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.”<fn>He went on to explain, “We have always been at war with Oceania!”</fn>*

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.*
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> *“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.