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Book Challenges and Bannings: YAL Censorship in Yakima County Secondary Schools

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I read my first banned book in tenth grade when my honors English teacher, Jake Palmer¹, introduced us to Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* as a young adult literature (YAL) companion to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I ate it up from page one: it had more substance and entertainment value than Lewis, Rowling, Riordan, Collins, Roth, Meyers, or anything I'd ever read in school.

Alexie's semi-autobiographical novel is told from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old Spokane Indian named Junior Spirit who's sick of being a poor kid on a poor reservation. He explains that he hates school because bigger kids beat him up all the time and because he's stuck using the same ancient textbooks his mom used decades earlier; at home, he sometimes goes to bed hungry, his alcoholic father disappears for days at a time, and his weekends often consist of funerals due to the reservation's drug and alcohol epidemic.

Even though I'd lived just fifteen minutes from the Yakama Indian Reservation in Yakima, Washington, my whole life, I had no idea circumstances could be that harsh for Native Americans in the twenty-first century. Reading and discussing *True Diary* with a young, open-minded teacher helped me see the world beyond my white, middle-class lens.

A few weeks into the unit, Mr. Palmer walked into our first-period classroom just as the bell rang, his head drooping slightly.

"You can all put *True Diary* away," he told us. "There's been a petition to ban it from our curriculum and we can't study it until after the hearing."

Outraged, we shot questions at him: *who wants to ban it? why would they do that? when's the hearing? what can we do to help? it's not actually going to get banned, is it?* He explained that a parent launched an official complaint because of the book's racial tension and slurs. Many of my classmates and I wrote letters to the superintendent and the curriculum committee, urging them to allow Mr. Palmer to continue teaching *True Diary* because it helped us better grasp modern-day racism and inequality, even within the walls of our predominantly white school. With our letters and the English department's support, Mr. Palmer fought—and won—the battle: *True Diary* got to stay.

That experience in 2012 sparked my interest in YAL censorship, but it remained largely dormant until a professor rekindled it last semester in a YAL class. He explained that, with the exception of God and religion, most taboos are extinct in YAL today (Cart 113). This raised my initial inquiry question: what YAL *has* been challenged or banned, and why?

Exploring the Inquiry Question

YAL Censorship: National Statistics

As I explored this question, I quickly discovered just how common YAL challenges (documented requests to remove

¹ All names have been changed.

literature from schools or libraries) and bannings (removals of said literature) are. According to the American Library Association (ALA), there have been 12,664 reported YAL challenges nationwide since 2000, which comes out to roughly one challenge every other day (Pulkkinen). In 2018 alone, 347 challenges targeted 483 books (Ayer), although the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) estimates that 82-97% of book challenges go unreported (“Top Ten”). If their estimates are correct, an upwards of 11,500 YA books were challenged nationwide in 2018 alone, for an average of about 31 books per day.

YAL Censorship: Targeted Topics

The 483 books officially challenged in 2018 were targeted primarily for LGBTQ content, injustices and inequality experienced by persons of color, political viewpoints, religious viewpoints, profanity, and sexual content (Ayer). Every year, the ALA compiles a list of the most frequently challenged books with explanations for why they were challenged. In 2018, that list included Alex Gino’s *George*, for including a transgender character; Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*, for profanity, sexual references, and being deemed “anti-cop;” Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, for being deemed “anti-white,” for sexual references, and for its religious viewpoint; and David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*, for LGBTQ content (“Frequently Challenged Books”). In response to these challenges, the OIF commented that they’ve observed “repressive pushback by those who believe that a more diverse and just society poses a threat to their beliefs and their way of life” (Corbray). In other words, some people challenged YAL because they feared that it would inspire readers to become more progressive and diverse, thus infringing on and threatening their own beliefs and

lifestyles. This observation helped me understand that, while hot topics like LGBTQ inclusion and racial equality are largely accepted by YA authors and publishers (and even many teenagers), some parents and other readers still consider them taboo. Because parents understand—and perhaps fear—the power of literature, they push back against YAL that promotes foreign, progressive, or disagreeable ideas.

YAL Inclusion Efforts

Schools and libraries across the country are striving to counteract book challengers’ efforts by becoming “centers of tolerance and inclusion” (Corbray). They are accomplishing this by carrying YAL that includes underrepresented, marginalized groups and by developing diverse programs and resources for library patrons. When I learned about these nationwide efforts to combat censorship, I wondered if my home county (where I hope to teach high school English after graduation) was engaged in these efforts. I contacted the Yakima Valley Library (YVL) and talked with a YA librarian. She happily told me that no books (YA or otherwise) have been challenged or banned at the YVL. On the contrary, they feature commonly-banned YAL during the annual Banned Books Week (September 22-28) and seek out books written by and featuring multicultural individuals. She explained that these anti-censorship efforts are important because “[libraries are] for everyone and we don’t discriminate against any books.” This got me thinking more deeply about YAL censorship in Yakima county. Did everyone there foster the same attitude about book bannings and challenges? Did everyone agree that books should promote tolerance and inclusion? I wanted to know more and narrowed my initial inquiry question to this: what YAL has been challenged or banned in Yakima county secondary schools, and why?

