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Dixie Chicks, Scrotums, Toni Morrison, and Gay Penguins:

Homosexuality and Other Classroom Taboos

"Everything I need to know about life I've learned by reading banned books" is the line on the button pinned to my denim jacket—a line which always gets attention, questions, and some explanation. Most individuals, including my English Education pre-service teachers, are quite surprised when I list some of America's banned books, and quite a few are even angry. Books are often challenged or banned in classrooms and libraries for language issues, sexual content, witchcraft, and a host of other reasons, and usually it is the teachers and librarians who fight for good literature. Unfortunately, it is our students who suffer. Young adults, especially those who feel isolated or rejected by society, need to find themselves in literature. They need literature for its most basic purpose, connection with humanity. They need to find their place in the pages of books so that they can understand their place in the world. But as educators continue to do their part in opening minds and books, we need to also be aware that censorship comes in many forms, and that we sometimes, without fully realizing our role, are the strictest censors of America's classrooms.

My teacher candidates fear their first years in the classroom, not because of the hard work, overcrowded classrooms, high stakes testing, or threat of violence. They are afraid of the battles they will need to fight over literature. And even as I equip them with the weapons they need for the struggle—parental permission slips, book rationales, and good planning—they are still afraid. While they understand the need for literature of diversity and are open to including texts of other cultures in their unit plans, these future teachers are most afraid of controversial literature and know that there are certain classroom taboos. They have heard the tales of even penguins causing a great stir in American classrooms, and therefore are especially afraid of literature containing gay or lesbian characters. So, I have begun to see the importance of exploring the role of censorship in the decisions of teaching, especially in the area of gender studies.

My new teachers' fears are well founded in a current atmosphere of American censorship and unrest. Even though the physical act of burning books may not happen as frequently as it once did, books and other art forms are banned or censored every day. As example of this censorship of democracy, we need to look only as far as our local radio station and listen for the Dixie Chicks. What we find is that the Grammy Award winning album, *Taking the Long Way*, and its protest song, "Not Ready to Make Nice" continue to be shunned from local airwaves after controversial statements made

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by Natalie Maines about President Bush and the war in Iraq. Country music stations, claiming to react to fan mail and calls, refused to play the album and protests of crushing CDs with tractors spread round the country. More seriously, threats were made on the life of Maines, all from her simple statement, "Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas." Similarly, Pink's song, "Dear Mr. President" is also meeting resistance in radio and television play time. Her lines, "How do you sleep while the rest of us cry? How do you dream when a mother has no chance to say goodbye?" also point to the conflict in Iraq. Many American people have taken a stand against the Dixie Chicks and Pink and their political statements while the airwaves continue to rap with the lyrics of drugs, murder, and woman beating. Censorship in America, although sometimes misdirected, is certainly alive and well. Interestingly enough, the Dixie Chicks are now the highest selling female band ever and have sold thirty million albums since June of 2006, so either sentiments have changed or the censors are very much outnumbered.

In addition to issues of political censorship, teachers are faced with controversy over books with edgy language. "Scrotum" is the word that stirred controversy when the 2007 Newbery winner, Susan Patron's *The Higher Power of Lucky*, was announced. The word appears on the first page of the book in reference to a story that the main character, Lucky Trimble, overhears while eavesdropping on Short Sammy's story of when he hit "rock bottom." "Sammy told of the day when he had drunk half a gallon of rum listening to Johnny Cash all morning in his parked '62 Cadillac, then fallen out of the car when he saw a rattlesnake on the passenger seat biting his dog, Roy, on the scrotum" (1). Librarians immediately began pulling the book from their shelves when the word came under public scrutiny. Others, without even reading the story, simply refused to buy the book, not wanting to face off against administrators or parents. *The New York Times* quoted one librarian as saying that this is a "good case of an author not realizing her audience" and, "If I were a third- or fourth-grade teacher, I wouldn't want to have to explain that." Another librarian quoted in the article claims, "you won't find men's genitalia in quality literature." Susan Patron, a juvenile librarian herself, responded to the criticism in *Publisher's Weekly*. "If I were a parent of a middle-grade child, I would want to make decisions about my child's reading myself—I'd be appalled that my school librarian had decided to take on the role of censor and deny my child access to a major award-winning book." I still wonder if "scrotum" were on page two instead of page one, would that have made a difference? If Susan Patron had chosen to use the word "balls" instead of "scrotum," would that have made her book more acceptable? Do we truly believe that anatomical vocabulary is the problem here? Why are there no public outcries against the endless series of television commercials about erectile dysfunction and quality sex that air throughout the day? In truth, most agree that if the book had not won the Newbery then the word would have gone unnoticed. But the word "scrotum" and the quality of this book are not really the issue. When librarians refuse to buy books or purposely keep them off the shelves, they take on the role of censor.

