

Teens Need Bold Books

Book Banning, 2012

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The tendency of some individuals and groups to place controls on what others may learn is cause for alarm. Those who advocate such controls do not trust teenagers to make the right decisions. They often call for the banning of books without actually reading them, and even in rare instances where objecting parents have read the books in question, they fail to see beyond the sometimes controversial language and to appreciate the valuable message in many such works. Individual preferences are understandable, and parents have a right to restrict what their own children read, but they should not control the choices available to other people's children. Most such challenges come from members of the Christian Right, who selectively read and interpret the Bible. In order to respond to such challenges effectively, teachers of literature must be bold thinkers who are not afraid to offend.

I prefer to think independently rather than follow any group's party line. That applies to education, religion, politics, and a number of other organized things. I own the unfortunate curse of wanting to know the reasons for things—the *whys* and the *hows*. And I want sensible answers. Which is why the kind of group-think that seems to be behind so many book challenges bothers me. Given a choice between group-think and independent thinking, I expect sensible people to choose independent thinking. But in America (not to mention Iraq, Iran, and other countries) a scary proportion of individuals prefer to be told what to think, what to believe, how to act. And what to read.

Book Banners Are Distrustful and Controlling

Whether it comes from fear of different ideas or from a need for power over others, most challenges to books used in schools and provided in libraries come from individuals and groups that do not want young people to make decisions for themselves. Comments I have heard and read from book banners suggest that they do not want their children to open their minds to new and different possibilities, do not want them to consider other points of view, do not want them to *think*. They do not trust teenagers to make right choices. And they do not trust educated teachers and librarians who have dedicated their lives to helping kids find the books they need for their intellectual development and emotional well-being.

Several years ago, a parent in a Connecticut school district objected to five literary works that were required reading in eighth grade: Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier*, Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, and Robert Cormier's short story "In the Heat" from my first anthology, *Sixteen*—all considered today to be young adult classics. When asked if she was "aware of the judgment of this material by critics," the mother's response to each book was a variation of "I don't care what awards it won—I don't place value in what the critics say." That is only one parent's response, of course. But the published records of objections to books provide many more examples. Worse, many would-be censors act as if English teachers and librarians are immoral manipulators intent on subverting the values that are being taught at home. And as other records show, many of those parents and other "concerned" citizens make their decisions about the books in question without reading them.

That parent in Connecticut also declared that *she* is the best judge of what is acceptable for her children to read. She may be right about that. Right or wrong, she does have the legal obligation to protect her children and so has the right to restrict what they read. But, like most other objectors to books and other media, the concern of this mother did not stop with her children. She wanted those literary works removed from the curriculum so that *no* eighth grader would be required to read them.

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That's pretty much the way book censorship works, except in this instance the school and district's administration did not remove those books just because one parent objected. They followed the guidelines for reconsidering instructional materials; they valued the judgments of their English and reading teachers, who had selected those titles for good reasons; they assembled a folder of reviews and awards the books had received; and they had a series of public hearings where students as well as adults could express their opinions. In the end they chose to reaffirm the value of those books in their eighth-grade program.

Concerned Parents Often Miss the Point

Although this event occurred seventeen years ago, I chose to recount it not just because it had (from my perspective) a happy outcome or because the school district did all the right things in dealing with the objections. I chose it also because the case had one unusual element: the objecting parent had actually read each of the books, including additional stories from *Sixteen*. As a result, the mother was able to identify the parts of each work that she and her husband found objectionable, noting the page of each reference, except for *The Chocolate War*, where the mother admitted to reading only the first 139 pages of the 253-page book because she "couldn't stomach anymore." Fair enough. She obviously read those 139 pages carefully, because she was able to note every instance of the words *bastard*, *hell*, *bullshit*, *breast*, and *goddamn* along with other comments and concepts she and her husband found objectionable. They did the same for each of the other texts.

Though they read the *words* carefully, their written comments indicate they missed the intentions of the words, the themes, the concepts. They did not see—or *feel*—those more significant things. They saw only what they wanted to see. In Cormier's short story, for example, they ignored the tenderness between father and son and the comfort that love can bring during the painful process of dealing with the death of the wife/mother. Instead, they saw the pain of death, the strong words, and what they viewed as inappropriate role models for children. They saw disrespect for a teacher and the absence of good role models in *The Pigman*; offensive language and the father's verbal abuse of his daughter in *Summer of My German Soldier*; the gore and the sad deaths in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. Those negatives for them outweighed any positive attributes the books had.

OK—certain things turn off certain people. My wife refuses to read any book in which an animal dies. Some readers won't read a book where characters curse. Lots of readers won't touch science fiction, others fantasy, especially if the novel has a witch or wizard in it. Many readers want only books with happy endings. Lots of people want only books in which the good guys and gals win every time. Most of us hate books where the lead character isn't likeable. These are emotional and not intellectual responses. No one has control of anyone's emotional response to a story. And in the final analysis, our emotional response is the only thing that matters when we read, no matter how much some literary critics might want to dispute

that.

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Books Containing Mature Content Must Be Read in Context

Many critics of contemporary young adult books, like the parent in Connecticut, attack them because they often contain violence, evil, and various examples of bad behaviors. Others attack books like these because they see the books as opposed to their religious beliefs. In fact, the majority of attacks on books in the last few years have come from what has been called the Christian Right.