Primary Research

Survey Methods

I began my primary research by compiling a list of secondary schools in Yakima county from the county government website (“School Districts”). I then went to each of the twenty-one secondary schools’ websites to gather contact information for librarians. Due to recent funding cuts, several Yakima schools no longer have designated librarians; for those schools, I gathered contact information for English department chairs. I then sent those librarians and English teachers an email survey with the following questions: (1) What YAL has been challenged in your school, but not banned? (2) What YAL has been banned from your school? (3) Who pushed to have that YAL censored, and why? (See appendix 1.)

Most participants responded within twenty-four hours. A week after emailing the survey, I sent brief follow-up messages to those who hadn’t yet responded and received multiple replies that way. In the end, librarians or English teachers from eighteen of the twenty-one schools responded.

Survey Results

Based on the ALA’s national statistics and my experience with *True Diary*, I expected multiple—if not dozens of—YA novels to be banned from Yakima county secondary schools. Yet, respondents reported that not a single YA novel has been banned (see appendix 2). In fact, very few books have been formally challenged in the past: Michael Dorris’ *Raft in Yellow Water* was challenged roughly twenty years ago at a small suburban high school for how it portrayed tribal issues (Gutzwiler); J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series was challenged roughly fifteen years ago at a

midsize city middle school and junior high for containing witchcraft (Henning); John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* was challenged roughly fifteen years ago at a midsize city high school for religiously-offensive language (Palmer); and Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* was challenged in 2012 at that same high school for anti-African American language and profanity (Palmer).

Discussion

The librarians and teachers who identified these book challenges explained that concerned parents initiated these petitions. For example, Palmer and Gutzwiler explained that they received pushback from parents who made snap judgments about the YAL their teenagers were reading in class but hadn’t read the books themselves. After they spoke with the concerned parents and explained the rationale for studying the YAL in question, the parents withdrew their challenges.

At a midsize city high school and Catholic private high school, a few concerned parents found an alternative to petitioning YAL at the school-wide level: they requested alternative book options for their teenagers in classes teaching Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Greene) and Khaled Hosseini’s *Kite Runner* (Judd). These requests were granted without issues.

To avoid potential YAL challenges and bannings, librarians from a midsize city middle school and two small, Christian private schools explained that they pre-censor their libraries by only stocking books they deem to be age-appropriate and value-driven. For example, one of the private school librarians specified that “[they] are sensitive to newer novels and their fit in a Christian setting” (Sheahan). Although this form of YAL censorship varies from the formal challenges and bannings tracked by the ALA, it is nonetheless a form of

ensorship. Ken Donelson, a leading expert in YAL and a former English professor at Arizona State University, agreed. In an article entitled “Shoddy and Pernicious Books and Youthful Purity: Literary and Moral Censorship, Then and Now,” he said:

Though some librarians and teachers believe censorship is a recent phenomenon, it has been a part of librarians' lives for more than a century. . . Those censoring on literary grounds often provide only subjective criteria, justifying censorship by their own personal tastes. . . Librarians and teachers have no right to impose personal literary or moral standards on the public, young or old. They have a duty to provide materials of all sorts to allow clients and students to search through and seek out ideas. (4)

In this quotation, Donelson refutes the tradition of pre-censoring books according to one's own subjective criteria because it prevents students from accessing literature of all sorts and forming their own values and ideas. There is a difficult line between pre-censoring YAL based on subjective criteria and filtering it to shelf the “best” books. Logistically, librarians and teachers can only shelf a fraction of published YAL, so there must be some sort of filtering process. I call for librarians to use objective, quality-based criteria as they add to their YAL collections.

YAL has a strong, lively presence in many Yakima county secondary schools. Many librarians celebrated their schools' spotless banning records, thus matching the YA librarian's attitude when she said “[Yakima Valley Libraries] don't discriminate against any books.” For example, a seasoned English teacher from a Christian private school reported that she's never had issues and said, “I guess I'm lucky.” Likewise, a librarian from midsize city middle school said she was “pleased to say” that no books have been banned or

censored at her school and that an eighth-grade teacher even devotes an entire unit to the study of banned books. A neighboring midsize city high school is making similar efforts to introduce students to commonly censored YAL by featuring books like *13 Reasons Why*, *The Hate U Give*, *Looking for Alaska*, and *True Diary* in their school library (Greene). Based on my findings, Yakima county secondary schools seem to successfully incorporate YAL into their libraries and curriculum. They have faced few petitions and have avoided all bans.

