

THE STAR DEMOCRAT

Exciting, illuminating book "The Words We Live By" makes the Constitution come alive

Nat Hentoff
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The arrival in August of an updated, expanded edition of Linda Monk's book, "The Words We Live By" (Hachette Books), reminded me of my initial rush of enthusiasm when I first wrote about it in The Washington Postcolumn I had at the time.

Monk subtitled her book "Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution," but it is actually a swinging adventure story of how Americans came to define themselves as a nation through the struggle to keep the Constitution functioning as the guarantor of our most fundamental liberties. Without exaggeration, I am convinced that this book should be taught in every classroom, and be on every citizen's reading list as an essential reference manual for evaluating candidates in the upcoming 2016 elections.

"My hope in writing this book is to make widely available the knowledge of the Constitution I acquired at Harvard Law School, without oversimplification or ideological bias," Linda Monk told me recently. "My job as an author is not to tell citizens what to think, but to equip them with the information they need to make up their own minds."

"The Words We Live By" makes even the most complex Supreme Court cases understandable to the average reader by integrating expert legal analysis with compelling storytelling and popular culture references. Monk has updated the revised edition with almost 100 new cases that tackle topical issues such as the legal battles over Obamacare, same sex-marriage, campaign finance reform, gun rights, NSA surveillance, abortion and affirmative action. The legal cases are made relevant to the reader through stories about people at the forefront of these issues; among them NSA surveillance whistleblower Edward Snowden, George Takei (Mr. Sulu of "Star Trek") and the families of the Newtown shooting victims.

The revised edition of "The Words We Live By" comes not a moment too soon. The results of the 2015 "State of the First Amendment" survey, produced annually by the Newseum Institute, reflect that too many Americans know too little about the Constitution and its relevance to their everyday lives. The survey asked 1,002 adult Americans the following question: "As you may know, the First Amendment is part of the U.S. Constitution. Can you name any of the specific rights that are guaranteed by the First Amendment?"

The First Amendment to the Constitution — “The First Freedom,” as the title to my 1988 book describes it — is part of the basic civics and history curriculum we expect every student to be taught in every school in the United States. It says: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Yet the Newseum Institute’s survey — which has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points — found that only 10 percent of respondents knew the First Amendment guarantees the freedom of the press. Only 19 percent knew that it guarantees freedom of religion, while only 2 percent were able to say it guarantees the right to petition. And 33 percent of the respondents — representing a third of the American public — were unable to name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment.

The importance of the revised edition of Linda Monk’s illuminating book is reflected in the survey’s dismal findings. There is a desperate need for a re-examination of the education of American school children — and the American public at large — on the Constitution of the United States and the importance of preserving the liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. “The Words We Live By” is a fine starting point for such an examination into how we can fill this dangerous void in public education and awareness.

During the 2016 election, citizens armed with the knowledge from this exciting book can use it to evaluate candidates at every level of political office — from local town councils to the presidency of the United States — by asking penetrating questions about the candidates’ positions on issues that impact our Constitutional liberties. Without knowledge of the Constitution — and the struggle to preserve its most fundamental values over the past two centuries — it becomes impossible for citizens to engage politicians in meaningful discussions about the issues that impact their lives and, fundamentally, what it means to be an American.

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.