

Coda:

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"People Seem to Think They Have Permission to Ban Books" — Censorship Today



"Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press . . ."
First Amendment

"The Carlsbad, New Mexico school board banished the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary because it contains 'the most obscene words imaginable'."

Censorship News #12, January 1983, publication of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Censorship: It has been unleashed on Flaubert and Fanny Hill, Sylvia Plath and Eldridge Cleaver, James

Joyce and Margaret Sanger, on Rabelais, Boccaccio, Voltaire and the Boston Women's Health Collective.

In 1983, the New Mexico State Board of Education adopted for statewide use a version of *Romeo and Juliet* that is missing 400 words of "sexually explicit material." In the same year, Laidlaw Brothers, a textbook division of Doubleday, omitted the word "evolution" from its biology textbook in order to "avoid the publicity that would surround a controversy," according to People for the American Way, Norman Lear's vigorous anti-censorship organization. That textbook was adopted for statewide use in New Mexico as well.

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Censorship Today—

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"Today the general public seems more willing to support a wide variety of censorship than at any time since the 1920's," writes historian Joan Hoff-Wilson in the New York Public Library's guidebook to their 1984 exhibit, *Censorship: 500 Years of Conflict* (now available from Oxford University Press, \$29.95). She reports that from the early to the late 1970's, the number of book-banning incidents in the United States has tripled. By 1982, 34% of all librarians had been faced with book challenges and, in over half of these cases, the offending piece of literature was removed.

The Well-Organized New Right

What is especially significant about these figures is that the will to censor came not from the government, as it often does in other countries, but from citizens in almost every state in the nation. "There is a very energized popular movement behind these attempts to censor," says Leigh Ann Katz, executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship. "At this particular time the general regard for the free exchange of ideas is quite low." Harold Marcus, of PEN's Right to Read Committee, agrees: "In the last four or five years people seem to think they have permission to ban books," he says.

Anti-censorship activists feel that the recent revival of book-banning (and in some places book-burning) is much more than a curious anachronism. The hatred of the different, shocking, or new may begin in individual hearts, but today these feelings quickly find a head in the well-organized New Right, which is more than willing to galvanize communities against literature, especially children's reading lists. "The New Right is now embarked on a serious campaign to attack a whole way of teaching that encourages children to think, to make choices, and to develop independent values," says Leigh Ann Katz. "The idea here is to learn by rote. We're talking about an attack on an entire system, not just on a few isolated books."

Even more disturbing is the philosophy that frequently turns such assaults from civil wars into holy ones. Barbara Handman, director of the New York campaign of People for the American Way, warns that "the underlying drive of the Far Right is to get as many people 'Christianized' by the year 2000, which they believe will be the year of the millennium." One of the ways to do that is to eliminate

public education and replace it with a particular brand of Christian education, which entails vigorous censorship of children's reading material.

Women, Gays, and People of Color

Yet, to the average "literary" writer, the specter of the avenging censor may still seem somewhat remote. The Moral Majority, after all, has not yet been seen haunting the editorial offices of the *New Yorker* or the *American Poetry Review*. The current choice of censorship targets—libraries and school reading lists, pornography, and those books labeled "threatening" to national security—may cause the creative writer concern, even anxiety, but perhaps not an energizing zeal.

Nor does a casual glance at the "Embattled Books" list compiled by the National Coalition Against Censorship and reprinted in the September 1984 *Harper's Magazine*, yield a unified roster of authors. What could the connection be between Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish and Other Poems* and Judy Blume's adolescent classic *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. A closer look reveals that about half of the thirty authors on the list are women, gays, or people of color. The remaining half of the books deal with the occult, sex education, violence (Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*) or may in some way be considered "anti-American" (Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*).

Pornography: "The New, Hot Issue"

Many, although by no means all of these books, were besieged on the grounds of their being unfit for the eyes and minds of children. But what is off-limits to consenting adults? That question has now been raised in furious anti-pornography battles in the legislatures of Wisconsin, Indiana, Minneapolis, North Carolina, and Suffolk County, New York. The desire to remove material "degrading to women" has inflamed and united a strange alliance of some feminist groups and the New Right. No clear successes have yet been reported, but Nan Hunter, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer and member of the Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce, feels that "pornography may well be the new, hot issue."

Pornography, however, has been the "hot issue" and

opening wedge for general suppression in the past. It was under the aegis of the Comstock Act of 1873, which legislated against "obscene, lewd and lascivious" publications, that birth control information was suppressed—along with the works of Voltaire, Theodore Dreiser, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence. Anthony Comstock, who gave the bill its name, also supplied a fitting motto for the sentiment which inspired it: "Morals, not Art or Literature."

The Gablers' "Hit Lists"

Today, the tool of the censor is not only moral outrage, but a canny manipulation of the market. Mel and Norma Gabler are well known to anti-censorship groups for the textbook "hit lists" they compile and distribute to parents, librarians, and church and civic groups around the country. Working full-time, the Gablers and staff review and pass judgment on textbooks covering subjects from literature to biology to math. A special report from People for the American Way includes the following quote from Mel Gabler: "When a student reads in a math book that there are no absolutes, suddenly every value he's been taught is destroyed. And the next thing you know, the student turns to crime and drugs."

