



RIGHT TO READ

James **Blasingame** and

E. Sybil **Durand**



“The Books That Will Never Be Read”

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“It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written, the books that will never be read” (Judy Blume, n.d.).

The theme of this issue of *The ALAN Review*, “Beyond Borders: Partnering within and across Schools and Communities,” has special significance for our Right to Read column, since its name and focus represent a right that is challenged on a regular basis in classrooms and school libraries across the United States. In a multicultural society, classrooms are often sites where the curriculum and the values of multiple communities collide. The borders between these communities—whether cultural or political—can be at once so muddled and so viciously guarded as to make censorship a confusing and divisive issue. At its worst, censorship has the potential to silence diverse voices in a curriculum that still struggles to adequately represent and address the needs of a diverse student population. And yet, people from diverse political perspectives have the capacity to come together and reach consensus on an issue as polarizing as what books we should make available to our children. In this issue’s column, we attempt to answer two questions: 1) How do books come to be challenged in the first place? and 2) How can unjustified book challenges be overcome?

To answer these questions, we have asked for help from authors, attorneys, and local community members. YA authors Laurie Halse Anderson, Jack Gantos, Lauren Myracle, Chris Crutcher, Bill Konigsberg, and Matt de la Peña share their thoughts on the impact of banned books and the motivations for challenging them. We also take a look at curricular battles waged in politically torn school districts and at how school board members and the administration in one district have prevailed in defending First Amendment rights in the face of substantial pressure to remove books from the classroom.

What Is at Stake?

Some attacks on books are hard to take seriously, even when they may suggest the motivation behind the negative response. As an example, Jack Gantos explained to us:

Ralph, the feline protagonist of the Rotten Ralph picture-books [1976–2011], has been accused of being the devil in disguise. One elementary principal banned it from being read—while I was reading it to a library full of students. She stood in front of the students and bellowed, “Ralph is the devil!” and marched out. That was an awkward moment—but more psychotic than sensible. I mean, a cat can be “devilish” but it cannot be “the devil.” (J. Gantos, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

At first glance, it seems rather comical: a pesky cartoon cat named Ralph, Jack Gantos reading to kids in the library, an enraged elementary school principal screaming about the devil incarnate. It almost sounds like something that would happen in a Joey Pigza book (1998–2014), a series that Jack told us is seldom

challenged. Jack acknowledges that although *Desire Lines* (1997) and *The Love Curse of the Rumbaughs* (2006) have been successful books, they are seldom used in classrooms, probably due to their content: same sex romance, the American eugenics movement, and murder/suicide. Neither an imaginary cat nor a 12-year-old with ADHD, however, seems to be seriously threatening to the majority of censors.

What do seem threatening, however, are books with sexual content and books that challenge an unquestioning version of US history and current status quo. While most can understand adults' desires to introduce sensitive topics at an appropriate time for children, the stakes are particularly high when an individual successfully challenges a book selected or recommended by a teacher or librarian. In her 2006 article, "The Voices of Power and the Power of Voices," titled in homage to Elsa Auerbach's (1999) presentation about privileged and unprivileged voices, Dr. Marlinda White-Kaulaity tells us that "when certain voices are excluded, students never hear and experience the 'power of voices.'" Such young readers are denied "one purpose of literature: to read and learn about themselves and others" (p. 8). The law against Ethnic Studies in Arizona's K-12 schools (HB2281) is an example of attempts to remove one particular voice that seemed threatening to the dominant group.

In the famous, if not decisive, censorship case, *Board of Education vs. Pico* (1982), a school board sought to remove *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1991), *The Best Short Stories of Negro Writers* (Hughes, 1967), *Soul on Ice* (Cleaver, 1991), *The Fixer* (Malamud, 1966), and *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 1971) from the school's curriculum. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun held that "school officials may not remove books from school libraries for the purpose of restricting access to the political ideas or social perspectives discussed in the books, when that action is motivated simply by the officials' disapproval of the ideas involved" (Introduction, Section 2, para. 2). And of course, the landmark case of *Tinker vs. Des Moines* in 1969 found that neither "students [n]or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate," including the right to access books they chose to read (Section I, para. 1).

In the following sections, however, we discuss

several instances where adults, in their attempts to shield young people from content that clashes with their own personal or political values, silenced voices and perspectives that have been traditionally marginalized in the curriculum.

