

Defending the Right to Read: A Modern Tale

In the 21st century, censorship in the English classroom rears its head in some familiar and some unexpected ways.

Few of us who choose a career in English education anticipate becoming embroiled in a public debate over the assignments we give to our students. But as defenders of the right to read, today's teachers find themselves navigating both new and old challenges to the intellectual choices available to this generation. What follows is a modern tale of two educators who put their students' freedoms first. Their experiences can teach us all something about the shape of censorship in the 21st century.

Defending the Right to Read

"Any book with any ideas of value is probably going to be challenged because somebody doesn't like what's being said."

—Kim Chism Jasper

In 2010, complaints from a parent and select members of the Stockton, Missouri, school board about Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* brought high school language arts teacher Kim Chism Jasper face to face with the First Amendment.

"I majored in journalism as an undergraduate," Jasper says, "so I've always been tuned into the freedom of speech." But Jasper had no idea what it would take to uphold this freedom until a reading choice she supported was challenged.

After learning that Alexie's book was being assigned as an all-school read at the local high school, the parent of a third grader in the Stockton system criticized the selection for its use of profanity and a scene depicting masturbation. The fight that ensued demonstrates how quickly an isolated complaint can overturn curricular choices—even when the charge comes from a parent whose own child isn't directly involved.

For years, Jasper had openly discussed commonly challenged books with her juniors and seniors. "It's important

to ask students to discuss why a book like Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is controversial," Jasper asserts. "What does removing it from the classroom say about their right to read?"

Despite the efforts of Jasper and several of her students to defend Alexie's book as a reading choice, the Stockton school board voted in April 2010 to remove the book not only as an all-school read, but also from the shelves of the school library.

According to Jasper, opponents of the book feared the book's message of nonconformity. There were concerns that reading literature sprinkled with profanity might encourage teens to adopt such language, and that exposure to an explicit expression of sexual desire might stir promiscuous behavior.

Whatever the points of contention, the decision was made far too swiftly in Jasper's opinion.

Refusing to simply accept the school board's ruling, Jasper and others insisted that proper procedures had not been followed and demanded another hearing. In a new vote several months later, however, the board unanimously upheld the ban of the book from the curriculum 7 to 0 and voted 7 to 2 against making the book available in the school library with restrictions.

One of the few consolations, Jasper says, was that "two of the board members who supported the ban weren't re-elected."

Jasper now admits that she should have taken the challenges to inclusion of Alexie's work more seriously from the start and begun "lining up [her] ducks" and "getting support" from her principal and other faculty.

But from an educator's standpoint, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* met the criteria for successful young adult literature—an assessment confirmed by the numerous awards the book's author received. Providing both high interest and a moderately low reading level requirement, Alexie's work was a good fit for many of the students at Stockton High—especially boys, who were drawn to the book's protagonist, Junior.

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Kim Chism Jasper

“Teaching is thinking,” Jasper notes, “and my job is to prepare [students] to think through ideas and make informed choices—to [know how to] be citizens of the world.” Through Alexie’s novel, students are encouraged to contemplate what it must be like for a boy living on an Indian reservation to step into a high school populated primarily by whites. From Jasper’s perspective, the book pushed hesitant readers to take on ideas they might not normally encounter.

“Sometimes, teachers have to require a book to get students to push through a difficult or challenging text—ideas can be uncomfortable, but reading these sorts of things is good preparation for life,” she says.

The toll on Jasper’s professional life since the Stockton decision is evident. “You begin to question things after going through this kind of battle,” she admits. But in the end, Jasper knows that defending her students’ right to read Alexie’s book or any other curricular choice was the right thing to do.

Addressing Censorship Proactively

“Censorship is like the monster under the bed. You never know what will trigger it, and you’ve got to be ready.” —ReLeah Cossett Lent

In her twenty-plus years as an educator, ReLeah Lent has encountered attempts to censor students’ reading and writing choices on more than one occasion. Her book *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*, co-written with Gloria Pipkin, chronicles the authors’ experiences with opponents to both reading selections and students’ rights to express themselves through their own writing.

As a junior high language arts teacher, Lent, like Jasper, experienced the swift removal of a challenged book from the classroom, after complaint from one parent. Although far more parents and students were in favor of offering *I Am the Cheese* as a reading choice alongside another selection, Lent’s supervisor singlehandedly banned the title.

Years later, as faculty sponsor of Florida’s Mosley High School newspaper, *Making Waves*, Lent was again positioned to stand up for her students’ rights. When the newspaper staff began addressing controversial

subjects like steroid use among student athletes, Lent faced strong opposition from the school coach, a principal aspiring to fill a vacant seat as superintendent, and members of the school board and community.

