

Oh for the love of...



Well here we are again, a gaggle of bible thumpers declaring victimhood because a book threatens the very ground of their beliefs.

It's bad enough when a parent helicopters into a school to protect his little precious from bad words and strange ideas. But now we have college students sheltering themselves from the horror of a broad education. Assigned a graphic novel<fn>In my day, we called them comic books, and we liked it.</fn> for summer reading, freshman enrollee Brian Grasso, Duke University Class of '19, took a look at Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and declared that he would not read it because of the book's "graphic visual depictions of sexuality".

I feel as if I would have to compromise my personal Christian moral beliefs to read it," Grasso wrote in the post.

FWIW, the so-called "graphic visual depictions of sexuality" are all icky gay stuff. Naturally. To wit:

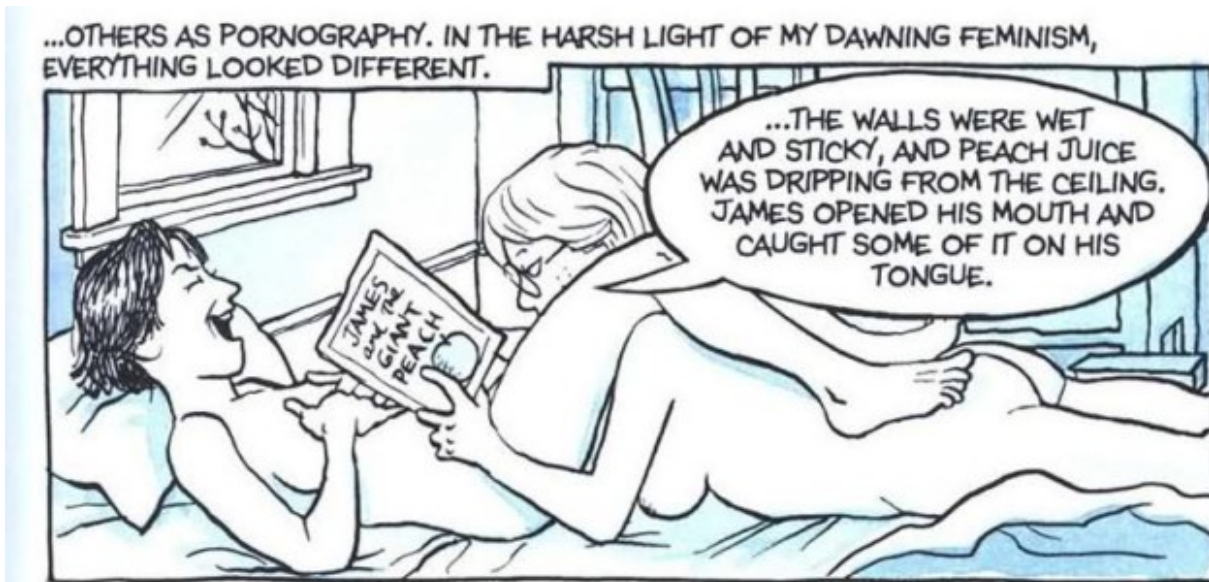


Look away! Look away!

Another student wrote in an email that:

The nature of 'Fun Home' means that content that I might have consented to read in print now violates my conscience due to its pornographic nature."

It's hard to tell, but I think this means he would have been okay with reading a steamy sex scene, but a pen and ink illustration of same would threaten his mortal soul. The grammar and theology behind the email make for a tough nut, crackwise. Perhaps it has to do with the confusion this book might create in re: a beloved children's book:



Roald Dahl would probably approve

I must lead a sheltered life, but I had not heard of this book before today. Now, thanks to the squeamish guardians of morality in Duke's Class of '19 – and, to be honest, this *intermède de pêche juteaux* – it has risen to the top of my to-read pile.