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But librarians are, of course, not the only censors in American schools. Teachers must also take credit for the texts they choose to teach and the books they place on classroom shelves. My pre-service teachers always want to know whether I was faced with any book challenges in my twenty years of teaching in Louisiana public schools. My only brush with book banning was when a parent went directly to the school board administrators without discussing the issue with me when I listed Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a summer reading choice. I feel very strongly that Toni Morrison ends that book with a plea for us to change our communities and help those young people who are being abused and sexually assaulted. I wanted my high school seniors to think about making our community better than Pecola's. My supervisor came to me and asked, "Have you read this book?" When I assured her that yes, I was writing my dissertation on Toni Morrison, she seemed satisfied. Since the book was a choice book, there was no real issue even with the graphic incest scene, but I notice that

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this book made the ALA list of most challenged books in 2006. Interestingly enough, all of my students chose to read *The Bluest Eye* that summer, even the one whose parent objected. Today's teachers must continue these battles each day and cannot allow the fears of parental pressure and supervisors to keep them from teaching good literature. We must also continue searching for books that matter, books that can open minds and inspire young people and help them find their place in the world. Educators cannot self-censor their classrooms in fear of controversial books but must, instead, continue choosing books that matter. While I am certainly not advocating that every teacher take *The Bluest Eye* into the classroom, I am suggesting that we cannot back down from literature that we know is important to helping young people find a sense of "self" or literature that was meant to change the world. The Pecolas of the world need us in this fight.

Even with so many censorship issues, classroom materials and literature certainly seem more diverse now than they were twenty-five years ago when I began my career as an English educator. The curriculum and new textbooks now incorporate more authors from a variety of cultural backgrounds, more women's literature, more non-fiction and other genres, more ethnicities. But there is one area that is not only avoided but, it appears, vehemently rejected by textbook companies and local curriculum designers. Literature of homosexuality still remains noticeably absent from the middle and high school canon. America's teachers seem very afraid of the controversy they imagine in regard to literature from gay, lesbian, or bisexual perspectives, and these books remain one of the greatest taboos in America's classrooms. Four out of the top ten list of ALAs most challenged books for 2006 were challenged due to homosexual content. But American teens are dying. As long as one of the highest suicide rates among teens continues to stem from homosexual issues, then we as educators must take some responsibility. If we censor our bookshelves and continue to ignore this segment of our population, we are at fault for not only discounting their experience, but we are also failing to improve the often hurtful school environment for these students.

Unfortunately, this is literature that many teachers have never read themselves, knowing only that the issue continues to stir debate around the country. Some teachers fear the texts because they assume that homosexual books must contain sexually explicit scenes. In truth, many gay teen books are much less explicit than heterosexual books, since these authors and publishers are more aware of possible censors. There are also many resources to help teachers and librarians choose quality texts including Frances Ann Day's *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*, but some teachers still feel at a loss on how to incorporate these books into the classroom. Even if teachers cannot bring themselves to face the controversy of teaching these texts, they owe it to their students to read the books in order to better understand the issues. Perhaps the books suggested in this article can be a starting point not only for my first year teachers, but also for veteran teachers who are realizing the need for change—if not in total curriculum, at least in bookshelf offerings. Gay and questioning young adults need to move to the forefront of our "at risk" lists, and they need us to realize the power of literature, a power that may even save a life.

