



Burning To Read

Letters from My Students in support of Banned Books Week and the Freedom to Read Foundation

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I am cognizant of how lucky I am. When I decided to teach *Fahrenheit 451* to my Accelerated Juniors during spring semester at St. Johnsbury Academy, the biggest administrative roadblock I faced was finding two minutes in the English department head's schedule to ask him face to face if I could. He said yes. And that was that. I did not have to fight with school boards, parents, or neighborhood committees. The books I handed out to my students may have been a little musty—ok, maybe a lot musty—but there were no “hells” and “damns” blacked out, no pages removed, and less than five minutes after Steve Jolliffe said “yes” I left the subterranean book room with an entire box of them at my disposal.

This is not the case everywhere. A quick Google search turns up three significant incidences of banning or censorship of *F451* (we shortened the title in class for quickness of discussion and also because I really like acronyms) in America. In 1987, a school in Panama City, Florida relegated it to the ignominious “third-tier” status, citing “a lot of vulgarity”; in 1992, a school in Irvine City, CA, redacted all the “obscene” words before distributing the books to students; in 2006, during Banned Books Week, incidentally, a school in Montgomery County, Texas was forced by parents to ban it due to offensive language, incidences of Bible burning, violence, the negative portrayal of Christians, and, both noteworthy and hilarious, the negative depiction of firemen. (Personally, I think the

only demographic who have valid claim to libelous portrayal in *F451* are Dalmatians—firehouse dogs get a pretty sadistic rap.) But for me, it was easy; I wanted to teach a book, and I was allowed to do so. It was my decision, my right, my freedom.

The irony of banning a book that is itself an indictment of book banning of course provides a natural learning opportunity. Before I began teaching, I spent ten years in publishing and participated in the outreach for and promotion surrounding the ALA's tireless Banned Books Week campaign. Given my familiarity with the campaign, many of my lessons essentially planned themselves. Most of my students already knew about Banned Books Week, at least peripherally, and could recall anecdotal incidences



of *Harry Potter* being burned or evince a passing familiarity with titles like *Beloved* or *Lolita* being banned. Together, we looked at the list of Banned Books throughout US history, and discussed the “rationale” behind the banning of each one. Some made sense to my students, some elicited gasps of horror or disbelief. Many found their own personal favorites on the list; *Looking for Alaska* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were particularly indignation-inducing. Wesley Kane, who is as old school as they come, (literally, the kid is the reincarnation of Jimmy Stewart) nearly exploded when he found out that *The Call of the Wild* had once been challenged. I asked my students, first in an all class discussion, then again in a written homework piece, if they had one book to save from such treatment, what would it be and why? *Perks* came up, as did *The Fifth Wave* by Rick Yancey, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and the Bible. I bit my tongue when Samantha Molleur claimed *My Sister's Keeper*, by Jodi Picoult, and reminded myself that she was young and would soon learn the error of her ways, that not everyone shared my deep, deep, deep disdain for ol’ J.P., and that it would break the bounds of hypocrisy to shame her in a lesson surrounding censorship. What was interesting was the commonality of reason behind each choice. All my students saved their one book because of the message it promoted, and because of the importance they perceived that message to have for society. And that message was universally one of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Saving a book that tells you to be a good person doesn’t just save that one book, it saves the idea of being a good person, too. And everyone who reads it, or hopefully the majority who do, are good, are better, people, because of reading it. Saving a book simply because it makes you happy is completely and utterly legitimate. Saving a book because it makes you happy and because it helps the world be a better place, that’s a whole different story. So first, my students are awesome. And second, they know that books can change the world. (I refer you back to point one.)