There's a bit of a skewed parallel between this kerfuffle and last week's tempest over *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Is a skewed parallel even a thing? Geomathematically, perhaps not, but I'm kind of loving the challenge of visualizing one, so a thing it is, says I. If this offends, you can either write your own blog or organize a protest against my invocation of such an abomination to Euclidean purity. In that case, it was busybody parents invoking their right to "raise their children as they see fit" while not so incidentally depriving the children of less hysterical parentage the opportunity to grapple with new ideas.

In this week's episode in willful ignorance, it is the busybodies' spawn invoking the right to remain unsullied by ideas that are new or unusual.

School-wide book assignments for incoming freshmen are a staple of college curricula these days. It provides a nexus

for the entire incoming cohort to discuss, debate, and argue the merits/cons of a specific work. It does not ask that anyone abandon their faith or accept a new idea that offends them.

It does, however, ask that students at least consider a perspective that may be new to them. It asks them to begin to think for themselves, to analyze information that is new and challenging. And that, alas, seems to be the core of the offense that these tender lads and lasses cannot bear.

Exposure $\neq$ indoctrination. Is their belief set so tenuous that a comic book would cast it asunder?

"I thought to myself, 'What kind of school am I going to?'" said freshman Elizabeth Snyder-Mounts.

You're going to Duke University, child, source of 8 Nobel laureates, 3 Turing Award winners, and 25 Churchill scholars. These are not honors that typically accrue to people who are afraid of a comic book. Duke has no religious affiliation. It has ranked in the top ten US universities for the past 20 years.

Duke did not seem to have people like me in mind," Grasso said. "It was like Duke didn't know we existed, which surprises me."

More likely, Duke knows people like Grasso exist and they don't care about catering to their narrow minds. Universities exist (at least in theory) to expand the minds of its students, to give them access and exposure to information that falls outside the experiences they bring to campus. If a student does not wish to have his tender feelings bruised from an encounter with new ideas, there is a simple solution: stay home. Get a job or go to a trade school. Or go to one of the bible-based schools where the mission is to keep you

safely cocooned inside your ignorance.</fn>

The student is asked to read a book, not adopt it as a how-to-live manual. The student is asked to bring a sense of skepticism to the exercise, to read with critical awareness, and to come to some conclusions about what they do/do not believe. Until the next book, and then it happens again, believing something new, discarding something old, re-believing something old, and so on. In the end, the student arrives at some semblance of understanding herself – what she believes, what she is willing to fight for, what she holds dear.

“In the end.”

I suppose I should reveal the deep, dark secret around this: there is no “end” to all this. It lasts a lifetime. This may be the most wonderfully maddening aspect of being an alive, alert human being. Exposure to a range of ideas in the course of one’s education is a terrific foundation for this kind of rich, multi-layered life.<fn>Of course, this D.D. secret might be terrifying to some, to those who want an answer now that will confer certainty and foundation to every challenge that will come their way. These are the people who wish to protect themselves from strange new ideas. Those things shake the earth beneath our feet. Scary stuff.

I will give the frightened flowers of Duke’s Class of ’19 this much: They are not trying to impose their fear of learning on anyone else. They just want to be able to close their senses to something that scares them. And the powers at Duke are letting them have their way. That’s probably as it should be. You can lead a horse to water.<fn>Or you can lead a horticulture &c.</fn> But somewhere, somehow, a strange idea is going to sneak through and these students will be utterly unprepared for the shock.

By the same token, students who invoke the recently-

minted *trigger warning* concept should also receive consideration. If someone really, really objects to certain kinds of material – for whatever sincerely held reason – she should be allowed to opt for an alternate curriculum. Perhaps that student should reconsider his field of study if this happens too often, just as those who feel that religion makes them incapable of fulfilling their professional duties should consider a different line of work.<fn>Mennonite airline pilots, perhaps?</fn> But in no case should the sincerely held beliefs of one, or a few, or even of a majority, be used to interfere with the rights of everyone else to learn what the school offers to teach them. And if your school insists on teaching you about knowledge you'd rather not deal with, go somewhere else.<fn>I'm pretty sure I would not appreciate the curriculum at Bob Jones University.</fn> And it's way past time our society stopped privileging complaints based on religion over other kinds of objections. If a student really wants out, let her out, whether it's because of religion or gluten or an objection to the teacher's cologne. And everybody else goes on with their business.

