

BRAINIAC

Clunkers to Africa

Recent highlights from the Ideas blog

By Christopher Shea | September 6, 2009

The effect of the “Cash for Clunkers” programs on stimulating the economy has been much debated, but a researcher with the Cato Institute in Washington recently attacked the program from a fresh angle: Why aren’t the nations with such programs donating or selling the clunkers to the developing world, instead of trashing them?

Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar, an Indian economist and Cato research fellow, notes that German police have estimated that some 50,000 clunkers collected under that country’s program were illegally diverted to Africa and Eastern Europe.

And that - minus the illegality - is precisely what should have happened all along, Aiyar suggests. “Imagine if the Salvation Army were ordered to destroy all the used clothing and furniture it receives instead of distributing it to the poor,” he writes.

Of course, the clunkers problem is supposed to help take polluting older cars off the road, and Aiyar concedes that adding cars in developing countries will increase noxious emissions there. Still, they might replace even older and dirtier vehicles currently in use. Either way, American and European policymakers faced an unappetizing choice, he writes: “Denying those poor people access to affordable cars means lowering their living standards. Lower living standards will of course always reduce energy consumption, but surely that cannot be a desirable policy objective.”

And did we mention that Healthcliff is immortal?

Can you blame them? Maybe you can, if “Wuthering Heights” is dear to your heart and shameless commercialism turns you off: The British branch of HarperCollins recently published a new edition of the Emily Bronte classic designed to appeal to fans of the “Twilight” saga, the hugely popular series of books about a teenage girl and her 104-year-old vampiric amour.

In the Twilight books, by Stephanie Meyer, the heroine Bella and her vampire pal Edward make clear that “Wuthering Heights” is their favorite book. Scrambling after that bandwagon, HarperCollins UK put together a cover that closely resembles that of the second book in the saga, “New Moon.” There’s the tagline “Love Never Dies” and, even more subtle, an emblem with text that reads, “Bella and Edward’s Favorite Book.” (Yeah, we get it.)

The publishing blog GalleyCat has some harsh words for the “wretched, wretched” British cover, calling it not just a ripoff but a lazy one - “ugly typeface, tiny ugly flower, and an ugly background” - but it has undeniably worked. The new edition has sold 10,000 copies since May, reports the Guardian, helping to nudge “Wuthering Heights” to the top of at least one British bestseller list for classics - hardly its accustomed spot.

History gets fresh

To mark the imminent publication of the massive “A New Literary History of America,” Harvard University Press has unveiled a comparably ambitious, not to mention deftly designed, website. A dozen icons link to sample entries: click the tall ship to read about “Moby Dick,” for example, or the electric guitar to read about national anthems.

The new book itself, which weighs in at 1,128 pages, represents a rethinking of the awkward genre of literary history, which can fall disappointingly between the cracks of criticism and narrative history. With the help of an editorial board, the book’s editors - the writer Greil Marcus and the Harvard literature professor Werner Sollors - settled on 218 artworks (film and painting as well as texts), authors, movements, and cultural artifacts that help answer the question, “What is America?”

Emerson, Melville, Dickinson, and Faulkner are in there, to be sure, but so are the Winchester rifle, “Steamboat Willie,” Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven,” Alcoholics Anonymous, and Linda Lovelace (the star of the pornographic film “Deep Throat”).

Marcus’s essay on “Moby Dick,” available on the site, gives a sampling of the new book’s freewheeling, omnivorous

approach: “There is the way the whole first section of the book, until the Pequod sets sail, is a nonstop comedy, Ishmael first as Bob Hope in Road to Utopia, then as Abbott running an outrageous who’s-on-first routine with his New Bedford innkeeper Costello{hellip}”

Such prose will inevitably find detractors as well as praise. But it would also be a welcome change if a “literary history,” for once, stirred up a little dust. The book’s rollout includes a two-day symposium at Harvard’s Barker Center for the Humanities, Sept. 25 and 26.

Christopher Shea is a weekly columnist for Ideas. He can be reached at brainiac.email@gmail.com. ■

I & RSI UJ K W I I I I 7 K H I H Z I < R U N 7 L P H M & R P S D Q

I