Mexican American Studies

The Arizona legislature's law HB2281, most often called the Anti-Ethnic Studies Law, was passed by the Arizona House and Senate and signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer in 2010. It outlawed K-12 curriculum that met a four-pronged test, which included two of the following criteria: the curriculum must not be "designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group" or "advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals" (Arizona State Legislature, 2010, p. 1). It has been suggested that this legislation was the result of political conflict between Arizona Superintendent of Schools Tom Horne and high school students and teachers in Tucson concerning a school visit from Mexican American Civil Rights leader Dolores Huerta. Huerta, cofounder of the National Farm Workers Association with César Chávez and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights, was invited to speak to students in an assembly at Tucson High School. At a time when four state ballot initiatives and a federal immigration reform bill targeted immigrants, anti-immigrant protests were common across the country. Huerta "was asking [students] to look at the legislation and challenging them to start a campaign to address why 'Republicans hate Latinos'" (Herrera, 2013). Horne, who would become Attorney General, sent Deputy Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dugan, a Republican of Mexican heritage, to provide students with an opposing viewpoint, but she received a hostile response from students. The struggle for control that followed seems more political than educational, but perhaps the two are inseparable.

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From an educational standpoint, the Mexican American Studies program was experiencing tangible success reified by empirical data. The program was originally implemented after a 1970s federal court

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order over desegregation. Data were collected and statistical tests applied for the 26,022 Latino/a students from the graduating classes of 2008, 2009, and 2010. Statistically significant differences were found in two categories between those who took the Mexican American Studies classes and their peers who did not: 1) passing rates on the high-stakes Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, and 2) successful rates of graduation

(Hawley, Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012).

So why did Superintendent of Arizona Schools Tom Horne and his predecessor, Jon Hupenthal, insist on banning the classes and the books in the curriculum, despite the findings of an independent evaluator hired by the state in 2010? Hupenthal claimed that when the classroom doors closed, teachers were fomenting racial hatred:

Do you cover those injustices in a way in which we say these are profound things that we should be aware of and we have to work in this country to make this country a better place? Or do you use those injustices to create racial division, and do you use those injustices to create hatred? (qtd. in Robbins, 2013)

Taking landmark books away from kids, books that help them to make sense of their place in the world, hardly seems a means “to make this country a better place.” In fact, it would seem to confirm that these “injustices” are systemic and ongoing. According to Appeals Attorney Anjana Malhotra, the curriculum was designed to right a wrong, and the ban on it was more of the original injustice and probably unconstitutional:

Indeed, the curriculum was developed to redress decades of discrimination against Latino students and was successful because it was based on a pedagogy that promotes equality. . . . The question here is more fundamental: whether the US Constitution allows the state of Arizona to enact a

broad, subjective, and sweeping law giving state educational officials unlimited power, and then enforce it only to target and suppress an entire educational curriculum for Mexican American students. (Seattle University School of Law, 2013)

As Augustine F. Romero, former director of Tucson’s Multicultural Curriculum Unit, now Principal at Pueblo Magnet High School, explained for the *New York Times*: “All our forefathers have contributed to this country, not just one set of forefathers. . . . We respect and admire and appreciate the traditional forefathers, but there are others” (Lacey, 2011, p. A1).

Some of the classes were reinstated to the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) course offerings in 2013, along with new classes in African American culture and history offered in response to an ongoing federal desegregation case from decades ago. However, Horne’s predecessor, Jon Hupenthal, took one parting shot at the classes before he was voted out of office in 2014, declaring them in violation of HB2281. Arizona’s new Superintendent of Schools, Diane Douglas, countermanded his order, saying that the schools would not lose their funding and that the classes, while in need of some revising, were not illegal.

Among the books now in boxes in a TUSD warehouse is Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy* (2008), the story of a bicultural, biracial teen in San Diego who is trying to navigate multiple cultures. The book is based on the author’s life experience and has won numerous awards from the American Library Association, the Junior Library Guild, the Texas TAYSHAS, and the Center for Children’s Books. We asked Matt to share his thoughts on the impact of removing that book from the curriculum:

I was fortunate enough to be able to visit Tucson High School just after *Mexican WhiteBoy* was pulled from the curriculum. Students were actually reading the novel in one classroom when representatives from the school board barged into the room, literally took the books out of kids’ hands, and took them to the basement in boxes. What a brutal metaphor. These kids were not only stripped of a program they took ownership of, that they were thriving in; they were also taught that books written by authors that looked like them were no longer fit to teach. Not exactly a great message. I expected to find these kids beaten down when I arrived on campus, and some were, but the majority of them were fighting the loss of their program and their books and their teachers. I spoke to a generation of emerging activists that day. (M. de la Peña, personal communication, April 6, 2015)

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Sexual Content and Sexuality

