

Believe in What You Teach, Down to the Comma

WHAT MY EXPERIENCE WITH CENSORSHIP TAUGHT ME ABOUT TRUST,
FREEDOM AND STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE

BY KIMBERLY HORNE

Toward the end of the 2004–2005 school year, I received a call from my Head of School who informed me that some parents had complained to her about a portion of my English 12 curriculum. She suggested that I might hear from these parents, but she wanted to reassure me that she was attempting to handle it herself. This fairly unexciting phone call ushered in what was for me and the school an extremely difficult time filled with anxiety, frustration, and pain. Neither I nor the school was prepared for the grueling and emotional battle which followed. Fortunately, we survived and, I believe, we are stronger for it.

The original complaint involved my use of Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain." At the time of the complaint, I had taught this story for 5 years in conjunction with Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*. Understanding the mature nature of both pieces of writing, I counseled my students before each reading assignment to read with care and sensitivity. I alerted them to the graphic nature of some of the scenes, and I also assured them that I would not quiz them over the story. Over the years I found it to be a powerful way to continue our discussion of language as it pertains to social constructs in the world of Hellman's play, in our contemporary world, and in the smaller world of St. Andrew's.

While some students tended to struggle with the material, my overall estimation of the use of the story in my curriculum was that it was a crucial cog in the greater wheel of the thematic continuum of my class which usually began with the summer reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Of course, if I had ever received consistent and fervent complaints about the story (especially from my students), I would have seriously reconsidered. Instead, I was convinced that, coming as it did at the end of the school year, its use helped prepare my students to face difficult conversations that they would certainly

encounter in college, and solidified a feeling of mutual respect between a teacher and her students.

Interestingly enough, the complaint came from parents who were not parents of seniors; in fact, these parents did not have students in the Upper School, but they had made a 3 million dollar pledge for new construction on the Upper School campus, which had already begun. In further conversation, this family threatened to pull their pledge if the story was not removed from the curriculum. During the summer, Lucy Nazro, the Head of School, and I met to talk not only about the story's place in my curriculum but also the consequences of letting parents dictate any part of any teacher's curriculum. Never at any point did I doubt Lucy's support or her understanding of the position she had been put in. Agree to the demands and establish a horrible precedent and potentially lose the trust of the faculty. Keep the story and lose the 3 million dollars and perhaps offend other families. After more meetings and conversations, Lucy, with the support of the Board of Trustees, kept the story in the curriculum, thereby rejecting the pledged donation. The Upper School blessed the new building in September of 2005, calling it Building 12.

At the end of that same month, however, much to Lucy's chagrin and my ambivalence (I believed this kind of public attention would inevitably come to the school), the *Austin American-Statesman* published a front page story about the controversy. Because the article was, I think, unbiased and fair, we braced ourselves for the worst. What neither of us could have predicted was the overwhelmingly positive response we received instead, namely about Lucy's decision *not* to change the curriculum. At this point, the family, as promised, had pulled their donation, but by December, St. Andrew's had replaced the lost money through large and small donations. Lucy, the Board, and I received letters and emails from local supporters and, as the story spread

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through different channels, from people as far away as Buffalo, NY, Canada and Australia. Even so, a rift now existed between the majority of the families at the school and a smaller number of people who continued to agree with the original complaints. Then, just as things began to quiet down, I had a run in with another family about another text in my curriculum, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

I began teaching Roy's book as one of a few optional texts for a postcolonial project. Students would read a book and then write an analytical paper that explored the book's postcolonial aspects. Due to students' positive responses to Roy's book in particular and to our department's gradual attempts to further include non-Western works, I then replaced Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a book I adore, with *The God of Small Things* which had won the Booker Prize in 1997 and dovetailed nicely with the thematics already in place in senior English. For two years running, it was a class favorite, despite its difficult subject matter and a few graphic scenes, one which depicted a young boy being molested in the lobby of a movie theater by an older man, an event that serves to destroy his childhood and realistically continues to haunt him into his adult life. Like "Brokeback Mountain," Roy's text brought a taboo topic out of the dark recesses where, culturally, we like to stow these things. Both texts, while difficult, are written in lyrical prose about characters who are overwhelmed and overlooked by the world they live in. Despite the vast differences between the characters and their private school readers, my students had responded almost unanimously in favor of the book. The realistic and graphic nature of some of the descriptions forced us all to question the author's intentions and her success or lack thereof in getting her point across. After these discussions, I knew that my students were benefiting from watching each other critically approach a text and its author in order to



discern literary merit.

