



## Prologue

When I first brought up this theme—banned books and censorship—when I first brought that up, I was greeted with mixed reaction. While some were excited by the issue's potential controversy, others were hesitant. What was surprising was that many people wondered if I could find contemporary writers who had been banned. "This is America" someone said, "It's going to be tough finding writers who've been censored." Well, guess what? According to the 1996 Banned Books Resource Guide, 116 books were challenged or banned in United States school

districts, public libraries, universities and college classrooms from March 1995 through March 1996. Most recently, a study conducted by People for the American Way, an organization out of Washington, recorded 475 books challenged or banned during the last academic year. Among those books were some of the standard banned books: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In addition to the usual banned books, writers and books such as Isabel Allende and her *House of the Spirits*; Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; the anonymously written, *Go Ask Alice*; Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*; Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*; and three of Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison's books *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* were also banned or challenged. Critics, public libraries, religious leaders, parents, and school districts who ban and challenge books claim the subject matter in these books is "inappropriate," "objectionable," "most pornographic," and "personally offensive." Books were taken off the shelf because they dealt with racial themes or because they were "full of gross evil." Robert Cormier's book, *The Chocolate War* has been accused of being "repulsive" and "humanistic and destructive of religious and moral beliefs and of national spirit." *The Chocolate War* was removed from the Grosse Pointe (Michigan) School District library because it deals with "gangs, peer pressure, and learning to make your own decisions."

An article in the September fifth issue of *The Virginian-Pilot* ranked Virginia ninth in states banning public school materials or programs. There were 16 incidents last year. None of them occurred in South Hampton Roads.

And this is only the beginning. These books are the ones recorded, books that have been publicly challenged. What about books, writers and other material banned in private? Poet Denise Duhamel's book *The Woman with Two Vaginas*, was accepted for publication by Salmon Run Press, sent to press

and then abandoned at the printers. The printers claimed her work was misplaced, never actually got to press. Salmon Run Press had to find another printer and finally published the book in 1995. In another case, Anthony Vigil, a Chicano poet, educator and political activist, was hired to teach Chicano studies in the Denver Public School System. At first, the public schools were excited about having a “Chicano teacher” teaching “Chicano studies.” But when Vigil began speaking from that Chicano perspective where Cinco de Mayo is not a celebration at all, but a commemoration of colonialist genocide, administrators suddenly stopped inviting the man and his poetry into their schools. This issue is pertinent. Critics, educators, parents, writers and readers need to consider what all of this implies—inappropriate material? Objectionable? Repulsive? Personally offensive?

During this presidential election year, Democrats and Republicans debate: does it or does it not take a village to raise one child, to teach him or her history, ethics, and morals? Parents, educators, and other concerned adults are right to question what materials are appropriate, when that material is appropriate for students and how to deal with certain subject matter. But the questions are many. Who sets the standard and what is that village’s responsibility—to teach what to think, or to teach HOW to think? We wear the First Amendment like a t-shirt, cry foul where other countries misuse and abuse the human condition in the name of freedom, and yet when put to the test, no one really cares about freedom of speech—even here, especially here. Oh, maybe the First Amendment should read, “Freedom of my speech. If you speak my speak, then freedom of speech will be granted to you.” What is beautiful, what is brilliant, what is appropriate?

As late as 1993, Martin Luther’s translation of The Bible was challenged somewhere near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, because it “contains language and stories that are inappropriate for children of any age, including tales of incest and murder.” June Jordan’s *His Own Where*, a finalist for the National Book Award, is a story written from the perspective of an African American character which, not unlike Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* was written in Black English. During the early 1970s, the same year the book was nominated and a finalist for the National Book Award, African American parents in Baltimore united to ban the book for encouraging “their children to shirk the diligent mastery of standard English that college entrance exams and the job market required.” Say nothing of the historic and social importance of recording and preserving a culture’s way of talking. Say nothing of how such stories have tremendous potential to empower a people, a classroom, one child.

What is the point of reading? Are we to ask children, teenagers, parents and friends to read in order to think, to question and build the critical mind? Or do we read to brainwash one another—to indoctrinate one another with one teaching, one culture, one “standard” of life? Didn't someone already try that in Europe? How will that road bring us to freedom, to equality, and to the eradication of racism and discrimination?

In Matt Bower’s September fifth article for *The Virginian-Pilot*, Carole Shields, President of People for the American Way, asks, “Will we bequeath to our children the tools and information they need to address complex issues as they grow into adulthood? Or will our gift to them be ever-narrowing horizons of thought and speech?”

