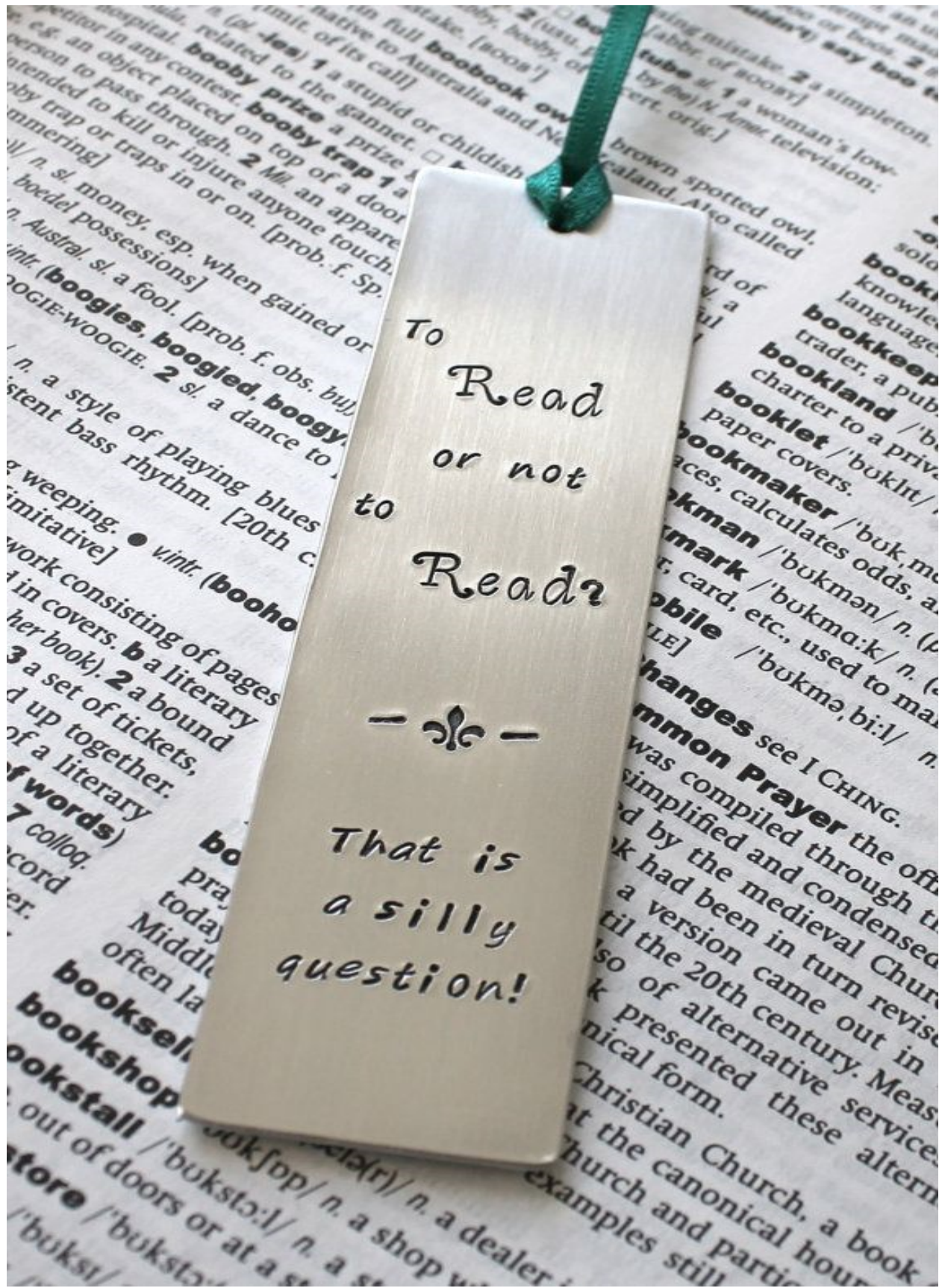


Books and Censorship
in the Modern Age - To
Ban or Not to Ban?

- *By Shannon Mulstay*



“It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read.”

–Judy Blume

The year was 1933, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, along with the National Socialist German Student Association, strove to bring the Nazi movement through synchronizing and censorship of the literary community. They began with Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, a burning that took place on May 10th of that year. In 1988, Salman Rushdie released his thought provoking “Satanic Verses” and what followed would be havoc, with his book banned in India, the UK attempting to have his novel banned, a fatwa (execution) declared upon his life, and simply because he wrote a fictional novel that others interpreted as immoral and blasphemous. India continues to have the Satanic Verses banned in today’s modern age. J.K. Rowling’s ever popular series “Harry Potter” has found its way on the banned & challenged list since 2001 when it was first introduced to the public, as it was discovered to introduce witchcraft and wizardry to today’s youth, of the same type that had two classics, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Scarlet Letter” written in 1850, and Elizabeth George Spears’ “The Witch of Blackbird Pond” written in 1958, a century later; and yet both having found themselves on the ban lists for their subject matter being seen as improper, immoral and too violent, not to mention witchcraft, the same that J.K. Rowling found her own work scrutinized and challenged. The practice of censorship is neither a new concept nor one that seems to be losing ground as we move forward into the future.



