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Childrens Literature

Dr. Hough

An Assault on Knowledge

For a while now, there has been a worrying darkness creeping into society, an evil that threatens the foundation of the society we currently live in. A product of its environment, it thrives out of hate, ignorance, and an unwillingness to accept change. It doesn't come with physical threats or the bang of a weapon, but instead the scratching of a pen and an annoying murmur from pitiful voices deciding what others can consume. This ancient practice, known as censorship, is as old as writing itself, and recently has gained traction and a worrying resurgence in contemporary American society. Book banning has never been and will never be about "protection"; it is an act of fear, a political tool for control, and a pitiful cry against a world that will refuse to stay simple and conservative. When a book gets banned, it just admits that we are so scared of an idea that we have to pretend it does not exist. Proponents of censorship simply give us an admission of intellectual cowardice that continues the cycle of failing to prepare the next generation for a complex and uncomfortable reality. In an era that has now been marked by a crazy amount of misinformation and division, one has to be committed to the stance that books must never be banned. Bannings open the floodgates for extinguishing any critical ideas, empathy, and fundamental education.

Manipulation, misinformation, and misunderstanding are to blame for the psychological fear that leads to the impulse to want to ban a book. At the foundation of censorship is the deep fear of the unknown and the human desire to impose its power and order onto an unpredictable world. The people who lead this charge to ban books most of the time are not monsters, but certain individuals who are struggling with the fear that being exposed to a perspective other than their own will corrupt and harm their children and communities. This fear really comes from a severe cognitive dissonance that all modern humans, and especially Americans, face when having personal world views and being confronted with difficult topics depicting racism, violence, trauma, or sexual content. Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor at the University of

Pennsylvania, argues that “the first instinct of people who want to ban books is to protect children... but what they don’t recognize is that children are already asking these questions”. The easiest way to fix this discomfort is not to engage with or debate a challenging idea, but to eliminate it or suppress it in the best way possible. When the books finally get banned, it restores a fake sense of control in a sanitized bubble where no truths can penetrate. This “benevolent” impulse, however, is an alarming betrayal of children’s intellectual and emotional development. The consensus becomes that children are passive and empty vessels, but many miss the mark in understanding that readers interpret a story based on their own worldviews. When kids are denied access to a wide spectrum of literature that gives them the tools to learn about the world, it leaves them vulnerable and utterly unprepared for life outside their bubble.

While individual fears light the match, organized political mobilization and think tanks fan the flames into an evil and worrying dystopia. Especially in recent times, the surge in book challenges has become a coordinated strategy to sway public opinion. Groups with large national funding and political agendas have weaponized the fears of parents into a bigger goal. Leading this charge in ideological influence is the Heritage Foundation, where the ultimate goal is the deliberate erasure of history and marginalized voices for a more ideal, “patriotic” and homogenous ideology. One specific group, Moms for Liberty, has a rapidly growing interstate network of over 200 chapters. According to the Beacon Press, “Moms for Liberty, is connected to 58% of all advocacy-led book bands around the country”. It has nothing to do with civic engagement; it is a clear and deliberate campaign to suppress and once again colonize the minds and ideas of our youth, a nasty cycle seen repeated over generations in the US and the world. It is also a crazy coincidence that “books with LGBTQIA+ content’ comprised half of the top 10 most frequently challenged books in 2021 (Sachdeva et al. 2023). It isn't about protecting kids from explicit content; it’s about the hateful and systematic elimination of all representation. In the near future, there will be permanent changes and marks in the knowledge accessible to our students and the general public. The crusade will continue to ban books dealing with race and American history by watering down the traumatic details that plague our history, in exchange for a weak and ignorance-based patriotism. One analysis notes,

book bans are part of an ongoing attempt by the right to silence the voices of marginalized groups in the United States. By restricting access to books by BIPOC authors that center BIPOC experiences, book banners seek to bolster white supremacist narratives by distorting the truth of history and the lived experiences of numerous communities."(Beacon Press)

All these ideas and actions simply act as a catalyst for societal decline, we don't care anymore and our nation has become afraid of its own reflection.

