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2 lazy 2 teach

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Have you checked your child's summer reading list? Beware: Some lame-brained school officials have decided to ditch the sonnets of Shakespeare for the tripe of Tupac.

That's slain gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur -- the drug-dealing, baseball bat-wielding, cop-hating, Black Panthers-worshipping, convicted sexual abuser who made a fortune extolling the "thug life" before he was gunned down in Las Vegas eight years ago.

Teachers in Worcester, Mass., have embraced Shakur's posthumously published book of poems as a way to get middle school students' attention. "We wanted to include books that kids would want to read," Michael O'Sullivan, a member of the summer reading list selection committee, explained to the Telegram and Gazette of Worcester last month before school let out. "Reading counterculture in schools, and to get kids to read anything that is not completely objectionable, is the goal," Deputy Superintendent Stephen E. Mills echoed.

Frances Arena, manager of curriculum and professional development of the Worcester Public Schools, told me this week that Shakur's book will remain on the list for the foreseeable future because it "heightens awareness of character education" and, more importantly, because it's "popular with the kids."

If that's the standard, why not just drop the pretense of academic instruction and assign them comic books and romance novels?

A school board member in Palm Beach County, Fla., is also championing Shakur's so-called literary work. Debra Robinson lobbied to bring Shakur's book into the classroom last month because "I always think we need to capture the children's attention where they are and bring them to where they need to be."

The presumption that children -- and particularly inner-city children -- can only be stimulated by the contemporary and familiar smacks of lazy elitism and latent racism. These educators, and I use that term as loosely as gangster rappers wear their pants, are clearly more interested in appearing cool than in inculcating a refined literary sense in students. Their aim is not enlightenment but dumbed-down ghetto entertainment. So that teachers and pupils can "relate" and be "down with that." So they can "keep it real." You know what I'm sayin'?

The schoolhouse rap peddlers disingenuously argue that Shakur's puerile scribblings serve as useful tools to engage children in reading. Reading? Deciphering is more like it. Shakur's volume, "The Rose That Grew From Concrete," looks more like a collection of cell phone text messages, teenage hieroglyphics and Backstreet Boys album titles than a collection of poems.

One poem is "Dedicated 2 Me." Another is "Dedicated 2 My Heart." There's one "4 Nelson Mandela" and another "2 Marilyn Monroe," which laments: "They could never understand what u set out 2 do instead they chose 2 ridicule u." Another Shakur opus is titled "When Ure Hero Falls." Still another muses: "What Is It That I (insert pictograph of an eyeball) Search 4."

A dictionary, perhaps?

In riveting prose that presumably rivals Frost or Longfellow, Shakur brags that he is "more than u can handle" and "hotter than the wax from a candle." Edgar Allan Poe had Annabel Lee. Shakur had Renee ("u were the one 2 reach into my heart"), April ("I want 2 c u"), Elizabeth ("the seas of our friendship R calm"), Michelle ("u and I have perfect hearts"), Carmen ("I wanted u more than I wanted me"), Marquita ("u were pure woman 2 me"), Irene ("I knew from the First glance that u would be hard 2 4get"), and Jada.

Proclaiming his love "4 Jada," Shakur pays gallant literary tribute to the object of his desire: "u bring me 2 climax without sex."

Lord Byron, he wasn't.

In an introduction to the dead rapper's volume, Shakur's manager, Leila Steinberg, suggests that her hero has been unjustly denied his "place as a literary artist/poet" because of the "media's sometimes negative portrayal" of him. May I politely suggest that he has been denied a place among the world's greatest poets because his writing is no better than a four-letter word that rhymes with "rap"?

The Western literary canon has been flushed down the cultural toilet in favor of shallow ramblings by celebrity thugs whose thoughts are best left on bathroom walls.

As 2Pac might have responded: 3 Cheers 4 Diversity.

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