The first amendment, often referred to as the Freedom of Expression, is one that is also one of the most controversial: “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.” (Amendment 1) Though in 1789, the clause concerning speech and press would be placed before the senate and put into effect, so as to make clear for the law that it was separate from religion. "That Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and consult for their common good, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” (Amendment 1) This Amendment would later become the center for several U.S. Supreme Court Cases, most notable: Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 vs. Pico. Within this particular case the students were found to be denied their first amendment rights by the school board of Island Trees “Whether petitioners' removal of books from the libraries denied respondents their First Amendment rights depends upon the motivation behind petitioners'

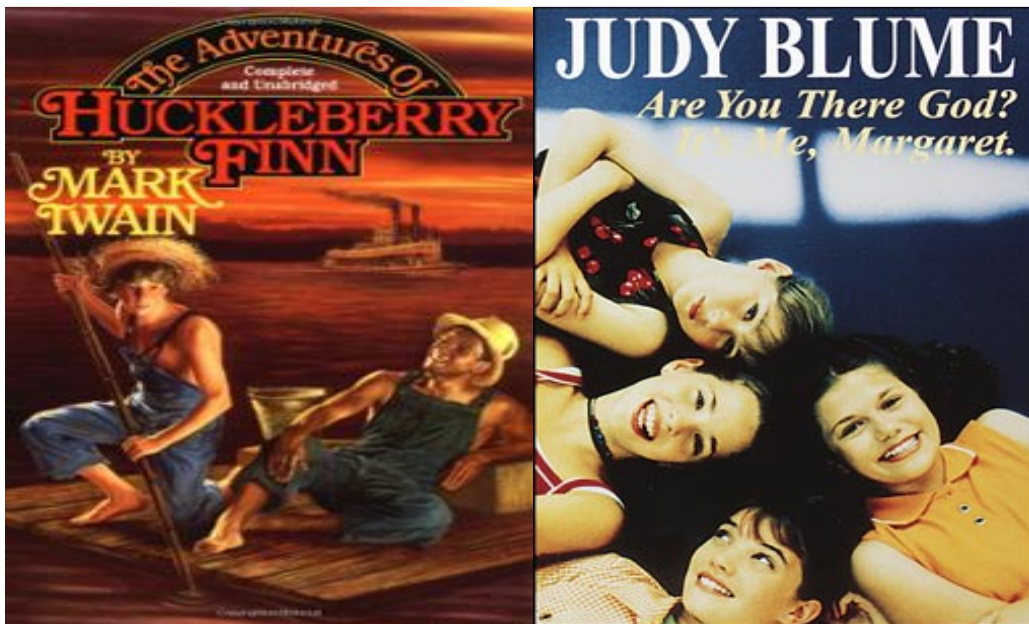
actions. Local school boards may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to "prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion." *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642. If such an intention was the decisive factor in petitioners' decision, then petitioners have exercised their discretion in violation of the Constitution." (Island Trees sec. C)

"In this age of censorship, I mourn the loss of books that will never be written, I mourn the voices that will be silenced-writers' voices, teachers' voices, students' voices-and all because of fear."

– Judy Blume

Imagine a world where imagination was censored and books were monitored constantly for proper content. Where the ideals that helped to form the foundation of American Society were no longer about "We the People..." but a society in which people lived knowing the government controlled what content was allowed to be published and distributed. This type of black and white "utopian" society is what organizations such as American Library Association (ALA) is working to prevent. For the past 30 years the ALA has gathered and provided to the public a list of banned & challenged books from across the nation. Their sources have come from School Districts, Journals, Magazines, Newspapers, Libraries and Online Publications. Through this organization dedication and hard work, now available on the web, each year Banned Book Week is celebrated in Libraries and School Districts nation-wide, with the hope of bringing awareness of what censorship and depriving our youth the freedom of expression will do to our future as a country. "The ALA promotes the freedom to choose or the freedom to

express one's opinions even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular and stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those viewpoints to all who wish to read them. 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. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others. As such, they are a threat to freedom of speech and choice.” (ALA para 1)



