

Banning Books in Schools Promotes Ignorance and Intolerance

Thomas G. Palaima

“Banning books and ideas promotes ignorance and intolerance.”

In the following viewpoint Thomas G. Palaima argues that banning books is dangerous, since books and ideas counteract ignorance and intolerance. Palaima believes that many people unwisely treat censorship lightly, unaware of the difficult fights waged against censorship in the past and the danger still posed by it. Palaima worries that attempting to censor certain books in schools will deprive students of the opportunity to examine serious issues. Palaima is the Raymond F. Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics and director of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a regular contributor to the *Austin American-Statesman*.

Thomas G. Palaima, “A School’s Wise Stand Against Book Banning,” *Austin American-Statesman*, October 5, 2005. Reproduced by permission.

AS YOU READ, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. What quote by President Lyndon Baines Johnson does the author refer to in support of his view of the danger of banning books?
2. What are two of the books that the author identifies as having been banned in the past?
3. Palaima claims that works by what well-known Greek philosopher were banned in Greece from 1967 to 1976?

Banned Books Week, sponsored by the American Library Association, has come and gone so fast in Austin and at the University of Texas [UT] that it might have escaped your notice.

The Dangers of Banning Books

A search of UT's main Web site shows only one event the entire week, Sept. 24 to Oct. 1 [2005], devoted to the topic of book banning—a two-hour discussion sponsored by the Student Association of the School of Information. Why such apathy at a major research university about such an important topic? Well, I am ashamed to say that Banned Books Week almost passed me by, despite the fact that the library

association's Web site features an Austin connection. It quotes [former U.S. president] Lyndon Baines Johnson's [LBJ] belief that "books and ideas are the most effective weapons against intolerance and ignorance."

If you agree with LBJ, then it follows that banning books and ideas promotes ignorance and intolerance. Why, then, do we and other cultures throughout history censor what we read, hear,

see and discuss? Part of the answer, of course, is that tolerance and truth lie in the eyes of the beholders. We all have different opinions about whether ideas are good or bad, helpful or harmful, and who

FAST FACT

Banned Books Week (BBW), started in 1982, is an annual American Library Association (ALA) event during the last week of September that celebrates the freedom to read.

should be exposed to them. Just these kinds of issues led me to find out about Banned Books Week in the first place.

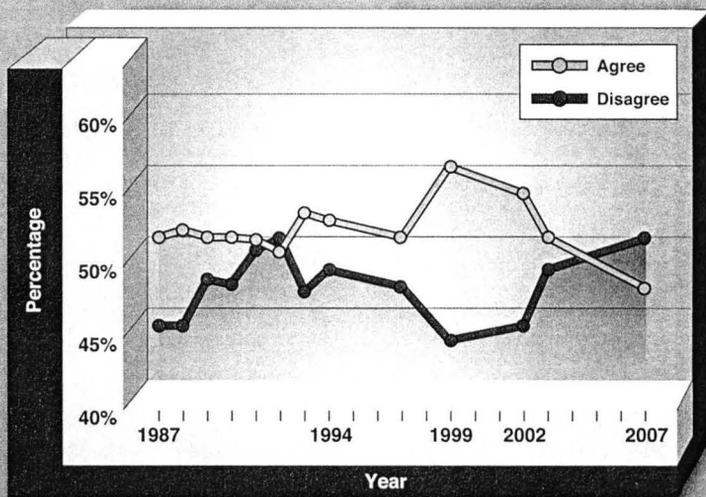
St. Andrew's Episcopal School here in Austin recently made a hard but wise decision. It resisted the influence of \$3 million and decided against a donor's wishes to ban the use of Pulitzer Prize-winner Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" in a 12th grade English class because of its gay sexual content. So I went out to find a copy of the offending work.

