Greetings, Alumni College Students!

I am so looking forward to our work together in August. We’ll be exploring the craft, the achievement, the teachings of two fantastic novels. How can learning get any better than that?

Charles Dickens called *David Copperfield* his favorite child, and I’ll admit that it is one of my three favorite novels* of all time. This coming from a lifelong reader and a professor in her 33rd year of teaching. We’ll begin our classes by focusing on this extraordinary novel, first on its own terms. Who is David? What are his challenges? How does Dickens build his world? Some of our key concerns will include friendship, disappointment, desire, home, and belonging. We’ll explore what Dickens kept from even his own family: the deeply autobiographical nature of the protagonist David’s shame when he falls into poverty.

Then we’ll turn to Barbara Kingsolver and her Pulitzer-winning 2022 *Demon Copperhead*. Why and how is Dickens’s presence so deeply felt by an author of our own time? Through the alchemy of inspiration, Kingsolver renders a brilliantly reimagined story about class in America, childhood in Appalachia, human thriving and failing. Her preoccupations of both heart and mind are consequential. Demon “gets himself born”; however, will (and can) he survive?

Your homework this summer is straightforward but oh-so-rewarding: Read these two novels. I recommend the Norton edition of *David Copperfield* so that we are, literally speaking, on the same page and can find our way through the text together with ease. We’ll be interested in certain formal aspects of this literary achievement—its illustrations, its serialized publication—and the paratextual materials in this particular edition are useful. As you read, take notes: What is catching your eye? What do you find yourself tracking? Where are key passages for your understanding of each work? And there is one additional assignment: Be ready on our first day to share the titles of your two or three favorite novels, as I will reveal what my other two* are. Why are these so loved?

As we study two astonishingly fine texts, we’ll ponder this metalevel question: What is it about the novel as a form that gives us such pleasure, joy, edification? How do we best understand its work, its achievements? *Why do we want to read?*

Barbara Black  
Professor of English  
Bread Loaf School of English  
Middlebury, VT 05753  
bblack@middlebury.edu