

By Robert Lipsyte

I'd like this to be a Fahrenheit 451 story, but, alas, it's only hot enough to burn my own butt. While heroic writers face deadly dangers speaking truth to power, going up against secret police and killer clerics, I only bump up against greedy coaches.

In 2006, I had anticipated that my Young Adult football novel, "Raiders Night," would run into trouble with librarians and English teachers because of the sex, drugs, and realistic language. There was a male on male rape during a hazing incident. It was a hard R for the genre. But I had some points to make.

As it turned out, the book got starred reviews and the invitations rolled in from librarians and English teachers. And then they rolled out. Sheepish e-mails disinvited me because athletic directors and principals read the book and decided that my Friday Night Darks approach was counter-productive. In a leaked e-mail, the athletic director of a tony private school wondered if I could be persuaded to talk about the violence in contemporary music. Violins, I joked? Of course, he wanted me to go after hip hop instead of football.

Because previous censorships had seemed misinformed and silly, I didn't take the disinvitations seriously. "One Fat Summer" was taken off shelves in several school districts for a vague masturbation scene I don't even remember writing. Teachers and librarians had it re-shelved. There was a court case in Washington state over an alleged lack of middle-class African-American role models in "The Contender." A Harvard educator flew out to lead the successful defense. She cited the middle-class characters in the book. It turned that the censoring parents – now this really hurt! - hadn't read the book.

But the "Raiders Night" situation was different; there was a logical reason to ban the book. Over an excellent bistro lunch, a bright suburban mid-western superintendent told me how much he had enjoyed the book and how, as a former football coach, he thought it was dead on. While he might let the occasional teacher slip it to the occasional reader, he said, it would not be a good mass buy because it could get in the way of his dream.

Someday, he said, Coke and Pepsi would be fighting for "pouring rights" at his district's sporting events, and he'd be playing off Reebok and Nike to outfit the players. He had good teams, he said, and if the fifty state federations could ever get their acts together and create national high school tournaments in football and basketball for ESPN and Fox Sports to televise, there would be money from pizza chains and cell phone companies to fund libraries and arts programs and computer upgrades. Who needs a book getting in the way by warning that coaches exploit their boys, who play hurt, shoot steroids and abuse girls?

Since he was buying, I had an adult beverage. But I didn't agree. I explained that I was a genre writer, a closet teacher-librarian-preacher-coach whose mission it is to tell useful, truthful stories to youngsters who are willing to absorb them into their process of becoming. I told him that the jocks with whom I had discussed the book – some in his own high school - thought it was like a documentary of their lives. What they really wanted to talk about was their profound distrust for adults, particularly coaches and school administrators.

He nodded ruefully. They have reason, he said.

For a moment, I wanted to clap him on the back, It's okay, big fella, censoring information for boys and girls is a tricky, nuanced game, don't beat yourself up. But I felt that Fahrenheit flicker and silently thought, It gets easier, toad, you censor information for kids and they're used to it as adults so you can make wars, poison the air and burn up our future with lies.

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