

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Banned Books Week: Celebrating the Freedom to Read

Joyce Huyett Turner · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2013

Image courtesy the Freedom to Read Foundation

As the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights of the US Constitution states: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press.

So, what part of “freedom of speech,” or “the press” is it that those who ban books do not understand? What are they afraid will happen if we read books they would ban? Whatever it is, this fear is greater than respect for the freedoms clearly outlined in the Constitution.

Recently, Banned Books Week (September 22-28) came and went without a lot of public attention. With the theme, *Celebrating the Freedom to Read*, the annual designated week is sponsored by an impressive number of associations who work to bring the issue to the forefront: the American Booksellers Association; American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression; the American Library Association; American Society of Journalists and Authors; Association of American Publishers; Comic Book Legal Defense Fund; the Freedom to Read Foundation; National Coalition Against Censorship; National Council of Teachers of English; National Association of College Stores; PEN American Center and Project Censored. It is endorsed by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress.

As a former high school English teacher who survived a book banning many years ago, the message of Banned Books Week – *Celebrating the Freedom to Read* – hits home for me. And across the country, librarians, teachers, booksellers, publishers, writers, editors, and readers were celebrating the freedom to read. If they weren't, they should have. It's a freedom we can't afford to take for granted. I know – I fought the good fight against a book banning in the rural farm community of Missouri where I taught high school English in a public school. When I learned recently that Banned Books Week was established around that same time, I had to share my story. Book banning is not something that happened only during the Dark Ages. Books are still under attack today. Over the past decade, The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom received over 5,099 challenges. Many more are unreported, as mine was, leaving me unsure about what to do.

The ALA provides an annual list of the top ten hit list of challenged books. Some may surprise you, such as this selection from 2012:

1. *Captain Underpants* (series), by Dav Pilkey.

Reasons: Offensive language, unsuited for age group

2. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie.

Reasons: Offensive language, racism, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group

3. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher.

Reasons: Drugs/alcohol/smoking, sexually explicit, suicide, unsuited for age group

4. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E. L. James.

Reasons: Offensive language, sexually explicit

5. *And Tango Makes Three*, by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson.

Reasons: Homosexuality, unsuited for age group

6. *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini.

Reasons: Homosexuality, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit

7. *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green.

Reasons: Offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group

8. *Scary Stories* (series), by Alvin Schwartz

Reasons: Unsuited for age group, violence

9. *The Glass Castle*, by Jeanette Walls

Reasons: Offensive language, sexually explicit

10. *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison

Reasons: Sexually explicit, religious viewpoint, violence

Of ALA's top five list of banned and challenged classics, I have read and loved each one:

1. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

2. *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger

3. *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck

4. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee

5. *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker

Just who decides what you can and can't read/teach? For some, it may be a school board, as in my experience. As a first year teacher (and my only year as a teacher) in rural Missouri, I was the entire high school English department, taught grades 9 through 12, and supervised the school newspaper. It was both demanding and rewarding in the first few months. That is, before I became a target.

My favorite class, International Novels for Seniors, consisted of nine girls. We formed a circle with our chairs and traveled the world together reading and discussing great works from *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck to *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Nobel Prize Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

And yes, *One Day in the Life* was the book that caused all the sound and fury, in the little hamlet of Orrick, Missouri. Alas, poor Orrick, where I found myself in the bizarre position of defending one of the most acclaimed writers of our time. I was also defending my right to teach and the girls right to read this great work of modern Russian fiction. I was advised by some to give up and turn in the novels, and not risk losing my job over "just a book."

But I would not give up. It was too ridiculous, too ironic, and too important a cause.

The protest against Solzhenitsyn was led by the father of one of my students. He also happened to be the minister of a local church. He objected to the profanity in the book, and objection led to obsession as he underlined every single "obscene" word in the text with a black felt-tip marker. "How else can you accurately describe life in Stalinist labor camp?" I asked the members of the school board, when given the chance to defend the author, the book, and myself.

No reply. Just stares. They must have thought it was a rhetorical question.

The story blazed across the front page of the Kansas City Star, whose editor took a keen interest in the outcome. For a brief period, the spotlight of public attention shone on this small farming community as we debated freedom versus censorship and great works of literature versus words deemed profane.

Friends rallied to my side, and with their help, I prepared packets for each board member to review, such praise of Solzhenitsyn as "A literary genius whose talent matches that of Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy..." I noted that the foreword of the book proclaims: "On the

whole *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* belongs with those works of literature which, once we have read them, create in us a deep desire to have our feeling of gratitude to the author shared by other readers too.”

The school board heard me out, as well as the strong protestations from the minister. The final decision merited an editorial in the *Kansas City Star*. I would be allowed to continue to teach the book to the other eight students, whose parents had shown no objection. However, for the girl singled out (I truly felt sorry for her, a good student, quiet, and soft spoken, who did not ask for all this attention), I would have to substitute an alternative book, one that would be acceptable to her parents, and suitable for the class. I chose one of my favorite novels for her to read, *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, about a young girl growing up in rural Nebraska.

Sadly, this was not the end of the story. A contemptible caveat was added. After that school year it was decided that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* would not live to see another day in that classroom. It would be removed from the curriculum and banned from the school. My victory was a hollow one. I had started the year full of enthusiasm, and optimism, eager to share my love of literature and creative writing with these students. My new goal was to press on, to survive the year without quitting. It was hard, but I did.

Surprisingly, I was asked to stay on and teach another year, which I firmly and politely declined. I moved to the West Coast and followed new career paths in journalism, then in public relations for nonprofit organizations – promoting good causes.

Today, I’m thankful for the most valuable lesson I learned – to fight for causes I believe in. Freedom to Read is such a cause. One that hits home for me; one we should all embrace.

It is my hope that somewhere – even in the heartland of America – students are discovering what this extraordinary novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* means to them. For me, it is a tribute to one individual’s will to prevail. *May One Day in the Life* live on for many days, years, and for generations to come.

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