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VOX POPULI: Freedom to Read KEVIN GRINBERG

In the spirit of free political discourse, and with the pledge to create an open forum for constructive disagreement, the editorial board of Concord Bridge publishes "Vox Populi." We energetically welcome submissions. We accept any and all political and philosophical sentiments. Viewpoints printed here may not necessarily represent the views of the Concord Bridge staff-at-large, and the Editorial Board does not specifically endorse any opinions expressed herein.

Every so often, someone steps into a library in search of a book. The patron walks to the appropriate section, finds the right shelf, and starts browsing for the volume. But then a curious thing happens: the book is not there. The first reaction is confusion: "What happened to *Huck Finn*? (Mark Twain) Why can't I find *Of Mice And Men*? (John Steinbeck)"

The next stage is denial: "This can't be – it's a public library! They just **can't** not carry *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*! (Maya Angelou) I *know* they must have *Lord of the Flies* (William Golding) here **somewhere!**" Somewhat embarrassed by his inability to find a classic, the frustrated patron asks the librarian: "Excuse me, could you help me find *To Kill A Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee?" The librarian looks down, shuffles his feet uncomfortably, and whispers, "I'm sorry, that book has been removed."

According to the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, between 1990 and 2000, over 6,000 challenges were filed objecting to books in America's libraries. Approximately seventy percent of those challenges were to books found in schools or school libraries, and about a quarter were to books in public libraries. The ALA estimates that for every challenge reported to the Office of Intellectual Freedom, another four or five go unreported. This means that on average, each day sees eight or nine books face a challenge – some successfully, some not. This is a scary trend.

Censorship is a terrible blight on society, and no form of censorship is more odious than the removal of books from public libraries. Some of the most common reasons for challenges are "sexually explicit material", "offensive language", "occult themes", "violence", "homosexual themes", "anti-family values" and claims that the material is "unsuited to the age group" (in the case of schools or school libraries). All these reasons can be summed up by one simple statement: "I don't like it." Removal of books from libraries is not only the forced imposition of one set of values – it is also a denial of everyone else's right to explore and discover their own.

Advocates of censorship – most often concerned members of the community – typically claim to be protecting children. Adults can (sometimes) be trusted to make up their own minds, they argue, but what about those poor, impressionable, children? How can they possibly read *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (J.K. Rowling) and not succumb to visions of Satanism and the occult?

The answer is simple – children, like adults, are entitled to make up their own minds. They are entitled to share in the wealth of art and opinion that an intellectually rich world offers. They are entitled to read, process and render their own informed judgment on the products of a free society. Children have been denied many rights – but the right to grow has never been one of them.

Just as children explore the physical and social space of the real world, they must be allowed to explore the intellectual space. A parent who confines his child to the house until that child reaches the age of legal adulthood would be negligent at best, and uncommonly cruel at worst. Likewise, a parent who confines his child to a closed, narrow set of ideas and ideals would have much to answer for.

The issue of censorship – particularly by parents – is an imprecise one. After all, we do grant parents broad rights over their own children, and most people seem to have accepted that parents should be allowed to keep their kids away from pornography. However, there is a strong qualitative difference between *Playboy* and the dozens of sex education books that have been challenged or banned – not to mention books like *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley). Moreover, while one parent might convincingly argue for the right to dictate his own child’s reading rights and habits, most censors claim the right to dictate the rights of *all* children – and, in the case of a non-school library, adults as well.

It is this presumption to dictate the rights and values of others that makes censorship – and library censorship in particular – so dangerous. The freedom to form one’s own opinion is a fundamental tenet of a free society, and the freedom to read is quite inseparable from it. The famed Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once remarked that “Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us.”

Each year, the last week of September is designated “Banned Books Week” by the American Library Association. Take that time – or any other – to celebrate your right to read. Visit the Banned Books Week website at www.ala.org/bbooks/; think about the implications of removing Salinger, Steinbeck, Twain and Angelou from our libraries; and finally, read a banned book.

Kevin Grinberg is a member of the class of 2004.