Teaching *F451* in 2016, too, added an entirely new and entirely terrifying dimension to the work. I lost track of how many times someone raised a hand and said “Wait, are you *sure* this was written in 1953?” Bradbury’s dystopian portrayal of a world constantly at war with itself, self-medicating with media, and deliberately blinkering themselves to reality in favor of soap bubble entertainment is freakishly similar to our current existence. The parallels we can now draw between our society and that of Guy Montag redefine the concept of foreshadowing. I don’t think we give Bradbury enough credit for predicting the excesses of our entertainment obsessed culture as

accurately as he did: for, in 1953, predicting that we would spend our lives absorbed in screens that told us what other people were doing; for, in 1953, predicting, literally predicting, reality, and now interactive, television. In “The Hearth and the Salamander,” when Montag asks Mildred what’s on that afternoon, she tells him that she’s watching a play with one part deliberately left uncast: “When it comes time for the missing lines, they all look at me out of the three walls and I say the lines.” I hate to write this, but I’m going to anyway: Ray Bradbury predicted *Dora The Explorer*. No wonder the future is so bleak.

Bradbury somehow saw that eventually we would cease to be satisfied with merely observing our entertainment, that eventually we would need to be part of it, too. When those hashtags appear at the bottom of the screen during . . . well, almost every primetime show now . . . that’s exactly what Mildred is saying. If I’m watching (OK, fine, judge) *Property Brothers*, HGTV is not satisfied with me just watching. They want me to get on my phone and tweet which house I prefer, [#concretechaos](#) or [#woodenwonderland](#). Just now, when I went to the show’s website to search hashtags, my computer offered to remind me when the next episode will air. The level of interaction that is now demanded by my entertainment is literally and figuratively the four walls that Mildred wants Montag to install in their parlor. And let’s be honest with each other, we give that interaction willingly. We can’t just watch a show anymore; we have to live inside of it. In class, we talked about Twitter, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, reality television, Kim Kardashian, and (God help us) Donald Trump and the 2016 primaries. I once had to tell a kid to take his headphones out so he could join our discussion of the ear Seashells that Mildred won’t stop wearing. The concept of three-dimensional immersive entertainment, the desired addition of that fourth, encircling wall, the idea of a population deliberately and increasingly blocking out everything to the exclusion of shiny, happy, and of-the-moment things, all of this was so close, so real, so terrifyingly predictive, that my kids were torn between being impressed at Bradbury’s clairvoyance and being disgusted at themselves for first creating and then perpetuating this world. It was simultaneously really cool and really, *really* scary.

So. All well and good. *F451* offered pretty much everything you could want in a classroom text. Engaged and engrossed students, vibrant class discussions of censorship, free speech, and mass media, contemporary parallels to everyday life, outrage, shock, hilarity, vocabulary, literary analysis, and the usual shouting, ridiculous dancing, and esoteric tangents that generally punctuate my classes.



But what else? There comes that time in the teaching of a text when you have to ask yourself “But what are my students going to do with this information? How will they show me that they have learned a skill or a thought process, and how can I assess their knowledge?” The message of *F451*, is that books, words, ideas, should never, can never, be censored, by anyone, for any reason. That censoring, blocking truth, limiting yourself to those shiny, happy, and of-the-moment things, engenders stupidity, ignorance, and anarchy. As Bradbury himself writes in his closing and mind-blowing letter to the reader, “The real world is the playing ground for each and every group, to make or unmake laws. But the tip of the nose of my books or stories or poems is where their rights end and my territorial imperatives begin, run and rule.” Within the covers of a book exist whatever thoughts, words, feelings, or ideas the author desired to write down. If you as a reader wish to read and share them, then great, read on. If you don’t, then don’t. It’s as simple as that. What remains paramount, crucial, essential, what remains necessary for the survival and progress of civilization itself, is the right of every human being to read on, or not, as they themselves see fit. It’s that “unalienable” right that those who seek to ban and censor have lost sight of, or have deliberately chosen to ignore.

