

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

A school's wise stand against book banning

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

A search of UT's main Web site shows only one event the entire week, Sept. 24 to Oct. 1, 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 Lyndon Baines Johnson's 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 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 "Broke Back 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.

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

Politically motivated censorship is one thing, but what about telling an experienced teacher that she or he cannot read "Broke Back 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: " 'Broke Back 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?

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.