Is YAL censorship is less common and problematic than it appeared on the ALA's reports, or is Yakima an anomaly? I searched for statewide statistics and learned that Washington as a whole “hasn't been a hotbed for bans” (Pulkkinen), even though most schools and libraries stock commonly banned books. In fact, only nine YA books have been pulled from shelves across the state in the past twenty years: Brock Cole's *The Goats*, Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits*, Michel Byam's *Arms and Armor*, Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels*, Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club*, Thomas Harris' *Hannibal*, Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It*, Nancy Springer's *The Case of a Missing Marquess*, and of course, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Pulkkinen). Given that 12,644 YA books have been banned across the nation in the past twenty years, Washington's contribution of nine books is staggeringly minute: only .07% of the national total.

Across the country, YAL is challenged and banned on an almost-daily basis. Many people resist new and progressive ideas out of fear, not realizing the positive impact that YAL can have on readers' lives. In a feature article about Banned Books week, a Yakima librarian explains that “censorship leaves us in the dark” and invites readers to “draw attention to, and speak out against,

ensorship in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas—even those that some consider unorthodox or unpopular” (Corbray). One of my biggest goals as an English teacher will be to fight against censorship so my students aren’t left in the dark. When I step into the teaching world in a year, I hope to carry on Mr. Palmer’s torch. And, meanwhile, I’m avidly collecting YAL that will help my students see the world from new angles, just like *True Diary* did for me.

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Appendix 1

Survey Instrument: Email to Librarians and English Department Heads

Dear [Insert Name],

I graduated from West Valley High School in 2015 and am currently studying English Education at Brigham Young University. I'm doing a research project on censored young adult novels in Yakima county secondary schools and have a few questions for you:

- *What YA novels have been banned from classes in your school? Are those books still available in your school library?
- *What YA novels have been challenged in your school but can still be taught?
- *Who pushed to have those YA novels censored and why?

Thank you in advance for your time and attention. I greatly appreciate it.

Elizabeth Daley

Appendix 2

Yakima County Secondary School YAL Censorship

School (District)	What YA novels have been banned at your school?	What YA novels have been challenged in your school?	Who pushed to have those YA novels censored and why?
Wilson Middle School (Yakima School District)	None	None	N/A
Discovery Lab (Yakima School District)	None (pre-censored)	None (pre-censored)	N/A
Davis High School (Yakima School District)	None	None	Some parents have requested alternative book selections for classes teaching <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> by Mark Twain and <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee, but they've never sought to challenge the novels.
Eisenhower High School (Yakima School District)	None	None	N/A
Toppenish High School (Toppenish School District)	None	<i>Raft in Yellow Water</i>	It upset a few Native American parents due to how it portrayed tribal issues.
Wapato High School (Wapato School District)	None	None	N/A
PACE High School (Wapato School District)	None	None	N/A
Grandview High School (Grandview School District)	None	None	N/A
Zillah High School (Zillah School District)	None	None	N/A
East Valley High School (East Valley School District)	None	None	N/A
Selah High School (Selah School District)	None	None	N/A

West Valley Middle School (West Valley School District)	None	<i>Harry Potter</i>	A concerned parent challenged the <i>Harry Potter</i> series because it dealt with witchcraft.
West Valley Junior High (West Valley School District)	None	<i>Harry Potter</i>	A concerned parent challenged the <i>Harry Potter</i> series because it dealt with witchcraft.
West Valley High School (West Valley School District)	None	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie <i>Of Mice & Men</i> by John Steinbeck	The <i>True Diary</i> challenged was over anti-African American language (one instance in the book) and profane language. The <i>Of Mice & Men</i> challenge was religious-based because the characters often said Goddamn.
West Chestnut Academy (Private School)	None (pre-censored)	None (pre-censored)	N/A
Christ the Teacher Secondary School (Private School)	None	None	N/A
La Salle High School (Private School)	None	<i>Kite Runner</i> (alternative reading assignment requested)	Some parents chose to have their teens opt-out of reading <i>Kite Runner</i> due to graphic sexual abuse early in the novel.
Riverside Christian School (Private School)	None (pre-censored)	None (pre-censored)	N/A
Sunnyside High School (Sunnyside School District)	No response	---	---
Grandview Middle School (Grandview School District)	No response	---	---
Lewis and Clark Middle School (Yakima School District)	No response	---	---