Parents Must Protect Children from Offensive Material in Books

*Book Banning*, 2012

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If true censorship were an actual threat in the United States, all reasonable people would support the goals of Banned Book Week. The real aim of the American Library Association (ALA), however, is to subvert the authority of parents and place control over children's education in the hands of the school system. Gone are the days when parents could trust schools and libraries to uphold their values; today quite the opposite is true, and in fact the ALA goes out of its way to support even substandard books as long as they promote its social agenda. Modern educational life is characterized by a cultural divide between families on the one hand and powerful organizations such as the ALA on the other. Parents are therefore justified in teaching their children not to give educators and librarians their unqualified trust.

During the last week of September every year, the American Library Association [ALA] holds what it calls "Banned Book Week." The purpose of this week, the ALA says, is to highlight "... the benefits of free and open access to information while drawing attention to the harms of censorship by spotlighting actual or attempted bannings of books across the United States."

It sounds like a noble endeavour, right? In this day and age I think it would be hard to find people who would actively support the notion of outright censorship. Yet we know that at other times and in different kinds of regimes around the world this dedication to free speech has not always been the rule. Keeping the principle of free speech safe requires vigilance; if people in America really were seeking to ban books—to forbid their printing or sale, for instance—it would be important to focus on their efforts and to raise awareness about them.

But that kind of "banning" isn't what the ALA is talking about at all.

The ALA Misrepresents Parental Concerns

In fact, according to their website, the ALA's Banned Book Week is really called "Banned and Challenged Book Week." A "challenge" to a book occurs when someone objects to some of the content of a book, and, most of the time, asks that the book be removed from children's access. Parents were responsible for 57% of such challenges between 1990 and 2008, and an astonishing 70% of the challenges involved books that were either in a school classroom or a school library. Moreover, nearly a third of challenges made to all books (including books aimed at adults) were made because the challengers found the materials to be too sexually explicit.

Now, if the vast majority of challenges to books involve parents, centre around books available in schools, and deal with such issues as sexual explicitness, offensive language, or the unsuitability of the books for a specific age group, then I think we're no longer talking about book-banning or censorship. I think we're talking about parenting.
The attitude of the ALA is that a parent only has the right to censor or control what his own children read. He doesn't have the right to request the removal from the school library or classroom shelf those books which he finds obscene or dangerous to morality, because someone else might prefer for his children to read those books. The school alone has the final say in what books are appropriate for the children under its care to read, and if a child reads at school a book or books which his parents absolutely forbid at home—well, then, perhaps the parents' values are too narrow and restrictive to begin with.

### Some Books Are Challenged for Good Reason

Here's the dilemma for parents, though—there was a time when we could trust schools and libraries to support, for the most part, the same values we ourselves held, and to abide by community standards of morality and decency. There was a time when it would have been just as unthinkable to the librarian or the school teacher as to a parent that a book for children would have contained the following things:

- Graphic language about sex, drinking, drugs; laced with profanity and written in "chat speak" (*TTYL* by Lauren Myracle)
- Violence, implied sex, anti-religious and anti-Christian messages throughout; God is literally killed (*His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman)
- Prostitution, witchcraft, voodoo, devil worship (*Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya)
- Homosexuality, drugs, suicide, sex, nudity (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, by Stephen Chbosky)
- Sex, drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, profanity, smoking (*Gossip Girl* series by Cecily von Ziegesar)

Most of these books are not, frankly, works of much merit at all.

These are some of the objectionable content found in just five of the ten most frequently challenged books for 2008. Given that most challengers are parents and most challenges involve books in school libraries or school classrooms, I'd be much more worried about society if books like these were never questioned at all.

Many of the challenges to these books are due to their presence on middle school bookshelves (or even in class assignments); middle school students can be as young as eleven years old. And yet the ALA views parental challenges to these books as being somehow akin to book-burnings and government censorship, as if there were no legitimate reason why a group of parents might not want their children reading novels in which gratuitous and explicit sex, violence, drug use, and the like were major elements of the story.

### Contemporary Young Adult Literature is Often Mindless and Sensationalized

The fact is, there are plenty of good reasons to object to books with these content elements in them, especially when such young children are the ones who have access to these books. Even if the works rose to great literary heights parents would not be out of line to ask that they be moved from the middle school library; but most of these books are not, frankly, works of much merit at all. They are the fiction equivalent of
mindless TV programs, complete with pandering, fantasy, commercialised writing, and shock value in place of decent storytelling, a well-developed plot, interesting and three-dimensional characters, and some idea of consequences for actions.

It is clear that in many instances the library and the school, as political entities, no longer share the cultural values of the vast majority of parents.

To put it bluntly, the ALA puts itself in the position of defending lousy, substandard, second-rate writing that would probably not even be published in the first place, were it not for the insatiable appetite for inappropriate content usually euphemised as "dark" or "edgy" by the sort of pre-teen who thinks angsty, brooding, sparkly vampires are a good idea. And they cast parents in the role of villains, as if their well-founded concerns about the content and merit of these books were on a par with Nazi book-burning efforts.

Parents Can No Longer Count on Libraries and Schools to Share Their Values

It is clear that in many instances the library and the school, as political entities, no longer share the cultural values of the vast majority of parents. We are living through a time of cultural divide—and whether you think it's a good or a terrible idea for novels aimed at eleven-year-olds to contain sex and violence—is largely going to depend which side of that divide you and your family is on.

Because we no longer live in a world where it would be unthinkable for an authority figure to give a child a book in which depictions of sex, violence, drug use, profanity and the like are major elements, it is no longer safe to delegate the choice of reading material for our children to such entities as the school teacher or school librarian. Because we no longer live in a time where giving a child a book like that would be considered either child sexual abuse or contributing to the delinquency of a minor, but instead is supported with smiling approval by the moral midgets at the ALA, parents have to be more vigilant than ever. Because we no longer live in an era where we can trust the authority figures in our children's lives to share our values and foster the same view of morality and decency which we ourselves have, we can't afford to let our children read whatever trashy novel they pick up at school.

It isn't censorship, to teach our children that they can't trust their teachers or librarians to give them good, wholesome books. It's just the fallout from our fractured culture, which insists on calling evil, good—and then handing it to children.

Further Readings

Books


• Christopher M. Finan From the Palmer Raids to the Patriot Act: A History of the Fight for Free Speech in


**Periodicals**


- Suzanne Bilyeu "Mark Twain's Bad Boy," *The New York Times Upfront* 142 (March 1, 2010).

- "Book Bans at Odds with Modernisation Efforts," *South China Morning Post,* February 8, 2008.


- Brent Bozell "Librarians against Censorship?" *Townhall,* May 9, 2008.

- Kelsey Bradbury "Authors of Teen Novels Defend Their Right to Tackle Tough Subjects," *Buffalo News,* September 27, 2006.


- Erin Downey Howerton "Just Open the Door: Banned Books (and a Librarian!) in the Classroom," *Young Adult Library Services,* spring 2007.


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