

The three of us sat around a brass coffee table. Polina told me about Hrosvitha, a tenth-century German nun who wrote plays in crystal clear Latin. She played with Alice's hair and continued her tale of the nun. Her Latin was as good as Terence's, the Roman playwright. And that was so pure that no one would believe a woman could write such perfect verse. It was a raging controversy in the medieval scholars' world, equal to the controversy over black intelligence in the psychology world....

My triumph of the evening was in picking up a copy of Hrosvitha's "Dulcitius" and reading it right off the page, in cadence.

"That's lovely. Your Latin is lovely."

"Thank you. I studied it all through high school and I'm still at it in college. I'm reading Livy and Tacitus these days with a little Attic Greek thrown in for good measure."

Polina clapped her hands and gave me a bear hug. "No wonder you've been so helpful to me! You're a classics scholar. We're a rare breed these days, you know. Ever since they took Latin off the compulsory study list in high schools, we've been slipping. But I find that only the brightest kids keep on with Latin. That's good, I guess."

"Well, I'm not really a classics scholar. I'm in film studies. I take Latin and Greek for the language credit, but I love them."

"I hope so. Greek is too difficult to take for laughs. If you're in film studies, why Latin and Greek?"

"Uh--this may sound funny to you, but Latin especially has helped my ability to discipline myself more than anything I've ever studied. It wouldn't matter what I would do, Latin would help me because it taught me how to think. And Greek, that adds a soaring quality, something that pushed my mind fast. I--well, this must sound stupid to you."

"No, no, not at all. I think that's exactly right about Latin teaching you the process of logic, to think, I mean. Too bad a few more of our politicians haven't studied it."

Alice was sitting wide-eyed through all this. "Molly, is that true about the Latin or are you buttering the old lady up?" She ribbed her mother and Polina grabbed her hand and held it.

"No. I know it sounds weird but it was the best thing I ever studied. I take that back. Not the best thing, but the most useful."

Alice moved forward on her seat. "Mom has been at me to take Latin so I did this year. I hate it. But maybe that's because my teacher is a fossil."

"Latin teachers have a way of getting ossified."

"Mine is pickled! Have you made any movies yet?"

Rita Mae Brown, Rubyfruit Jungle
(New York, 1973), 191-192

Sober discussions on higher education in the liberal arts and humanities, and on classics as a discipline and profession, often feature the very same topics here humorously treated by Rita Mae Brown: the survival of classical languages and classical learning in Western culture; the nature and value of studying classics today; the shortcomings of pedagogy and scholarship in classics. Be they general or specialist, such discussions in turn often feature the very same arguments which Brown has assigned to her three fictive symposiasts here: Professor Polina Bellantoni, her daughter Alice, and the