



## RIGHT TO READ

Teri S. **Lesesne**



# The Tip of the Iceberg

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**D**uring our spring break, my husband and I spent a day at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Several exhibits piqued the interest of my majored-in-anthropology husband. We toured Ancient Egypt and the cave paintings of Lascaux. We saw one of the extant copies of the Magna Carta and spent an hour with the butterflies fluttering through a rain forest. On the way out of the museum, we stopped at the gift shop to look for a magnet to add to our collection representing places we have visited. We passed a display of books with its accompanying poster proclaiming, “From a snowflake to an iceberg,” reflecting another of the museum’s exhibits. However, it was not the topic of the book that caught my interest. It was the single word *iceberg*. I had been mulling over what I wanted to write about when it comes to censorship, and the idea of “snowflake to iceberg” coalesced some errant thoughts I had already jotted down.

Most of us are familiar with the fact that 90% of icebergs are unseen; they exist below our line of vision. I think that the hidden nature of the bulk of an iceberg makes it a perfect metaphor for a column on censorship. So much censorship lurks beneath the surface; much of it is off the radar. We need to extend our definition of censorship to cover instances that lurk beneath our notice or that might reflect a new, more subtle form of censorship. I hope that we can sound the alarm well before the iceberg of censorship

sinks the ship of books and reading and writing and teaching.

ALAN has long been a strong voice in the censorship arena, including sending letters supporting teachers, authors, and librarians who are facing challenges. It has also joined voices with NCTE, our parent organization, and ALA—specifically YALSA, the Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association, and OIF, ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom. I hope to contribute to that effort and want to thank the editors for including my own small voice here. In this inaugural column, I will talk about the iceberg that lurks ahead, something that cannot just obstruct forward movement but can cause catastrophic damage to the freedom to read.

## The Danger of Icebergs

### The Tip Provides a Warning

The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (ALAOIF) tracks challenges and notes that, in 2008, there were more than 500 reported challenges. That figure drops precipitously to 460 in 2009, then 348 in 2010, and 326 in 2011. There is an increase for 2012 to 464. These numbers do not appear to be significant on the surface. But we need to take into consideration a few other facts.

First, many challenges and book bannings are never reported. ALAOIF asserts that for every ban or challenge reported, 4-5 incidents go unreported. So we must consider the 20% of challenges that we see as a warning about the 80% of the challenges that might be “below the surface.” Warnings also exist in the obvious efforts to censor, because we know

that other efforts are deviously subtle. Consider these examples:

- An administrator comes to the school library and asks that a book causing controversy in a neighboring district be removed temporarily from the collection until “things quiet down.”
- Patrons of a public library borrow a controversial book, claim they have lost it, and pay the fine, hoping that the book will not be replaced. If it is added back to the collection, another patron will come to check it out and lose it.
- A school librarian receives a survey from a parent group asking her or him to check off titles that are in the school library collection.
- A local group with a patriotic name stands on the steps of the public library with a mulching machine into which they feed the books they deem harmful, books they want removed from shelves.

I think all of us would define the last scenario as an obvious example of censorship. The other three examples, however, represent realities potentially more dangerous because they are likely not seen. I know about the preceding incidents because they occurred in my neighborhood, in schools my children attended, at the public library down the road. However, I doubt that many outside of my community know that censorship is this stealthy. After all, also hidden are the books targeted, the places where the challenges are occurring, and the results of such challenges.

*This is the iceberg of censorship, and as we confront the warnings we see in the tip, we must remember that the bottom of the censorship iceberg is indeed formidable. Much of it is never witnessed by anyone outside of the incident, and it is difficult to tackle what we cannot see, to prepare for challenges, to develop appropriate practices than can withstand this hidden attack on freedom to read.*

### **A Greater Threat Lurks beneath the Surface**

There is a second cause for concern about how deeply censorship might be cutting into our freedom to read, our FREEDOM, if you will, and that is gatekeeping. I was blissfully unaware of this incidence of preemptive censorship until I was interviewing YA author Barry Lyga many years ago. He was part of a panel on censorship for a Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) of the American Library Association when

I asked him about his experience with would-be censors of *Boy Toy* (2007). Lyga reported that he encountered little push back on this novel that focuses on a young boy who is sexually abused by a teacher and what happens once that teacher is released from jail. When I expressed surprise, Lyga began talking about the fact that his book was not even being purchased for library shelves in many schools.