In 1839 Edward George Bulwer-Lytton would make famous a quote from his play “The Conspiracy”. This particular quote, “The pen is mightier than the sword...”, holds truth, especially when one is speaking of book banning and censorship; for why ban and challenge books if one does not fear the influence of the written word between the pages of those particular books? The following is a list of the top ten books reported on the banned and challenged list, including the reason for them being on the list, as reported by the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) at ALA. (ALA banned book list) This list can be accessed along with

other resources concerning challenged and banned books in the past 21st century on the ALA website:

Top 10 Challenged Books of 2013

1. **Captain Underpants** (series), by Dav Pilkey

Reasons: Offensive language, unsuited for age group, violence

2. **The Bluest Eye**, by Toni Morrison

Reasons: Offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group, violence

3. **The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian**, by Sherman Alexie

Reasons: Drugs/alcohol/smoking, offensive language, racism, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group

4. **Fifty Shades of Grey**, by E.L. James

Reasons: Nudity, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group

5. **The Hunger Games**, by Suzanne Collins

Reasons: Religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group

6. **A Bad Boy Can Be Good for A Girl**, by Tanya Lee Stone

Reasons: Drugs/alcohol/smoking, nudity, offensive language, sexually explicit

7. **Looking for Alaska**, by John Green

Reasons: Drugs/alcohol/smoking, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group

8. **The Perks of Being a Wallflower**, by Stephen Chbosky

Reasons: drugs/alcohol/smoking, homosexuality, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group

9. **Bless Me Ultima**, by Rudolfo Anaya

Reasons: Occult/Satanism, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit

10. **Bone** (series), by Jeff Smith

Reasons: Political viewpoint, racism, violence

A few of the reasons for banning of books as described above include Racism, violence, sexual conduct, political issues, witchcraft, blasphemous language, religious overtones. The list is an extensive one, although the Butler University website gives an in-depth description of some of these issues, for example:

1. **Racial Issues:** About and/or encouraging racism towards one or more group of people.
2. **Encouragement of "Damaging" Lifestyles:** Content of book encourages lifestyle choices that are not of the norm or could be considered dangerous or damaging. This could include drug use, co-habitation without marriage, or homosexuality.
3. **Blasphemous Dialog:** The author of the book uses words such as "God" or "Jesus" as profanity. This could also include any use of profanity or swear words within the text that any reader might find offensive.
4. **Sexual Situations or Dialog:** Many books with content that include sexual situations or dialog are banned or censored.
5. **Violence or Negativity:** Books with content that include violence are often banned or censored. Some books have also been deemed too negative or depressing and have been banned or censored as well.

6. **Presence of Witchcraft:** Books that include magic or witchcraft themes. A common example of these types of books are J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series.
7. **Religious Affiliations (unpopular religions):** Books have been banned or censored due to an unpopular religious views or opinions in the content of the book. This is most commonly related to satanic or witchcraft themes found in the book. Although, many books have also been banned or censored for any religious views in general that might not coincide with the public view.
8. **Political Bias:** Most Commonly occurs when books support or examine extreme political parties/philosophies such as: fascism, communism, anarchism, etc.
9. **Age Inappropriate:** These books have been banned or censored due to their content and the age level at which they are aimed. In some cases children's books are viewed to have "inappropriate" themes for the age level at which they are written for. (Butler web)

Some of the books one might find on the banned list would not surprise many, for how many readers truly wish children to read the contents of Fifty Shades of Grey? At the same time, it is the responsibility of parents to help the youth of America to understand what Freedom of Expression is and that each writer expressing their imagination within the written page is not to necessarily to be taken literally as factual, or a life choice. Others would be surprised to know that books such as Huckleberry Finn, and other classics have consistently been on the banned lists throughout American Society, for writing fiction that depicts a reality that is too close to a truth than what some feel is politically and morally correct for the youth of America to be able to "handle."

At the end of the day, it becomes the people's choice what they will and will not allow for the children to read for the fight for intellectual freedom begins at home. Will the youth of today grow to see monsters around every corner, or will they truly understand the ideals of Freedom of Expression and what the forefathers of America hoped for in establishing "We the People..." Banning books in American Society is not something that can be shrugged away as insignificant, for all it takes is one person to stand up and raise an alarm to set the cycle in motion. Knowledge is power, but to turn a blind eye from this issue is to deny knowledge, and therefore people are sacrificing their intellectual freedom of expression. In the words of the late John F. Kennedy "If this nation is to be wise as well as strong, if we are to achieve our destiny, then we need more new ideas for more wise men reading more good books in more public libraries. These libraries should be open to all—except the censor. We must know all the facts and hear all the alternatives and listen to all the criticisms. Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors. For the Bill of Rights is the guardian of our security as well as our liberty." Pick up a book and turn on your imaginations... one never knows where it will take you.



Resources:

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