People who take the Ten Commandments literally, for example, are repelled every time a character in a book says *ohmygod*. People who believe in the reality of witches freak out over the fictional wizardry in the Harry Potter books. Many of those people hold up the Bible as the best (or only) example of literature they want children to read, ignoring the fact that the Bible overflows with sex, violence, treachery, betrayal, theft, adultery, incest, bigamy, illegitimacy, and mayhem. People in the Bible, in fact, are killed in as many creative ways as one can find in any of today's supermarket tabloids: stabbed, slashed, stoned, hanged, burned to death, nailed to crosses, and in one instance a spike is driven through a man's temple, pinning him to the floor. Isn't that lovely?

In the last two years, a number of well-known Christian clergy as well as laypeople have led vicious attacks on books for teenagers that contain gay characters because the biblical book of Leviticus says that being gay is an "abomination." It also says that such offenders should be killed. I do not dispute that claim—the Bible does say that (twice) in Chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus. Why, then, do I criticize this? Elsewhere in Leviticus it also orders, among other things, that adulterers should be put to death; believers should not eat pork—or rabbit, camel, tortoise, shellfish, and snails, among other creatures; men are forbidden from having their hair trimmed; and wearing clothing made from more than a single kind of thread is forbidden. Other books of the Bible approve of concubines and slaves, and a passage in Exodus says that anyone who works on the Sabbath shall be put to death. I need not go on. Why do so many people, then, ignore all those other admonishments yet choose to attack gay people and books with gay characters on the basis of what the Bible says?

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The Bible is an amazing collection of fascinating stories (except for the begats part), but they must be viewed intelligently and the sordid parts must be viewed in their context. So must the events in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, and [William Shakespeare's] *Macbeth*, and the Harry Potter books, and every newly published book for teens that has been reviewed in this column.

Teachers and Librarians Must Consider the Needs of All Students

That is why anyone who edits a column like this one must be bold in his or her thinking. And it's why language arts teachers and librarians must be open-minded souls who think independently and consider the possible needs of *all* students, including those from religiously conservative homes. I don't believe you can be an effective teacher of literature without being a bold thinker.

Not too long ago I received an email from a high school English teacher in a small town in Wyoming who was disturbed by the books I had recommended in my July 2006 column. (Among the titles were Chris Lynch's National Book Award Finalist *Inexcusable*, Mary E. Pearson's touching *A Room on Lorelei Street*, Ellen Wittlinger's insightful *Sandpiper*, Markus Zusak's clever *I Am the Messenger*, and Jan Cherioko's beautiful *Sun Moon Stars Rain*.) I don't know whether the correspondent read any of those books, but the descriptions I provided led him to believe that it is books like those that cause our society to have "problem[s] with teen pregnancy, under age drinking, drugs, etc.... With this kind of filth running around in their brains, its [*sic*] no wonder we produce the kind of kids today. Please recommend some good books that teach good values and morals for today's youth."

I see no difference between the parent in Connecticut who wanted various books removed from the eighth-grade classroom and this Wyoming teacher who didn't want his high school students to even know about the kinds of books I had recommended. Both people are concerned about their teenagers; both want to protect the kids. But neither of the adults seems to respect their teenagers, and neither seems to believe that teens, unlike the adults, have the good sense to see the positive attributes of any of those books.

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I wrote back to that teacher, pointing out that teen pregnancy, underage drinking, and other ills of society have existed for far longer than books like those I reviewed in my July column. There is obviously no cause and effect there. On the contrary, I said, "I believe those books provide excellent moral values for teenagers, even those from Wyoming. If nothing else, *Inexcusable* is about moral responsibility. *Sun Moon Stars Rain* is one of the most beautiful moral stories I've read in a long time. *Sandpiper* provides teens with several moral lessons, as does *I Am the Messenger*." I wondered if the teacher objected to those books because there was an element of sex in each of them. If that's why any teacher keeps books out of the hands of high school teenagers, they don't understand teenagers and aren't willing to help them deal with one of the most important aspects of their lives.

Good Books Are Those That Challenge Us to Think

Similarly, I have heard and read comments from too many school librarians who, fearing to upset a parent or an administrator or the majority of adults in their community, are afraid to order certain books. In an effort to not offend one individual or even many, they ignore the needs of others. I've heard too many librarians ask for "safe" books, books that won't cause a controversy. I'm proud to say that I don't think this column under my editorship has ever recommended a book that is without controversial elements. The column is titled "Bold Books" for a reason. Good books have always caused people to think, and since few of us think alike, controversy is guaranteed. To be able to face life outside their protective homes and classrooms, teenagers need access to books that allow them to see the bigger world. And there's no better place to explore the larger, diverse, often scary world than from the safe distance a book provides.

Denying teenagers access to a controversial book denies them a better future.

Teens need books like those reviewed in this column, not only for their intellectual, emotional, and moral growth but also for the hope that if today's kids can become comfortable thinking for themselves, the future of this country will be better served. So we must be bold and courageous in our choices of books and in our teaching. And maybe in the future there will be fewer attacks on books because today's teens will be tomorrow's adults who better understand the value of diverse viewpoints and experiences.

Further Readings

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