

Banned Books, Burned Books

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Monday, May 01, 2023

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“But the truth is, that when a Library expels a book of mine and leaves an unexpurgated Bible lying around where unprotected youth and age can get hold of it, the deep unconscious irony of it delights me and doesn’t anger me.” ~~ [Mark Twain](#) in a letter to Mrs. F. G. Whitmore, 7 February 1907

I recently finished watching a truly excellent and very timely course from [Wondrium](#), [Banned Books, Burned Books: Forbidden Literary Works](#) taught by [Maureen Corrigan, Ph.D.](#) Ms. Corrigan is a professor at Georgetown University, a book critic for NPR, a contributor to several of the most prominent newspapers of the country, has served as a juror for the [Pulitzer Prize](#) in Literature, an author in her own right, and on and on. She is unquestionably an expert in literature, and if I were to judge from her Wondrium course, a very good teacher. The following quote from her, given on her Wondrium bio page, sums up the point of view of the course nicely, and our current obnoxiousness with the banning of books across the country.

“The impulse to protect impressionable readers runs up against some of our most cherished democratic principles—not just free speech, but also our commitment to the open exchange of ideas.”

The principle aim of this posting is to encourage you to watch this class if you have access to Wondrium. The DVD and instant video are also available at [Great Courses](#), but unless they have an amazing sale on it, the price is prohibitive. You are better off buying a streaming subscription from Wondrium. It is all the same classes; you just do not end up with a digital version of the class. Given the wave of book banning sweeping through Republican controlled districts, this is a very timely offering. There is much to ponder – and learn – as you watch the 24 episodes. I found it very much worth my while, entertaining and educational.

What struck me as I watched the course was how many of the books discussed I had read. The books may or may not be banned now, but have been in the past, at least at various locales. It was not that I set out to read all these so called controversial books, but that around the beginning of this century I set a task before myself. Being an indifferent student (usually bored out of my mind) in high school, having pursued a science degree in college, I felt that the literature / philosophical / humanities portion of my education was sorely lacking. I set out to make a small dent in that intellectual vacuum. If you use the Internet you can find many different lists of books, such as [The Greatest Books of All Time](#), [The 100 greatest novels of all time](#), [100 Books to Read before You Die: Creating the Ultimate List](#), and many, many more lists are out there. Using these lists as a guide and starting point, I have read a large number of books deemed of sufficient merit to be on one or more of those lists. Not infrequently, my muse will take me down different paths if I discover an author that I really enjoy. It has been an extraordinarily rewarding journey.

If I had a magic wand, I would make Corrigan's course required watching in Congress, state legislatures, and many other places. I would also make [George Orwell's 1984](#), and [Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451](#) required reading in all those same places. But that does bring to mind the old country saying: "*you can bring a horse- ahem – to water, but you can't make him drink.*" Just as an ironic aside, both of these books have been banned, in various places, at different times.

Book banning, book burning are the very definition of a slippery slope. What one person sees as troubling, another person may see as extraordinary literature. I included Mark Twain's quote at the beginning of this blog posting because if I still had that alleged magic wand, and was so inclined, the Bible, along with many other religious texts, would be on my list of banned books. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, should be given an X rating due to violence and sexual content. Given the astonishing amount of damage, strife, outright malevolence committed in the name of religion, I often think the world would be a much better place without our religious texts. I would ban all of [Ayn Rand's](#) work. Her big dog eat little dog philosophy has been taken up by many politicians and policy makers, such as [Paul Ryan](#), [Alan Greenspan](#) and [Clarence Thomas](#). In my world view that is simply horrifying. And the policies pursued by those folks influenced by Ayn Rand are just as equally terrifying.

I could go on with books that I would ban, but I am not being genuine as I do not believe in the banning of books. About as far as I would go would be limiting access of some books to children or minors. I remember when I was in 7th or 8th grade we were passing around a copy of [Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure](#) by [John Cleland](#). Published in 1749, it is widely considered the first erotic novel. My mother discovered the book, took it from me, and I imagine burned it – or at least put it in the trash. A few years ago, just from curiosity, I read the book I had barely started when I was 13. I would have to agree that at least in 1965 (who knows with today's kids) it was not appropriate reading for a person of my then tender years. But I would never ban the book. It is actually a reasonably well written novel that keeps your interests, and, of course, Fanny Hill turns out to be another one of those prostitutes with a heart of gold. But then again, you will not find it on any of the lists above.

I am not going to go through all the books she covers in her 24 lectures, but I will mention a few here. There are many contenders for the great American novel, but four regular entries are [The Great Gatsby](#), [Moby Dick](#), [Invisible Man](#) (Ralph Ellison), and [The Grapes of Wrath](#). All have been targets of book bannings in the past. How much poorer would be our literately life be if they were not available? And then there is the [Harry Potter's](#) series that have raised the ire of various religious groups for promoting

witchcraft as well as promoting children to defy authority. Having read as much science fiction and fantasy as I have, I could just not see their point.

Of course, this current “woke” generation would like to cancel [J.K. Rowling](#) and her books over her transgender comments. That is a whole other issue. There have been some real scoundrels that have produced beautiful books. Where do you draw the line separating an author from their works?

I could ramble on, but there is one thought that keeps popping into my mind. How can you ban books and not ban assault weapons and not regulate gun ownership? How? Why “gun rights” has become one of the key boards of the Republican platform perplexes and angers me.

The other thought that keeps popping up is that *Freedom to Read* is part of *Freedom of Speech*, one of our supposedly must cherished rights... number one on the [Bill of Rights](#) hit parade. I would not have thought we would have needed a specific amendment for *Freedom to Read*.

Banning books is about attempting to control people’s values, ideas, and pushing whatever vision of how the world should be, according to the book banners point of view. Much of what is being banned boils down to Christianity’s long struggle against sex, in any guise. Diversity can make you uncomfortable, especially if the added weight of prudish morality is stacked on top.

I have been finding it hard to find a good way to end this posting. Part of me wants to go on a long diatribe about book banning and book banners. However, given the number of alarming issues in the United States of America of 2023, it would just unleash a ceaseless cascade of castigation about how the Republican Party, the far right and Christian Nationalism are ruining this country. I never thought I would live to see such a day.

And so it should not be going.

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