At the top of my list of suggestions for those who are beginning this study is a book that contains one of the best portrayals of young gay love represented through the character of Joe in James Howe's *The Misfits*. This is a wonderful book for teaching teenagers that they do indeed have the ability to change the world, an ability that lies within their daily actions and words. The story follows a group of students who have always viewed themselves as misfits among the ever popular middle school kids who tease them and call them names. The group, inspired by a student election and the chance to make a change, run their candidate on the "no-name" platform in an attempt to

stop the endless bullying throughout the school. Along the way, Joe becomes infatuated with another young man, and their middle school relationship develops by the end of the book. Perhaps it is Howe's likable quirky characters or maybe it is that memory deep inside each of us of the names we were called, but whatever the reason, his novel is truly a joy to read. Joe's homosexuality is part of the storyline, but it is treated like a normal plot line rather than a problem. Joe is not struggling with his identity or sexuality. He is, in fact, more sure of himself than most of the other characters, and that is part of what makes his character important to the genre of gay adolescent stories.

This is a book that could easily be taught in grades six through eight, and because of its easy ties to discussions of bullying and name calling it is a great text for teaching tolerance. It has even inspired a nation-wide trend in No Name-Calling Week with a web site for teacher and student use. Howe has also continued Joe's story in *Totally Joe*, claiming that the character of Joe is patterned after his own adolescence. Classroom activities for this book can begin with journaling about nicknames and then a discussion of the names adolescents use against one another. This will allow an open discussion of the prejudices and hurt that all teens have felt. Students can also write about the issues in their own schools that they would like to fight against. One of the strengths of Howe's book is its ability to tackle tough issues without the use of offensive language or explicit scenes, allowing it to be taught as a "safe" book in most schools.

Another recommendation is *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*, a collection of short stories by both homosexual and heterosexual authors written for teens. The book is over ten years old now, but it still holds a comforting position on my bookshelf. Teachers who cannot find the time for another novel in their curriculum might choose one of the short stories here to supplement their readings. Since several of the stories are written by well respected heterosexual authors like Bruce Coville, Lois Lowry, and Jane Yolen, teachers may find some of their students more interested in the material. But the book also contains wonderful selections from homosexual authors such as Nancy Garden and Leslea Newman, so it is a nice collection from many perspectives. Bruce Coville's title story, "Am I Blue?" is zany and fun while also making some serious statements about gay life while M. E. Kerr's "We Might As Well All Be Strangers" reminds us that "coming-out stories are a continuing process" (26). The collection is a nice addition to the classroom bookshelf and several stories might even be taught as whole-class readings. A more recent collection, *The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* is also good for the classroom library. These stories were written by today's youth and reflect the experiences of GLBTQ young people in a new light.

High on my list of recommendations is David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, another sweet story of teenage romance. The teenagers, however, just happen to be gay. Levithan's book is set in a perfect world where gay love is well accepted, where no one is bothered by the cheerleader/football player cross-dresser, and the biggest problems are how to get the guy and where to hold prom. Of course, even in this perfect world, gay teenagers still struggle with issues like parental acceptance and heartache. Levithan's book is also free of explicit scenes or language, and it is a light-hearted story of young love. Levithan chooses to explore the issues of gay love by painting a picture of what the world could be, giving teens a vision of homosexual love as part of normal routine.

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My list of lesbian adolescent stories grows longer every year, since there are so many quality books now with a variety of perspectives, but twenty-five years after its publication, *Annie on My Mind* still remains one of the sweetest lesbian love stories ever written. Nancy Garden's book continues to be challenged and has already seen its days in court, but the book contains no problems with language or explicit scenes. The story follows two young girls who find love but struggle with the fears and many questions of their

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sexuality. Her more recent novel, *Good Moon Rising,* is also a sweet love story plagued by schoolmate harassment. Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah*, written in 1969, a lesbian love story set in nineteenth century New England, reveals the historical perspective of homosexual love and "passing."