This practice of not purchasing potentially controversial materials—gatekeeping—is a silent censorship, part of that below-the-surface section of the iceberg. How many books are never purchased for a collection because of the fear that they *might* provoke a challenge? A decade ago, a survey of several Texas school libraries revealed that many collections did not include titles that appear regularly on lists of challenged and censored titles. Similarly, *School Library Journal* surveyed hundreds of librarians and found that almost three-quarters of respondents would consider not adding a controversial book to their collections (Whelan, 2009; see <http://www.slj.com/2009/02/censorship/a-dirty-little-secret-self-censorship>). This is not an isolated case, as Rickman (2010) observed in her research on self-censorship.

A survey I conducted with colleagues (Lesesne, Hynes, & Warnock, 2013) resulted in similar conclusions. We found that certain topics and issues may lead to gatekeeping, to self-censorship. To date, there has not been research about classroom libraries and how they might also be problematic. Are we limiting students' access to books via gatekeeping? Are there texts we avoid adding to our classroom shelves for fear of potential challenges? This is a deadly part of that censorship iceberg that lurks beneath the surface.

Hand in hand with gatekeeping comes the practice of “dis-inviting” authors from scheduled school visits. Last year, Rainbow Rowell and Meg Medina, two authors whose books received recognition from the American Library Association's Youth Media Awards, had their author visits cancelled (<http://ncacblog.wordpress.com/2013/09/13/talks-cancelled-for-ya-authors-meg-medina-and-rainbow-rowell>). In 2010, Ellen Hopkins received similar treatment, being dis-invited from an appearance at a teen book festival (<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2022356,00.html>).

I would add to this discussion of gatekeeping another subtle form of limiting reading and expression:

filtering. I understand the need for CIPA (the Children's Internet Protection Act). Keeping children safe while online is a task schools do take seriously. However, filters can also prevent information from reaching the people who need it the most. Filters might prevent a student from accessing information about breast cancer or stop a student from finding information about LGBTQ topics. Indeed, several lawsuits have claimed that school libraries are unfairly restricting access to information. As someone who travels to present workshops on books and reading, I can attest to various instances of filtering gone awry. There are district buildings inhabited only by adults where the filters prevent access to Facebook, Twitter, and a host of websites. I have learned to travel with my own modem so that I can use the hyperlinks in presentations to show a YouTube video or explain how Twitter can be utilized as a Personal Learning Network (PLN) for educators.

Filters are not the only restrictions facing many educators. In addition, there are districts across the country that limit postings to social networks by their employees. This limitation of free speech is troubling. The legal issues that arise from limiting teachers' use of social media are complex as well, as this brief discusses: <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1393&context=lsfp>. Is it possible to draw a line between what is deemed "acceptable" and "unacceptable" by a school or district or state? When is the right of an educator to speak her or his mind "unacceptable"? This potential for censorship is one that will not be easily solved by policies, I suspect.

## Diving Deeper

Censorship extends even deeper than the previous sections illustrate, though. A widespread narrowing of the freedom to read comes from a source we might not readily suspect: programmed approaches to books and reading. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Accelerated Reader, and other programs that limit the books students may read can also be forms of censorship. When an 8th grader is told he or she may not read *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen or *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins because these titles are not in his Zone of Proximal Development or her Lexile band, reading has been curtailed and/or limited.

While canned programs and curricula will note that lists, scores, numbers, and the like are not meant to be the sole guideline for selecting books to use within the classroom, this is disingenuous at best. When the curriculum or program demands that students read books only at (or in the case of CCSS, above) their grade level, they do narrow the selections teachers might use and students might read.

The aforementioned *Nightjohn* has a Lexile that places it within the band for 3rd grade and a 3.8 reading level, according to AR measures. *The Hunger Games* comes in at a 3rd- or 4th-grade Lexile measure and a 5.3 reading level

(though the companion book based on the movie has a 7th-grade reading level, interestingly enough). I do not want to be sidetracked here with the lack of reliability of using scores and numbers and formulae to select materials, but the bottom line is that using scores and levels and numbers does deny access in classrooms

that are adhering strictly to the demands of such curricular programs and packages. It is possible to include books not already on the recommended lists. However, the process for selecting those books is long and involved. Given the constraints on time caused by a new curriculum and new tests, it is doubtful that many educators will have the time, much less support, to do the necessary work to include more diverse titles, more contemporary titles, and titles with a wider band of complexity as measured by levels and Lexiles.

Perhaps a step back here is advisable. Lists, in and of themselves, can be limiting, can narrow what children might read. Whether the lists are the ones currently making rounds on Facebook ("How many books on *this* list have *you* read?"), or the ones defining the classics, or the ones compiled by various organizations, lists are limited and limiting. Starred review lists, award lists, best books lists from a wide range of people and organizations are useful for educators. However, if educators use these lists alone without paying attention to the individual needs and

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interests of their students, we all lose. When you put together a list, be sure to ask yourself *What is the purpose of this list? Is there any way I might be limiting what someone could elect to read?* I wrestle with these questions each semester as I put together my required reading list for the YA literature course I teach. Am I providing as broad a list as possible? Is something missing? I solicit student feedback each semester as well. This list continues to evolve; I doubt it will ever be the same from one year to the next.

