Banned Books

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Look at your bookshelf, or think of the books you have at home. Do you have anything by the following authors: Judy Blume, J K Rowling, Phillip Pullman, Sherman Alexie, Suzanne Collins, Laurie Halse Anderson, John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, Toni Morrison, Lois Lowry, Gary Paulson or Stephan Chbosky? If you do, you are harboring a work that has been either challenged or banned in the past 10 years. I know, some of you are blown away; how archaic, to ban books, especially ones as harmless as some of these. But it happens, more often than many of us would like to admit.

Books are banned or challenged for various reasons. Mostly to “protect” children from unhealthy exposure to mature themes such as sex, violence, nontraditional gender roles, or language that may not be appropriate. While it is up to individuals whether or not they or their children read these books, it is another matter entirely when they try to stop other people from accessing them. According to the American Library Association, “A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials.” So even if a book is challenged, it is another group imposing its expectations or moral restrictions on a wider population. This is a violation of the First Amendment.

The freedom of speech issue in literature is nothing new. It goes back to the 17th century when books and other manuscripts were banned for religious reasons, most notably John Eliot’s *The Christian Commonwealth*. It was banned by the New England government for advocating a system of government based on overthrowing the king. However, first amendment challenges really took off in the mid 20th century, especially after the Obscenity Trial for Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem, “Howl” in 1957. Censored by U.S. Customs officials because of Ginsberg’s “obscene” language, including references to sex (both homosexual and heterosexual) and illegal drugs. However, it wasn’t long before many began to protest the banning, citing the artistic vision of its author. Of course members of the Beat movement backed it, but academics and well known poets also supported Ginsberg and the banning was revoked. “Howl” isn’t the only poem to be challenged, but for the most part, it is novels that cause the greatest commotion.

*Lolita*, written by Vladimir Nabokov in 1955, details the life of professor Humbert Humbert and his sexual relationship with a 12 year old. It is very clear to see why some object to this book’s presence in public libraries. After all, sexual exploits between consenting adults are bad enough, but a child and a middle-aged man is socially unacceptable in the 21st century. However, from a literary standpoint, Nabokov’s prose is masterful and his work is clouded by a subject matter many find obscene. Nabokov’s work has been banned or challenged somewhere almost every year since the American release in 1958 (even though it sold 100,000 copies its first week). However, it is in works like this that the First Amendment is truly taken to task. Should this book be left on library shelves to influence future generations because it’s ‘art’? Some argue no, because children need to be protected; others cite the lasting effects rape has on children and claim leaving this work on shelves condones the abuse of children. There is, however the problem of personal freedoms. Should this book be banned from all libraries forever, overlooking its prose, its characterization, its literary elements that have stood the test of time because of its subject matter? No, of course not. However, should parents and guardians have the right to refuse to let their
children read it? Of course. There is a fine line between protecting children and stepping on the rights of others.

Another, slightly more recent issue, is one of the most challenged and banned authors in the United States: Judy Blume. I know what you’re thinking, dear readers. Judy Blume?! She wrote things like *Superfudge* and *Are You There, God? It’s Me Margaret* and so many other “coming-of-age” style young adult novels that taught me good lessons about life, such as how to accept others, to love yourself regardless of what others say about you, how to get along with people who can be difficult and so on and so forth. How could someone like that be banned more often than someone who wrote about child rape? The answer, dear reader, is that Judy Blume’s works deal with things many parents feel their children aren’t capable of handling: sexuality, the existence of God, body image, friendship and divorce. The Religious Right has targeted Blume for this, citing her ambiguity regarding religious issues. However, this is a classic case of imposing one group’s view on all and restricting the access of others to materials based on an arbitrary morality.

However, some authors are banned based on racial stereotypes that are socially unacceptable. For example, Mark Twain’s classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is constantly being called into question for use of the n-word. And while it is appropriate to the setting in which the action takes place, it is questioned whether or not it is appropriate for reader consumption in a so-called ‘post-racial’ society. Use of the n-word is a common objection to many African American novelists describing African American culture, regardless of century. While the word is offensive to some and brings to mind horrible memories of America’s ugly past, it has also wormed its way into contemporary American culture. The N word is common in most hip-hop and rap albums heard by many thousands of people every day, and even though censored versions of their albums and songs are available, most choose to listen to the original; the same is true of literature. While the words used are not acceptable in conversation, using them to evoke certain feelings in a reader or describe a time or place is appropriate and shouldn’t be censored.

Language and mature themes aren’t the only reason books are censored. Many, including the first book mentioned, are challenged or banned because the go against the government. Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is one such example. Written in the 1950’s, it is a cautionary tale of what happens when government goes awry and freedom of expression is eradicated in favor of uniformity and compliance. *(Sound familiar, 21st century?)* While many accused Bradbury of being anti-Christian, it is his anti-government message that caught the censors’ attention. Another such example is George Orwell’s opus *1984* (which has found an new incarnation in Haruki Murakami’s *1Q84* should you be interested). Of course many students have read it and have familiar with its adage that “WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, and IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH,” some may even look upon Ross Hall and see a resemblance to the Ministry of Truth. Orwell’s masterpiece has influenced culture a great deal, giving us buzzwords to describe the big government to be feared such as “Big Brother” and “doublethink” *(which means to accept two contradictory beliefs as absolutely correct in distinct contextual situations; it’s very clear to me that we do this all the time!)* Most governments would not welcome a novel with such enormous cultural impact, of course.

Last and certainly not least, there are those books which become a cultural phenomenon and lead to conservative movements for their removal. I am referring to those books such as *Harry Potter* or *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman or, more recently, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. This last one may surprise those of you who have read it, but its opponents are claiming it has sexually explicit material and violence. The real reason is it portrays a vision of America that most aren’t comfortable with yet. It’s a portrait of the not-so-distant future in which people watch other people kill each other for entertainment, where food is a scarce commodity, where the rules are always changing and there is no one to trust; given reality television, this isn’t far off. A mother in New Hampshire was the first to lead the charge against this series, and many other states followed suit. While few have been successful, it has drawn attention to the violence and ‘immoral’ content in the book. Those of you who have read it will know that Katniss has much more on her mind than sex and murder!

Most challenges and banning movements are lead by parents; more than any other group, in fact. Is this because they are malicious, conservative, ignorant bigots? Of course not; they merely want what is best for their children. *(Or so I try to remind myself).* A lot of times, parents don’t even read the books before leading the town with their torches and pitchforks. They see what seems to be an outrageously offensive passage and react. However, this is not the most effective course of action. It leads to the removal of books from library shelves and that helps no one.

Instead when something offends you, before reaching for your cellular phone and calling up your senator to voice your outrage, read it carefully. Think outside your own little sphere of experience, realize that not everyone has the same views that you do. If it does nothing for you, exercise your freedom of expression: don’t read it. Read something else. But just because a text offends you, do not take that to mean the text itself is offensive. Reader response is a powerful thing, but we, as a intelligent bibliophiles, should use our powers for good.