
Banned Books in New Mexico

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As a lover of books, I am always curious about what books have been banned or challenged each year, where they were banned, and why. Since becoming a published author, my view of book banning has changed somewhat. Before, I had viewed banning and challenging books as a nuisance at best, an attempt to control people's minds at worst. Visions of comic book stores being raided in recent times, Nazis burning books in the twentieth century, and church officials burning books in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries come to mind. As seriously as I view such anti-literacy events, I cannot help but be amused sometimes by the reasons for challenging a specific work. Since having my own books published, I often wonder if I would be more successful if someone would just challenge my books.

A lot of books re-appear on the American Library Association's (ALA) list of one hundred most banned or challenged every year. They include such classics as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1984, *Bless Me Ultima*, and *Flowers for Algernon*. And because new books are constantly being published, new books make the list each year. In 2012 for instance, *Fifty Shades of Gray* joined the list.

Just as frequently, articles on banned or challenged books are published in a variety of publications, including online or e-publications. This year, during Banned Books Week, I perused articles to see if anything new was coming up. I came across one of particular interest to me. Not only was it written by Katharine Eliska Kimbriel, a writer whom I know personally, but it also involved a book burning that occurred in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Titled "An Accidental Burning,"¹ the article set me on the trail of information about the history of banning or challenging books and other censorship in the state. At first it seemed that this one incident was a rarity.

The book burning occurred in 2001 in Alamogordo, New Mexico, at Christ Community Church. As told to Kimbriel in a letter from a member of the church staff, it was never intended to be a big deal.² Based on what was described as a long-standing tradition, Pastor Jack



"Holy bonfire" in Alamogordo, N.M., December 30, 2001. Photographer unknown.

Brock invited parishioners to write down sins that they wished to erase from their lives on slips of paper to toss on the bonfire at year's end, or to bring items they wished to purge from their lives.

However, prior to that, Pastor Brock had been asked by one of his parishioners whether she should buy J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books for her grandchildren for Christmas. He had never read the books himself nor had he seen the movie. (At the time the book burning occurred in Alamogordo, four of the Harry Potter books had been published and one of the movies had been released.) After consulting various Christian sources, he not only decided that it was not a good idea for her grandchildren to read the books, and in spite of more recent statements to the contrary, he preached a sermon on the evils of the "blatant witchcraft found in the books." In several accounts, he is quoted as saying, "Harry Potter books are going to destroy the lives of many young people."³

There are several news articles and personal blog accounts, detailing the event. When time came for the bonfire, people showed up with many items to burn. Several Harry Potter books were thrown on the flames along with Ouija boards, records and other novels. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, branded as satanic and promoting witchcraft, were burned, too. According

to one account, at least one Stephen King novel was included (although it was surreptitiously rescued from the flames), as were works by Shakespeare.

A query to the *Alamogordo Daily News* on the incident went unanswered and there is no account on their webpage. However, Wikipedia includes the story in their entry on Alamogordo.⁴ Accounts of book banning and challenging on the websites of the libraries at New Mexico State University (NMSU) and the University of New Mexico (UNM) include this in their lists of specific incidents. Other online news webpages, such as Reason.com and About.com, also have accounts.

In spite of later claims by the church members, there seems to have been more to the book burning than their description of the incident. In the text of his December 23rd sermon once posted on the church's website, he "compared the story of Harry's birth with that of Jesus, implying plagiarism."⁵

In the same Associated Press International (API) wire article sent out on December 31, 2001, titled "Good, Old-Fashioned Book-Burning," it is noted that the bonfire was always intended to include more than slips of paper from the very start. Brock is quoted in the article as saying the books burned were "a masterpiece of satanic deception," and that the attention the church was getting enabled him "to preach the gospel around the world."

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) News reported that "Pastor Brock said he had never read any of the four Potter novels – but had researched their contents." Reuters quoted Pastor Brock as saying that the book burning was part of an effort to encourage Christians to remove things from their homes that interfere with their communications with God.

As the books burned, hundreds of protesters stood nearby with signs that read "Stop Burning Books." Another read "Hitler – bin Laden – Pastor Brock – what great company."⁶ One protester reportedly dressed up as Adolph Hitler.⁷ Letters sent to the local newspaper after the bonfire condemned the actions of the church with only a few exceptions. Some accused Brock of hating Halloween and Harry Potter, among other things.

The story was picked up by several other press organizations, Associated Press and CNN among them. The Reuters article reported that "A New Mexico church plans to burn Harry Potter books because they are 'an abomination to God.'" The BBC reported on 31

December, that an anti-Potter sermon was given during the day before the bonfire. On About.com, an article states that Pastor Brock titled his sermon "The Baby Jesus Or Harry Potter."⁸

Overall, book burning events in this country are not as rare as we would like to think, although they don't always come off as planned. A book burning planned in Lewiston, Maine, had to be cancelled because the city would not issue a fire permit. Instead, they held a "book cutting," with those present being given scissors to cut pages from books. Sometimes these events have grievous results, as when a pastor in Gainesville, Florida, announced his church would burn copies of the Qur'an on September 11, 2011. Government officials and others convinced them to cancel the bonfire, but by then riots had broken out in the Middle East and several people were killed.

