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## Censorship in the Library--The Dark Side of Dystopia

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# Censorship in the Library: The Dark Side of Dystopia

by **Candace K. Vance** (Murray State University, Murray, KY 42071; Phone: 270-227-8196) <cvance4@murraystate.edu>

**P**at Conroy in *My Reading Life* stresses the importance of helping students “experience the inevitable transformation that occurs through reading...we must do everything we can to offer and then protect the book that just might change their lives.”<sup>1</sup> An important role of libraries is ensuring every reader can find that life-changing book.

Unfortunately, sometimes that transformational book isn't available because it was thought too difficult, dark, or challenging for a particular audience. Although “too dark” or “too challenging” are often heard, especially in regards to dystopian novels, the most cited reasons for a book to be challenged according to ALA's most banned books are sexual content, offensive language, or unsuited to age group,<sup>2</sup> usually evident in a very small portion of the book.

One study conducted by **Strothman** and **Van Fleet** set out to determine if there is a connection between transformational books and banned books. They analyzed 298 statements describing books in the “Books That Inspire” exhibit at the **University of Oklahoma**. The reasons academics found particular books inspiring fell among twenty-six recurring themes. For the inspiring books in the exhibit that had also been challenged, the authors compared the exhibit statements regarding why the book was inspiring to statements regarding why it was challenged. Were there any similarities in the statements? Is the reason it was inspiring to some people the same reason it was offensive to others? The hypothesis was partially supported because there were similar reasons stated for certain books on why it inspired or why it was offensive. But in many cases, the reason for inspiration was broader than the reason for challenging. Inspirational themes included “relationships and understanding others,” “the individual in society,” or “intellectual influence and appeal,” to name a few.<sup>3</sup> These are fairly broad concepts, difficult to define and almost impossible to quantify, helping to explain the precarious position many librarians find themselves. How does one defend a book with complex themes and abstract concepts against two or three concrete sentences with objectionable content?

**Lester Asheim** described this dilemma in “Not Censorship, But Selection.” “Single words and unrelated passages can be used to damn a book...the major theme, the total purpose, the effect of the work as a unified whole have been ignored in order to focus on a word or phrase or sequence. In other words, four letters have outweighed 500 pages.”<sup>4</sup>

**Kenneth Kidd** proposes a different theory of why many repeatedly challenged books are also considered among the most popular. A book which has been challenged or banned automatically becomes an object of interest. If a book has been removed from a school, it will suddenly be on the waiting list at the public library.

Censorship can also lend legitimacy to books over time. **Kidd** states that censorship has a way of enshrining certain books, establishing them as literature.<sup>5</sup> Does that mean *Captain Underpants* will become a literary classic? We'll have to wait and see, but when we look at lists of banned books over the last century,<sup>6</sup> many of them are now considered classics, begging the question of whether controversy lends credence to a book, pushing it into the realm of “greatness”...or at least giving it a degree of “social merit”<sup>7</sup>

One genre which has withstood its fair share of challenges is the Young Adult Dystopian novel. These novels have a history of making parents or other concerned citizens uneasy. Complainants may not be exactly sure how to voice their concern, resorting to questioning its age appropriateness or the depth of darkness. Dystopian books are dark. Of course they're dark, but are they too dark?

My personal experience with book challenges didn't occur in my job as a librarian. I became an accidental advocate for a school system's students' right to read when a book was censored in my son's seventh grade classroom. He had read **Neal Shusterman's**, *Unwind*, when he was in fifth grade. When he was in seventh grade, his reading teacher assigned the second book in the **Shusterman** series, *UnWholly*. When a parent complained about the book being too dark and disturbing, the Principal immediately removed it from the classroom, bypassing any type of formal review. I included book reviews in support of the book when I wrote the Principal and offered an argument as to why one parent's complaint should not result in the removal of a book from the whole classroom. I also spoke to the School Based Decision Making Council, along with the complainant. When my efforts failed, **Millie Davis** from the **National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)** and **Svetlana Mintcheva** from the **National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)** offered to help persuade the administration and school board to reconsider.

