

Cultural Daily

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The Personal Cost of “Ban That Book!”

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Thursday, August 11th, 2011

In Alabama, a state quickly surpassing Arizona in reactionary responses to anything (and anyone) deemed “Un-American,” state lawmaker Gerald Allen wants to [ban books](#). His main target is books (fiction and non-fiction) which represent gay or lesbian characters who portray homosexuality as normal. Allen reasons (and I use the term lightly) that if people – particularly young people – read a book in which the main character is a well-adjusted gay person then the reader will become gay. And this will inevitably lead to the end of heterosexuality, the end of marriage and usher in the demise of our country’s civilization and status as a world super power.

Two of the literary works on Sen. Allen’s list of to-be-banned books are Tennessee Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*, both of which have storylines about gay relationships.

But of course, gay characters in books and plays don’t turn straight people into gay people. Everyone who has ever read or seen *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *The Color Purple* did not suddenly desire a partner of the same sex. In addition, reading books by gay or lesbian authors doesn’t turn straight people into gay people.

I have more than passing interest in gay authors and characters. My favorite author is James Baldwin and many of his books contained gay characters. Baldwin himself was gay. And without Baldwin I would not exist.

James Baldwin is my father. OK, not literally. But it is because of him that my actual father returned to the United States, met my mother and had me. When I was a teenager my father gave me a copy of Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*. In the intervening years I have read and re-read this book many, many times. Baldwin’s letter to his nephew, “*My Dungeon Shook*,” remains one of the most poignant descriptions of the destructiveness of our American racial nightmare – to blacks and whites alike – and of the hope that we may yet reconcile. But what also keeps me coming back to my little paperback copy with the yellowing pages is the inscription written in my father’s hand at the front of the book:

“Dear Ulli: When I was a young soldier I read this book and ‘Notes of a Native Son.’ While the latter meant more – as a father I’ve now come to understand my dad and myself.”

I asked my father about this when he gave me the book and he told me the following: He had been in the Army in the early 1960s and was stationed in Germany. He had grown up during Jim Crow and had watched racism destroy his own father (who was an alcoholic jazz trumpeter and former

WWII soldier). He saw – and felt – how racism was working on himself; how segregation undermined all attempts at full humanity. He saw, in his father and his uncles, what could happen to black men who tried to insist on their full measure of citizenship, happiness, and peace. He also knew that in 1960s Germany, and Europe more generally, he might be able to be free of the worst of this.

And then he read Baldwin. He realized that he could not run from history and needed to be part of the tumultuous present. He wanted to be part of fashioning a better future and he could not do so from abroad. So he came home. Baldwin helped him understand himself, his father, the US condition. Baldwin helped him not hate those who oppressed him but to try to understand, to teach, to learn.

He moved to New York, became part of the Art Students League and devoted himself to his art. He also met a young woman who needed a painting tutor. She was a beautiful white woman from Spokane and soon the two had married and moved into a tiny apartment where their neighbor played Aretha Franklin's "Respect" over and over again. A few years later they moved to Rhode Island. He was hired in the Illustration Department at Rhode Island School of Design. And in a second floor apartment on Hope Street, I was conceived.

None of this would have happened without James Baldwin and for that, I owe him more than most. If Sen. Allen and others like him have their way, James Baldwin would be removed from reading lists, libraries and perhaps even bookstores. People like my father (people like me, people like you) would not have access to literary works that speak to them, that help them understand the world and their place in it and give them the courage to face the adversities in their lives with strength and hope for the future. Without access to all voices, we become silent prisoners of our fears instead of fearless actors in our personal – and national – narratives.

“For this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become.” – James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

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