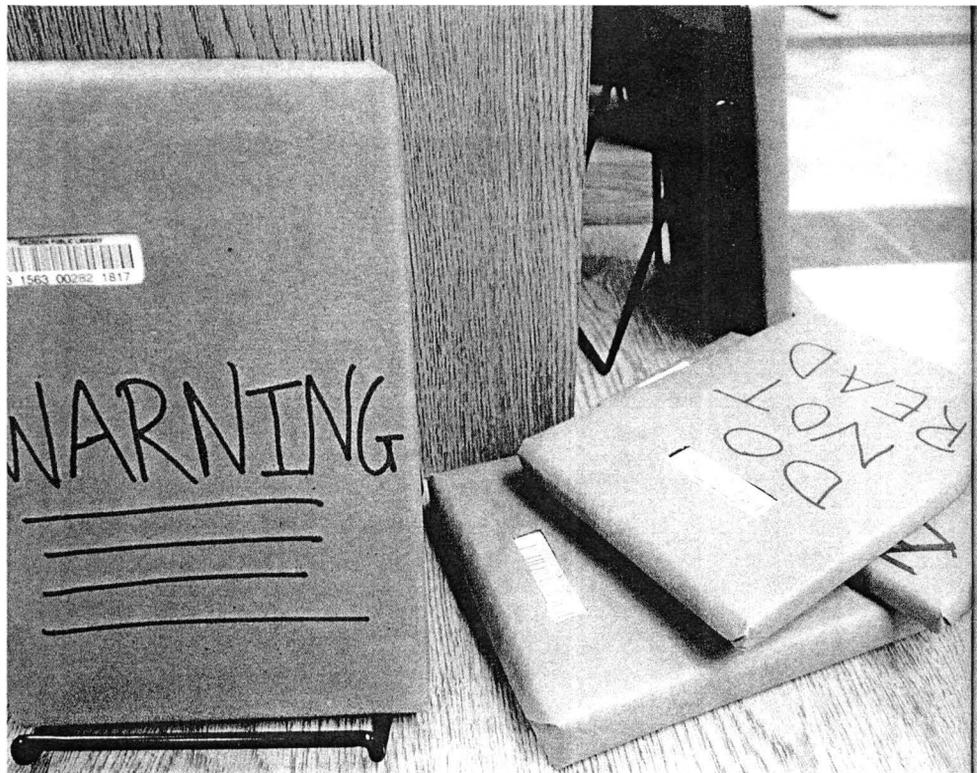
The Foundation for Free Inquiry

If, like me, you went into Half-Price Books at Lamar Boulevard and Koenig Lane [in Austin, TX], you would have seen a prominent display of "hot reading"—books that have been banned in the past. The

Changing Views on Book Banning

Books that contain dangerous ideas should be banned from school and public libraries:





The Gadsden Public Library in Gadsden, Alabama, shows a Banned Books Week display to recognize the American Library Association's efforts to encourage readers to judge books not by their covers, but without them.

display included Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and the Greek comic poet Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. It even had the Bible.

One reason for taking book censorship so lightly is how amusing it looks in retrospect, especially in our society, which at least in principle values openness and mutual understanding. It leads us to think that in time, people will come to their senses and reason will prevail. But this is a foolish way to think. The censorship documented in that book display was real, and it took personal courage and long, hard work to undo it.

Back in 1982 while at a conference in Prague, I stayed with a Czech family behind the Iron Curtain. Every night, the mother of the family stayed up reading a samizdat [secretly produced controversial or banned literature] carbon-copy typed version of Leon Uris' novel *Exodus*, about the founding of Israel. She had a week to read this

banned text and pass it on to someone else. For her, censorship was grim and repressive. Her teenage son wanted to play for me some contemporary folk music, but she cautioned against it.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* was not only banned in the United States. The right-wing Christian military dictatorship that the United States supported in Greece from 1967–1976 banned Aristophanes and Plato and other classical Greek works, which are the foundation for the free inquiry that has defined Western culture since the Renaissance.

Let Students Examine Issues

Politically motivated censorship is one thing, but what about telling an experienced teacher that she or he cannot read “Brokeback Mountain” with a class of 18-year-olds? Here we should think like LBJ. Books and ideas are effective against ignorance and intolerance. Most of these students are old enough to volunteer to fight and die in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many are knowledgeable about sex beyond the imaginations of middle-aged parents such as me. And many of them are starving to examine serious issues about life and to have their ideas taken seriously.

Efforts to censor works such as Proulx’s short story are sad. On literary or gay and lesbian Web sites, you will read messages like this: “‘Brokeback Mountain’ is one of the best stories I have ever read. It captures love, beyond borders, and reminds us that we never know how love will come to us. Hope that you recognize it when it does.” Our almost-grown children know all about sex. Don’t we want them to recognize what love is, too?

EVALUATING THE AUTHORS’ ARGUMENTS:

In this viewpoint Palaima argues that a short story such as “Brokeback Mountain” is valuable reading material for seniors in high school. What do you think Palaima would say about a suggestion—such as that from Warren Throckmorton, author of the previous viewpoint—that parental permission be required before students were allowed to read this story in class?