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An Interview with Neal McCluskey: Banned Books? or Burned Books?

Posted by [Michael Shaughnessy](#) [EducationViews Senior Columnist](#) on October 5, 2012 in [Commentaries](#), [Daily](#), [Editor's Pick](#), [Insights on Education](#) | [0 Comment](#)



Michael F. Shaughnessy -

1) Neal it is supposedly “Banned Books Week “- I guess I didn't get the memo. But anyway, what is your initial reaction?

Banned Books Week is actually celebrating its 30th anniversary, so I've known about it for a while. My reaction is unchanging: It misses the primary ways in which government purchasing and assigning of books violates basic freedom.

First, it is understandably disquieting when people try to have books removed from the shelves of public libraries and schools, or taken off school reading lists. Those are the main concerns of the American Library Association and other Banned Book Week supporters. That said, such efforts are not really book “banning”. They are efforts to remove books from public institutions – institutions for which the “banners” must pay along with everyone else – not make it illegal for individuals to buy or possess the books. More important, by focusing only on efforts to remove books from public shelves, the week misses the root problem: that public institutions – government – buy and assign books in the first place. The instant a public institution decides to buy or assign one book and not another it privileges the speech of the selected author, a clear violation of government neutrality on speech. Worse yet, it compels people who may vehemently disagree with the selected speech to support it with their tax dollars, another blatant violation of freedom. Finally, when the “free” public schools that all people must support assign specific books they impose the content of those books on children. That's both a violation of free speech and a recipe for divisive conflict.

The problem isn't “banned” books. It is government selecting speech to support.

2) Are there books that should be banned, in your humble opinion?

Absolutely not, if by “banned” you mean the correct definition: forbidden to possess or read. If you mean removed from public shelves, the problem is the purchase to begin with. Buy a book and you violate the rights of those who dislike it. Remove it and you violate the rights of its supporters. One way or another, freedom is curbed.

3) And who are these wise souls that should be entrusted with the banning ?

Right now it's librarians, teachers, and school officials who decide on reading material. No one, though, truly bans books as far as I know.

4) I once wrote to Stephen King about his book "Misery" and told him he had gone too far. But just because he had some gruesome awful, terrible, horrible scenes- does that mean the entire book should be banned?

Gutsy move, telling Stephen King he'd gone over the line! And I – like many – would probably have a big problem with my child being assigned a book like Misery in school. But make it outright illegal to possess or read Misery – a true banning? No way!

5) Okay- politics—Karl Marx- The Communist Manifesto—should we leave it on the shelves?

We should privatize the shelves.

6) Now some individuals go a bit overboard in describing some sexual things- does that automatically make it eligible for burning?

Burning? Nope. Forcing others to pay for it or read it? Also, no way.

7) You indicate that "Banned Books Week Misses the Root Problem". What in your mind is the root problem?

It is government favoring of speech – and compelling support of it – that is the root problem. It is not people who are members of the public and who pay taxes objecting to what is selected. Force them to pay and they have every right to object.

8) Now what about pornography- should magazines fall under this " banning " or " burning " aspect?

Again,no. But would we say public libraries should have to carry pornography? Few people probably would, but if government purchases expression it must not discriminate. That means it should have to purchase every sort of expression there is. Or, as makes infinitely more sense, it should get out of the business of running libraries and schools.

9) What have I neglected to ask?

I think you got it all.