The policy the school followed was inadequate and **Davis** suggested that I ask the School Board to consider replacing it with the NCTE's position statement and policy for handling book complaints. The NCAC issued a letter to the school board in support of reinstating the book and adopting the NCTE's policy. The School Board and General Counsel did not change the policy, but indicated the Principal and Superintendent had followed the wrong policy. They contended the policy they should have followed was very similar to the NCTE's. The process took time and when the Board and General Counsel had made a decision, the school year was over and it was too late for the book to be reinstated. We failed to help that

particular class of students, but hopefully in the future the process will be closer to the NCTE's method of dealing with book complaints and future classes will benefit.

In our school system's middle school we hope future challenges will more appropriately follow the procedures in the NCTE's and NCAC's guidelines. The parent who voiced her concern about the book said it went against her family's values. She based this opinion on the cover art and scanning the book, as did the Principal. The complainant was not required to read the book or file a written complaint. Requiring complaints be made in writing after actually reading the book can often diffuse the situation. No committee was in place to review the complaint. A committee charged with resolving challenges can also help diffuse impulsive complaints. No rationale for choosing the book was on file and the concerned parent was not offered an alternative selection for her child to read. The book was simply removed from the whole class at her request.

The book in question was one in the **Neil Shusterman** *Unwind* series. In these books parents can decide to retroactively abort their children between the ages of 13 and 18 and donate their organs and body parts to others. The storyline is not for the faint of heart. It's far removed from **Nancy Drew** and the cover art in the series can be somewhat terrifying. But like other dystopias, its merit rests in its appeal to readers and in its ability to have them recognize the danger of blindly following societal rules which requires critical thought.

The very definition of dystopian novels can raise concern. **Fredric Jameson** refers to dystopia as a “near future novel” which tells the story of an imminent disaster — ecology, overpopulation, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident — waiting to come to pass in our own near future, which is fast-forwarded in the time of the novel.<sup>8</sup>

If exciting, challenging books are not available, students will not develop the habit of reading. The importance of students developing into readers cannot be ignored. “Wide, independent reading develops fluency, builds vocabulary and knowledge of text structures, and offers readers the experiences they need to read and construct meaning with more challenging texts”<sup>9</sup> College students who aren't readers haven't developed the reading skills or the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in college or become life-long learners.

YA Dystopian novels involve different levels of critical thinking. At the center of many, such as *Hunger Games*, *Unwind*, *The Giver*, and *The Declaration* children serve as sacrifice



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and scapegoats.<sup>10</sup> Readers learn to make comparison between fictional and historical societies and how important it is for a society not to repeat prior mistakes. The cornerstone of scapegoating is sacrifice to end violence. A conflict always begins with an issue — a difference of opinion, an argument.<sup>11</sup> Once a conflict “turns into a war, the issue doesn’t matter anymore, because now it’s about one thing and one thing only: how much each side hates the other.”<sup>12</sup>

In a school or a library where a book is challenged or banned, it may be a reaction to a tragedy in the community — suicide, violence, racism. The community looks for a scapegoat — often finding it in a book which represents the tragedy. In our school system, the concerned parent said one reason she objected to the **Shusterman** book was because of the recent preteen suicide in the community. In making the book the scapegoat, she was theoretically trying to contain the violence in the book by removing it. Librarians and teachers must handle such concerns carefully, preventing them from turning into a situation where sides form. A difference in opinion can easily become divisive, until it’s no longer about the book, but about the battle between sides.

What can librarians do in the face of a challenge? The **American Library Association** offers these strategies for dealing with concerns or challenges. Certain libraries may best prepare by having a well-thought out rationale written for books with a history of being challenged. A rationale is the articulation of the reasons for using a particular literary work, film, or teaching method. Rationales should include a bibliographic citation and the intended audience, brief summary of the work and its educational significance, potential problems with the work and how these can be handled, as well as alternative works an individual student might read.<sup>13</sup>

Libraries should also have sound policies in place when challenges occur, including a requirement that concerns or complaints be made in writing with an indication the complainant read the book. Libraries should have a sound selection policy in place also. Policies can indicate the support of intellectual and academic freedom.<sup>14</sup> The **NCTE** has position statements and policies on their website, as well as guidelines concerning different situations.<sup>15</sup>

Once a concern has been raised, librarians should discuss the issue with the complainant, at which time the rationale should be shared with them, if one is available. This is a very important time in the process. Diplomacy and understanding are key. Adults have the right to question whether or when their own children should be exposed to certain books or ideas, but they do not have the right to determine whether or when it’s appropriate for other readers.