In the fall of 2005, one student and her family disagreed with the "filth" I was teaching which resulted in that student refusing to come to class, a bitter confrontation between me and the family, and numerous meetings between me and the administration and the family and the administration. Once again, I felt wrongly accused and deeply misunderstood. My intentions as a teacher were seen by a select few as furthering some sort of private agenda. As a popular teacher who had spoken at graduation and had friendly relationships with my students, I was even seen as taking advantage of that position in order to in some way brainwash my unsuspecting students.

The family in question came to see themselves as brave standard bearers in an all out war against a school that had so radically misrepresented its Christian mission. At the height of the controversy, the family sent out a 13-page letter detailing its interactions with the school to every family just as contracts for the next school year

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were coming due. Eventually, the senior graduated and a feature article appeared in *Texas Monthly* the following Fall, a year to the month after the original *Statesman* article.

Remarkably, the waters calmed as the new school year began. Some families had left the school while a few had enrolled their children in support of the school's position. I continued to teach *The God of Small Things* but cut "Brokeback Mountain" and *The Children's Hour* after witnessing an underwhelming discussion in the spring that was more about my students trying to exhibit their utter lack of prejudice than about an honest discussion of difficult topics. I appreciated their efforts (and recognized it as their way of showing their support) but mourned what I knew was the end of my teaching of the story. Even as there were losses, there were gains. The humanities department as a whole felt fairly battered and buffeted, but we were also even more committed to what we do.

The eleventh grade began teaching Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a way to expand its American Studies curriculum, and teachers became more deliberate about explaining up front why they teach what they teach. Now, for every potentially controversial text or movie or cultural artifact we teach, we write a statement in defense, explaining the merits and procedures of its use. If there is a parent complaint, we can address it right away. We also became more deliberate about advertising what we do as a way to celebrate what we teach, holding brown bag lunches for parents and laying out any and all materials at Back to School Night. At our last brown bag

luncheon for parents, the main concern was AP exams, not curricular quality. We knew then that the worst was really over.

As for my personal experience, I learned in real time that you have to believe in what you teach down to the last comma; every bit of text you ask a student to read has to have sound pedagogical reasoning behind it. Luckily, I had thought carefully about the materials I had chosen and had followed the proper channels to get their approval. Luckily, the administration of the school wholeheartedly supported my professional ability to make the right choices for my students. Because teaching well is so hard to do, I have felt ever since I entered the field that it is the greatest vehicle for self-doubt. During the worst of it, late at night, sleep-deprived yet unable to sleep, I would let myself begin to be convinced that I had somehow done something wrong. In sympathizing with the families who adamantly disagreed with me, I tried to see my choices in the light by which they had cast them. Every time I let myself go down this path, however, I could honestly say to myself at the end of it that I passionately believed in my careful choices of texts, my intentions behind my use of them and the powerful ways that I seen students grow from reading and discussing them. Defending myself and the moral worth of these books was not a fight I chose, but I never doubted it was a fight worth fighting. At every step of my career at St. Andrew's, I have been trusted to be the professional that I am. I have been given the freedom to make choices about my curriculum, knowing that it's incumbent upon me to teach the material with sensitivity and with a respect for artistic achievement and my student's burgeoning abilities to recognize such achievement. It was that trust and freedom, as much as it was my career and my beliefs, that I knew I had to protect. ■

About the Writer

KIMBERLY HORNE received her B.A. in English from Tulane University in 1994 and an MFA in Poetry from the University of Virginia in 1997. She has taught 10th grade humanities and Senior English at St.

Andrew's in Austin, Texas for nine years. In 2007, she received the National NCTE/SLATE Intellectual Freedom Award and was one of seven recipients of the 2007 NCTE/SLATE State, Region, and Provincial Affiliate Intellectual Freedom Awards.

