

# BETWEEN FAITH AND FICTION: EXPLORING THE GIFT OF DIVERSE LITERATURE IN PUBLIC SCHOOL LIBRARIES

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*This paper delves into the intricate and often contentious relationship between religion and book banning, shedding light on the motivations and rationales behind both proponents and opponents of this debatable practice within the context of public schools. While acknowledging the significance of parents' rights in guiding their children's literary exposure, this essay proposes a novel third approach, emphasizing collaborative efforts among educators, librarians, and parents to cultivate an intellectually stimulating yet culturally sensitive learning environment. Religious beliefs have long influenced societies and their education systems. This has prompted passionate debates about the appropriateness of certain literary materials in the classroom. Building on this discourse, this paper examines the reasons behind religious influence and extremist efforts to gain greater control over what children and adolescents can access in public and school libraries.*

Proponents of book banning argue that certain texts may contain content deemed objectionable or contradictory to their religious doctrines. These voices get an equal opportunity to explain their fear of exposure to such materials that might lead to moral confusion or undermine the values they wish to instill in their children. Opponents who advocate for freedom of expression and unrestricted access to diverse perspectives, asserting that banning books curtails intellectual growth and stifles critical thinking are equally represented. The concept of a middle ground is nothing new, however. It is an exploration of harmonious balance between intellectual freedom and parental rights, an issue that deserves a closer investigation.

In communities where religious beliefs hold significant sway, it could be argued that the practice of book banning has been influenced by the perceived importance of theological doctrine and certain moral principles. Supporters argue for protecting sacred texts from blasphemy while preserving faith and integrity, emphasizing the need to shield believers from potentially harmful ideas. In contrast, opponents advocate for intellectual freedom and the open exchange of ideas, warning that book banning based on religious grounds stifles creativity and hinders critical thinking. Additionally, critics of book banning assert that such practices can lead to censorship, limiting the potential for personal growth and societal progress.

Conservative values come to mind when assigning strong beliefs in preserving first amendment rights. What do we teach our young people when we choose to ban certain literary works? Understanding these diverse perspectives is essential in navigating the balance between respecting religious beliefs and upholding the principles of intellectual liberties and constitutional rights.

With an informed and unbiased exploration of the complex relationship between religion and book banning, light will be shed on the reasoning behind both proponents and opponents of this debatable practice happening in our public schools. This topic doesn't have to be binary. A third approach balances youth intellectual exploration with parents' right to choose what their children read and are exposed to with the help of educated librarians and teachers working together with the best interests of society in mind. Our children too can be empowered to make decisions on the material they wish to explore with guidance from parents and trained professional librarians.

A pragmatic approach acknowledges the complexities of the issue and seeks a centered position between opposing views. This perspective calls for thoughtful leadership that balances the protection of community values with the promotion of intellectual freedom, recognizing that some material may indeed contain content that could be deemed offensive or harmful to certain individuals or groups, while still celebrating diversity and the freedom to exchange ideas.

In an interview conducted with Representative Carol Spackman Moss, a 30-year English and literature teacher, and current Utah State Representative, she was asked what material might be considered harmful and how these concerns should be addressed. Moss states,

Books that are racist, have hate speech, antisemitism, or other hateful or conspiratorial language or comment, should not be in a school or public library. Again, parents, librarians, and teachers should advise students of harmful content, even though some of it might be subjective. Sometimes kids need to read things themselves and then they can make their own judgment about not wanting to read books that are racist, misogynistic, or violent. (Moss, 2023).

Representative Moss goes on to say when considering censorship of literature there are many factors that should be considered. She says,

First and foremost, a book should be read in its entirety to judge whether a passage is obscene or violent. In context, a book that depicts a rape or a racially violent act might illustrate the harmful and lasting effect such acts have on a person, like the main character Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In that context, the passages are neither sexually titillating nor pornographic. (Moss, 2023).

This perspective also supports empowering parents, educators, and community members to be actively involved in guiding the reading choices of minors, rather than imposing blanket bans. However, Moss believes that it's important for kids to begin developing their own sense of judgment. Monitoring everything our kids read takes away choices and their ability to make decisions on their own. "They tire of those mindless books eventually and then read something more edifying." (Moss, 2023).

Historically, Christians have been the most ardent supporters of book bans, but not all Christian voices echo the same sentiment. One Christian perspective about banning books is shared in *Christian Century*, a non-profit magazine founded in 1884, and proud to be the first to have published the full text of Martin Luther King Jr's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

In an article published in May 2022, “Why books get banned”, the editors state that,

Books about difficult topics – when approached with openness and attention to context – can function similarly. They can show us our failures. They can impel us to make our society more just. They can transform us into more empathetic people and more responsible citizens. (Christian Century, 2022).

