

The Blessings of Books

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Article abstract

The attack on the written word is not new. It has happened many times through history, especially in modern times as the availability of books has grown so rapidly. It is most often in authoritarian regimes that books are deemed a potential threat, and the elimination of this threat a means to maintain control of a potentially rebellious population. Probably the most heinous of book banning and burnings occurred during Nazi rule, prior to and during the Second World War. To witness, recently, in the United States the ugly head book banning and their removal from libraries is a sad commentary on the state of some senior politicians, including Governors and Judicial leaders. Fortunately, there is vigorous opposition to these efforts and notable successes in the quest for universal access to the world of books.

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TÉMOIGNAGE / PERSPECTIVE

The Blessings of Books

Michael Gordon^{a,b}

Résumé

L'attaque contre l'écrit n'est pas nouvelle. Elle s'est produite à de nombreuses reprises au cours de l'histoire, en particulier à l'époque moderne où la disponibilité des livres s'est accrue très rapidement. C'est le plus souvent dans les régimes autoritaires que les livres sont considérés comme une menace potentielle, et l'élimination de cette menace comme un moyen de maintenir le contrôle sur une population potentiellement rebelle. Les interdictions et les brûlages de livres les plus odieux ont probablement eu lieu sous le régime nazi, avant et pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le fait d'assister récemment aux États-Unis à l'interdiction de livres et à leur retrait des bibliothèques est un triste commentaire sur l'état de certains hommes politiques de haut rang, y compris des gouverneurs et des responsables judiciaires. Heureusement, il existe une opposition vigoureuse à ces efforts et des succès notables dans la quête d'un accès universel au monde des livres.

Mots-clés

livres, interdiction, censure, liberté, connaissance

Abstract

The attack on the written word is not new. It has happened many times through history, especially in modern times as the availability of books has grown so rapidly. It is most often in authoritarian regimes that books are deemed a potential threat, and the elimination of this threat a means to maintain control of a potentially rebellious population. Probably the most heinous of book banning and burnings occurred during Nazi rule, prior to and during the Second World War. To witness, recently, in the United States the ugly head book banning and their removal from libraries is a sad commentary on the state of some senior politicians, including Governors and Judicial leaders. Fortunately, there is vigorous opposition to these efforts and notable successes in the quest for universal access to the world of books.

Keywords

books, banning, censorship, liberty, knowledge

Affiliations

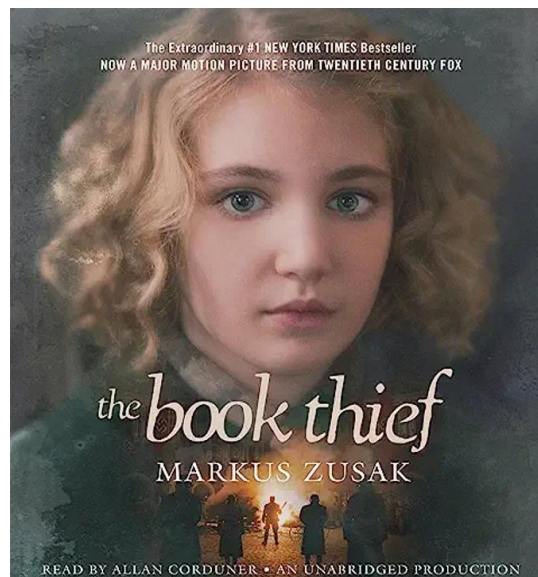
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Galileo was almost burned by the Spanish Inquisition for the publication of his many scientific works. In order to avoid the death penalty, he publicly admitted his error in publishing these works and was only vindicated by the Catholic Church hundreds of years after his death, in the modern era (1). Public displays of book burning in Nazi Germany, with gleeful citizens throwing tomes into the fires, were projected through the media as an indication of how Hitler et al. would cleanse Germany of seditious writings, especially by the deemed enemy – Communists and Jews (2).

I was recently cleaning my bookshelves, which were overflowing with books that I was thinking of donating to the local neighborhood borrowing box. I saw the book, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (3) and recalled that I read it years ago but also noticed the film listed while browsing Prime Video.



Source: Zusak M. *The Book Thief*. Audiobook cover (3)

As I started watching it, I recalled the story and was mesmerized by the acting of the young heroine Liesel and the images of the Nazi reign in a small town in Germany and the outbreak of the war and its impact on the main actors. Max, the Jewish son of a friend that “saved” the life of *papa*, in the first world war, has taken it upon himself to teach Liesel to read. *Mama* was reluctant and afraid to hide Max in their house, even after he had been moved to the basement. But she knew it was her duty because of Max’s father’s death while saving her husband. Max marveled at the “dictionary” that was written on the wall of the basement with chalk, and updated by Liesel as her vocabulary grew from the books she was now able to read due to the generosity of the town’s burgomaster’s wife. Max quotes Aristotle to Liesel, “memory is the scribe of the soul”, extolling the wonderment of books as a way of entering one’s soul and seeing the soul of others.

One chilling scene early on in the story is the town’s collective burning of books in the town square. As the population gleefully threw books into the fire, the town’s Nazi leader boasted how the new Germany would rid itself of the communists and Jews, and their books. After the fire dies down Liesel goes to the smoldering pyre and retrieves one of the books that is still smoking. That becomes the book that propels her into her quest for literally gobbling up books.



