

# Does Censorship Matter?

BY PAT SCALES

*“What I shall never forget is the silence of my teachers during the book banning. Only one of my teachers ever commented to me about the book banning. She was the English department chair, a good English teacher who had instructed me as a junior and in a ‘Great Books’ course as a senior. One day after class she whispered to me, ‘Steve, you’re doing the right thing.’ I will never be able to forget that she felt the need to whisper.”*

—*School Library Media Quarterly*, Winter 1990. “An Introduction to Censorship,” by Steven Pico

All Americans have a voice. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution says so. This is why it’s so ironic that book censors use their First Amendment rights to try and suppress the free speech rights of others. Words matter. Thoughts count. Opinions are important. This is what we teach students in school—then the book censors arrive and knock at the doors of principals, superintendents, and school board members. From there, curriculum is rewritten, library books disappear, and educators start to question their teaching decisions. What are the effects of censorship on students? Who should select books chosen for the curriculum, or placed on school library shelves? What difference does it make if a book is banned? Does censorship really matter?

To most librarians and English teachers, there are answers to these questions. But in the ongoing battle over books and materials used in public schools, the resolve to provide answers is sometimes challenging. Parents, students, and some educators are often surprised to learn that children and young adults have First Amendment rights. In fact, the courts have ruled in favor of students’ free speech rights in a number of cases.

The most defining case of the 20th century concerning free speech in schools was *Board of Education vs. Pico* (1982). Steven Pico was only seventeen-years old, a junior in high school, when he began the long battle to rescue eleven library books from the hands of book banners—the Island Trees school board in Levittown, New York. It all started in 1976, when three school board

members attended a conference in New York State and heard a presentation by conservative activists about the “kinds” of books creeping into the hands of the young. There was a list of thirty-three books that were considered “objectionable.” These three board members returned to Levittown with booklist in hand, and entered the Island Trees High School library at night when there were no students or staff in the building. They scanned the shelves and pulled nine books from the high school library: *Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*, edited by Langston Hughes; *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris; *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas; *Go Ask Alice* by an anonymous author; *Laughing Boy* by Oliver LaFarge; *Black Boy* by Richard Wright; *A Hero Ain’t Nothing but a Sandwich* by Alice Childress; and *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver. *A Reader for Writers*, edited by Jerome Archer was removed from the junior high school library, and *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud was banned from the high school English curriculum.

One of the important facts of this case is that no parent, student, or teacher ever objected to the books. They were simply removed because school board members didn’t like the “ideas” expressed in the books, even though they probably hadn’t read them. What transpired was a lengthy legal battle led by one passionate student who was determined to prove that his First Amendment rights had been violated.

In summary, the Supreme Court heard the case and ruled that neither school boards nor school officials

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could remove books from libraries simply because they didn't like the ideas in them. To date, *Board of Education vs. Pico* is the precedent case for book censorship arguments. Unfortunately, most school officials don't know about *Pico*, and they aren't likely to learn about it unless they land in court over similar circumstances. That is exactly what happened in 1994 when high school students in Olathe, Kansas, sued the superintendent of schools for removing *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden, a book about two high school girls who question their sexuality. A United States District Court Judge, citing *Pico*, ordered the book returned to the library shelves.

Though "Annie" won her day in court in Kansas, some parents and citizens throughout the nation have continued to challenge books that deal with gay and lesbian lifestyles. Books like *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan, *The Full Spectrum* by David Levithan and Billy Merrell, and *Joining the Tribe: Growing Up Gay & Lesbian in the 90's* by Linnea Due are disappearing from library shelves. Students who question their own sexuality, or straight teens who simply need books to help them understand other lifestyles, need these books to help them with their journey. Ask these students if censorship matters when they can't get the information they need. Libraries have an obligation to stock books and materials that represent every element of their student population—meaning all cultures, all religions, and all sexual preferences.

In the summer of 2006, the ACLU of Florida and the Greater Miami Chapter Student Government Association took Miami-Dade County School Board to court. *¡Vamos a Cuba!*, the Spanish language edition of *Let's Go to Cuba*, was removed from school libraries because the book, intended for ages 4–7, didn't relate the true nature of oppression under Castro. The attorneys for the school board argued that to omit information in a work of non-fiction is essentially, "lying to the reader." This notion led the school board to remove all twenty-three books in the *Let's Go* series. The judge in Miami cited *Pico* and ruled in favor of the ACLU. But this case

was appealed in 2007, and the decision is pending. If the Appellate Judge in this case rules in favor of the Miami-Dade School Board, there will be a chilling effect on school libraries and the students they serve. Would an omission of a fact in *Partners to History* by Donzaleigh Abernathy constitute lying? What about *Jerusalem* by Karen Armstrong, or *Inventing Japan: 1853–1964* by Ian Buruma? Will the credibility of these writers be questioned if there is a missing fact? Even high school students know that works of non-fiction aren't always comprehensive. Librarians read reviews, study a book's Table of Contents, and check the authority of the works of non-fiction before selecting books for school libraries. They strive to include a number of books on a given subject so that students have access to books with various scopes and viewpoints.

In 2002, the parents of a fourth-grader in Cedarville, Arkansas, sued the principal and superintendent of schools for placing the *Harry Potter* books on a restricted book shelf. The judge ruled in favor of the parents. He concluded that requiring parental permission to read *Harry Potter* might indeed imply that children who choose the books are "evil" in the eyes of their classmates. This case was the first to deal specifically with restricted shelves in libraries. It was an extremely important victory for free speech advocates, and students of all ages. If the parents in Arkansas had lost this case, then the Catholic League's opposition to Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* in the fall of 2007 could have landed the book on a restricted shelf, along with any number of works of fantasy.

In the past five years, there have been a number of attempts to censor works of literature taught in AP English classes. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou was banned because of, "immorality"; *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien because his view of the Vietnam War was believed to be, "anti-American"; *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Nobody Knows My Name* by James Baldwin for, "racial issues that could lead

to bigoted behavior”; *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons for child abuse; and *Old School* by Tobias Wolff and *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld for dealing too realistically with issues related to adolescent angst.

There have even been concerns expressed by teachers over using *All Over But the Shoutin’* by Rick Bragg in their English classes. This issue arose after Bragg admitted that many of his columns in *The New York Times* were fictionalized. This book is a memoir. It is unlikely anyone outside Bragg’s immediate family could possibly know how much fiction exists in his boyhood memory. Facts are often illuminated in personal essays. There are several possible strategies for teaching this book. Censoring it is not one of them.

There continues to be debate over classics like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Many schools used abridged editions of these books, especially *Canterbury Tales*. This may appear to be a reasonable solution, but if abridged versions are used improperly, they could become a kind of censorship. If teachers use these versions to avoid dealing with “offensive” passages, then they are guilty of censorship. On the other hand, English teachers may select abridged editions because they feel that Chaucer’s “old English” and Twain’s 19th century language is too difficult for the students they teach. Knowing the intent of the teacher makes it easier to determine whether censorship has occurred.

Currently, there is a huge debate in Charleston, West Virginia, over the use of *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy in the AP English curriculum. This is an especially troubling case because the school board is proposing that a rating system, like the MPAA ratings for movies, should be developed for books. Here’s the problem: who will decide the rating system? Do several sex scenes in a book get a different rating than a single sex scene? What about violence? Will there be a formula to decide how many four-letter words it takes for a specific rating? Who will police such a system? This lame attempt to censor the books used in an English curriculum designed for “college credit” is an insult to the professionalism of teachers who carefully select the novels they teach, and to students who are intelligent and analytical enough to handle the reading.

What will likely happen is that all students, regardless of whether they are in AP classes, will now read the

works of Pat Conroy. This is simply human nature. The desire for the forbidden is very strong. Does censorship matter to the students in Charleston, West Virginia? Apparently it does, because they have promised a lawsuit if the school board moves forward with its attempt to abridge their free speech rights. Organizations like the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, the National Coalition against Censorship, and the American Civil Liberties will join their efforts.

Racial slurs, bullying, obscene language, sex scenes, and violence will always appear in books that students read. There will always be challenging themes, emotionally-charged scenes, and characters with few traits to admire. This is the stuff of real life. Good teachers have a tremendous amount of power. They have the power to inspire, guide, and help students understand the totality of the human experience.

Websites like [www.pabis.org](http://www.pabis.org) tell the public that teachers are doing a poor job of selecting books. There are school officials who will use these book lists in the same way the Island of Trees School Board used their list of “objectionable” books. There are journalists who write inflammatory stories about the novels used in classrooms. School boards will demand justification in every book challenge, but they most likely aren’t going to read the books. Teachers and librarians will, and they have the skill and knowledge required to make the best literature choices for the students in their schools.

Does censorship matter? It did to Steven Pico, the students in Olathe, Kansas, and the student government leaders in Miami. It mattered to one set of parents in Cedarville, Arkansas, and it matters to the students in Charleston, West Virginia. How does censorship affect students? It affected Steven Pico so much that he left this country because it simply became too hard for him to live here. ■

### About the Writer

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To download a free copy of *CENSORSHIP: An Educator’s Guide* by Pat Scales, which includes lesson ideas and discussion questions for the classroom, please go to:  
[www.randomhouse.com/highschool/resources/guides3/censorship.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/resources/guides3/censorship.html)

# Suggested Reading...

Books cited in this article include:

**PARTNERS TO HISTORY** by Donzaleigh Abernathy  
Crown, HC, 978-0-609-60914-9, 256 pp., \$29.95

**I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS** by Maya Angelou  
Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-27937-5, 304 pp., \$6.99  
Bantam, TR, 978-0-553-38001-9, 304 pp., \$15.00  
Audio Available Read By Maya Angelou  
Random House Audio, Unabridged CD, 978-0-679-45173-0, \$22.95

**JERUSALEM: One City, Three Faiths** by Karen Armstrong  
Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-39168-1, 512pp., \$18.00

**NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME** by James Baldwin  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-679-74473-3, 256 pp., \$12.95  
Teacher's Guide Available

**ALL OVER BUT THE SHOUTIN'** by Rick Bragg  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-679-77402-0, 352 pp., \$14.95

**INVENTING JAPAN: 1853-1964** by Ian Buruma  
Modern Library, TR, 978-0-8129-7286-3, 208pp., \$12.95

**THE CANTERBURY TALES** by Geoffrey Chaucer  
Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21082-8, 688 pp., \$5.99

**SOUL ON ICE** by Eldridge Cleaver  
Delta, TR, 978-0-385-33379-5, 256pp., \$15.00

**BEACH MUSIC** by Pat Conroy  
Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-38153-5, 784 pp., \$15.00  
Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-57457-9, 816 pp., \$7.99

**THE PRINCE OF TIDES** by Pat Conroy  
Dial Press, TR, 978-0-553-38154-2, 688 pp., \$14.95  
Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-26888-1, 672 pp., \$7.99

**JOINING THE TRIBE** by Linnea Sue  
Anchor, TR, 320 pp., 978-0-385-47500-6, \$19.00

**INVISIBLE MAN** by Ralph Ellison  
Preface By Charles Johnson  
*Winner of the National Book Award*  
Modern Library, HC, 978-0-679-60139-5, 624 pp., \$19.95  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-679-73276-1, 608 pp., \$14.95  
Audio Available Read By Joe Morton 978-0-7393-2207-9, \$34.95

**THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL** by Anne Frank  
Translated By B.M. Mooyaart  
Introduction By Eleanor Roosevelt  
*Winner: YALSA Best Books for Young Adults*  
Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-29698-3, 304 pp., \$5.99

**THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL: The Definitive Edition** by Anne Frank  
Edited By Otto M. Frank and Mirjam Pressler  
Translated By Susan Massotty  
Bantam, MM, 978-0-553-57712-9, 352 pp., \$6.99

**ELLEN FOSTER** by Kaye Gibbons  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-375-70305-8, 144 pp., \$11.95

**BOY MEETS BOY** by David Levithan  
*Winner 2004: ALA Best Books for Young Adults*  
*Winner 2004: ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers*  
Knopf, TR, 978-0-375-83299-4, 192 pp. \$8.95

**THE FULL SPECTRUM** by David Levithan and Billy Merrell  
Knopf, TR, 978-0-375-83290-1, \$9.95

**THE NAKED APE: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal**  
by Desmond Morris  
Delta, TR, 978-0-385-33430-3, 256pp., \$16.00

**THE THINGS THEY CARRIED** by Tim O'Brien  
*Winner: YALSA Best Books for Young Adults*  
Broadway, TR, 978-0-7679-0289-2, 272pp., \$14.95

**"HARRY POTTER AUDIO"** by J.K. Rowling and read By Jim Dale  
Available in Listening Library Unabridged CD:  
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, 978-0-8072-8194-9, \$49.95  
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 978-0-8072-8232-8, \$54.95  
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, 978-0-8072-8195-6, \$49.95  
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 978-0-8072-8259-5, \$69.95  
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, 978-0-307-28365-8, \$75.00  
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, 978-0-8072-2029-0, \$75.00  
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 978-0-7393-6038-5, \$79.95

**THE GOLDEN COMPASS** by Philip Pullman  
*Winner 1997: ALA Best Books for Young Adults*  
*Winner 1997: ALA Notable Children's Book*  
Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-23813-3, 368 pp., \$7.50

**HIS DARK MATERIALS, BOOK I: THE GOLDEN COMPASS**  
by Philip Pullman Read By Philip Pullman and Full Cast  
Audio Available  
Listening Library, Unabridged CD, 978-0-8072-0471-9, \$29.95

**PREP: A Novel** by Curtis Sittenfeld  
Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7235-1, 448pp., \$13.95

**UNCLE TOM'S CABIN** or, Life among the Lowly  
by Harriet Beecher Stowe  
Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21218-1, 544 pp., \$5.95  
Introduction by Jane Smiley  
Modern Library, TR, 978-0-375-75693-1, 688 pp., \$8.95

**DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS** by Piri Thomas  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-679-78142-4, 352pp., \$12.95  
Also available in Spanish edition:  
POR ESTAS CALLES BRAVAS  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-679-77628-4, 384 pp., \$12.95

**ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN** by Mark Twain  
Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21079-8, 320 pp., \$5.95  
Ballantine, TR, March 1997, 978-0-449-91272-0, 448 pp., \$14.95  
Children's Classics, HC, 978-0-517-22999-6, 256 pp., \$6.99  
Ballantine, MM, 978-0-8041-1571-1, 384 pp., \$4.99  
Introduction By George Saunders  
Modern Library, TR, 978-0-375-75737-2, 304 pp., \$6.95

**SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE** by Kurt Vonnegut  
Teacher's Guide Available  
Delta, TR, 978-0-385-33384-9, 288pp., \$14.00  
Dell, MM, 978-0-440-18029-6, 224pp., \$7.99

**SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE: Or The Children's Crusade, A Duty Dance With Death (25th Anniversary)** by Kurt Vonnegut  
Delacorte Press, HC, 978-0-385-31208-0, 224pp., \$25.00

**OLD SCHOOL** by Tobias Wolff  
Vintage, TR, 978-0-375-70149-8, 208 pp., \$12.95