The Gablers are significant not only in the fantastic nature of their rhetoric, but in their effect on textbook markets around the country. As residents of Texas, they are situated in one of the largest textbook markets in the country, a plum too large for even the most well-known publishers to pass up. It is simply too expensive to print one version of a biology textbook for Texas and another for the rest of the country, and the Gablers have proven enormously effective at getting the word out. People for the American Way reports that 18 of the 28 textbooks targeted by the Gablers in 1978 were removed, and in 1984, 10 of the 21 texts they disliked were not used by the state.

Possibly more foreboding, however, is the fact that in response to such pressure groups as the Gablers, Holt, Rinehart & Winston has cut by 25% the discussion of evolution in a widely distributed biology textbook and the scramble for markets such as Texas encourages other publishers to do the same. Self-censorship looms larger as creative writers begin to wonder what will be publishable in the future and to what audience it will be made available.

Defending the First Amendment

The good news is that, when organized, communities across the country frequently come to the support of the First Amendment. *Go Ask Alice* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* have been attacked many times each, but they have almost as frequently been defended by a myriad of groups, sometimes local, sometimes national, sometimes a coalition of both. "We have had a very high success rate in opening dialogue and beating back censorship attempts by simply bringing the writers whose books are under attack, or are likely to be, into their communities," says Harold Marcus.

Certainly the struggle against censorship is exhausting, time-consuming, and frequently less than glorious, but it is of vital concern for writers everywhere. Because when the creative reader is suppressed, the creative writer becomes an endangered species.

Stacey D'Erasmus ■

Anti-Censorship Organizations

The following list of anti-censorship organizations covers both international and domestic concerns. Many of these organizations also have newsletters, books, and other helpful publications. All expressed a great willingness to aid the censored writer or embattled community with direct action.

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

132 West 43 Street
New York, New York 10036
(212) 944-9800

Always a good first resource, the ACLU has local branches around the country which can provide both advice and legal assistance.

American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611
(312) 944-6780

Judith Krug, Director

Makes recommendations for safeguarding First Amendment rights to ALA council, issues bi-monthly newsletter, monthly memorandum, and the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*.

American Society of Journalists & Authors

1501 Broadway
New York, New York 10036
(212) 997-0947
Evelyn Kaye

Sponsors read-outs of banned books, gives Open Book Awards to those who have taken a stand on freedom to read; distributes (for \$3) a background paper on the history of censorship. Some individual case work.

Association of American Publishers

Freedom to Read Committee
International Freedom to Publish Committee
One Park Avenue
New York, New York 10016
Richard Kleeman, Director, Freedom to Read Committee
(212) 689-8920
and at
2005 Massachusetts Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 232-3335

The Freedom to Read Committee is concerned with individual cases; the staff writes legal briefs, gives testimony, and sponsors public and educational programs.

The International Freedom to Publish Committee monitors the general status of freedom to publish in foreign countries, discusses problems with our and other governments, and issues recommendations.

Committee to Protect Journalists

36 West 44 Street, Room 911
New York, New York 10036
(212) 944-7216

Gathers and distributes data about arrested, killed or imprisoned journalists around the world. Publishes a newsletter, alerts media in U.S. and abroad, pressures governments to release jailed journalists, and runs seminars and forums on these issues. Between January 1981 and April 1984, a total of 324 journalists were killed, detained or jailed, or simply disappeared.

Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce

Box 135
660 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, New York 10025
(212) 807-5586

A newly organized group primarily interested in fighting the anti-pornography ordinances now being introduced into many state legislatures.

Fund for Free Expression

36 West 44 Street
New York, New York 10036
(212) 840-9483

Their bi-monthly magazine, *Index on Censorship*, which was founded by Stephen Spender, covers international censorship issues. Subscriptions available for \$25/year.

Media Coalition

425 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10022
(212) 687-2288
Michael Bamberger

A coalition of booksellers, publishers, and distributors. Activities include regular reports on censorship to members, filing amicus curiae briefs, and writing state legislatures. Also distributes a compilation of obscenity laws in the fifty states and a pamphlet with advice about defense against vigilante groups.

National Coalition Against Censorship

132 West 43 Street
New York, New York 10036
(212) 944-9899
Leigh Ann Katz, Executive Director

All roads lead to this organization, which provides advice, information, books, a newsletter, and links to every anti-censorship organization in the country.

National Committee of Teachers of English Committee Against Censorship

1111 Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(715) 346-2050

Lee Burrell, Chairperson

General help, advice, referrals and support.

PEN

Right to Read (domestic)
Freedom to Write (international)
568 Broadway
New York, New York 10012
(212) 334-1660

Harold Marcus, Right to Read
Philip Balla, Freedom to Write

Right to Read fights domestic book banning with a writers speakers bureau, an information clearinghouse, a videotape documentary on book censorship, and assists in litigation. Also issues a Right to Read newsletter.

Freedom to Write monitors threats to writers and writing around the world and acts to counter those threats with letters, demonstrations, press releases, and financial and legal assistance.

People for the American Way

1424 16th Street, NW
Suite 601
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 462-4777

Interested in all censorship issues, both in print and other media. Conducts mass education campaigns and citizen action programs, distributes films, documentaries, critiques, and citizen action guides. Monitors the New Right and conducts media campaigns against censorship. Assists in local organizing.

S.D.■