The policy should also include the provision for a committee made up of librarians, administrators, faculty or teachers and possibly community members. The committee should base their decision on the educational value of the title. Their decision should stand. The policy should

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also include the provision that titles will not be removed unless the policy and procedures are followed, nor until the process has been completed.<sup>16</sup>

According to the **NCAC** the following practices should also be followed when a book is challenged: the complainant should be clearly defined, not anonymous. Complainants must have read the entire work and include specific reasons for the objection, such as calls upon a broader knowledge or range of experience than students typically possess. Complaints should request a specific remedy. And complaints should never provide grounds for disciplining librarians.<sup>17</sup>

If the issue has not been resolved, has gone public, or has been pushed up the chain of command, the challenge can be reported online to the **NCAC** or **NCTE**. Librarians can fill out the “Report a Censorship Incident Form,”<sup>18</sup> or call **Millie Davis**, **NCTE** Senior Developer, Affiliated Groups and Public Outreach. Someone from these organizations will contact the reporter and ask for more detail concerning the situation. These organizations offer a range of services, from advice, to writing letters to administration, boards, or media outlets in support of the challenged book. Other allies include the **American**

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Library Association, America Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, Association of American Publishers, Freedom to Read Foundation, First Amendment Center, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

It can also be helpful to contact the author or publisher concerning the challenge. They may prove to be helpful allies in the process of protecting the book. The **National Coalition Against Censorship** also reports censorship incidents if you notify them.<sup>19</sup>

**Millie Davis** from the NCTE encourages everyone to give more credit to students. "They can distinguish between the real world and fiction. Through reading, students can encounter human experiences vicariously, giving them the chance to think about these issues without ever having to actually experience them or, in some cases, in preparation for experiencing them."<sup>20</sup> Libraries that are properly prepared to handle challenges can better protect everyone's right to read.

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Charleston. Several local academics from the **College of Charleston** and the **Citadel** will be presenting about their blogs!

By the way, we are considering **videoing or recording** some of the Concurrent sessions! If there is one that you would especially like to attend and cannot, slip us an email please with the subject line "**possible session to record for 2016.**"

**Yalfest** is not bumping heads with the **Charleston Conference** this year unfortunately! **Ramune Kubilius** is disappointed! Her book club just discussed the third book of Lithuanian American YA author, **Ruta Sepetys** who will be at **Yalfest**.

**PEW Research Center's Libraries 2016** was just released September 9. The report discusses trends in public libraries. Patrons like libraries and but are unaware of all the services that the library provides. **The large majority want libraries to have programs to teach**

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### Endnotes

1. **Pat Conroy**, *My Reading Life* (Nan A. Talese, 2010).
2. **American Library Association**, "Number of Challenges by Reasons, Initiator, & Institution, 2000-09," accessed <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics/2000-09> (Accessed May 19, 2016).
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19. **National Coalition Against Censorship**, "Unwholly by Neil Shusterman Removed from 7th Grade Class in Kentucky," accessed May 19, 2016.
20. **ReLeah Cossett Lent and Gloria Pipkin**, *Keep Them Reading: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators* (Teachers College Press, 2012).

mitted funds to make this a reality. Are you in the process of developing new, innovative, and implementable ideas to improve your academic library or related organization? This competition wants to showcase innovation in library and information management. We don't realize how innovative we are! [fastpitch@charlestonlibraryconference.com](mailto:fastpitch@charlestonlibraryconference.com)

Speaking of innovation, have you explored the **ACI Scholarly Blog Index**? This is an editorially-curated collection of scholarly blogs written by scholars and thought leaders in all academic disciplines. In fact, I was just reading that the **Open Library Foundation** has been established to promote open source projects for libraries and to foster support. <http://scholar.aci.info>

**Pat Sabosik**, the general manager of the **ACI Index** will be running a panel in