In discussing censorship, I had tapped outrage and disbelief that such a “dystopian” idea was put into practice on a regular basis. As a teacher, I had succeeded in sparking something inside my students. As a teacher, I now had to take that spark and do something with it. I had to kindle it, and keep it burning. But how? I suppose the word “spark” and *F451*’s ubiquitous flame metaphors had a lot to do with what came next. In “The Hearth and the Salamander,” that famous Hugh Latimer quote is spoken by an old woman as the firemen burn down her house with her inside it: “Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.” Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burnt at the stake for heresy in 1555. They were, when you think about it, some of the earliest activists against censorship, together with Thomas Cranmer, in fighting for their freedom to read *The Book of Common Prayer*. But as Latimer urged Ridley on that unfortunately damp October day, in death they wanted to be a symbol of those who had gone before them and to those who would come after. They wanted their deaths to be that spark, candle,

torch, light, beacon, whatever you want to call it, that would remind people what they were fighting for and why.

OK, so here is where I stop waxing lyrical and say as a caveat that I had no plans of death (mine or anyone else’s) for this final project. Whilst I am the first person to go the wall for my students, and the first person to tell them to give it their all, advocating a fiery conflagration for the sake of a final grade might be pushing it slightly. But the principle remained. I had ignited that (metaphorical) spark, and I wanted to turn it into a raging fire. In my ten years in publishing, I worked fairly closely with the ALA and their Freedom To Read initiative. Given my familiarity with the campaign, it struck me as an interactive, authentic, and fun idea to have my students write a letter to the organizers of Banned Books Week in support of their efforts. A letter would (articulately) channel their indignation; it would light an (articulate) candle, which, hopefully, would never be extinguished. It would serve as an (articulate) wake up call and an (articulate) reminder to themselves and others

that censorship is alive and kicking, and that complacency in some cases is as good as support.

For who better to speak out on behalf of the freedom to read in schools than students themselves? Who better to express the desire to learn from whatever source they choose, to expose themselves to whatever writing and ideas they choose, than the ones doing the learning? A letter would test their expository writing and interpretive skills, and, considering we were in the home stretch before summer vacation, would be a powerful and uplifting note on which to finish. In class I distributed copies of the Freedom To Read Statement, readily available on the ALA’s website. Included within it is the affirmation of seven propositions, guaranteed by the Constitution, of an individual’s right to read. After reading the statement and the propositions, the students were given the following assignment:

Write a letter to Banned Books Week. In it, explain that you have just read *Fahrenheit 451* (itself a banned book!) and why you as a student agree with the propositions above. How did your reading shape your interpretation and reaction to these propositions? You can pick one in particular to focus on, or treat them generally. We will be sending these to the American Library Association! Make them GOOD! If you wish,



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for extra credit on this project, you may create a video, a piece of poetry, art, anything you feel represents your letter.

My kids were excited. They loved the idea of their letters being sent to an influential, national organization. They loved that they were able to express themselves passionately and wholeheartedly, and that they could do it in their own words. I jumped the gun slightly and, name-dropping all the way, emailed Macey Morales, Director of the ALA's Public Awareness Office, ahead of time. Macey very kindly put me in touch with James LaRue, Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom. From him, I secured at least a nebulous inkling that their letters (if worthy) might see the light of publication. When I broke that news the next morning, anyone remaining even vaguely ambivalent

on the effort front was immediately pushed over the edge. These weren't just going to be letters in support of intellectual freedom. These were going to be, and I quote, "The. Best. Letters. EVER."

And you know what? They kind of were.

Below is an excerpt from each student's letter. Feel free to tear up, cheer, or do a happy dance. I did, many times. I have to give them credit, they took this assignment and ran with it, producing work beyond anything I could have expected. I am immensely proud of all of them, and it only breaks my heart that now, as I teach in a different school, I don't get to deliver this article and the ensuing praise face to face. But my kids should consider that candle lit. And if they have anything to do with it, it will remain burning brightly for quite some time to come.

