

Ravena Arun

Ms. Small

Humanities

10/10/2024

Reading Into Book Bans

I first encountered Maya Angelou's 1969 autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* in seventh grade. I was immediately captivated and found the novel both heartbreaking and beautifully poetic. I immediately declared it my favorite book. I was shocked when just a few days later I encountered the title again, this time, on the American Librarian Association (ALA)'s "Top 10 Most Banned Books" lists for 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2007 ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books and Frequently Challenged Books Archive"). Book bans have long been a controversial issue, but recent vague state legislature has pressured the removal of over 1,550 book titles across US public school libraries and classrooms in just one year, reported the ALA. Some believe that these book bans are essential to protecting middle school students from age-inappropriate content. Others, however, believe that book bans are an undemocratic act of censorship that inhibit learning. Although parents have a right to be concerned over the content their middle schooler is exposed to, this is often taken too far at the expense of books that offer representation and teach students empathy.

Several well-meaning community members uphold pro-book banning views because they believe complex social issues, such as racial discrimination and homophobia, are too inappropriate for middle school classrooms, but this is unfair to authors and students. Moms for Liberty, an extremist political organization, expressed their opposition of books that discuss

gender and sexuality and critical race theory by publishing a 111-page “BOOK of BOOKS” document. This online resource for parents categorizes “problematic” novels into five content-based levels. Among this list is *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas’s 2017 novel that describes the protagonist’s struggle to find her voice after witnessing her friend being subject to fatal police brutality. *The Hate U Give* is rated a Level 3 novel for inappropriate content, stating that “under 18 requires guidance of [a] parent or guardian” (Moms for Liberty 3). Their concerns listed for *The Hate U Give* include “inflammatory racial commentary; frequent profanity; and inexplicit sexual activities” (Moms for Liberty 71). Among their list of problematic quotes was, “‘You mean y’all wanna justify what that pig did,’ Daddy says. ‘Investigate my a**.’ [...] ‘A sixteen-year-old black boy is dead because a white cop killed him. What else could it be?’” (ctd. In Moms for Liberty 51). Police brutality has been a recent, sensitive topic of discussion that students should be aware of but is often avoided out of fear of making white students feel guilty or spreading “anti-police propaganda”. Moms for Liberty has stated that they are against barring access to books and instead are solely attempting to shield their children from inappropriate content. However, book bans not only censor information from students, worse, they also censor stories. Banning books sends the wrong message to middle school students and authors that some people’s stories are “too inappropriate” or “too raw and vulgar” to be shared. Everyone deserves to see themselves and the real problems they face every day represented and shared in a classroom setting. This was reiterated in an X-post by author Angie Thomas: “[Black kids] deserve to have their stories told whether it makes you comfortable or not” (Thomas). Authors deserve to share their stories and students of all races deserve to be well-represented and have access to books with protagonists that they can relate to. It is deeply saddening that despite immense progress in the addition of books from more diverse authors, there are still attempts

made to limit student access to these books. Thus, concern over classroom content is justified, but banning books that provide middle schoolers with representation is not.

Although some believe that it is not the school's place to teach "sex ed", and especially not gender and sexuality, these topics are introduced thoughtfully and with the intention of educating middle schoolers. Frustrated parents have flooded school board meetings calling for the removal of any books containing sexually explicit content, violence, death, or racial discrimination and making gross accusations about any librarians or staff members facilitating this. One college student from Dordt University argues that parents should be the ones to "control when their kids are exposed to hard subjects like 'the sex talk,' not schools" (Hofmeyer) and that schools are "overstepping their bounds when they expose kids to this sexual material" (Hofmeyer). Additionally, supporters of book bans often argue that book banning is a debate on politics and the level of control public schools should have over student exposure to various topics, but the debate on book bans should not be a political one. Books are used as tools to teach, not indoctrinate, students. Librarians are hired to create "well-rounded collections that represent a range of viewpoints, especially on contentious topics" (Harris & Alter) and they often use "award lists, reviews and other publications to inform their choices" (Harris & Alter). The novels selected by librarians are not chosen lightly. They are placed in libraries because they were deemed quality pieces of literature that well-represented a population of the student body and a resource that middle school students could learn from. Middle school is a critical stage of life when habits begin to solidify, and social skills and emotional intelligence start to become permanent. Novels that describe the lives of characters with diverse adversities erode ignorance and build empathy in students. Reading fiction allows them to live thousands of lives, experience the protagonist's joy and pain, and observe cultural differences: "Empathy is a profound act of

imagination and human connection. In fiction, we imagine ourselves into other people's experiences. Of course, another word for that is 'reading'" (Patrick). Reading diverse novels not only provides students with representation, but it also teaches middle schoolers empathy and the dangers of ignorance. Thus, the decision to read a book in an academic setting is one that is completed thoughtfully by professionals with the intention of educating students. Book bans only serve to undermine this effort.

Despite the discomfort that certain literature may cause, book bans are not the solution because they are unfair to students and authors and do not consider that books are purposefully chosen to foster student empathy and provide representation. Although the controversial topic of book bans is often reduced to angry "woke folk" fighting for the freedom of speech, this is a pressing issue that reflects the priorities of our nation. Parent concern is understandable, but it is not sufficient justification to ban novels that have provided imperative lessons to past generations of middle schoolers. In my formative years, books, such as *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, were an empathy lesson disguised as a source of comfort and joy. Book bans must be fought against to provide future students with the same access to these crucial lessons that shaped us.

Works Cited

Harris, Elizabeth A., and Alexandra Alter. "With Rising Book Bans, Librarians Have Come Under Attack." *The New York Times*, 6 July

2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/07/06/books/book-ban-librarians.html.

Hofmeyer, Jonah. "I'm Pro Book Banning. Here's Why." *The Diamond*, 6 Jan.

2024, dordtdiamond.com/2024/01/06/im-pro-book-banning-heres-why.

Moms for Liberty. *BOOK of BOOKs*.

drive.google.com/file/d/1BNfax73kzqWwMMfkjcopgEXMDBD-fr4O/view.

Patrick, Bethanne. "Sunil Yapa: "Empathy Is a Radical Act."" *Literary Hub*, 27 Jan. 2016,

lithub.com/sunil-yapa-empathy-is-a-radical-act/.

Thomas, Angie. "X.Com." *X*, 7 Jan. 2022,

x.com/angiecthomas/status/1479501223241949184?lang=en.

"Top 10 Most Challenged Books and Frequently Challenged Books Archive." *Www.ala.org*, 26

Mar. 2013, www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive.