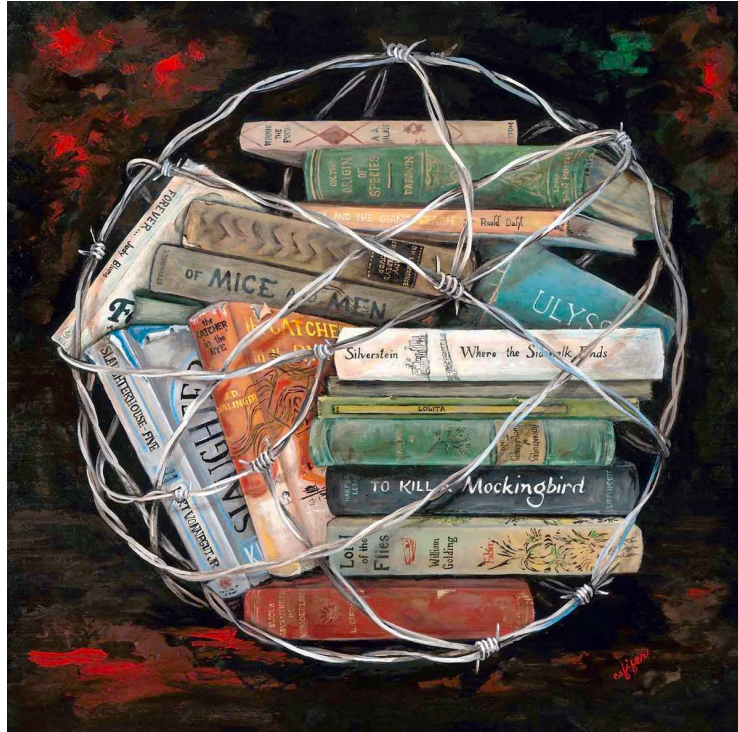


WHAT DID YOUR *READ ACROSS AMERICA* CELEBRATION LOOK LIKE?

Last year I wrote a blog on the recent spate of book banning efforts by parents in various communities around the country. This year I find that these efforts have gained a stronger foothold. Legislative bills proposed in several states will result in further restricting the use of particular books, and particular themes in books, in school libraries and classrooms. Because attitudes always inform policy, personal prejudices about subjects like LGBTQ+, same-sex marriage, women's rights, social justice and racial inequality are framing the kinds of legislative restrictions on books and areas of study being proposed in some communities around the country.



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A growing number of school districts in New Jersey have also seen incidents where public school curricula, particularly in the area of social studies, has come under attack.

I recently spent a number of weeks in a community that is part of Monroe County, Florida. I was taken aback to read in the local newspaper about how far the state government was insinuating itself into the school curriculum, calling for specific books and topics to be banned. Further, there were intimations that there might be certain consequences for teachers who displayed or read any of these materials. Florida House Bill 1467 is a recently passed law mandating that only books approved by a certified media specialist may be included in any school or classroom library. Many county school officials are responding with their own interpretations of this law and requiring that any books not on the approved list be removed, or wrapped in paper and made unavailable for student use. Some Florida districts are using videos as training materials for the purpose of informing their teachers about

this new law and recommending the covering of books. Mention was made in these videos of third-degree felony penalties for the distribution of books deemed harmful to children under a pre-existing anti-pornography law.

Proposals have even been made to rewrite history, “disappearing” certain facts from the books students would be using in their classrooms. Book companies are attempting to comply with some of these proposals in order to win bids to sell their textbooks in large states like Florida and Texas. So much of our country’s history should be celebrated. Other aspects of our history are shameful, but should not be watered down or “whitewashed”. We learn from history in order to prevent a repeat of past mistakes. Children read about these parts of our history, not because they should feel personally responsible for the outcomes, but so that they may better understand that people were wronged. History can help teach not just lessons of facts, but lessons of compassion. In Florida, there have been recent efforts to remove certain elements of AP African American courses from the curriculum, partly because of their coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Our children aren’t being protected by these restrictions ... they are being deceived, or at the very least grossly misinformed.

Like art and music, literature reaches audiences everywhere. Literature in the classroom is meant for discussion and deliberation as we share ideas and reflect on what we read. When I think about what book in what state will be next, I have to

wonder what group, or religion will be next. The freedom of this country is the acceptance of its diversity. The curiosity of children, their ability to investigate, learn and question is their most valued freedom. It ensures not just educational growth, but mental health and emotional wellbeing.



In March of every year, during *Read Across America*, the National Education Association offers a challenge to students “to discover their own voices as they learn from the stories of others”. What could be more powerful than to see something of yourself reflected in the book you are reading?

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As a teacher, I also valued the extra impact of having the author teaching right alongside me. Who better to rely on for the best examples of what you are teaching than the writers themselves. And yet, grass roots movements directed at public schools are putting pressure on our school officials to remove books and change curriculum based on personal prejudices and fears.

Attitudes always inform policy, and we need to pay attention with growing concern to what is happening in schools around the country. Be aware of the attitudes in your community, and how they impact your child's or your grandchild's education. If you are a student pay attention to how attitudes are affecting the books you read and the content of your courses. New Jersey Governor Murphy passed a bill in January of 2022 that allows student representatives to have a voice on boards of education. Join with a group of friends and other like-minded people to add to your number and strengthen the power of your voice, and attend your local school board meetings and town council meetings. Write an opinion piece for your school or local paper. Have discussions to raise awareness in your school clubs.

The League of Women Voters and the New Jersey Public Education Coalition are two examples of issue oriented, non-partisan groups made up of concerned citizens interested in the future of public education. Consider joining one of these groups. These organizations meet with local representatives to dialogue about issues of concern. Learn the attitudes of those running for office by going to candidate forums and asking questions. Run for local office yourself. My husband was on our local school board for nine years, and helped work on school policy while meeting other interested and concerned citizens. Pay attention to what is happening elsewhere. **Don't ever think it can't happen here. If you take just a moment to investigate, you will find it is already happening.**



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