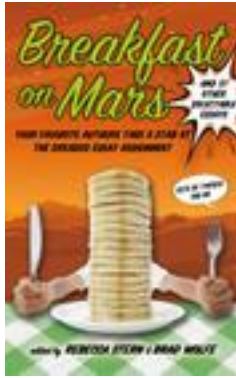


BANNING BOOKS: An UnAmerican Act

By Sarah Darer Littman from the anthology *Breakfast on Mars*



"Without Freedom of Thought there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as Public Liberty, without Freedom of Speech."

Benjamin Franklin, writing as Silence Dogood, No. 8, July 9, 1722

The Founding Fathers understood that the fledgling American democracy would not survive without protecting the free dissemination of ideas. Having seen political and religious dissenters imprisoned and killed for their beliefs under British rule, they wanted to ensure citizens of the United States were free to criticize the government openly and freely, without punishment. These rights were written in into what became the First Amendment:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

These ideas might sound like they have nothing to do with your everyday life, but they do – a threat to your First Amendment rights could be happening this very minute, in a classroom or media center near you.

Every year, hundreds of books are challenged in schools across the country.¹ A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict books or other library materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. If that challenge is successful, it results in a ban; the materials are removed from the classroom or library and that means no one else has access to them.

Over the past ten years, American libraries faced 4,660 challenges, for based on the material being, “sexually explicit”; containing “offensive language”; being deemed “unsuited to age group” or “anti-family; or containing “violence” and “homosexuality.” Others were challenged for their “religious viewpoints.” Of these challenges, sixty-seven percent took place in schools, either in classrooms or in school libraries.²

Parents initiate the overwhelming majority of challenges in schools because they object to their child being exposed to the words or ideas a book contains. Unfortunately, on too many occasions this is without having actually read the book in question.

Lois Lowry, whose Newbery-winning dystopian novel *The Giver* was one of the ten most challenged books of the 1990’s, said a Boston Globe interview: “I just always wish the parents would read the book in full before they challenge it...I think

¹ Source: ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom:
<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengesbytype>

² Source: ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom
<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/21stcenturychallenged>

fiction, in order to say anything, has to startle and upset you at some point. To be a book that affects you, it has to make you think." ³

Schools are supposed to be places where we encourage young people to do exactly that – think. It’s a place to be exposed to a wide range of ideas and learn how to evaluate them critically.

I’m the parent of teenage children and one of the most important lessons I’ve learned in all my years of being a mom is that kids learn most from the behavior you model as a parent. It makes me wonder what lesson the parents who challenge books are conveying to their kids. That certain viewpoints are “acceptable” and “correct” in a democratic society and others are not? That young people don’t have the emotional or intellectual intelligence to be able to read about certain behaviors without automatically trying to emulate them?

One mother in Florida went so far as to refuse to return *Gossip Girl* books from the public library after her teenage daughter checked them out because she didn’t believe they were suitable for the young adult shelves.⁴ She accumulated \$85 in library fees before finally returning the books. Then she refused to pay the fees. She was concerned about the behaviors her daughter might read about but what did her own actions teach her child? That despite the fact that libraries have established procedures for challenging books, it’s acceptable to steal books from the library if you don’t like the content? Or that fines are optional?

³ “Lighting the Way” Louise Kennedy The Boston Globe May 11 2003
<http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20030511/NEWS/305110678>

⁴ “Mom checks out racy teen books from library and she won’t give them back” Rachel Jackson Orlando Sentinel May 6 2010 http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-05-06/news/os-longwood-library-gossip-girl-books20100505_1_library-notes-library-services-manager-library-policy

My parents never restricted my access to books. I read well above my age level, and started reading adult novels way before I probably “should”. But for me, books were a safe way to learn about and process a world that was sometimes frightening and always confusing.

Parents are certainly entitled to monitor and restrict the books their children read. There are many styles of parenting. Personally, I encourage all parents to become a part of their child’s reading life. Nothing makes me happier than to hand a book I’ve read to my kids and hear what they’ve got to say about it. Sharing a book is a great way to start a conversation, and that’s another thing I’ve learned: being a good parent is all about the conversations.

What other parents are *not* entitled to do, under any circumstances, is to restrict access to the books *my* kids read.

An important 1982 Supreme Court case *Board of Education vs. Pico* confirmed this point. While schools might restrict access books in other ways – such as choosing to not buy them in the first place or not including them on the curriculum – once the books are on the library shelves it is a different story.

“Just as access to ideas makes it possible for citizens generally to exercise their rights of free speech and press in a meaningful manner, such access prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic, often contentious society in which they will soon be adult members... The special characteristics of the school library make that environment especially appropriate for the recognition of the First Amendment rights of students. Keyishian v. Board of Regents, [385 U.S. 589](#) (1967), observed that “students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate,

to gain new maturity and understanding.” ²¹ *The school library is the principal locus [457 U.S. 853, 869] of such freedom.”*

Justice William J. Brennan *Board of Education vs Pico*

With this ruling, the Supreme Court confirmed that it’s unconstitutional to restrict the availability of books in a school library simply because a parent or a Board of Ed member, or an outside organization disagrees with the ideas or content it contains.

The Founders would have been proud. As the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas observed: “Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us.” ⁵

⁵ “The One UnAmerican Act” Speech given by Justice William O Douglas to the Author’s Guild Council on receiving the 1951 Lautenbach Award, [Nieman Reports](#), vol. 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1953): p. 20,