

12TH GRADE FIRST PLACE WINNER: KAREN VYVERBERG

“The Right to Read” by Karen Vyverberg, Gainesville High School
Teacher: Kathy Bergeron

Consider that Shel Silverstein’s A Light in the Attic was banned in 1980 because it “encourages children to break dishes so that they won’t have to dry them.” Now, what are the odds that, after reading Silverstein’s poem, any kid *actually* broke a plate so he didn’t have to dry it? Despite the fact that readers generally have better foresight than fictional characters, books have been censored for as long as they’ve been written. As far back as 360 B.C. the great philosopher Plato, in engineering the “ideal Republic”, deemed that “[the Republic’s] first business will be to supervise the making of fables and legends rejecting all which are unsatisfactory.” Even the forward-thinking ancient Greeks were illiberal about the literature they created.

Early book banning was predominately religious in motive. King Henry VIII of England - ever the righteous ruler – required all manuscripts to be reviewed by Church of England authorities before they could be printed. The Roman Catholic Church published the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559. It was the earliest and most infamous list of prohibited works, and was not dismantled until 1966 when it had expanded to include five thousand books. It took four hundred and seven years of internationally censoring literature before Pope Paul VI judiciously ended the publication of the *Index*.

Today book banning is mostly local, and the complaints against the books have expanded to include not only religious reasons, but profanity, sexual content, occult/witchcraft, “politically incorrect” or racist/sexist language, new age philosophy, homosexuality, and violence. Basically, anything that anyone could possibly consider “vulgar” is at risk of censorship.

The landmark case in book banning was decided in 1975, and the reasons listed above were cited as legitimate evidence against the books. The board members of the Island Trees School District on Long Island, New York, heeded the advice of the conservative Parents of New York United group and decided that several books in the school libraries were unfit for students to read. According to the law they were supposed to appoint a committee to review the books before they were banned, but the school board chose to side step this technicality and “unofficially” take the books out of the libraries. A committee then advised the school board to put the books back on the shelves, but they declined. As would be expected, the students did not take the violation of their constitutional rights lightly. Led by seventeen-year-old Steven Pico, a group of high school students sued the school board for violating their First Amendment rights. The case bounded between appeals courts before being taken to the Supreme Court, where the justices ruled 5-4 in favor of the students. In commenting on the decision, Justice William Brennan explained it best: because the First Amendment guarantees the right to express opinions, citizens have the implicit right to receive that information.

Aside from the blatant violation of the First Amendment, I personally find the concept of banning and censoring books to be illogical and pointless. Like most teenagers, if an authority figure tells me I'm not allowed to do something, then the restricted act becomes even more appealing. Even if I've never heard of the book before, a banned book would tempt me just because some official thought I wasn't mature enough to read it. Naturally, I would want to read it just to prove that official wrong. In addition, banning books is pretty much pointless in terms of effectiveness. I probably hear more vulgar language in my high school cafeteria than I could ever read in any novel from a school library. I brush shoulders with pregnant girls in the hallways every day, and – remarkably it seems – I am not inspired to go out and have sex. If school officials really want to keep kids from exposure to controversial areas such as race and rebellion, then they would have to ban our iPods, televisions, and computers too. I would feel sorry for the poor school official who'd dare the impossible feat of prying teenagers away from technology.

What it all comes down to is this: censoring and banning books is as senseless as it is unconstitutional. Popes, Supreme Court Justices, and kids alike have all denounced the practice that the Founding Fathers protected American citizens against in the first place. As Americans, my fellow students and I have the right to receive the concepts and ideas that others are guaranteed the right to express. Besides, if school officials decided to ban me from reading a book, I would just order it from Amazon.