classes is not very great, except for some movement in the choice of short stories. *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet* are every bit as dominant in 2006 as in 1996. Many of the plays, films and poems that appear on the "top ten" lists in 2006 were also popular in 1996.

The "long tail" of titles listed only once does provide considerably more evidence of change. The many examples of open-ended assignments of computer use and reading assignments may also provide opportunities for new materials to move into the classrooms in ways that cannot satisfactorily be recorded in a survey such as this one.

The Edmonton lists of most popular titles greatly resemble lists collected from high school surveys elsewhere, as was also the case in 1996. The evidence for the existence of an informal "canon" of texts thought appropriate for high school in large areas of the English-speaking world is thus strengthened. This survey makes it clear that elements of this canon are deeply established; the comparative data establish that change takes time. What a survey such as this cannot decree is whether change is needed or desirable; that decision lies with the teachers who organize these busy classrooms and manage the education of the students in their care.

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Appendix: The Survey Form

Survey of English Language Arts Materials Used in Grade 10 Classrooms

Please note: To keep responses confidential, this survey is not available electronically. Please return your completed survey to your department head, using the envelope provided.

Part One: Please provide the following background information.

1. For which course are you responding to this questionnaire? (Check one only)

_____ English 10-1 _____ English 10-1 AP _____ English 10-1 pre-IB
_____ English 10-2 _____ English 16

2. Number of students in this class _____ : _____ boys; _____ girls

3. Number of students in this class who speak more than one language (estimate if you're unsure)

_____ French _____ Other languages (please specify if you can)

4. Number of students in this class whose first language is not English (estimate if you're unsure; please specify languages if you can)

5. Number of special needs students in this class (please provide details if you can)

6. Which of the following phrases best describe the majority of students in this class? (Check _____ up _____ to _____ three)

_____ High proportion of recent immigrants
_____ High proportion of students from high socio-economic groups
_____ High proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups
_____ High proportion of students from average socio-economic groups
_____ High proportion of students who work part-time
_____ High proportion of students who have access to a computer at home
_____ Specialist population (i.e., academic, arts, special needs, etc; please specify)

7. What *other* ELA courses are you teaching this semester? (Check all that apply)

_____ English 10-1 _____ English 20-1 _____ English 30-1
_____ English 10-1 AP _____ English 20-1 AP _____ English 30-1 AP
_____ English 10-1 pre-IB _____ English 20-1 IB _____ English 30-1 IB

_____ English 10-2
_____ English 16

_____ English 20-2
_____ English 26

_____ English 30-2
_____ English 36

Part Two: Please answer the following questions on materials used with your Grade 10 class.

1. What literature have you used/are you planning to use with this Grade 10 class? Please specify which works are full-length books and films, which are short stories, poems, plays, non-fiction, newspaper articles, electronic texts, etc., and provide the authors' names. If possible, include the title of the anthology in which the shorter works can be found. Where you can, briefly state where or how you located each work. (Please note that we are not interested in copyright information.)

To answer this question, you can fill in the blank table on the last page of this questionnaire (feel free to photocopy it as needed). If you prefer, you can create your own list or form on a word processor and attach a printout, or you can attach a printout of an existing list (e.g., your course outline).

Example

Title	Author	Genre	Where/How Found
<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i>	Harper Lee	novel	In the school bookroom
"Is Advertising Effective?"	Raymond Brown	newspaper article	From the Edmonton Journal
"Somewhere I Have Never Traveled"	E.E. Cummings	poem	Cummings anthology from personal library
<i>Bend It Like Beckham</i>	Gurinder Chadha, director	film	Saw it in a theatre and wanted to teach it
To Kill a Mockingbird & Harper Lee http://mockingbird.chebucto.org/	Jane Kansas	website	Recommended by colleague
Virtual Museum of Canada http://www.virtualmuseum.ca	Dept of Canadian Heritage	website	Surfing the Internet

2. Please list any audio-visual materials you have used/are planning to use with this class. (If you have a list, simply attach it.) Include any such texts produced by students themselves. Include any assignment that involves watching TV or DVDs.

3. Please describe any way in which your students have made use of computers for this class, beyond basic word-processing (e.g., used the Internet for research, created a web page, etc.)

4. Please list any field trips or in-school presentations at which your students have viewed cultural performances such as theatre, dance, author readings, etc.

5. Do you allow your students to read materials of their own choosing?

_____ Yes _____ No

If you have answered yes above, please answer the following questions:

a) Do you allow your students completely free choice?

_____ Yes _____ No

b) Do you allow your students choice within certain limitations? (Please explain)

_____ Yes _____ No

c) Do your students choose from a pre-selected list? If so, please attach the list (if available) or provide details below.

_____ Yes _____ No

d) Do you give your students in-class reading time? If yes, please give details.

_____ Yes _____ No

6. Do you allow your students to view **films** of their own choosing?

_____ Yes _____ No

If you have answered yes above, please answer the following questions:

a) Do you allow your students completely free choice?

_____ Yes _____ No

b) Do you allow your students choice within certain limitations? (Please explain)

_____ Yes _____ No

c) Do your students choose from a pre-selected list? If so, please attach the list (if available) or provide details below.

_____ Yes _____ No

7. Do you allow your students to view **digital materials** (e.g., websites) of their own choosing?

_____ Yes _____ No

If you have answered yes above, please answer the following questions:

a) Do you allow your students completely free choice?

_____ Yes _____ No

b) Do you allow your students choice within certain limitations? (Please explain)

_____ Yes _____ No

c) Do your students choose from a pre-selected list? If so, please attach the list (if available) or provide details below.

_____ Yes _____ No

8. Please suggest at least one text or one example of material in any medium that has worked well in your Grade 10 classroom.

9. Is there a particular text or other material in any medium that you would *not* use again

with a Grade 10 class? If yes, please provide details.

_____ Yes _____ No

10. Have you found any materials that work well with ESL readers? If so, please list:

11. If you wish, please provide any further details or information about the materials taught in your Grade 10 class.

12. Did you complete a survey similar to this one in 1996? (Check one)

_____ Yes _____ No _____ Can't remember

We would be grateful if you would provide the following optional information about yourself:

Teacher's gender _____ Female _____ Male

In what year did you graduate from your teacher education program? _____

Thank you very much for your assistance!

Title	Author	Genre	Where / How Found