

## Don't Know Much About History?

By Karen Green

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I can't remember exactly when it was I first started hearing all the buzz about Kate Beaton and her webcomic "Hark! A Vagrant." I think I saw it talked up on Twitter first, a few years back. I went over to the Hark! A Vagrant site, and I can't remember which strip I saw but at the time my take was that it was rather crudely drawn and maybe just a teeny bit vulgar. So, because I can be a godawful snob, I didn't go back.



Until a few more months passed, and MORE people were buzzing about Kate Beaton and "Hark! A Vagrant" and I tried one more time. And I can't remember which comic I saw that time, either, but I was utterly entranced by its erudition and its sly wit, and immediately became a rabid fan. Because I may be a godawful snob, but I'm not rigid.

Still more months passed and I posted my favorite strips on Facebook or on Tumblr, and my friends laughed and commented and cheered, and I didn't think much more about the larger significance of Beaton's work until the accidental confluence of the Hark! A Vagrant print release and my reading of a Louis Menand article in a June 2011 issue of The New Yorker (yes, June: I'm really behind in my New Yorker reading).

The Menand article, "Live and Learn," was an assessment of two recent books on the purpose of higher education, and it began with an anecdote. Menand described teaching at an Ivy league institution, then shifting gears to teaching at a public university, where, to his astonishment, a student asked him one day, "Why did we have to buy this book?" Now, Menand received a PhD in English from my own fine institution, went on to teach at Princeton, and then enjoyed a Distinguished Professorship at the CUNY Graduate Center, before departing for Harvard. He's a smart guy, is what I'm saying. But he describes being taken aback by this question (he notes he more often heard its related form, "Why did we have to read this book?"), which, he writes, he "had never been called to think about before."

# AUSTEN MANIA



He then posits two possible answers to the question: a) you read this book to become intelligent, in a way that is measurable by grades (i.e. meritocratic) or b) you read this book because college teaches you things you cannot learn elsewhere and that will enrich your life (i.e. democratic). I read this and thought to myself: "Seriously? You NEVER thought about why you have your English-lit students read, say, *Pride and Prejudice*? You've never thought about how Austen uses the device of romantic fiction to condemn the effects on families, especially women, of 19th-century inheritance law and the practice of entail? How about *Fitzgerald*? You've never thought about what *The Great Gatsby* has to say about class in America and the post-WW1 era? You've REALLY never thought about these questions?"

That is just sad. But then I looked up Menand's dissertation topic and discovered he'd written about 19th-century Modernist literary criticism, not about the literature itself, so perhaps his reaction constitutes an occupational (pedagogical?) hazard. He might want to spend some time reading Atlantic editor Ta-Nehisi Coates' brilliant and insightful readings of Jane Austen and Edith Wharton for some teachable moments.

Returning to Menand's two answers, however, I tend to lean more towards the second. A college education--done right--should introduce students to ideas and ideologies that challenge them, that nudge them out of complacency and help shape them as individuals. Where I differ from Menand is the assumption that such books would or could only be read in a university environment; I'll wager there's not a book on his syllabus that I hadn't read long before I entered the ivied halls of academe. But, certainly, university professors can often find depths and angles in those books that the solitary reader might miss...if the professor bothers to think about why he or she is assigning the text, that is.

But, honestly, I don't think that's the purpose of a college education. One of the books Menand discusses, *Academically Adrift*, written by a pair of sociologists, recounts the researchers' attempts to identify whether a college education endows students with those oft-invoked "critical thinking skills." So they created a study where they assessed the critical thinking skills of 2,000 students at about a dozen

four-year colleges: they gave a set of problems to the students as incoming freshmen, and then again three semesters later, in the middle of their sophomore year, and measured the improvement in the students' critical thinking.

There wasn't actually much improvement. The liberal arts majors improved the most (yay!). The business majors improved the least (boy, does that explain a lot). But, taken overall, the improvement was pretty negligible. Menand defends the results by pointing out that three semesters isn't much time for critical training to kick in. I agree with him, but I think that that's not wholly the point.



First of all, I don't think that the critical thinking skills one acquires in college magically kick in, like a software upgrade, as soon as they're demonstrated for students in classes. What makes more sense to me is that those skills mature over time, as graduates learn how to apply them in real-world scenarios. Just as wisdom is the product of intelligence and experience, analytical techniques need to combine with experience to mature into true critical insight.