As it happens, as I was writing this lament about how some kids these days are wasting their opportunity to learn and to embrace their humanity in full, I was alerted to a new opinion piece in our local fishwrap in which one of the local students affected by the *Curious Dog* kerfuffle lamented the loss she felt from the affair. This is a young woman whose curiosity for new ideas is undampened.

Here's a point J.W. makes well:

Telling students to avoid books containing "wayward beliefs" implies we are incapable of thinking for ourselves. The removal did not give parents the freedom to parent, but instead attacked freedom of thought."

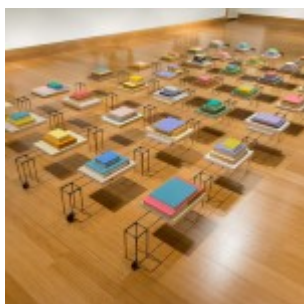
That's the story in a nutshell. The fear of ideas and the

attempt to run away from them, to pretend they don't exist, leads to nothing good. Suppressed ideas become alluring, forbidden fruit, suffused with the aura of being "naughty" or "bad". The refusal to grapple with them in the light gives them greater power. And when the time comes – and you bet your last dollar it will – when the time comes that the sheltered innocents are forced to face the world as it is, the ground will shake and the walls will crumble. This story is as old as time.

I worry about the students who are supposedly 'getting an education' when all they are really getting is a piece of paper that says they hung around for 4 years or so. These people are a danger to themselves and to our society's ability to govern itself.

But then again, students like J.W. and all the others like her – curious, awake, alive – just might give this cynical old coot cause for optimism. <fn>For real.</fn>

My Favorite World #35



One of the great things about living with an artist is that you get to watch ideas journey from a-borning to fully alive. That also means getting to watch the struggles, the anxieties, the process, and finally, the realized piece.

That piece up there – *Here Today* – is by Judy Rushin.<fn>Full

disclosure...she is married to someone who wears my clothes every day.</fn> Early ideation began about 7 months, followed by a lengthy design phase, with most of the heavy duty labor completed this summer. It has been a blast to watch it unfold. You can see some in-progress photos here.

The photo at the top was taken a few days ago at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, FL, where it is set to premiere to the public tonight. This piece, along with another by Judy, is part of a group show of The Florida State University painting and drawing faculty. It is open from August 14 to October 25. Do yourself a favor and go see it. As good as it looks here, photos don't come close to doing full justice.

My Favorite World.

Who Will Rid Me of This Meddlesome Meddling?



A little over a year ago, Daughter was assigned Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* for her high-school literature class. I love this book.<fn>Heck, I pretty much dig all of Murukami's work.</fn> So I was excited about reading along with her and hearing about how the book was discussed in class and what she thought about it all. But about halfway through the book, one of the parents discovered that the book "offended" her, so she pressured the school administration to stop teaching the book. And just like that, the kids were told that it was no longer part of the class syllabus and the teacher was admonished to please not discuss it with the students.

Sure, I was annoyed at the bible banger who kicked up a fuss and short-circuited a group of intelligent kids from exploring a really great book. But to be honest, I was more irritated that the school caved so easily.

The bitter twist? The kids had just read a section that is truly upsetting, and this decision to halt the teaching of the book left the kids in limbo with no guidance to help them put the reading into context. Instead of “saving” these poor innocents<fn>Note: 17 year olds are not all that innocent. Just saying.</fn> from the trauma of so-called “inappropriate” material, the crusaders left them at its mercy.

