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My Journey to Loving Literature

by Mary Bennett

When I entered high school in September 1965, I enjoyed all my classes, but my favorite class was English taught by Mr. Thomas P. Hunt. When he talked about a novel, play, essay or poem, he always provided a historical framework and background on the author before we even opened the book to the first page of text. Whether we were reading a play or a sonnet by Shakespeare, a poem by Dickinson, or *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, he generated eagerness in us, his students, to want to read, enjoy and analyze the richness of the texts. He introduced us to poetry by Langston Hughes. I had never read anything by a Black writer before this. We read complete texts, not excerpts.

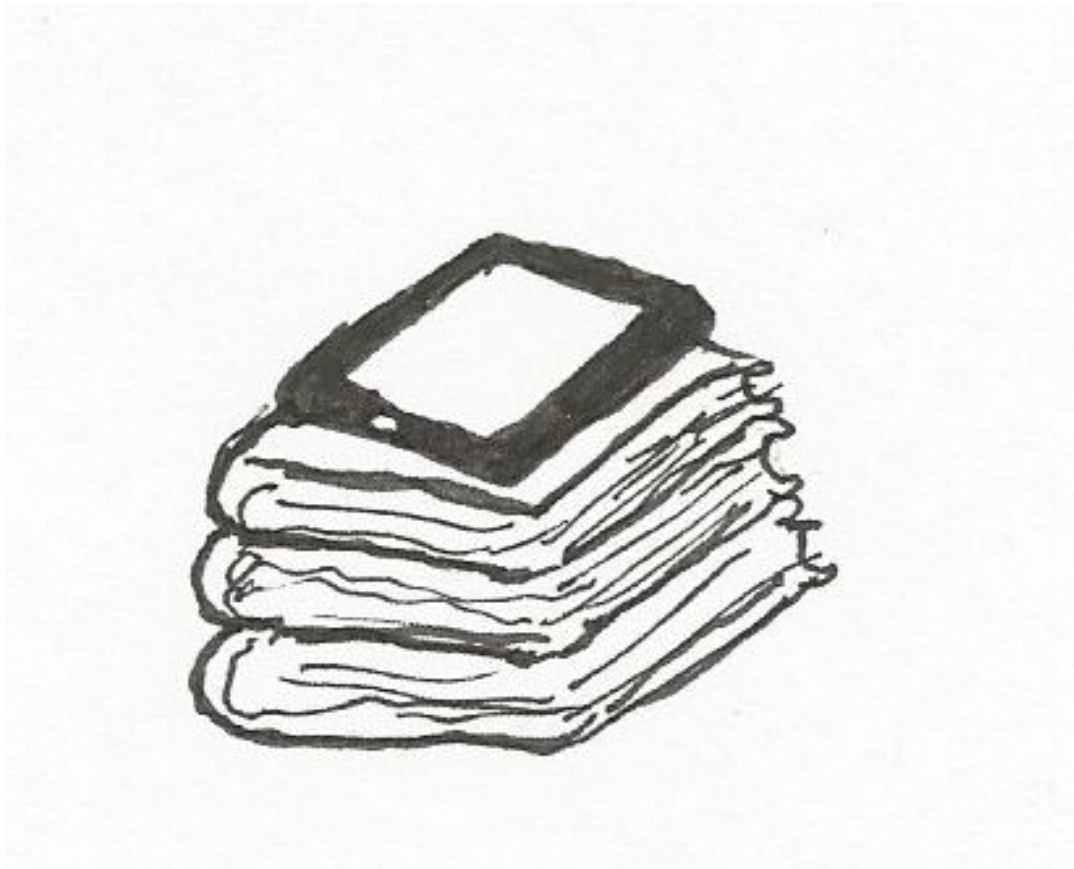
When Mr. Hunt discussed an author of a literary work, he would sometimes mention other authors. One such talk included a reference to Alexander Dumas and I wrote down that name. On my next trip to the Book Mobile, I looked for a book by him. One was not available that day, but two weeks later; I was able to get a copy of *The Count of Monte' Cristo*. It was nearly 1,000 pages in length. I devoured every word. I brought the book to class one day and Mr. Hunt noticed it. He was pleased and excited. As my reading continued, we had side chats about the characters and plot. I was thrilled and he was proud that something he said inspired me.

By the time I was a sophomore, I had decided that I wanted to become an English teacher. I wanted to help young people in the ways Mr. Hunt had helped me. He loved literature and wanted us to love it too. My hope was that someday I would follow in his footsteps and inspire others.

Mary Bennett is a product of the Newark Public Schools; she graduated from Fifteenth Avenue Elementary School and West Side High School. She received her bachelor's degree in English/Language Arts from Douglass College and her master's degree from Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education. She is licensed as a teacher, supervisor, principal, superintendent and business administrator by the New Jersey Department of Education. She was an English/Language Arts teacher at Barringer High School, an assistant principal at West Side High School and Malcolm X Shabazz High School and principal of Malcolm X Shabazz High School for 10 years, all in New Jersey.

After retiring, Bennett served as the lead facilitator for two US Department of Education programs, one national (GEAR UP) and one international (iNdlouvu Partnership for Lifelong Learning) in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. For 12 years, she was the Executive Director of Project GRAD Newark that served more than 8,000 Newark public schools students, providing in-school support,

supplemental services for students and teachers, college awareness, summer enrichment programs as well as emphasizing the importance of PK – 16 education, and home – school partnerships. Project GRAD Newark awarded more than five million dollars in scholarships to 964 graduates of Central and Malcolm X Shabazz High Schools to help them pay for a college education.



Artwork by Izzie Boyce-Blanchard