Young adult books with sexual content are often challenged for exploring topics that seemingly exceed the maturity of intended readers. In a 2014 article in *The Federalist* web magazine, Mark Hemingway, senior writer for *The Weekly Standard* whose conservative opinions have also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and on Fox News, takes a few potshots at Lauren Myracle (author of *ttyl*, 2004; *tfn*, 2006; *l8r, g8r*, 2007; *Shine*, 2011; and more). Hemingway (2014) begins by deriding the format of her novels, given their use of email/text shorthand, a language he is quite certain will not be around for long: “Text speak might be yet another classic example of a faddish teenage behavior that adults erroneously believe is more prevalent than it is” (Hemingway, 2014). If Hemingway truly believes that “text speak” is a fad, then all we can do is LOL! Although he admits that *Kirkus Reviews* called these titles “perfectly contemporary,” and *Teen Magazine* said they would “chang[e] the way you read” (as cited on the book jackets), he continued to degrade Myracle’s writing as “subliterate.”

Hemingway’s most potent accusation is that Myracle’s books have content from which young readers should be steered clear; by that, of course, he means sex. Banning “dirty books” provides an easy rallying point for community; these charges are often lumped in with other approved “bad guys,” such as socialism, political correctness, and gender equity. One of Hemingway’s biggest complaints about the sexual content in Myracle’s 2004 *ttyl* (*Talk to You Later*) is that the characters have a critical email conversation about a “lecherous Christian teacher” who is always staring at their chests—and not to read the slogans on their shirts. Obviously, such behavior by male authority figures can be terribly disconcerting to young women. Myracle’s conversation among friends about this topic may very well alleviate emotional and psychological tension for the title’s readers.

Is it likely that a parent would take up this subject with a child? Is it likely that a child would express distress to a parent? Probably not. We asked Laurie

Halse Anderson, whose books often include sexual forewarnings for young people who may be socially naïve and unarmed until reading *Speak* (1999) or *Twisted* (2008), about the dynamics of censoring this sort of material:

The parents who try to ban books are afraid; they don’t know how to talk to their children about things like sex and violence. I have some compassion for the parents and nothing but contempt for the politicians. The politicians who try to ban books are the worst sort of Americans; evil-minded, craven cynics who manipulate the fears of parents in order to further their own political agenda. (L. Anderson, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

And let’s not forget archconservative talk show hosts and rightwing news pundits.

We asked Lauren Myracle to share her thoughts on withholding books from young readers, the impact of such a choice, and the repercussions of losing a book from the universe of young adult reading. She told us that “sometimes a single book can change a kid’s life. Sometimes a book can save a life. If that book isn’t on the shelf, what happens to the kid who needs it most?” (L. Myracle, personal communication, April 4, 2015).

And this brings us back to Judy Blume’s concern “for the books that will never be read” and why some parents might listen to those who want books with mature content removed from the curriculum.

Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children’s lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don’t read about it, their children won’t know about it. And if they don’t know about it, it won’t happen. (Blume, n.d.)

Banning “dirty books” provides an easy rallying point, a sort of comfortable community for folks who are not sure how to talk about these things with their children—and prefer that no one else do it either. Difficult topics can include LGBTQ content. We asked Lambda Award winner Bill Konigsberg (*Out of the Pocket*,

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2008; *Openly Straight*, 2013; *The Porcupine of Truth*, 2015) about his experience with censorship:

I think the only reason anyone would censor my books would be for LGBTQ content. There are still people who wish to keep their heads in the sand and believe that gay and lesbian people don't exist, but that number is getting smaller all the time. It's a good thing that the one attempt to censor *Openly Straight* in Texas failed. The school board saw through the blatant homophobia of that attempt. I say it's a good thing because censoring books that allow teens to see reflections of themselves is evil. It sends the

message to those kids that what they are is bad, and that their stories don't matter. (B. Konigsberg, personal communication, April 4, 2015)

Doesn't everyone's story matter, and matter equally? And why are some voices and some versions of history threatening?

Perhaps Oscar Wilde (2003) was correct in say-

ing that "what the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its shame" (p. 208).

We underestimate our young people when we decide for them that they are not ready to make adult meaning of their lives.