Well dammit, according to the local fishwrap, it’s happened again. One of the local high schools assigned *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* as the summer reading. Our intrepid education correspondent<fn>Who is doing some very good work. And hooray that we actually have someone on that beat.</fn> reports that “...the f-word is written 28 times, the s-word 18 times, and the c-word makes one appearance – in Britain that word is less charged than it is in the U.S. A few characters also express atheistic beliefs, taking God’s name in vain on nine occasions.”<fn>I had no idea that *cunt* was less offensive in Britain, but it’s in the paper, so it must be true! Personally, I love the blunt (rhymes with..) impact of the triple consonant / single vowel sound, much like that other favorite word of mine, but with the ultra-hard opening consonant that makes the word more of a punch than the relatively gentle *fuck*. But I accept that its misogynist freight makes it unsuitable in all but the most extreme instances, at least here in the colonies. Alas.</fn>

And thus it was that one eagle-eyed defender of purity decided that the book was inappropriate for her child’s tender sensibilities.

“I am not interested in having books banned. But to have that language and to take the name of Christ in vain – I don’t go

for that. As a Christian, and as a female, I was offended. Kids don't have to be reading that type of thing and that's why I was asking for an alternative assignment.

"I know it's not realistic to pretend bad words don't exist, but it is my responsibility as a parent to make sure that my daughter knows what is right or wrong.

I understand, I do. I live in mortal terror of the day my kid wanders in and declares, "Hey, we have to read this thing called *Atlas Shrugged*. Ever heard of it?" But not because it is a terrible piece of so-called literature in every particular.<fn>Though it is.</fn> It's not that it is brimful with ideas and concepts that offend me to my very core.<fn>It does.</fn>

No. My terror is this: If one of my kids has to read it, then so do I. And then I have to be prepared to talk with her or him, to explain my thoughts. And I have to be prepared to listen when one of them says, "Gosh, Dad, that Ayn Rand had some pretty great ideas!"

Here's where Outraged Mom missed a huge opportunity. Given that her child will certainly hear/face this kind of language and thinking as she journeys out of her cocoon<fn>As if she has not already. Please.</fn>, this was Outraged Mom's chance to engage her child's critical thinking. She could have learned more about how her child thinks and who she is on the way to becoming. O.M. could have explained – even though she "is not interested in having books banned" – exactly why she effectively had this book banned. What was so important about this book, exactly? Why, exactly, was she "offended" as a "Christian, and as a female"? She might even have asked her daughter what she thought and felt about it all. And listened.

Instead, she prefers her child to remain ignorant about the book's contents and to the basis of O.M.'s objections. And to remain ignorant herself about her daughter's ability to reason

and think in the face of new ideas.

Some of the comments on the article hailed this woman for getting involved in her daughter's education, for monitoring her reading material. But let's be real: if O.M. actually read *Curious Incident* start to finish, I'll eat a copy. This is not engagement; it's reactive hysteria.

When Daughter read Murakami, I read along with her and we talked about it. When Son was assigned *The Dubliners* this summer, I was thrilled to re-read it. But there have been some rough moments, too. They both read *The Alchemist*, a perfectly terrible little parable about placing your faith in magical thinking and an all-powerful god. I bought it in an airport and read it during a long day of travel. And I hated every word, comma, and period. Daughter and I talked about the book, and I asked her thoughts, and it turned out that she didn't care for it, either. She's read *Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, *Americanah*, *Metamorphosis*. She's read *Mrs. Dalloway* (she hated that one), *The God of Small Things*. She's read tons of Emily Dickinson and some EM Forster and Kate Chopin and the boy has read *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Some of the themes and ideas they have dealt with through school assigned readings are what we euphemistically refer to as *mature*. Hell, *Scarlet Letter* is about adultery for crying out loud. They both read *The Great Gatsby*, and really, it is just one long debauch. With adultery! They've read *Romeo and Juliet* <fn>Sex between minors before marriage, murder, suicide, lying to their parents(!).</fn> and *The Hunger Games* <fn>Kids killing each other in horrific ways and revolution against the government. Plus, sex.</fn> and *Homer's Odyssey* <fn>Murder, rape, incest, kidnapping, adultery, cursing the gods. But no "dirty" words! Win!</fn> and *Macbeth* <fn>Murder and dabbling in the occult!</fn>. They've dealt with violence and profanity and duplicity and religious fervor and rank heresy. They've managed to compile one hell of a catalog of books read. And each one has offered an opportunity to learn

something.

