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Book Banning Backfires

By Louisa Fordyce, President, Delmont Public Library Board of Trustees

Book banning has occurred for centuries. The Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang had 460 Confucian scholars buried alive (259 BC to 210 BC) because he disagreed with Confucianism. The great philosopher Plato didn't want the youth of Greece to read Homer's "Odyssey" because he didn't want their minds corrupted with vices. In 35 AD, Roman Emperor Caligula didn't want the populace to read the "Odyssey" because he feared it would give people notions about being free to do as they wanted. At least Caligula didn't execute them.

Thomas Morton's "New English Canaan" (1637) was banned by the Puritans because Morton criticized the Puritan way of life. Morton was also friendly to the Native Americans, which contradicted the Puritan attitude. Not only was Morton's book banned, he was banned from Massachusetts and denied entry back into the colony. At least he wasn't executed, either.

I don't know if earlier book banning increased interest in the forbidden tomes, but by the early 20th century, book banning backfired. Banning a book very often increases interest in the book and can lead to crimes such as smuggling.

In the 1920's, American-born Sylvia Beach, an editor and publisher in Paris, published James Joyce's "Ulysses," which was promptly banned pretty much everywhere. Enterprising souls, including Ernest Hemingway, conspired to smuggle the book into various countries. Copies of the book first entered the U.S. in the 1930s from Windsor, Canada, through a friend of Hemingway's who took the ferry from Windsor to Detroit, bringing over one or two copies at a time to avoid detection. There is another famous anecdote about Bennett Cerf, the founder of Random House Publishing, having the book smuggled into New York City in 1933. If you want to increase a book's popularity, ban it. People will sometimes go to great lengths to acquire what they have been told they can't have.

Other books have faced censorship in the U.S., such as "Lady Chatterley's Lover," "The Great Gatsby," "Lolita," "The Catcher in the Rye," and "To Kill a Mockingbird," all of which are regarded as great classics now and in the literary canon.

And so it goes. There is nothing new under the sun. This idea comes from Ecclesiastes, 9:1, part of our Christian bible, a book that has also faced censure.

When I was a teenager in the mid-1960s, I bought a copy of "The Catcher in the Rye." My mother was an avid reader but wasn't well read in literature. She favored Alfred Hitchcock's and Ellery Queen's mystery magazines as well as cheap novels with scantily clad women on the cover who were usually victims in the books. She saw my copy of "Catcher" and knew it was "bad" based on what she had heard from others. She started to read the book when I wasn't reading it and got to the famous "f" word before I did. She confiscated my copy of "Catcher" and told me not to buy anything like that again.

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What did I do, a rebellious 14-year-old? I bought another copy of “Catcher” and hid it, probably under my mattress or under the cushion of the chair in the living room where I lounged to read, and read it when my mother was at work. I also bought other trashy novels and hid them from my mother’s view, further compounding the edict of not reading “junk” and “garbage.” Yes, I was quite the criminal back then.

Speaking of mattresses, shortly after Mother tried to interfere in my reading escapades, I was changing the sheets on her bed. This was before we had fitted sheets and the bottom flat sheet had to be tucked under the mattress. Imagine my surprise when I pushed my hand under the mattress to encounter a copy of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover.” We certainly were two peas in a pod.

By the way, I started to read “Lady” and found it too boring to bother with. I also found it boring when it was required reading for a college literature class. Nabokov’s “Lolita” also left me cold when I was a teenager; I didn’t make it past page 2. I don’t know how I would feel about it as a mature adult today.

Book banning is again a hot topic in America. Current books under fire are the graphic novels “Persepolis” and “Maus,” as well as the old standards of “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “The Catcher in the Rye.” As of this writing, through the Westmoreland Library Network’s online catalog system, there is a waiting list to borrow these books, which warms the cockles of this retired English professor’s heart. To paraphrase a famous movie saying, if you ban it, they will want to read it.

So let’s ban some other books that could or should be read so that book banning continues to backfire. In a quote attributed to Stephen King, “Read whatever they’re trying to keep out of your eyes and your brain because that’s exactly what you need to know.”

Note: This article first appeared under author copyright in the 2022 Loyalhanna Review. It appears here at the time of Banned Books Week, September 18-24, 2022, which is a celebration of the freedom to read. The celebration is promoted by the American Library Association and others; see 3/02/22 article of this series (<https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>).