Lent’s response to the second encounter with censorship sparked a passion to spread the message about how educators can prepare for the possibility of being challenged on a reading or writing assignment.

Lent compares censorship to “the monster under the bed”; she is adamant that educators should prepare for the possibility of having to defend a reading choice long before the “monster” creeps out and takes them by surprise.

When you’re in the middle of a censorship case, Lent says, “you learn that it’s all about power and politics, who yells the loudest,” and “who knows how to use the media to further their agenda.” She admits that as the struggle to protect students’ rights continues, teachers are likely to “feel out of control,” especially those who are without tenure and fearful of losing their jobs.

In *At the Schoolhouse Gate*, Lent provides an honest description of an ongoing battle between herself and members of Mosley’s administration when it came to how the newspaper staff for *Making Waves* should be managed. Lent proudly argued that the students were displaying journalistic skill by reporting on the real struggles faced by students, while the principal insisted that any coverage that brought into question Mosley’s leadership and values was unacceptable.

Just as vivid, though, are Lent’s accounts of the many students, parents, and colleagues who supported her as she made her position known publicly—from the hallways at Mosley to school board meetings to statements in the *News Herald* to the courtroom.

Eventually, Lent and the school board agreed to a settlement, and though Lent never returned to her post as advisor to *Making Waves*, she was recognized for her strength and integrity with a PEN/Newman’s Own First Amendment Award in 1999. (Pipkin and Lent were honored with the NCTE/SLATE National Intellectual Freedom Award in 2003.)

Based on her experiences, Lent says that “good policies” for handling challenges to freedom of speech “involve a number of steps with plenty of checks and balances” while “bad ones” almost always “rest with single judgments.”

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ReLeah Cossett Lent

sensitive to a range of perspectives. Lent offers the following guidelines:

- **Creation of a District Policy on Censorship**
All school districts should issue and, more important, enforce a policy regarding the specific procedure to be followed if an objection to classroom material arises.
- **Development of Censorship Learning Communities**
Censorship learning communities consisting of educators and administrators offer participants an opportunity to share perspectives and concerns. Such groups can also be effective in working proactively to establish definitions and guidelines for examining challenges to educational material. These communities can formulate their ideas through the following:
 - ✓ **Dialogue Prompts**—articulation of the specific questions and criteria that should guide both discussions within censorship learning communities . . . outside the school environment.
 - ✓ **Pedagogical Rationales**—identification and documentation of the specific pedagogical objectives to be reached through chosen material. Lent and Jasper agree that individuals opposed to classroom selections should be required to articulate their objections in the context of the established pedagogical rationale.
- **Nurturing of Community-Wide Forums**
Lent encourages the creation of community-wide forums to extend dialogues about reading, learning, and citizenship beyond the classroom.

Interestingly, the kind of forums that Lent describes often evolve unexpectedly from the negative press a book receives. Jasper says that Alexie's book sparked such interest in Stockton that citizens sought out the title to see what all of the fuss was about!

Empowering Students through Print

"Censorship, or challenges to the book we've selected for our students, has a chilling effect on teachers, especially new teachers who are too scared to choose books that might cause a problem or to choose a side in the debate."—Kim Chism Jasper

Many times, teachers like Jasper and Lent are asked a deceptively simple question—sometimes by their own colleagues: "Why not just choose another book, one without profanity or a scene that raises eyebrows?"

Lent's response is straightforward: "First it's this book, then that one, and on and on."

Jasper and Lent agree that parents must be informed about the books their kids are assigned to read and the rationale behind these readings. Lent advises students to make their own critical choices as they develop as readers and thinkers as well, being prepared to assess and defend the appropriateness of a book's content and presentation according to individual family values, personal interests, and reading habits.

"We know how important individual choice is to literacy development," Lent says. She and Pipkin support a pedagogy that "creat[es] rule-makers—and even rule-breakers—as students identify and confront injustice" as opposed to encouraging "rule-followers" (216).

For these courageous teachers, defending the rights of student-citizens to read and think and express for themselves comes with the territory. And their stories can assure us all that the written word remains powerful.

For Further Reading

- "Facing the Issues: Challenges, Censorship, and Reflection through Dialogue," by ReLeah Cossett Lent. (*English Journal*, January 2008. Vol. 97, No.1, pp. 61–66.)
- The NCTE Anti-Censorship Center
<http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship>
This site provides valuable information, including resources on censorship issues, sample censorship challenge reports, and updates from NCTE's Standing Committee against Censorship.
- *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*, by Gloria Pipkin and ReLeah Cossett Lent. (Heinemann, 2002.)

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Join the Internet Read-Out in September by reading an excerpt from a banned or challenged book—find a list of literary classics that have been banned at <http://tinyurl.com/yadjazp>.