Taking away our intellectual freedom turns us into robots. What someone decides to read in their free time should not be dictated by anyone. I have read some of the books that take place on the banned books list and they should not be there. Those books tell beautiful, thought provoking stories and those stories are being taken away from us. Though only a small amount of the many books out there are being banned, the act of banning books in general is just anathema to me, whether it be a handful of books like they do in our present day world, or all of the books like in *Fahrenheit 451*. . . . Humans need to be trusted. People should be able to read something and take what they will from it. We do not believe everything we hear, we live in a world where expressing your opinion with evidence and reasoning is honorable. Let us put these skills to good use and flourish. (Kylie Beausoleil)

I believe books are a form of art that and the writer is the artist. The writer expresses his or her emotions with words and through the book. Many artists for instance, Salvador Dali, Georgia O'Keefe or just nudes in general are vulgar and inappropriate to the viewer; But yet are viewed by thousands of people daily in museums and other public venues. Saying what a writer can and can't put in the book is destroying the creative genius. Sometimes the writer may have to use writing in the context of what happened during that time, and just because it is frowned upon today it doesn't mean that it didn't happen. (Thomas Buonanno)

There are many parallels between our society and *Fahrenheit 451* that could be drawn if groups of people and individuals continue to try to ban books and have authors censor their

writing, which leads me to another one of your resolutions: "Both governmental intimidation and the fear of censorship cause authors who seek to avoid controversy to practice self-censorship, thus limiting our access to new ideas." People that republish *Fahrenheit 451* will take out the words like "damn" and "hell" to allow it on to library and bookstore shelves. It has happened to other books as well, for example, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Where would society be if those books had been banned? I think that our society would be filled with people that do not appreciate the value of books and the ideas that fill them. I do not think I would like that society. (Grace Callaghan)

Freedom is a precious commodity that is cherished by this nation, so why do we take it for granted? Books are among our greatest teachers, and it is no coincidence that the nation's most cherished literary masterpieces have earned their spots on the list of banned novels. Protecting children from the difficult realities of the world is an exercise in futility. In a media-flooded world, information travels faster than any petition or town hall assembly. We are going to be exposed to controversy at one point or another, so we might as well learn something while we're at it. (Jackson Coyle)

It would be unfortunate if we, as a society, continue to restrict these ideas that provide us with valuable information about the world around us. The perspectives and opinions of everyone should be respected, especially if they are taking time to perfect and share their research, knowledge, and ideas about a subject. Even if people disagree with the ideas



presented, it is important to allow these contradictory works to be accessible to all. As Faber's third rule states, we must have "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two." We must not hinder this process of learning. We must encourage and facilitate the spreading of various ideas and standpoints on a subject, as this is the only way of learning and expanding our mindset. It is our duty as individuals, as a society, to pass the torch of unrestricted ideas and viewpoints to others, and to allow every work, disagreeable or not, to circulate, unrestricted, for all to learn. (Wesley Kane)

By banning books, our society is following in these footsteps of becoming mindless Mildreds. By banning books, those who ban books are closing people off from topics and situations that while uncomfortable, are real events that take place every day in the world. It is important for people to be aware of these events and take action instead of turning blind eyes because they are uncomfortable. By continuing to ban books, we are leading our society towards a numb, mindless world like the one in *Fahrenheit 451*. (Pauleena Kapoukranidis)

While reading some of the resolutions about Banned Books Week it stood out that one of the main reasons against banning book is because it goes against a person's personal freedom. People who want to ban books are often people who stick to the Constitution as their main defense of their beliefs. By doing this, but then turning around and banning books, they are being hypocrites because—as also pointed out by the resolutions—"The freedom to read is protected by our Constitution." People should be uncomfortable. Life hasn't, isn't, and will never be perfect, That's just a fact. By only believing what we want to believe we will also only be living in denial. In the gray boring world.

