

John Pruitt

From the Editor

*A note from the editor of
the Wisconsin English
Journal.*

In January I'm set to teach Contemporary Women Writers, and, as always, the anxiety of assigning the perfect texts that I and my students will eagerly pore over loomed large. In years past, I turned to the critics and award winners, mostly with success, occasionally without: of course, if my students hate a short-listed Booker Prize nominee, they obviously lack the artistic and literary disposition I demand in my classroom. Right?

It nearly happened again, this time with Rachel Kushner's novel *The Flamethrowers*, a finalist for the 2013 National Book Award and a *New York Times* bestseller and Notable Book, its dust jacket covered with glowing reviews from *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, and other renowned publications. I sort of liked it—it was actually a little too pretentious, I thought, so I decided to shun the professional readers and turn to common readers for their reactions. My students, after all, are common readers

themselves, so I sought out reviews from their peers.

That's how I serendipitously discovered the [BookTube Network](#), which I understand happens with most great discoveries: the Venus de Milo, the Uluburun shipwreck, the Galapagos Archipelago, Uranus...Thousands of videos about books and reading abide here, assuring me that even millennials continue to turn to the written word. In fact, here's what I learned from them about *The Flamethrowers*:

“Much of this book just isn't very good. It's actually pretty bad.”

“Reading this was like sitting in the back of a cab in a strange city. You're pretty sure you're headed somewhere but it's taking forever and it looks like you're going in circles.”

“There are some good passages, but they're hiding deep in long stretches of clunky writing where nothing, literally nothing, happens.”

“This reads like a book that I should like in a literary sense, and I'm not positive that it worked out like that. I pretty much struggled through it, and was relieved when I reached the end.”

“If you're craving substance, engagement, something, this book will leave you wanting.”

I did think about this approach before I decided not to assign the book. After all, Amazon is replete with [negative \(and hilarious\) reviews](#) written by jaded adolescents *forced* (as they put it) to trudge through another dull classic, but I don't teach those students. In college, they may take my literature courses simply to fulfill a Humanities requirement, but they have options in music, art, philosophy, and other disciplines as well. And, frankly, I don't care if they can psychoanalyze Hamlet or deconstruct Joyce or queer Woolf. I don't want to do that myself.

I care only that they continue reading for pleasure when my class finishes. That's also why I teach primarily contemporary

literature. Very few English majors cross my path in the two-year system, so current novels speaking to current events will more likely engage those who may never again enroll in literature courses.

So, while I do turn to the *London Review of Books* for personal reading, I turn to the young masses for classroom reading. As we know, despite how much we want them to love Dickens and Faulkner, if our students hate what we're teaching, we all suffer.

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