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Book Censorship Article

**Should We Censor What Teens Read?**

*THE BLOG*

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By Peter Brown Hoffmeister

I was walking back from my high school’s audio-visual room with my English 9 students. We were all carrying our new class book, a memoir titled *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls. Another teacher happened to be walking down the hall in the middle of our group, and saw the book that my students were holding in their hands. She approached me.

“Hey,” she said quietly, “do you warn students before they read that book?”
“Sorry, what?”
“I mean...that book’s pretty serious,” she said. “There are a lot of triggers in it.”
“Right. Actually, I did warn them. I told them how intense it might be for some of them and that the book has some really gritty elements.” I said I warned them in the same way that a movie has a rating. I let the students know that they were going to read the difficult journey of an American girl, and that she was going to experience some things that might disturb them. The teacher and I quietly talked about the elements, but she wasn’t satisfied. “I just don’t know,” she said. “That book’s really dark.” Her face was a combination of a wince and a frown. Clearly she didn’t think that *The Glass Castle* was appropriate for high school students.

I almost asked if the book was too real for her, but I didn’t want to fight over a book in front of my students, and so far we’d kept our voices down. We’d acted like professionals. So I kept walking.
Even though I was the teacher who acquired *The Glass Castle* for our English department, I wasn’t offended. First, *The Glass Castle* isn’t very dark. I know that it isn’t too dark in the context of memoirs because I read contemporary memoirs regularly and I’m also the author of a dark, contemporary memoir (*The End of Boys*). Second, I’ve never argued much when I’ve encountered literary conservatives or would-be censors. So I didn’t say anything. But then I thought about it for a couple of days and realized that this is an important fight - the fight against book censorship - and that I have to stand up and challenge this insidious point of view.

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| ***Explain the difference between the author’s attitude and the teacher’s attitude towards* The Glass Castle**. | **Justification** |
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To fight any argument, we have to understand the positions our opponents hold. So - to summarize - these would-be book censors believe the following:

1. We need to protect young people.
2. Teenagers can’t handle gritty material.
3. Teens won’t understand what’s going on if the material is too complex.

On the issue of protecting teens by not allowing them to read certain books, isn’t that one of the founding doctrines of the average 20th Century European fascist dictator? We need to protect the people by not allowing them to read dangerous ideas. If we do in fact allow people to read anything serious, there could be dangerous consequences.

Also, because I hang out with adults and teenagers on a daily basis, I know that the people-group I hear talk about horror movies most passionately and regularly is high school freshmen. The adults I know rarely watch horror movies, and my seniors rarely talk about them either. But 14 and 15-year-olds LOVE the horror genre. And if they’re allowed to watch gratuitous and graphic violence on the screen, what are we protecting them from in books?

If we censor and limit teens’ reading material, don’t we then stunt their intellectual development?
Also, can we actually protect teens from swearing, sexuality, bigotry, and violence? Aren’t they getting regular doses of all of those while watching Netflix, television, movies, or Youtube? Don’t professional athletes regularly use homosexual slurs? Isn’t “Game Of Thrones” full of rape and incest? Aren’t the hallways at the average U.S. high school populated by teens who sometimes use the F-word and/or disparaging terms for many people groups? I’m not saying that bigotry and violence and rape are good things. Clearly they’re terrible. But they’re also common occurrences in contemporary media and secondary schools. So is protection even possible?

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| ***Explain the author’s overall stance on censorship.*** | **Justification** |
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Teens reading [these books] will discover real-world issues, real-world language, and real-world situations. They will read those very *real* scenes and have to decide how they feel about them. In reading a real book, they will sometimes laugh, sometimes cry, and sometimes root for or against certain characters and events. In short, they will have normal responses to lifelike things. And what’s wrong with that?

Finally, let’s talk about the most ridiculous argument for censorship: “Teens are not able to understand complex material.”

Young adults are simply young *adults*. They are not feeble-minded or mentally-limited people. They are not weak and they don’t struggle with cognitive issues. Most high school students aren’t old enough to buy cigarettes or enlist in the Army, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be challenging their minds and expanding their worldviews with excellent literature of all types. In my experience as a high school teacher, I’ve found teens capable of incredibly insightful readings of novels and nonfiction. I’ve seen teens be creative, argumentative, philosophical, and opinionated. They often discover something in a text that I’ve never thought of. So why shouldn’t we put excellent literature in their hands?...Why do we limit teens’ lives and disparage their abilities as learners? Why do we think that a teen is less capable than the average adult?

Teens have an opportunity in their classrooms and homes, an opportunity to take back their education. They have an opportunity to challenge and develop their capacities for empathy and understanding. They can demonstrate curiosity and zeal, can question what has been taken from them, and demand that they get it back.

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| **Partner Talk**  |
| ***Do you agree or disagree with the author’s stance on censorship?*** | **Justification** |
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| ***What is the author’s purpose for writing this article?*** | **Justification** |
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| ***Select a piece of text evidence that best supports the author’s main idea of the article.*** | **Justification** |
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