But of course I'm mostly interested in those liberal arts majors. You remember: the ones with the highest measurable improvement in critical thinking skills. That's a great reward, but I don't necessarily think even that is the best reason to pursue a liberal arts education. The benefit that I see--and that Beaton exemplifies with such wit and flair--is to gain conversance with a shared cultural and historical landscape. To be part of an intellectual discourse that begins in the West with the Bible and continues up through Michel Foucault and beyond. To be more than merely charming or knowledgeable (or tedious) at cocktail parties, but rather to understand how every new work of art or of literature, how every new political idea, fits into a long tradition, and to understand the relationship between the old and the new.



THE HORROR OF THE NEW WOMAN



I thought of all this as well when I was sent a link, recently, to one of Rush Limbaugh's periodic rants on the topic of liberals and the liberal arts. Limbaugh was mocking an "I am the 99%" protester who lamented the jobless future she has with her Classical Studies degree--he wondered what kind of future she expected with a useless, impractical major like Classics. Limbaugh's not even sure what her major really is: "Tell me, any of you at random listening all across the fruited plain, what the hell is Classical Studies? What classics are studied? Or, is it learning how to study in a classical way? Or is it learning how to study in a classy as opposed to unclassy way? And what about unClassical Studies? Why does nobody care about the unclassics? What are the classics? And how are the classics studied?" He then posits that maybe it's about reading Dickens.

THE HORROR OF THE NEW WOMAN



But, after all, colleges aren't trade schools, training programs resulting in a specific skill and a specific job. Their mission is to educate, producing thoughtful, well-rounded graduates, who combine learned skills with their innate abilities to qualify for any number of careers--but rarely aimed at a specific one. And as I read that tirade, I found myself thinking: I believe Limbaugh loves him some Founding Fathers, but perhaps he doesn't realize that the traditional education of 18th-century gentlemen such as our Founders was a complete immersion in classical studies, and it was that familiarity with the political theory of the ancients that underpinned their rationale for revolution, and their conception of the American democratic experiment. So, one perceived benefit of a classical studies education might be the ability to understand the true nature and goals of these United States, and to be a better citizen as a consequence (although, I'll grant you, that's a difficult skill to monetize).

When Beaton was in college, for example, she studied history and anthropology but, as the blurb in her book states, she has enjoyed "lifelong obsessions with literature, history, and drawing." (In other words, she may have immersed herself in literature and history before entering college: goodbye, Menand argument A.) Beaton's own inclinations, combined with her college education and--dare I say it?--the critical thinking skills she exercised there, allow her to comment on and unconsciously promote the western literary canon. You can't fully appreciate Beaton's work if you don't know the literature--or the history--she pokes fun at (or celebrates; it's a toss-up).



Her readers' assumption of cultural familiarity is so strong that, when Beaton introduced fictional poet Charles and his wife Janita, her fans assume they're real, and then question their own cultural knowledge. I know; I did the same thing. "Who is this poet, with the unusually-named wife? Let me use my awesome research skills to identify him!" It was jarring to learn that they were invented. And it was that befuddlement over Charles and Janita that those without familiarity with literature and history must feel whenever they read Beaton's work--the cultural references aren't an extra, they're the feature.

### GET ME OFF THIS FREAKING MOOR



Anne, why are you writing books about how alcoholic losers ruin people's lives? Don't you see that romanticizing douchey behavior is the proper literary convention in this family! *Honestly*. Losers who ruin people's lives are who we want to dream about at night.

Reading Beaton's work, I'm reminded of advice I once read for aspiring comics writers (I honestly can't remember where; it's driving me crazy): don't read only other comics books. The advice-giver's point was that comics writers who read only other comics can live in a kind of bubble. Getting ideas from outside the medium isn't a bad thing. That advice reminded me, in turn, of a documentary I once saw about competitive hip-hop artists, called "Freestyle: the Art of Rhyme." One of the freestylers they interviewed described spending hours reading the dictionary, in order to expand his vocabulary and make his rhymes more complex. Beaton is like the champion MC of gag comics, dropping rhymes few can equal and virtually no one surpass. There's little that can beat the gratification of knowing you're one of those who knows what she's talking about. That gratification? That's one of the rewards of a college education.

What former professor of hers would not be gratified to read her work? Take a peek at some of her more recent online work: French Revolution comics. Click through and read them--and then read her commentary at the bottom of the page. She's given real thought to the natures of the people who many have never heard of, or think of as lifeless names on a high school history final.

So, essentially, the purpose of a college education is to be able to read Kate Beaton. And, if you're very lucky and very clever and go to a very good school, you might just be able to be her.

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