

B

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Article:

I hit the top of the third flight of stairs, veered right down the hall, trying not to slip on the freshly waxed tiled floor in my 2-inch heels. The door was open, so I knew I wasn't late—yet. Bad form to be late on the first day of a graduate seminar. I had stopped to chat with a friend I had not seen in two months, so here I was racing to make that open door. I almost collided with the professor outside the classroom. Secure in my arrival, I smiled. "Why are you taking this course?" he queried me in the hall.

"Because I want to read Melville and Hawthorne," I replied a bit confused.

"Well, you'll not get better than a B' for your time." As he strode in preparing to set his materials on the lectern, he commanded, "Close the door behind you."

I had not looked up or into the room in my haste to get to class. But, when I did, I recognized that all of the other graduate students were quiet and looking down at their desktops. They had heard everything. Like Hester Prynne, I walked into the classroom a marked woman, only my scarlet letter was a "B."

Like many other students in that course, I had had this professor in the previous semester's seminar on Faulkner and Hemingway. I had loved the reading. We had read all of Faulkner and all of Hemingway in one semester. I was reading three novels a week. The man's pedagogy consisted of lecturing and weekly essay exams with regurgitated answers that we had to guess at since he did not tell us in advance. We learned his agenda only after the exams, as he read from the essays he liked and read from the ones he did not. My writings and Socratic responses were either ignored or ridiculed. But I loved the reading. Class time was hard because he was brutal and mean, particularly to women. Each semester he gave a speech about how women had no place in higher education. That statement, of course, came the first day in Melville and Hawthorne, and, of course, it was aimed directly at Hester with a "B."

I had been anxious about each class session on Faulkner and Hemingway, but being labeled before we started this course changed my educational life radically. While the professor was trying to run me off, I chose to stay. While he worked to show me my place, I wallowed in the ecstasy of the readings. The he-man-teacher who so tried to discourage me taught me-woman-student in one short semester the difference between working for a grade and learning. Yes, I got the "B." And I am very proud of it.