

Eight American Authors

Donald Richie. Tokyo, Japan: Kenkyusha, 1956.

At first glance, choosing reading material for an English as a foreign language (EFL) literature class would seem like a simple enough proposition. After all, there are hundreds of authors to choose from and various editions available, from the latest 250-headword illustrated classics to the original works themselves. But as with most things that look easy, there are a number of things to consider before putting together a reading list. One of the most refreshing books on the subject is Donald Richie's *Eight American Authors*, a wonderfully opinionated view of the canon of American literature from Hawthorne to Hemingway.

According to Richie, people studying American literature in an EFL context "want to know two things. First, . . . who are the novelists, poets, dramatists and essayists Americans usually consider the best. Second, among these which are easy for the English language student to read and which are not" (p. 178). To address these questions, Richie divides American literature into four categories: Easy English—Easy Situations, Easy English—Difficult Situations, Difficult English—Easy Situations, and Difficult English—Difficult Situations. The easy/difficult English side of the equation has to do with vocabulary and style. Does the author write sentences that can be readily understood with the aid of a dictionary? Is the style relatively easy to read and largely free of idioms and colloquialisms?

On the other hand, the easy/difficult situations element has to do with factors such as references and allusions, context, and the milieu of the work. Does the author presume that his or her readers possess a great deal of background knowledge about the subject matter and the time period? If so, then that work is going to be difficult to read no matter how direct and clear the style.

Although some authors' work fits into more than one category, and Richie does have his reservations, authors such as Sherwood

Anderson, Willa Cather, Jack London, and William Saroyan are categorized as Easy English—Easy Situations. Under Easy English—Difficult Situations, Richie includes Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway (which may seem like a surprise until you try teaching “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”), and John Steinbeck (although “The Pearl” could be put in the previous category).

Under Difficult English—Easy Situations, we have Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, and J. D. Salinger. And finally, the last category—and the most challenging (one might say bordering on the masochistic) for the EFL class—is Difficult English—Difficult Situations. Here Richie includes Herman Melville, Henry James, and William Faulkner.

Richie’s “What Not to Read” list is mercifully short and includes Washington Irving, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Fenimore Cooper, Richard Dana, O. Henry, and Theodore Dreiser. Whether or not you agree with Richie on who is under- or overrated, his lists make the task of choosing appropriate material that much easier. In addition, his categories are quite useful and can be applied to other national literatures as well as to more contemporary authors. More important, his approach underscores the distinction between what is comprehensible on a semantic level and what is comprehensible on a cultural level. Long out of print and somewhat difficult to find, Richie’s take on teaching American literature is still surprisingly fresh.

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