I dunno. I always took it for granted that that's what reading was all about.

"I know it's not realistic to pretend bad words don't exist, but it is my responsibility as a parent to make sure that my daughter knows what is right or wrong."

Exactly! This book was a perfect opportunity for O.M. to teach her daughter what "right and wrong" actually means, and to learn from her daughter why she agrees or not. It was a chance to demonstrate how humans can apply critical thinking to analyze ideas and situations to make moral choices beyond simply trying to "pretend bad words don't exist", which in fact is exactly what her objection to the book amount to. One of the objections from the puritans towards this kind of reading in the school is that it should be up to the parents to teach their children about "such things". The school gave this woman and her gaggle a golden opportunity to do just that. They swatted it away.

The school board and principal wish to pretend that this is not really a banning, but is something not quite that bad.

But it wasn't a part of the true curriculum. We use summer reading as a way to keep kids engaged over the summer. The book will remain on the media center shelves and is not being banned."
He went on to explain, "We have always been at war with Oceania!"

Just as with the Murakami, the school folded like a cheap lawn chair when they saw the godbotherers prepping their torches and pitchforks. Even worse, they pretended that, since this was "just" summer reading, it was not really part of the curriculum, so no harm, no foul. Oh, well alrighty then.

OK, step into the principal's shoes for a minute. School is

two weeks away. There are a million details to attend, and the thought of wrangling with a bunch of Carrie Nations smells like living hell. So he throws them a bone and hopes they'll go away. But feeding these jackals does nothing but make them hungry for more. They'll be back, ready to dine on precedent.

We read on:

School Board member Alva Striplin is now recommending the removal of "Curious Incident" from the district's approved reading list.

"We are simply listening to parents' concerns," Striplin said. "We've got a million books to choose from and this one should not be on the district approval list."

And just why the shit-flinging monkey fuck not? As it turns out, two other schools in town – one private, the other part of the public system – assigned this book for the summer and have had no problems, no complaints. But now, because one Outraged Mom has complained, our school leadership is ready to go even farther than O.M. asked for. Jesus H Christ burning a scroll, what the hell comes next? This quisling quiescence<fn>That's called alliteration. I learned that in high school lit class. Thanks Ms Coker.</fn> puts all those books I listed above on line for the chopping block.

(Fittingly, both of our kids also read *Fahrenheit 451* as part of their curriculum, so they are familiar with the kind of thinking that lies beneath the urge to stop people from reading "dangerous" ideas, even if the danger is something as simple as a dirty word. They may even be familiar with the fact that *451* has been the target of banning attempts for decades, due to its language and "un-Christian" ideas. This is how one learns about irony, I imagine.)

If all it takes to get a book yanked is a handful of bible banging meddlers, no book is safe. If this is the model, then

teaching actual biology, actual climate science, actual history...all these subjects are up for bid to the loudest whiners. I don't hold the whiners responsible for this. It's up to the educators to say, "No, this bullshit stops right here." Those exact words would suit me just fine.

If a parent wants to pull his child from a class for certain subjects or assignments, so be it. If they find themselves doing this fairly regularly, they may wish to consider that they are in the wrong school, and might wish to investigate opportunities at the nearest madrassah or parish school.<fn>Pro tip: Avoid the Jesuits if real science offends you.</fn>

In the meantime, teachers and administrators need to belt up and tell these people, "Sorry, but the rest of us have no obligation to try to sooth your feelings just because you are 'offended'. At the risk of further offending...go pound sand."

Well, a boy can dream.

My Favorite World #34



Life is busy in the bloggy vineyard, with overlapping deadlines combining with ridiculous hot weather to sap my precious bodily fluids, leaving me weakened of my essence,

Mandrake.

But I would be remiss if I failed to share this photo from daughter's soon to be stomping grounds. Apparently, I have the sense of humor of a 14 year old. I am unashamed.