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Banning Rights

Advocating for banning books is advocating against someone else's rights, rights to read what he or she wants to read. Fran Bogos, retired teacher of remedial reading, speech, and debate spoke on "Banned Books: Facts, Opinion, and Legislation" at the local American Association of University Women's (AAUW) May branch meeting. The program, described in the AAUW's "Focus," v. 53, No. 9, was presented in conjunction with the Murrysville Community Library, and it was very well attended.

Ms. Bogos gave the attendees highlight stories. One was about her father, who when she was just a young girl, tried his best to control what she could read according to her age of the moment. But, a very important "but," he did not invoke his views on the public. He did not seek to ban anything for others. In some depth, she also provided evidence about how certain organizations seek to advance their banning agenda through individuals of like mind. The voice being heard is that of the individual making the challenge publicly, rather than that of the organization behind the challenge, which itself is not necessarily a wavefront of majority, or informed, view.

On a table for the occasion, staff had assembled an array of books, which those who enjoy classics, might say are more modern classics. They were marked by ribbons on the table announcing them as having suffered banning. It is interesting to me that a fair number of those books are also on the list of the American Library Association's (ALA) top 100 most frequently challenged books of the last decade, 2010 – 2019.

Here are some titles from the ALA list, almost all on the "banned" table: (1) "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison; (2) "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee; (3) "A Brave New World" by Aldous Huxley; (4) "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck; (5) "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood; (6) "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain; (7) "Persepolis" by Marjane Satrapi; (8) "Beloved" by Toni Morrison; (9) "The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger; (10) "Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl" by Anne Frank; (11) "1984" by George Orwell; and (12) "Awakening" by Kate Chopin.

The ALA estimates that 82 to 97% of challenges go unreported, so this selection of books is merely a snapshot. However, the snapshot is one of closed minds who wish to put the clamps on the rights of others to hear voices of diversity in scholarship and authorship. How saddening is that for them, for the challengers, that they will not open their hearts and minds to views of others. Importantly, unlike Ms. Bogo's father, they wish to isolate others who do not share their parochial views, who do wish to learn and enjoy, and who do not wish to have their own rights ripped away from them.

I have read all but one of the above books at one time or another. I am a much better person for it, more understanding of other viewpoints and more tolerant. I am a better citizen of our democracy for it. I am, and I say this humbly, a better writer for it. And I wonder this: Can any challenger honestly say that he or she is any of that for being a challenger of the rights of others to read? I would bet the house that none can so claim

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honestly. I doubt that any can justly claim that by suffocating the rights of others he or she is better in any way for it.

So what is the purpose in banning? Ask that.

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