

## Sharing the joys of reading with youth

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I can imagine asking my students this question: Whom do you like the best, singer Kelly Clarkson, or 19th century British author Jane Austen?

Well, no. Actually, I cannot imagine asking my students that question. The answer would be too predictable.

How can someone who deals with college students on a daily basis, and who teaches literature to boot, imagine that a writer who passed away 196 years ago could be more popular than a current pop singer? But, listen to this.

A spokesperson for the Jane Austen House Museum says that Austen fans are pledging donations in a feisty drive to prevent a ring the British author willed to her sister from being bought by Kelly Clarkson. The American singer, who admires Austen and owns a first edition of her masterpiece "Persuasion," reportedly bought the ring at a Sotheby auction last year for some US\$225,000 (CP 8 - 15 - 13, p. 8). She does not yet have the ring in her possession. At the moment, the British government is exercising its legal power to delay the export of an object it considers a national treasure. In the meantime, the Austen Museum is scurrying to match the figure Ms. Clarkson put up for the ring. Clarkson has agreed to sell it, allowing the ring to stay in the Austen House Museum, if the dollars and cents add up.

Now we could argue until the cows come home about Ms. Clarkson's values. Should an admirer of an author deny other literary fans the opportunity to gaze upon a special piece of jewelry ensconced in a glass case in a far away land, but the land of that writer's birth? From a different viewpoint, what are we to think of someone spending over US\$200,000 for a ring, and a ring, we suspect, that she would rarely, if ever, even wear? For the same amount of money, you could pay basic tuition expenses for four years for 17 students at my university.

Allow me, please, to momentarily change focus.

I am in the midst of a transition. After 27 years as a full time instructor on my campus, I am now a part-timer. On the first day of this month, in a sense, I retired.

What do I hope to do as a part-timer? In addition to continuing to teach and write, I hope to do more reading. I want to read so that I might improve myself

as a person. I want to read to deepen my knowledge of myself and of human nature. I want to read for the sheer pleasure it gives me.

The Child Welfare League (CWLF) reported this week on a survey it recently administered to local junior high school students. A full 42 percent of the youth said they have no real leisure time. And 54 percent are unable to find a proper place for leisure. Hanging out at Internet cafes and karaoke parlors are popular activities for 24 percent. Up to 73 percent spend more than two hours daily surfing the Internet in the summer, and 67 percent watching television (CP 8-15-13, p. 15).

As I let go of full time status, I must let go of my office, too. Like John the Baptist, I am preparing the way for the one who is to come, the colleague who will take my place. I am dusting off books, choosing which to keep, and which to say farewell to. I am giving away 2/3 of those books. I am contacting former students, secretaries at my university, friends wherever I may find them. I am asking, "Want some books?"

That CWLF survey forgot to ask those students how much time they put into reading. I guess the answer would have been (sigh) predictable.

Something is drastically wrong with an educational system that leaves over 40 percent of its high school students feeling they have no leisure. If they have no leisure, those young people will never discover the joy of reading. They are doomed to miss much in life.

There is nothing wrong with a bit of karaoke, or hanging out, or surfing on the Internet. There is a time and a place for everything. There ought also to be time for reading.

My thanks to Kelly Clarkson for helping to shine a light on an old and treasured friend, Jane Austen. Thank you for pushing the topic of reading under my nose this week.

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