Literary contributors to this article, Schneider and Berkshire, continue in that same vein saying that public schools are faced with a seemingly unattainable task of helping parents raise the next generation in the face of a myriad of hurdles like racism, economic inequity, and geographic inequity (2022). They continue by stating, “When powerful people can orchestrate mass censorship through book-banning campaigns, it doesn’t just erode the First Amendment rights of educators and library patrons. It undermines this important work of formation (2022).

To date, no regime has ever succeeded in erasing ideas by destroying the pages that carry them.

The ironic absurdity is that the banning – or in extreme cases burning – of books has never achieved its intended goals. Presumably, those demanding the banning/burning are afraid that those who read the books might get and internalize some ideas that are a threat or are anathema to the ruling regime. (Gordon, 2023).

So why do proponents of book banning feel so passionate about their stance? Tamney and Johnson (1997) explain that fundamentalists don’t see censorship as opposing freedom; instead, they believe true freedom comes from following God’s laws. Therefore, censorship is viewed as a tool that protects people from sin and deception so they can live freely, clarifying they do not subscribe to this opinion, but they do believe in a worldview that offers true freedom for obeying God.

Supporters of banning books argue that certain materials should be restricted to protect vulnerable minds from harmful content. They believe that certain books may contain explicit or disturbing themes that could negatively influence young readers or sensitive individuals. By controlling

access to such materials, proponents claim that society can create a safer and more morally upright environment for everyone, especially children, who are still developing their understanding of the world.

Another reason in favor of book banning is the preservation of cultural or religious values. Advocates maintain that certain books may challenge or contradict the beliefs and customs of a particular community, leading to potential conflicts or erosion of their cherished traditions. They believe they can safeguard their cultural identity and maintain social harmony by limiting access to such literature. In their view, book banning serves as a protective shield against ideas that could disrupt a society's cohesion and stability rooted in shared values and norms.

In Utah, one anonymous submittal led to the banning of the Bible. In March 2022, Utah Governor Spencer Cox, a Republican, signed H.B. 374 into law (Utah State Legislature). The "Sensitive Materials in Schools Act" bans books with "pornographic or indecent" material from schools and school libraries. The law allows parents to submit book challenges for review. The anonymous parent cited the Bible as being "one of the most sex-ridden books around." They state the Bible has "no serious values for minors' because it's pornographic by our new definition. Get this PORN out of our schools!" (Anonymous, 2022). Essentially, they read the new law and turned it against the party of banning books by providing countless passages that discussed sex, incest, alcohol, nudity, rape, and more. This turn of events occurs amid an effort by US conservatives in multiple states to curb teachings of controversial topics like LGBTQ+ rights and racial identity. Ken Ivory, who wrote the bill scoffed at the anonymous challenge, calling it a mockery. He continued by stating the Bible is best studied at home with family (Matza 2023). Multiple attempts were made to contact Utah State Representative Ken Ivory to hear his opinion firsthand, but all attempts were left unanswered.

With the proliferation of information available to all on the internet and mobile phones, students now have access to a wealth of information at their fingertips. This has made it increasingly difficult for book bans to be effective, as students can easily access banned books online. Narayanaswamy and Weaver state there was a free flow of information and barriers that were once in place but are no longer there. People are

free to access information about virtually any topic (Narayanaswamy & Weaver 2015). This begs the question: are book bans effective if our young people can access anything they want via mobile phones?

Librarian Amy Affelt explains that the duties of librarians and libraries are to include providing materials and information that offer all points of view and educating accurately on current and historic issues. Affelt also believes libraries need to challenge censorship as a fulfilment of their responsibility as librarians to provide information and enlightenment (2022).

How does society separate the sometimes overwhelmingly loud desires of a few armed with megaphones to censor literature based on their own belief system and desire to raise virtuous adolescents? It will require a careful and thoughtful approach that respects both the principles of intellectual freedom and the concerns of proponents of censorship. Leaders must uphold the fundamental principle of freedom of expression and intellectual freedom, which allows individuals the opportunity to have access to a wide range of ideas and perspectives. By emphasizing the importance of diverse discussions and the opportunity for individuals to develop critical thinking skills, advocates are doing a service for the next generation by helping develop a democratic society.

Education and information must flow to promote and encourage civil discussions about the values of a democratic society and the importance of open dialogue in addressing sensitive topics. We can recognize that not all materials are suitable for all age groups. We must also be honest with ourselves knowing our children and adolescents have access to smartphones that provide anything and everything a young mind might want to inquire just one tap away. Knowing this, fear-mongering and biased censorship does nothing to protect the virtues and innocence of our young people.

Schools must advocate for inclusivity, ensuring a wide range of perspectives and experiences are represented by engaging in civil dialogue and encouraging respectful exchanges leading to a better understanding of each other's concerns. Thus, reflecting the diversity of the world we live in. If we proceed with respect, kindness, and an open mind to what might be possible, we succeed together.

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