School and Community against Censorship

When *Beloved* (Morrison, 2000) and *The Bean Trees* (Kingsolver, 1988) were recently under attack in Gilbert, Arizona, teachers, school board members, professors at two universities, and the Gilbert Superintendent collaborated to fight the challenge. Although the two books had been in the curriculum for decades, school board members reported up to 200 recent emails claiming that *Beloved* is not only "pornographic" but also "glorifies death as a form of entertainment" (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015). School board member Jill Humphreys took it upon herself not only to read both books but also to seek informed opinions, visiting with professors at both Brigham Young University and Arizona State University. She arrived at the January 27, 2015, school board meeting ready to share her findings. According to Humphreys:

Our goal here is to graduate students who are critical thinkers, who can grapple with problems, can think about what is right and wrong, and be empathetic with other people. The study of literature is an important component of being

able to do that. . . . If a board member or parent wants to remove a book from the reading list, we cannot do this as a top-down decision and just remove it; we must have a committee devote the necessary study and discussion of the book and bring a recommendation to the board for further discussion. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

Humphreys continued by citing the 1977 US Circuit Court of Appeals case of *Minarcini v. Strongsville, Ohio* (1976), in which a school board would not allow a teacher to continue teaching *Catch 22* (Heller, 1955) or *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (Vonnegut, 1965). According to the court, "Once a book is in, it may not be withdrawn by subsequent school boards or the library will fail to be a storehouse of knowledge and be winnowed down over time." Humphreys also quoted from an email she received from Arizona State University Professor of English Education James Blasingame in which he provided a summary of the law in regard to book censoring in public schools: "The federal government has given power over the educational program to the states, and they have given it to elected local school boards. Parents have power over what their own children read in school, but no one has the right to decide what someone else's children may read. That is a violation of the First Amendment" (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015).

Humphreys also read from an email to her from Brigham Young University Associate Professor of English Susan Howe, who gave a rationale for using *Beloved* in the classroom:

This story never justifies evil or presents any evil action as being exciting, titillating, or desirable. One of the purposes of literature is to help readers comprehend the conditions of the world so that they will be prepared to combat evil when they encounter it and that purpose is Toni Morrison's in this novel. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

Humphrey's final words to the board were as follows:

I think we need to trust our educators and our students that they will be able to handle these complex and complicated readings that help them to form ethical and moral decisions in their own lives. By experiencing these dilemmas vicariously, they can have a better chance of thinking through what they would do as that character or how they would respond in that situation. (Gilbert Public Schools, 2015)

The Gilbert Public School Board voted 5-0 to retain the current high school reading list, which included *Beloved* and *The Bean Trees*. Superintendent of Schools Dr. Christina M. Kishimoto added to the mo-

tion that in an effort to help parents make curricular decisions for their children, the district curriculum team of teachers would provide a resource that would make available to the public information about all the books on the approved reading list, including potentially objectionable content, the educational value in using each book, and the themes and topics the books were used to teach.

Beloved (Morrison, 2000) has very mature content, but it takes that content to make the author's point in ways that can only be accomplished through what Dr. White-Kaulaity (2006) calls "the power of literature" (p. 8). We underestimate our young people when we decide for them that they are not ready to make adult meaning of their lives. When asked why he never balks at including the gritty aspects of life in his novels, Sherman Alexie said, "Kids have complicated and emotional lives," and disallowing literature that reflects this is a failure "to take kids seriously. It's condescension. Kids respond well when they are taken seriously" (as cited in Blasingame, 2008, p. 74).

We close with an email from Chris Crutcher, from whom we asked for advice for educators faced with censorship issues:

The advice I have is for teachers and administrators. If I'm an English teacher with the funds of knowledge about young adult literature that I would have coming out of, say, a program like Alan Brown's or Joan Kaywell's or any of the big ALAN stalwarts, I'm going to know a lot about reading level and content and intensity of interest. Added years of experience in the field of education will increase that expertise geometrically. At the beginning of every year, I'd get all my like-minded colleagues together and meet with any and all administrators and extract from them a commitment to support my expertise as an education professional. (C. Crutcher, personal communication, April 5, 2015)

James Blasingame is a professor of English Education at Arizona State University (ASU). He is a past president of the NCTE's Assembly on Literature for Adolescents and a past coeditor of *The ALAN Review*. He is coauthor of the English Journal annual Honor List and editor of the *Print-Based Texts* pages of the International Reading Association's Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. He is a winner of the International Reading Association's Arbutnot Award, the ASU Parents Association Professor of the Year Award, and the Arizona English Teachers' Association Lifetime Contribution Award.

E. Sybil Durand is an assistant professor of English at

Arizona State University where she teaches courses in young adult literature and methods of teaching English. Her scholarship is grounded in postcolonial and curriculum theories, which situate literature and education at the intersections of sociocultural, historical, political, and national contexts. Her research focuses on young adult literature in general and postcolonial young adult literature in particular.

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