

Censoring young adult literature

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Raise your hand if you have never heard of the word ? rape, called out my sixth grade teacher as she introduced Harper Leer’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Luckily, my best friend briskly intercepted my eager, curious hand and adamantly shook her head. It was one of those moments that turns your cheeks warm and etches itself into your memory, taunting you for years to come. After sensing the look on my puzzled, rose-colored face, she reassured me while signaling that she would disclose the mystery term at a later time.

Whether we would like to admit it to ourselves or not, the world today is filled with intolerance that is all too prevalent in forms of mass-shootings, sexual assaults, and hate speech that we are reminded of each time we tune into the news. I look back fondly on the days where my eyes were unscathed by the harsh realities of a world in which we turn a blind eye to those that look, think, speak, or worship differently than we do. Sadly, my twelve-year old self would have likely encountered the meaning of this once mystery word all too soon, regardless of whether or not my teacher had prompted the discussion in our classroom that day.

Novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* serve as windows from which readers can examine controversial topics and perspectives that may differ from their own personal experiences (Denzin, p. 8). Yet, these works are frequently included on the laundry list of books that are banned from classrooms across the country in hopes of censoring the information that our young adults are consuming. Although those who contend books in the classroom are not necessarily ill-intentioned, it prompts us to examine how this reveals a host

of questions regarding who holds power over our classrooms and whether filtering knowledge is a productive and beneficial process for our students.

Contents

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as the attempt to restrict a person's right to read, view, listen to, and disseminate constitutionally protected ideas (ALA, 2012). The ALA sponsors banned book week annually, in order to unite the literary community against censorship by celebrating and embracing books that cross boundaries. As Americans, we boast a land of freedom and opportunity, however, when engaging in the process of selectively choosing material which students are permitted access to, we are actively violating our own First Amendment rights (Raskin, p. 64). Most often, the books are removed from classrooms and libraries due to profane word(s), a particular lifestyle, or a concept that may be deemed as offensive to certain parties or groups of people (Boyd et. al, p. 656).

In response to his novel, *Looking for Alaska*'s appearance on the banned book list, John Green unpacks the misconception that books corrupt people and encourages readers to open books with a lens of accepting a challenge (Hauser, 2017). Green's novel has been added to the list time and time again labeled with so-called pornographic content. In response, the author makes the point that books, including his own, are often targeted based off of one page that is taken out of context of the piece as a whole. In this case, critics wag their finger at one particular scene which contains sexually explicit content in order to illustrate the point that it is not required in order to develop a strong, emotional partnership (Hauser, 2017). Ironically, people

who dismiss this book immediately due to one isolated scene are denying the presence of a beneficial message to young adults that physical demonstrations of affection are not the sole form of human connection.

Parents and policy-makers often point to the impressionability and vulnerability which characterize the teenaged-years as they decipher which books contain content that merits elimination from the curriculum (Freedman et. al., p 357). When considering the adolescent profile, it is important to remember that they are in the thick of self-discovery, navigating daily situations that prompt them to question identity, spirituality, and a host of values that make us who we are.

Although most would express an interest for students to learn about thought-provoking topics in the nurturing environment of the class walls, 52 percent of the most-often banned or challenged books from 2000 to 2014 either addressed issues of race, sexuality, or disability, or included characters who are non-White, LGBTQ, or have disabilities (Flannery, 2015). While teachers have a great deal of control over students during the school hours, it is not possible to censor or protect what they will encounter beyond the school building.

If the majority of texts that portray diversity are being excluded from the libraries, it is clear that many of our adolescents will not have held discussions in a constructive environment that open their eyes to situations, people, and ideas that are prevalent all around us. In a stage of life which is consistently recognized as a time of exploration, it is critical that we are providing insights into experiences which they are bound to encounter, so

that students are given the opportunity to develop thoughts, opinions, and value-systems.

Literature serves as a key into a new world which contains stories and experiences that both reflect our own and also ones that take us on the road less-traveled. Arguably, the most important part of being an educator is teaching students to be critical, passionate consumers of content, whether it be through social media platforms, digital content, or print information (Freedman et. al. p. 365) Yet, by dictating a prescriptive curriculum, this is sending a message that undermines teacher professionalism and inhibits their abilities to teach students who they know on a personal basis.

When teachers aren't free to offer ? controversial materials to supplement the content the state has endorsed without fear of repercussions, students experience a diminished range of ideas... One reason for exposing students to material some people regard as controversial is to stimulate a cornucopia of images and arguments. Another is to let students practice the art of forming their own opinions. As one judge observed about controversial books, the reactions they elicit are ? what makes them worth reading (Ross, p. 113).

In order to help our students develop voice, assert opinions, and critically analyze issues of social justice, it is imperative that the teacher is permitted to appropriately share content that students are excited to read (Denzin, p. 10). The topics that peak student interest, along with realistically any reader, is content that contains conflict and takes us along the journey of how the characters in the story go about responding to the action in the story.

Indeed, our classrooms serve as a microcosm of the beliefs and values of our Nation, as the standards are controlled by state government (Lent, p. 63). By excluding novels such as *The Outsiders*, *The Hunger Games*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and so on, we are sending a message to students that reveals that we are uncomfortable to engage in discussions that make us uncomfortable, including themes such as racism, gender-identity, religion, among others. In order to cultivate classrooms that embrace diversity and freedom of expression, maintaining transparency with our students is critical (Sulzer et. al., p. 164).

The books included on the American Library Association website each year do not as much indicate our yearning to lookout for our students, but rather , they demonstrate how we internalize our very own insecurities and prejudices (ALA, 2012). It is important to recognize the topics that cause some discomfort or controversy, while simultaneously presenting the content to students in an unbiased, appropriate manner. By letting go of the desire to remove books off of our students shelves, we may cultivate groups of students that are increasingly aware and tolerant of those who hold different views and life experiences.

When teachers present novels containing themes dubbed as taboo, they are doing no more than revealing the times that we live in and extending an invitation to students to become inquisitive, active readers that critically examine alternative perspectives and ideas (Hauser, 2017). In a commentary on censorship, Boyd and Bailey draw a connection between censored material and a barbed wire fence. When protecting students in an unsolicited

manner, we illuminate how censors evoke barriers to free thought and speech when they block knowledge acquisition, intellectual development, as well as creative and critical thinking by calling for books to be removed from libraries, classrooms, schools, and districts (Boyd et. al., p. 655).

I feel fortunate to have gained exposure to particularly difficult topics within the nurturing walls of the classroom prior to inevitably stumbling upon situations in the harsh realities of the world. As we assist in shaping the next generation, it is imperative that we assure that they are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and skills that enable them to critically evaluate contentious content in order to take action against issues regarding social justice.