In conclusion I commend you for sticking up for books because we should not be celebrating banned book week. Every week should just be book week. (Abigail McNally)

I sincerely believe the act of banning books is a tragedy, because our society is so diverse. With the act of censoring these texts, we are also in a sense discriminating against diverse thinking and helping encourage students to have the same thought processes as well as the same way of comprehending different events, situations, and many other situations they may encounter in their lives. Everyone should be given the freedom to decide what they read and to comprehend the text themselves. That is why I believe there should be an end to the banning and censorship of books. Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist wrote; 'A book is

a version of the world. If you do not like it, ignore it or offer your own version in return.' The censorship of books should be left up to individuals themselves, primarily students themselves. They should be able to choose whether they wish to enrich themselves and form their own opinions and ideals based upon these literary works. Books should not be censored because of their content. A book is a lens into reality that every person should have the right to look through or ignore. This decision is not something anyone but you yourself, as the reader should be authorized to make. (Samantha Molleur)



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We must not allow others to dictate how we express ourselves. If people do not like what you have to say, or do not want to hear it, they can simply not listen. But it is no one's decision to tell another person what they can or cannot read and give attention to. Most people move to ban books because of their harsh language, or vulgar themes. But these things are truthful, they are real parts of life. If you don't like that then change it, work to do better, but don't ignore it. Don't shut it down. Books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* that cover the heavy themes of racism and prejudice that shadow our country's past are pushed out because people are offended by the language and hard to handle topics. But what they should really be offended by is that that was how people really acted in that time, and even now. This should drive them to want to make society better, not hide the truth of our unfortunate actions. You can't change things if you don't acknowledge the real problem, and that problem is certainly not the books. We have so much to learn from these stories, especially from *Fahrenheit 451*. It shows a grave image of where our society is going if we continue on the path we are on. It is for these reasons and for many more that we must not ban books. We must cherish them and welcome their ideas and what they have to offer our society in terms of helping it grow. These are all things that we should remember when we celebrate Banned Books Week. Banning books



will not solve our problems, but reading them just might.
(Elise Plonski)

Banning books is a way of suppressing the greatness that could occur if everyone was forced to think for themselves about the issues that really matter. This is why Banned Books Week is so important. We have to bring attention to the books that succeed in challenging our idea of “normal.” We have to force people to read and to understand things for themselves in their own special way, whether that understanding be the same, or different than others. We have to force people to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. A world without variety is a boring one. Without different opinions and beliefs, without people thinking for themselves, the world would not progress. Being able to formulate your own opinions is a form of education that creates

brilliance. Without opinions and dreams, brilliance wouldn't exist. And a world where brilliance doesn't exist is a world in which I don't want to live. (Mackenzie Stanton)

The idea that in the future our society could not only ban books, but burn them and the houses that contain them, is an incredibly terrifying thought. I believe that books shouldn't be banned for any reason. It's important to write and read books about controversial topics. The books will live on and people in the future will be able to learn about the issues of today and how the world used to be. They can compare their society with our own and reflect on our actions and on how their actions may mirror ours. Books document the progress of society, whether it be incremental or exponential, and help people to learn from their mistakes. (Baylee Wagner)

School ended for the summer, and I took up residence in Oxford as part of my graduate studies with The Bread Loaf School of English. Right outside my door was the Martyrs' Memorial, where Latimer and Ridley met their ends. I walked by it every day, and every day I whispered to myself “We shall this day light such a candle.” I had helped my kids light their own candles in the darkness of censorship and ignorance. I had helped them understand that the right to read and think unfortunately still cannot be taken for granted, and that they themselves must engage in the daily battle to preserve it and keep it alive. I hope that we as a society do not fulfill the prophecy laid down by Bradbury. I hope that we continue to challenge book banning and confront those who seek to do it. I hope that the generations of readers and thinkers to come

are able to use their eyes and minds however they choose. It is only this way, as my students say, that society will flourish and progress, that art will continue, that stories and words and emotions will continue. So let me push this candle lighting metaphor one step further, and gratefully take it up from all the teachers and librarians that have come before me, for the ones that actually had to fight to get a book on the syllabus or in a school, for the ones that because they fought made my life easier. And let me keep that candle burning for all those that will come after me. It is my fervent wish, yet it is also my fervent belief, that if each and every one of us does this, if each and every one of us champions the freedom to read and think, then, as Latimer said with his dying breath, “it shall never be put out.”