

Well Read

By Daniel J. Philippon

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Louisa Dette's reputation preceded her. Even before I entered sophomore English at Wayne Valley High School in northern New Jersey, I knew Mrs. Dette was one of those teachers whose course you absolutely had to take. She was tough, my sources told me, but fair.

The summer before school began, she had already lived up to her reputation, sending each member of the class a list of the books we were to read in the coming year and suggesting we had best get started on at least two of them if we expected to pass her course. Even if we 15-year-olds couldn't yet define an oxymoron, we at least knew that the words summer and reading definitely did not belong together.

When fall arrived, the situation only worsened. Sophomore English meant American literature, and Mrs. Dette intended to study all of it, from Puritanism to Post-Modernism.

Looking over my notes, I am astounded to see how much she accomplished that year. "The Red Badge of Courage," "The Great Gatsby," "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "Ethan Frome," "The Crucible," "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Of Mice and Men," "Black Boy" -- we read them all, and all of them in detail. We debated whether "In Cold Blood" was a classic; we discussed the moral

implications of violence in "The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson; we explored the quality of sympathy in "The Mourners," by Bernard Malamud. I can still hear Mrs. Dette's hand pounding the podium, marking out the beat as we memorized Poe's "Annabel Lee" ("It was many and many a year ago/In a kingdom by the sea . . .").

In her class I first learned how to compose an essay, how to conduct research and how to use the English language properly. But I can also see now that she wasn't just teaching us how to read and write; she was teaching us how to live, how to appreciate the monuments of human culture and how to prepare ourselves eventually to join that culture on equal terms.

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In fact, she so overflowed with names and titles that, try as she might, she couldn't get them all onto the chalkboard fast enough, and we were forced to rely on our own creative attempts at spelling. Consequently, my notes are filled with hundreds of scrawled references to such classic books as "Mole Flanders" and "The Autobiography of Alice Betoclis."

Like any good teacher, she was known for her quirky turns of phrase and her seemingly outrageous demands on our time and attention. She never gave us quizzes; she presented us with "opportunities" to display our learning. When, as was all too often the case, we failed to live up to her high standards, we would receive her characteristic reply: "Horrors!"

The news of Mrs. Dette's recent death from cancer surprised me not only because she died so young, but also because I had forgotten the influence she exerted upon my life. She changed the direction of my studies, and as a result I

now find myself teaching some of the same books she first taught me 12 years ago.

While I have no doubt forgotten many details of my year in her class, I will always remember one particular incident: I discovered a Bible -- horrors! -- tucked into a bookshelf in the back of her classroom. "And just what is a Bible doing in a public school?" I asked her with a youthful enthusiasm for the absolute separation of church and state. "This, too, is literature," she patiently reminded me, a lesson whose wisdom I acknowledge more deeply with each passing year.

Although I regret having lost touch with her since I moved away from New Jersey, in one sense our distance has helped me better to understand the extent of Mrs. Dette's achievement. Despite her death, to me she will always remain as she was, actively teaching. I'm still working on her reading list, and as far as I'm concerned, she is still very much alive.