### **Sounding the Alarm: Preventing a Collision**

In 2011, in response to challenges put forth against Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and other titles, Paul Hankins and David Gill assembled a blog and Twitter campaign entitled SpeakLoudly. As a result of these efforts, *Speak* was ultimately returned to the shelves. Other books, sadly, were not, including Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. When Wendy Glenn and her anti-censorship committee began to write about this issue in the *ALAN Newsletter*, they adopted the title SpeakLoudly as well. This same committee created an incredible resource page at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/censorship-committe>. You can also look at past issues of the newsletter and the SpeakLoudly columns from this archive page at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-newsletter-archives>. The work of this group continues under the leadership of Barbara Ward.

I think this idea of speaking loudly is essential for us all. Pastor Martin Niemoller (1963) put the need to SpeakLoudly thusly: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not

speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me" (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>).

If we permit a challenge to go unanswered, we run the risk of making more challenges even easier. We must fight, we must SpeakLoudly, for *all* books and not just those that might be our favorites. If we do not speak up in defense of books and the freedom to read (and write), we might as well abrogate all of our responsibility to a computer program or someone outside of our classrooms to make the list of approved books. When that happens, who will be dictating the content that is deemed acceptable?

Recently, author A.S. King wrote about censorship on her blog, *Here's Me Using the Word Blog in a Sentence* (<http://www.as-king.info/2014/03/whos-afraid-of-as-king.html>). Here is her take on some of the aspects of censorship discussed in this column (used with permission of the author):

I don't know about you, but quiet censorship freaks me out. It's the censorship that's spoken over tea, over lunch, at random times when we are not prepared to answer because we are caught so off-guard that we really only think about what was said on the plane home. Last year I was asked to be on a censorship panel as an "expert." I had to reply and say I was not an expert at official challenges. So far, my books haven't had an official challenge as far as I know. Instead, I get embarrassed looks from dedicated librarians who whisper, "My principal won't let me have that one in the stacks." I have quiet un-invitations. I have quiet conversations with saddened teachers who tell me that a colleague said, "But you're not going to actually give that book to students, are you?" I get quiet letters from devoted teachers who apologize for not being able to share my book with a student who needs it because of a fear of losing their job. Ah quiet. It is usually an indication that something really important is being withheld. Like the way we whisper *cancer*.

### **A Final Request**

As I write and submit this inaugural column, there are at least a handful of very public censorship cases being discussed in the educational community. Surprisingly, one of the current attacks on books is leveled against the CCSS Exemplar Texts: [http://blog.al.com/wire/2014/03/mccarthy\\_was\\_right\\_the\\_crucibl.html](http://blog.al.com/wire/2014/03/mccarthy_was_right_the_crucibl.html). The claim is that these texts are socialist in nature and are being used to indoctrinate our school children.

Other challenges center on some of the most frequently challenged books each and every year (see the list from ALAOIF at <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>), with challenges against *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie), *Speak* (Laurie Halse Anderson), and *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi), among others. Another organization has targeted AR's point system as a result of a graphic novel checked out of an elementary school library (<http://www.momma bears.org/1/post/2014/03/alert-is-this-in-your-childs-library-at-school.html>). Remember, these instances are simply the tip of the iceberg. In how many schools, classrooms, public libraries, and even bookstores is censorship occurring with barely a ripple seen on the surface?

For those of us who cherish YA literature, who know the power of the right book in the right hands at the right time, who witness the power of the incredible authors who offer books to teens, it behooves us to get beneath the surface, to lower our line of vision, to shine a light on challenges, and to make certain that everyone is given access to books. If you have a story to share about censorship or challenges or book bannings, please contact me ([terilesesne@gmail.com](mailto:terilesesne@gmail.com)). I want future columns to feature a chorus of voices. If we all Speak Loudly, we can and will have an effect on censorship in all of its guises.

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University in Texas where she teaches courses in literature for children and young adults. She is a former ALAN president and currently is the Executive Director of ALAN. Teri is an author of three professional books, numerous articles, and several columns on YA literature. Teri also blogs about books (<http://www.ls5385blog.blogspot.com>) and educational issues (<http://professormana.livejournal.com>). She has served as the chair of NCTE's Standing Committee Against Censorship. You can find her on Twitter (@professormana) and Facebook (Teri Lesesne). Most of the time, though, you will find her with her nose stuck firmly in a book.

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