Book burning is considered by many as an extreme form of censorship, more radical than banning or challenging. In my research I found only one other example of specific book burning in New Mexico. In February 1981, *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, was ordered burned by the school board in Bloomfield, New Mexico. It was being used in a cultural awareness class in that city. Christine Donisthorpe, State Senator school board member, stated, "We took the books out and personally saw they were burned."⁹

There are differences between the Alamogordo book burning and the banning of Anaya's book in Bloomfield. In Alamogordo, Pastor Brock and his followers made a statement about their own fears of the influence Harry Potter, *Lord of the Rings*, and the other works they burned have on their readers. They did not burn all of the copies in town so that no one could read it. The banning, and ultimate burning, of *Bless Me, Ultima* in effect kept anyone in the Bloomfield school system from reading the book, at least as part of the curriculum. Anaya's story of a boy's coming of age in New Mexico is one of the most challenged in the country.

Other incidents of book banning or challenging in New Mexico include one in Albuquerque in May 1968. A high school student complained to Reverend Bradley Parson of Albuquerque Baptist Church about *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger because of its use of profanity. Parson had not read the book, yet he complained to the school system. The book remained on the shelves.

In 1982, the Carlsbad schools removed the *Merriam*

Webster Collegiate Dictionary from classrooms because it defined obscene words. In 1992, *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite was challenged at the Roswell Public Library because it was seen as promoting the gay lifestyle.

In 2007, the school superintendant in Clovis removed the book *Daughters of Eve* by Lois Duncan from elementary school library book shelves. Although there had been no actual complaints, he had heard that some parents were upset about it because they felt it was not acceptable for younger students. The author agreed and the book was removed from elementary school libraries.

Surrounding states have their own histories of book banning or challenging which brings us to Arizona's most recent efforts to censor curriculum. The state legislature has banned Mexican-American studies in their school systems, through state law HB 228. News stories were published of officials entering classrooms and removing books that were used in these classes, most written in Spanish. In response, an underground library was created bringing books from Texas and New Mexico to replace those that were removed.¹⁰

Texas State Board of Education has a strong influence on books chosen for classes in public schools across the nation and there are many people who consider this a form of censorship since those making the choices are seen as social conservatives, or even ultra-conservatives who want to impose their beliefs on all others. Public libraries throughout the state contend with many challenges to books intended for children and young adults. In 2006, a school system was asked that *The Diary of Anne Frank* not be taught the following school year because it promoted the Jewish religion.¹¹

Huckleberry Finn and *Catcher in the Rye* are not strangers to challenges in Oklahoma, which also has a history of raiding book stores and comic book stores. In 1940,

a raid on the Progressive Bookstore in Oklahoma City that specialized in books on socialism and communism led to the owners and patrons arrests, although it also carried many classics and other literature. All or part of the store's inventory was taken to the Oklahoma City stadium and torched. In 1995, Planet Comics, also in Oklahoma City, was raided by police, accused of selling sexually explicit comic books to a minor. After a two-year legal battle, they were forced out of business.¹²

Norwood, Colorado, also banned *Bless Me, Ultima* in 2008, because of profanity. Some libraries in the state have pulled *Fifty Shades of Grey* from their shelves for being sexually explicit.

The reasons for challenging books are as varied as the contents of the works. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has been called irreligious and un-Christian by those who would ban it, but others argue that it is based on the Christian ethos.

From profanity to religion, from sex to racism to violence, there are people who feel they have to protect prospective readers from exposure to what they disapprove of or feel will be hurtful. Burning books is a drastic demonstration of censorship or at least disapproval. Anyone thinking of planning a bonfire should be aware that, once word gets out, there will be an influx of media types eager to tell the story. Sometimes the only reputation that is hurt is that of the people who carry out the act. Some, like Pastor Brock, welcome the limelight so that they can get their message out to the world.

However, the real benefactors are most often the writers and publishers whose books are attacked. It is pretty certain that, although the Harry Potter books are among the most challenged books each year, sales have only been helped by the free publicity.

ENDNOTES

1 Kimbriel, Katharine Eliska, "An Accidental Burning." Book View Café. October 2, 2012. Found at <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2012/10/02/banned-books-week-an-accidental-burning/>.

2 Kimbriel, "An Accidental Burning."

3 "New Mexico Church Plans Harry Potter Book Burning." Reuters. December 26, 2001.

4 Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alamogordo,_NM.

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- 6 “Satanic’ Harry Potter Books Burnt.” BBC News World. December 31, 2001.
 - 7 Jeremy Lott . “Burning Sensations.” March 1, 2002. Found at <http://reason.com/archives/2002/03/01burning-sensations/>. Accessed October 2, 2012.
 - 8 Kennedy, Elizabeth. “They’re Burning Books Again: Harry Potter Book Burning and Other Cases of Book Burning.” About.com. Found at <http://childrensbooks.about.com/cs/censorship/a/burningbooks.htm>. Accessed October 16, 2012.
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 - 10 “Ariz. Bans Bless me, Ultima, NM students take action”. Found at http://www.dailylobo.com/article/2012/03/ariz._bans_bless_me_ultima_nm_students_take_action. Accessed on October 24, 2012. Marisa Demarco. “Fired Up.” Alibi.com, Vol. 21, No. 10. March 8-14, 2012.
 - 11 Rose Stage College, “Freedom to Read” Is Focus for Banned Books Week. Found at <http://www.rose.edu/11>, (August 20, 2012). Accessed October 16, 2012.
 - 12 Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. “CBLDF Case Files – Oklahoma v. Planet Comics.” 2012. Found at <http://cblfd.org/acout-us/case-files/planet-comics/>. Accessed November 26, 2012.