In recent years, Julie Anne Peters has written several books with strong adolescent lesbian characters, including *Keeping You a Secret* and *Far from Xanadu*, but *Luna* is unique in its story of a teen struggling with transsexual desires. Peters tackles this complicated story with respect and grace, giving Luna the intricacies of a well-rounded individual searching for identity. *Finding H. F.* by Julia Watts and *Orphea Proud* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth are also wonderful books. The Watts story details the journey of a young girl searching for her own identity and the mother who abandoned her and is a wonderful road trip novel about the true nature of families. While H. F. is certain of her feelings for another girl, she is heartbroken with the rejection and denial she must face. Wyeth's portrayal of Orphea, a young African American lesbian, who is not only rejected by her own family, but also tortured by the death of her lover, is a heart-wrenching depiction of a character who must find the strength to accept her own "self" even when members of her family do not. Lauren Myracle, Sarah Ryan, Tea Benduhn, Jacqueline Woodson, Marilyn Reynolds, and Bonnie Shimko all have recent books with strong lesbian characters. I have included many more recommended books in my reference list below.

I suppose there are many reasons why educators censor books—explicit language, gratuitous sex, scenes of witchcraft, violence, or drugs—but these books do not have any of those issues. The most explicit sex scenes are in Lauren Myracle's book, and they are part of a heterosexual relationship. These books, like many young adult novels, are well-written portrayals of struggling teens facing issues of love, family, and identity. These teens just happen to be gay. Our questioning young adults need these characters in their lives. Our heterosexual young adults need them too. If the purpose of literature is to share a common existence and provide a broader world view, then these books will help us perform that act, but these books might also help a struggling young person find a sense of self. These books may even save a life.

We face censorship issues every day in America, perhaps in the classroom more than anywhere else. New stories of homosexual penguins, *And Tango Makes Three*, and old stories of Jewish merchants, *The Merchant of Venice,* have all been banned. Classic authors such as Steinbeck and Twain make the list along with modern authors like Toni Morrison and Robert Cormier. Even Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, a book about the evils of banning books, has been banned. In David Levithan's perfect *Boy Meets Boy* world, teachers would be allowed the respect and intellectual freedom to choose the literature they know to be just and true. But in this world the struggle to teach quality texts in America's classrooms must continue. The battle for student rights and profound literature must go on. That much is certain. What remains uncertain is who will have the courage to join the battle.

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Gallo Grants

The Gallo Grants were established in 2003 by former ALAN Award and Hipple Award recipient Don Gallo to encourage educators in their early years of teaching to attend the ALAN Workshop for the first time. The grants provide funding—up to $500 each—for two classroom teachers in middle school or high school each year to attend the ALAN Workshop. (The amount of a grant may be less than $500 if the applicant lives within commuting distance of the convention location where airfare and housing would not be necessary.)

The Workshop is held at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English on the Monday and Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving Day. Applicants must be teaching full-time; must have been classroom teachers for less than five years prior to the year in which they are applying; and must not have attended an ALAN Workshop previously. Membership in ALAN is not required for consideration, though applicants are expected to become ALAN members if they receive this grant.

Each applicant must fill out the grant application form and submit an essay of no more than 750 words explaining their interest in Young Adult Literature, what they hope to gain by attending this year's ALAN Workshop, and how they hope to use the experience in their classrooms in the future. A letter of support must also come from the applicant's school system. The deadline for submission is September 1. Applicants will be judged on their ability to articulate their understanding of the value of Young Adult Literature as well as their explanation of how they intend to use YA books and the information they gather at the Workshop in their own classrooms.

For further information about this grant, contact ALAN Executive Secretary Gary Salvner at gsalvner@ysu.edu or 330-941-3414. Information about the ALAN Workshop may be obtained from the ALAN Website—www.alan-ya.org. Information about the NCTE Convention may be obtained on the NCTE Website—www.ncte.org—or by writing to NCTE Headquarters at 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.