As a Filipino American woman, as a woman in America, I would much rather do away with negative stereotypes, with racist behavior, with discrimination. Many of the books such as Twain’s *Huckleberry*

Finn and even Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* are challenged and banned by minorities who fear such books encourage negative stereotypes. And yet I wonder if that problem can ever be fully dealt with unless we examine those stereotypes and attitudes in literature, in art, in conversation. Just this summer, my Women Writer's Seminar spent hours debating the political correctness of some of this festival's authors. In doing so, we examined issues of racism and gender. Discussion was often heated, personal, and "off track." But as I see it, the classroom is the perfect environment to confront notions of "rightness," to lay our vulnerabilities on the table and exchange them with one another to be politically incorrect, and have the heart to learn from it. If all we read has been purged of everything offensive, we not only arrest freedom of speech, we begin the slow and painful death of freedom to think. Then the First Amendment becomes—"Freedom to think as long as you think like I think. Speak as I would. Question nothing, especially authority." The whole thing sounds less and less like freedom and justice for all, and more like one life under Hitler, or Stalin, or Mussolini, Or Limbaugh . . . Doesn't it?

In our culture, thinking critically is a tough task—what with people running into cineplex theaters to "escape" or "get lost" or "stop thinking" while movies like *The Rock* and *Dusk Till Dawn* explode before them. What with the obedient consumption of what some invisible other deems "appropriate" or "safe" or "moral," thinking has become an activity saved for "brainiacs" and "geeks" and "academics." In fact, reading actively and critically has lost so much of its importance outside of English departments and liberal arts colleges, there are actually universities where administrators consider eliminating freshman literature. A student could graduate from college without ever reading Flannery O'Connor, Richard Wright, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Geoffrey Chaucer (whose *Canterbury Tales* was banned in 1995 by Eureka (Illinois) High School for its "sexual content.")

To be honest, gathering a body of writers whose works are dangerous, are banned or censored for their critical thought, for their "explicit" rendering of the world as they see it, for injustice as they have experienced it, was an easy task. Perhaps what was difficult was narrowing down the list.

The goal in choosing this controversial theme is to continue the exploration of voice and the human condition. What is censorship? What part does it play in our American dialogue where freedom of speech is supposed to be a given? How is censorship shaping the way we communicate to one another in literary, professional and personal correspondence? How does it change the way we conduct our world? For writers June Jordan, Anthony Vigil and Jessica Hagedorn, politics and the fight against racism battle censorship's clever hand. For others, like Tony Kushner and Achy Obejas the fear of AIDS and mainstream America's intolerance for the gay and lesbian community activate censorship's protest against their work. Brian Evenson, a fiction writer and professor of creative writing and literary theory, has been asked to stop writing fiction or risk excommunication from the Mormon Church. Denise Duhamel writes of woman and her body, of the way society has objectified the body through the popular Barbie Doll, and has been banned in both Canada and parts of America. Poet Eleanor Wilner slips through the pages of history and tradition, re-sees some of our most remembered wars, political events and myths, blurs the lines and redraws them; imagines that world with new eyes, subversive eyes. She dares to question. Ben Marcus' fiction is exciting because it is not traditional in form and content, does not follow some edict from a higher moral conscience of literary right and wrong.

While the issue of censorship in itself is compelling, “Forbidden Passage” looks at the material within these works. How has the civil rights movement in America survived under the quiet and intimidating rule of censorship? What actually happened on Cinco de Mayo? Why are people debating over Jessica Hagedorn’s portrayal of Filipino culture in her novel Dogeaters? Are Filipinos ashamed of this faction of their culture, are they in denial, or is Hagedorn painting a warped portrait of the Filipino as “Dogeater?” Are Tony Kushner and Achy Obejas telling the same story? Are Brian Evenson’s stories so powerful and threatening, he alone can instigate the demise of the Mormon Church? Really? Does it matter that his fiction has virtually nothing to do with the Mormon Church? This body of writers, diverse, outspoken and internationally recognized promises to charge “Forbidden Passage” with literature we might otherwise never have a chance to hear.

It is an honor and a privilege to present you with these distinguished writers. We hope to challenge you. We hope to ignite a fire under you. The right to write, to read, to speak what differs is not only an endangered act in third world countries, in communist blocks, in socialist regimes, it is a right, fighting for its life here, among us. In other parts of the world where censorship is public and outright, people can see what they are fighting for. Here, in our land of opportunity, equality, and freedom to consume, to escape and to shed social and political responsibility, censorship creeps into our lives like an invisible vapor, strangles us little by little. In naming the forbidden passage, censorship threatens to take away what might be the most important freedom of all, the freedom to think for ourselves.

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