



Burned

An English Teacher Talks About the Freedom to Read— In Her Own Classroom and Across the Nation

By Carmelita Seufert

Next July, bookstores across the country will be stocking their shelves with the seventh and final installment of what may be the most popular book series of all time: *Harry Potter*. At midnight on the day of its release, millions of kids will line up outside their local bookstores, donning round, black spectacles.

Now imagine if those eager fans were stopped at the doors and told that they were no longer allowed to buy a *Harry Potter* book. The explanation? It had been *banned*.

Wait a second, don't we ban activities that are dangerous—things like driving too fast and smoking cigarettes in public places? How can reading a book be dangerous? Well, believe it or not, sometimes books *are* banned, even *Harry Potter*.

HITTING CLOSE TO HOME

Last year, I experienced a battle over book banning firsthand. I never thought that would happen to me in my career as a teacher. The parents of one of my ninth-grade students challenged one of the books I was teaching. According to the American Library Association (ALA), a challenge is "an attempt to remove or restrict materials [from public access] based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials."

The novel in question was *Grendel*, by John Gardner, and it is taught by all ninth-grade honors

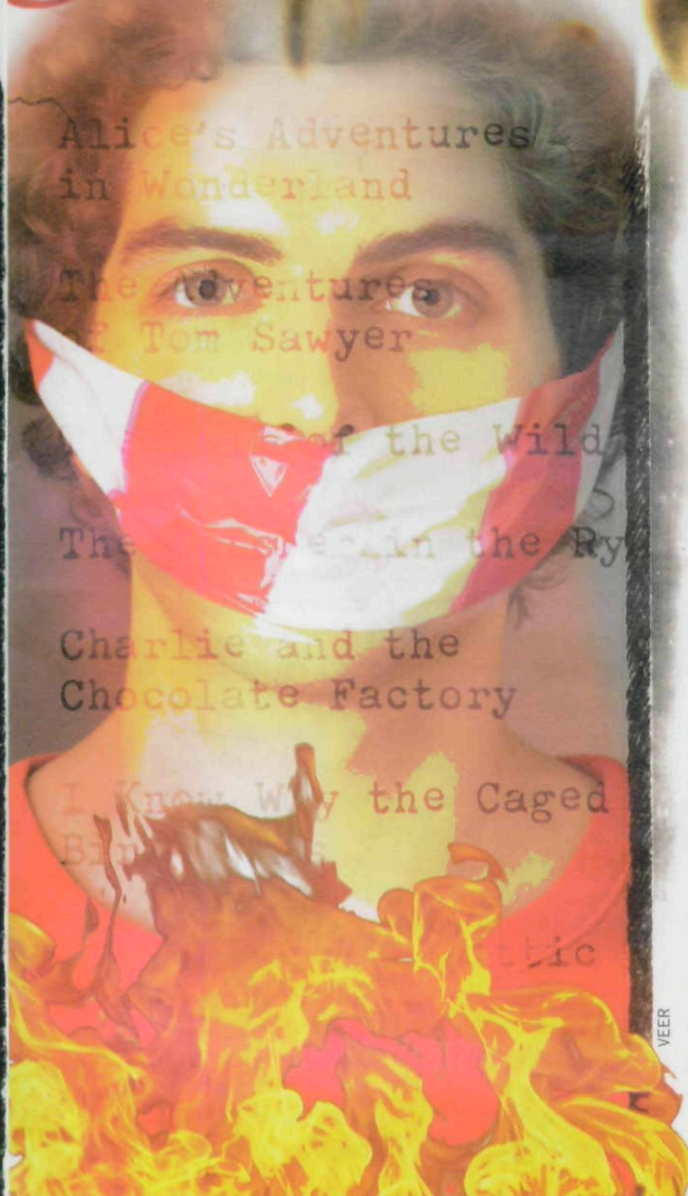
English teachers at my school. *Grendel* is the monster in the classic epic poem *Beowulf*. In the poem's battle of good versus evil, *Beowulf* is the hero, and *Grendel* is the villain. Gardner's book tells the story through the eyes of—and with sympathy for—the monster, flipping the perspective.

Switching the story's point of view allows readers to question the monster's **motives** and decide whether *Grendel* is truly evil. The parents who challenged the book felt that there is enough evil in the world and that schools should teach only uplifting books. My feeling is that the world is made up of both good *and* evil, and for students to decide where they stand, they must first explore the nature of good and evil, argue about it, change their minds a few dozen times, and then come to a decision.

Before last year, I had no idea what an ordeal it would be to make sure a challenged book stayed in my curriculum. It was a long and **grueling** process that resembled a court battle.

The National Council of Teachers of English and the ALA provide support for teachers in my position. They provided evidence from previous cases involving the challenged book. Then the other teachers at my school and I put together a binder of evidence to prove that *Grendel* is worth teaching. We even asked our students for help. I think the letters from kids who had read the book helped us save *Grendel* from collecting dust in our book room.

Banned



Finally, after weeks of waiting, we got word that *Grendel* had been found innocent on all charges. The decision then needed to go before the superintendent, who voted yes on keeping the book.

For now, in my district, *Grendel* is a free monster. But that doesn't mean other books won't face challenges in the future. My experience with *Grendel* gave me some sympathy for *Harry*.