Opernplatz, Berlin book burnings (2)

The day before I started watching the film, in late January 2023, I noted a news article about the banning of books in a Virginia library (4). As noted in the article, one of the books banned was Margaret Atwood’s dystopian story, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (5). Other books included *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (6) by Sherman Alexie, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (7) by Stephen Chbosky, *Shatter Me* series (8) by Tahereh Mafi, and many others by recognized authors. I have personally read two of the books and my children at least five of them – and they were not even trying!

To make matters worse, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law in April 2022 that requires schools to notify parents if any reading materials are sexually explicit (4). This law also allows parents to say their child cannot read said material. This law was required to be put into action by January 1, 2023. In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one of the themes of the novel was the banning of books for much of the population and the harsh punishment meted out to those who broke that law. Serena, Commander Fred’s wife, had her finger cut off for reading the bible. June, the protagonist in the story had been a literary editor prior to the take-over of that part of the country from the United States (5).

On March 4, 2023, The Washington Post reported on “Culture war in the stacks: Librarians marshal against rising book bans” (9). Jamie Gregory, a school librarian in South Carolina, on receiving an award at the American Library Association’s winter conference said “The book censors are resorting to various underhanded and illegal tactics to force their own narrow interpretation of the freedom to read on everyone else... they will eventually run out of tactics, but we will still be here”. Another speaker added, “they’re serious about suppressing information and taking away people’s civil liberties based their identity and race. They want to go back to 1952” (9).

I recall being in junior high school when my teacher asked the students to read a book not on the required curriculum for a book report. I had already read Thomas Wolf’s *Look Homeward Angel* (10) which my father had recommended to me and which I found very profound. I offered that book for my project. My teacher called me aside after class and forbade me to read the book or write a report on it; she said someone my age should not be reading such a book. I substituted another book but could not understand what it was that so frightened her.

The ironic absurdity is that the banning – or in extreme cases burning – of books has never achieved its intended goals. Presumably those demanding the banning/burning are afraid that those who read the books might get and internalize some ideas that are a threat or are anathema to the ruling regime. Goebbels’s act leading to the mass burning of books in May 1933 did not prevent those who wanted to be educated or discover what was happening in the world from finding ways around the prohibition.

As reported in the Simone Wiesenthal Center

the reaction of the world was great. Walter Lippmann, one of the leading liberal journalists of his time, again proved himself a towering exception and a most astute analyst, immediately recognizing the enemy and his ultimate goals: The Nazis deliberately and systematically mean to turn the minds of the German people to war. These acts symbolize the moral and intellectual character of the Nazi regime. For these bonfires are not the work of schoolboys or mobs but of the present German Government acting through its Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment.... For example ... they burn with conspicuous zeal ... Erich Maria Remarque's [anti-war book] *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The ominous symbolism of [this burning and] these bonfires is that there is a Government in Germany which means to teach its people that their salvation lies in violence. (11)

The wonder of the library is beyond comprehension. It goes back thousands of years and the Great Alexandrian library, despite many fires, is still in existence. My father introduced me and my younger sister to the Brighton Beach Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library system when we were very young. Every Saturday we did an outing, walking to the library, he reading newspapers from other places and me and my sister reading and then choosing the five or six books we would check out for the week. My father's favorite phrase about libraries was "They contain all the knowledge of the world". I continued the same practice with my four children, and my youngest daughter, who is presently living in Detroit, takes the neighborhood children to the local library on Saturdays.

I love the fact that at the Geriatric Center in Toronto at which I used to work, there was a lending library for occupants of the home, staff and family members. Many of the books were donations from family members. The librarians were all volunteers, many well on in their years, but clearly book lovers. They not only could deal with the administration of loans and returns, stocking and culling books, but often gave very good opinions about the quality of books sought by borrowers. It seemed to me whenever I entered to take a book, that they had read almost every book that had been donated. One volunteer admitted to me, "the library position keeps me active and young. I have always loved reading, and this fulfills all my needs of reading and expressing my feelings about books to interested borrowers".

Susan Orleans's *The Library Book* (12) is a combined "Who done it?" mystery and historical overview of the history of libraries. While reading it, I recalled the monument to books that is New York's Fifth Avenue Library. It sits in the middle of a bustling part of the city, in its own little park, open for all and sundry, to study, read, do research, or look at some of the wonderful exhibits that occasionally are contained within.

In this digital world where one can access almost every book ever written, in text format or often as an audio-recording, the idea of banning or burning books is almost meaningless. It may carry great symbolism of "authority" and "protection of children" and "protecting religious beliefs". But as a methodology it is useless. Every cell phone, computer, tablet and other digital device can download books from everywhere, and in virtually every language. The Gutenberg project (13) provides access to virtually all books no longer covered by copyright. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, touted by some as the basis of western literature can be loaded on to almost any digital device for free. Even if all the written copies of the books were burned, it would mean nothing to public readership if people wanted to access these precious tomes.

As I love to hear and sometimes say, "this too will pass". I know of a German who fled to Israel when the Nazi's came into power. In mid-1939 she went back to retrieve her mother. The reply was, "This too will pass". Unfortunately for her and more than one-hundred-and-fifty relatives who perished by the hands of Nazis, this did not pass. Even now, the ugly head of fascism rears itself, here and there, a reminder of the potential for evil in this world.

Books may be part of humanity's hope for salvation from the potential brutality of the species. Read a book, a novel, memoir, history book, political thesis, a philosophical treatise and help save the world.

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