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Banning Books, Part 2

Book banning continues to be a hot topic, if not a problem, in a variety of public and school libraries. There should be guidelines as to what is appropriate for various age levels and preclude materials that are prurient or salacious just for the shock value. Parents and taxpayers should have an informed voice in policies that are being created or revised.

However, should a high-school student who can join the military at the age of 17 (with parental consent) be restricted in what he or she can read? Should a 16-year-old, able to hold a job, be told what he or she can read?

Banning books or restricting reading materials is a double-edged sword. Yes, we want to keep minors safe but how far should public and school libraries go? When is banning harmful or self-defeating?

I grew up in a household in which reading was a sacred activity. I could read before I started first grade and by third grade, I was reading adult encyclopedias and literature such as Longfellow's poems ("By the shores of Gitche Gumee/By the shores of Big-Sea-Water"). Possibly unfortunately, when I was still in grade school, I also read the junk novels that my mother read, the kind that cost 65 cents in the 1960's with hard-boiled detectives and damsels in distress. "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" and "Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine" were also found in our home. (Mother was big on mysteries for some reason.) However, don't ask me about Nancy Drew or "Little Women"; my precocious early reading habits precluded much of the canon of childhood favorites. But I can always catch up with them someday.

In junior and senior high school, my reading tastes expanded to include other junk novels, the kind with a lot of sex and violence, at least for the 1960's. I'm sure those books are pretty tame by today's standards. But back then, we teenage girls huddled around a copy of Arthur Hailey's "Hotel," gasping at the depiction of the rape scene in the elevator. Gace Metalius's "Peyton Place" dealt with rape, incest, and abortion, among other unsavory human actions. A good bit of the action was suggested without being explicit, but we got the point. These books, especially "Peyton Place," faced public scrutiny and censor, but they were popular with many teenagers and adults.

True literature, though, was still in my life. "To Kill a Mockingbird" is still one of my favorite novels and I have read it several times through the years. The Dickens oeuvre occupied the entire summer during vacation between sixth and seventh grades. Shakespeare, Faulkner, Twain, and Thurber were also acquaintances of mine.

Because I was permitted to read whatever I wanted, I was free to explore, to complement the junk with the worthwhile. No one ever criticized my reading choices, although to be honest, my mother didn't always know what I was reading. I was smart enough to know what reading material to keep out of mother's sight and what could be read in the open.

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Not having my reading censored led me to be a good and prolific reader. It also led me to pursue (at this count) six college degrees, including a PhD in English Literature. When I retired, I was a professor of English and taught some of the literature that I loved many years ago, some of which is challenged now.

Within reason, let young people read what they want to read, but if parents find something objectionable, they should have a conversation with the reader or readers, discussing what might be disconcerting or distressing about the reading matter. Don't just ban something because someone else objects to it. Allowing young minds to discover things on their own will very likely be life changing for them.

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