Apart from directing knowledge away from the general public and building an anti-intellectual society, the students suffer the biggest blow of all: the future of our communities is deprived of rational thinking. School is not a luxury; it is a basis for logic and empathy. It's where a child from a homogeneous suburb can begin to understand an immigrant, or where a student struggling with self-identity can find someone who relates, making them feel less alone. By providing a rich and diverse source of knowledge, future leaders of an ever-changing and multicultural society learn about complex histories and truths that have shaped our world. American Progress notes, "Such measures seek to prevent teachers from providing a thorough curriculum on American history, civics, and government in U.S. public schools and deny students their rights to a complete education." We are robbing an entire generation of the ability to think critically, to maneuver around complexity, and to develop the empathetic imagination necessary for a functioning democracy. Banning has become malpractice and should be punished as such. For those who value traditional values and the doctrine of this country, one particular case stands out. When books are removed from shelves, students' First Amendment rights are violated; this has been confirmed and suggested by the Supreme Court in *Board of Education v. Pico* (1982). The bans do not just get rid of the beautiful stories, but they prevent a comprehensive education that so many people are jealous of. In all, it transforms into a raw and emotional toll that students have to deal with, especially from marginalized communities, that leaves a mark for generations. It is simple and calculated state-sanctioned bullying that says, "you are not welcome here", but it does not matter, because it's already being said out loud and in the legislature, where intolerance will haunt us forever.

Most do not even think of the logistical and financial nightmare that comes with these bans; there is no automation, tired and underpaid teachers are forced to divert already limited resources from the real needs of the education system. Especially in a time where schools are plagued with staff shortages and budget crises, they have to spend so much unnecessary time on these goose chases. The Center for American Progress reports, "These censorship efforts require tens of thousands of hours from teachers, librarians, and administrators to review the books and implement a system of censorship—all at a time when school resources are already stretched thin." At the end of the day, it's an enormous waste of taxpayer money and a disrespect to the countless professionals who have dedicated their lives to his expertise. Every dollar a district spends on legal fees to fight back is a dollar not spent on new equipment, the well-being of its instructors, or extracurricular activities. It is a self-defeating cycle that benefits no one.

The argument for parental rights is very often used as the justification for book banning, but these rights are often misread. A parent absolutely has the right to guide their own kids' reading, to decide what books are appropriate for their own family, and to engage in conversations about difficult topics with others. However, no parent has the right to make that decision for every other child in the community. The solution to a parent's concern is simple, elegant, and requires no censorship at all. it is a conversation between themselves and their child. As The Beacon Press puts it," It's as simple as telling your child to stay away or, simply avoid that specific kind of literature without needing your input. And if they do read them, then perhaps it was meant to be anyway." The public library and the school library are places of exploration and choice. They exist to serve the entire community, which is diverse in its beliefs, values, and needs. To allow one small, vocal group to dictate the contents of these shared resources is undemocratic and kills the creativity of our future.

Nowadays, we are at a crossroads. As censorship grows rampant, it leads us to a dark place where curiosity disappears and empathy is nonexistent. The only stories told are those that reinforce the prejudices taught by the powerful, with rampant manipulation and suppression. To ban a book is to sever our connection to each other, to our past, to our distant future. It leaves us

poorer, blinder, and more scared than before. These bans in our nation have nothing to do with a simple school policy, but the heart of our entire nation. Complicated is hard, but complicated is beautiful, and with it comes some pain, no question. Our educators must be empowered and our libraries defended harder than our military bases, because they are the true red, white, and blue that show freedom. With every fragment of our souls, we must continue to raise our voices in our communities to declare that nothing will be silenced and no voice will be forgotten. This act must be intentional and commanding, because if you give the fascists an inch, they will take a mile.

Works Cited

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After my visit at the writing center, I gained a further insight into the flow and clarity of what I am speaking about. I have trouble converting my own language and mannerisms into academic literature and they do not mix well. Grammar always needs a touch up but overall, the purpose and message of the essay were complimented and small tweaks were made.