NOT SO WILD ABOUT HARRY

Since the first *Harry Potter* book was published in the United States in 1998, J. K. Rowling's fantasy series has been causing a stir. Some people think that it promotes sorcery and the occult and that kids shouldn't be reading about such things. Earlier this year, a parent in Gwinnett County, Ga., tried to get *Harry Potter* books removed from her school district's libraries and classrooms. She called the books "evil," and she gave the board of education a list of reasons that the books should be forbidden. But *Harry* had some strong defenders. Some parents were glad their kids were reading instead of spending hours in front of the television. Some teachers thought the books were valuable literary examples of the classic fight between good and evil. And some kids said they had

vocab

MOTIVES—reasons for one's actions

GRUELING—difficult and exhausting

Germany 1933



USA 2001



'It's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers.' — author Judy Blume

never been so excited about a book before Harry flew onto the scene.

Harry Potter was given the OK in Gwinnett County, but some other school districts have chosen to ban the books. And the young wizard is not alone. Many other books are currently off-limits for some kids. Remember reading the *Captain Underpants* series back in elementary school? Well, those zany pranksters George and Harold are not allowed in some schools and libraries. The same is true for Shel Silverstein's wacky take on poetry *A Light in the Attic*, as well as nearly every Judy Blume book.

Two books my ninth graders are crazy about, Francesca Lia Block's punk fantasy *Weetzie Bat* books and *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson, have been taken out of classrooms across the nation.

Earlier this year in Colorado, copies of the novel *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, were confiscated from a ninth-grade classroom and burned by parents (that's *burned*, not *banned*!). In other places, there are huge gaps in the *K* sections of local libraries because horror writer Stephen King's books have been permanently snatched from the shelves. The author of such creepy tales as *Carrie*, *Cujo*, and *It*, King is one of the most banned authors of all time. Another book popular among

high school students is Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. That tale of a boy's struggles as he begins high school was one of the 10 most banned books of 2005. If you think your favorite book is safe ... think again.

WHY BAN?

Book banners have been around a long time, and in the past they've been very successful at getting rid of books they didn't like. In ancient Greece, stories were banned or changed before most people could read them. Sometimes the written works were burned. That was a good way of permanently getting rid of a book, because the printing press hadn't been invented yet, and often only one or two handwritten copies existed. In Nazi Germany during the early 20th century, books deemed unacceptable by Adolf Hitler's government were commonly burned in public as a way of instilling fear and blind obedience into the people there.

Why do people try to ban books? Sometimes, they may have the best of intentions. They may think a book explores an unsuitable topic or contains unacceptable language. They could simply choose not to read the book. But sometimes they feel so strongly that they think they must stop

LEFT: ULLSTEIN BILD/THE GRANGER COLLECTION; RIGHT: AP WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

everyone else from reading it too. It seems that as long as people have opposing views on life, and one group believes its view is the *only* correct view, books will be challenged.

TOUGH QUESTIONS

Since going through the challenge battle, I've had time to reflect, and it has made me wonder about the very nature of book restrictions. Some books have been banned in local libraries as well as in schools. Hey, that affects me—an adult! Should other adults tell me what I can and cannot read?

Parents have the right to restrict what their own children read. But do those same moms and dads have the right to tell other kids what they can and can't read? Doesn't that decision belong to the parents of those children? That is what happens when a book is challenged. The book banners have decided what is good not only for their own children but also for an entire community of children.

So, should there be *any* restrictions on books? The question is trickier than you might think. Should a second-grade classroom have gruesome horror novels on its bookshelves? Should a middle school offer books on bomb building and terrorist tactics? How about books promoting racial hatred? Should any public library offer such material? If your answer to any of the above questions is no, then who decides? Teachers? Librarians? Parents? The government? Where does our constitutionally protected freedom of speech (and by extension, freedom to read) bump up against society's responsibility to protect its citizens? Mind-boggling, isn't it?

That argument has existed for centuries and undoubtedly will continue into the future. Although the ultimate decision about who reads which books is an adult decision, kids can play a role. More and more kids are getting involved in defending books and having their voices and opinions heard.

BANNED BOOKS WEEK

September 23–30, 2006, is the ALA's annual Banned Books Week. Check out the Web site at ala.org/bbooks to see banned and challenged book lists that date back to 1990. Click on *For Young People* to find information about freedom of thought.

BANNED OR CHALLENGED BOOKS

Here are some well-known books that are among the most frequently banned or challenged.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,
by Mark Twain



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,
by Lewis Carroll



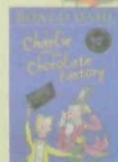
The Call of the Wild,
by Jack London



The Catcher in the Rye,
by J. D. Salinger



Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,
by Roald Dahl



I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,
by Maya Angelou



A Light in the Attic,
by Shel Silverstein



Little House on the Prairie,
by Laura Ingalls Wilder



WRITE ABOUT IT

Book banning is not the only way to restrict freedom of thought and expression. Recently—as well as historically—certain music groups, movies, newspapers, and radio and TV shows have been subject to various forms of censorship.

Choose one such example from recent news events. Research the topic, and write an opinion piece about it. Take a position either defending the restriction or arguing against it. Support your arguments with facts.

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