should be generative of questions rather than answers and above all should be fun, allowing students to relax and shed inhibitions about the texts and authors they will encounter in their studies.

---

**Literature Class Band**

*Claire Cothren*

A first-day exercise that encourages students to think critically about literary canonization.

**Genre:** any  
**Course Level:** introductory  
**Student Difficulty:** easy  
**Teacher Preparation:** medium  
**Class Size:** any  
**Semester Time:** first day  
**Writing Component:** none  
**Close Reading:** none  
**Estimated Time:** 45 minutes

**EXERCISE**

On the first day of class, show students the iconic cover art for the Beatles’ album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which pictures the band members in front of a collage of more than fifty other artists, actors, athletes, philosophers, celebrities, and various historical figures. (Copies of the album sleeve can be found in many places online, including the Beatles’ official website, http://thebeatles.com.)

Explain that the collage features images of individuals the band members liked and admired—figures they would enjoy having in attendance at one of their concerts. After identifying a few of these individuals and commenting briefly on their various credentials, ask the students to imagine that they have the opportunity to create a “literature class band.” They should consider whose work they would most like to study in a literature class and then select a dozen or more of these figures for inclusion on a class “album cover.”

Allow students five to ten minutes to discuss their ideas in small groups. Encourage them to share their favorite authors or works, and then reconvene...
the groups to solicit nominations. (For a class size that is medium or large, consider asking groups to agree on just one author to nominate, with backup candidates at the ready if another group chooses the same author.) If the classroom is equipped with an instructor’s computer and access to the Internet, you can easily create, on the spot, a makeshift album cover by copying and pasting to a Word document images of the authors whom students identify. (Alternatively, you can ask a tech-savvy student or two to do the job.) If the classroom is not equipped in this way, you or the students can simply list the authors on the board.

After displaying the names (and, if possible, images) of at least a dozen literary figures, ask students to talk about the “album” they’ve created. Questions to consider: Are these figures ones you are likely to encounter in a traditional literature classroom? Why (or why not)? Do they represent “true” literature? “Great” literature? Who gets to decide? Also: What do these figures have in common (nationality, gender, genre, race, time period)? After a closer look, do any figures seem to be missing or underrepresented? Why might their omission be considered problematic? Do literary figures have to be poets, playwrights, or novelists, or can they include other kinds of writers? This entire exercise takes roughly forty-five minutes, though you can adjust the timing by limiting or expanding the number of authors included on your album cover.

REFLECTIONS

“Literature Class Band” is a fun first-day activity that allows students to get to know each other by discussing their favorite literary figures. While many enjoy discovering that they share an interest in certain authors, they find even more compelling the ensuing class discussion about how to define literature.

_Sgt. Pepper_ is a useful starting point for this discussion because once students observe the relative diversity of the figures on the Beatles’ album (Bob Dylan, Shirley Temple, Sonny Liston, James Joyce), they also tend to think about their literary preferences in more inclusive terms. From there, students can begin to consider questions of literary canonization—whether, for example, the work of young adult fiction writers, rappers, or graphic novelists is (or should be) studied alongside the work of novelists, playwrights, and poets. The visual component of the exercise is particularly important because it helps students identify canonical trends or aporias (like the predominance of men), not only on the _Sgt. Pepper_ cover but also (often) in their own nominees, as well as in the literary canons from which many class syllabuses typically draw.

When I used this exercise in an introduction to literature course, students were quick to nominate “classic” Western novelists and playwrights for their band, including Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Hawthorne, Poe, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Dickens, and Austen. They also offered up a few of their
favorite contemporary authors—J. K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer, and Suzanne Collins. However, it was with some hesitation that they ventured to list “alternative” choices such as speechwriters (Martin Luther King Jr.), lyricists (Kanye West), or screenwriters (Quentin Tarantino). A discussion of why the class felt more reluctant to name some band members than others not only helped students to reach conclusions about which texts are already widely canonized in the West but also encouraged them to think critically about trends in genre, style, and periodization. In examining the “album cover” that we created, students further noted the overwhelming representation of white British and American men. We were then able to discuss what factors contributed to this canonical trend as well as the need and potential for change.

Although I have had great success with this exercise in general literature surveys, it could also work well in genre courses (classes devoted to the gothic, science fiction, mystery, detective fiction, or romance) and in contemporary fiction survey courses, where canons have yet to solidify.

---

**Judge a Book by Its Cover**

_J. Michelle Coghlan_

A first-day exercise that encourages students to consider the visual cues of literary canons.

**Genre:** fiction  
**Course Level:** any  
**Student Difficulty:** easy  
**Teacher Preparation:** medium  
**Class Size:** any  
**Semester Time:** first day  
**Writing Component:** none  
**Close Reading:** none to low  
**Estimated Time:** 35 to 40 minutes

**EXERCISE**

Choose two or three books (they may be popular or canonical) and cart into class as many different editions of them as you can. (A suitcase to carry them all makes a nice stage prop.) Any book with a range of covers will do,