

News

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STUDENT DECRIES MARKING OUT OF “EPIC OF GILGAMESH”

School book censored

A parent says parts are sexually explicit.

BY SARAH EVANS
Statesman Journal

Ellie Poujade is an avid reader.

So when her eighth-grade English teacher at Parrish Middle School assigned her class last week to read “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” often considered a difficult high school- or college-level book, she wasn’t fazed. In fact, Ellie already had read the book on her own.

But when her teacher took the book a few days later to black out portions of the text, Ellie was surprised.

Ellie’s mother, Marijo, was more than surprised - she was flaming mad.

She immediately wrote an e-mail of complaint to her daughter’s teacher.

“As a parent, I want my kid coming out of school willing to think,” she said.

“I think the damage is done to the kids’ thinking processes.”

That spirit of freedom of expression and the right to read an uncensored text is what underscores Banned Books Week, which is being commemorated this week across the country.

Banning classroom texts and school library books rarely happens in the Mid-Willamette Valley.

Two books were challenged in the Salem-Keizer School District last school year, both in libraries, not classrooms. In both cases, the district decided to keep the book in place.

Two years ago, the Dallas School Board voted to allow teachers to continue reading “Harry Potter” books aloud despite the objections of some parents.

Robert Miller, assistant director at the Salem Public Library, said books are so rarely challenged that the library isn’t doing anything this year to commemorate Banned Books Week.

Although blacking out questionable words may not be as severe as banning “Huckleberry Finn” and “Little Red Riding Hood,” which has happened in other states, it does raise eyebrows among advocates of freedom of expression.

“I personally have an issue with changing an author’s work,” said MaryKay Dahlgreen, coordinator of the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse.



FRANCESCA PEREZ / Statesman Journal

BLACKED OUT: Ellie Poujade, 13, holds “The Epic of Gilgamesh” on Thursday afternoon with passages blacked out by a teacher at Parrish Middle School in Salem. Ellie, an eighth-grader at the school, says she is interested in becoming a writer.

Others, however, say that educators must consider the maturity level of their students when deciding what to teach. “We always have to be mindful that regardless of intellectual abilities, these are still 11- to 14-year-old kids,” said Parrish Principal Michael Johnson.

The Parrish controversy started when Ellie’s teacher, Frankie Osborne, assigned N.K Sandars’ translation of “The Epic of Gilgamesh” to her advanced literature class to expose the students to ancient writings.

The epic poetry in the book, which was written by an anonymous Babylonian several thousand years ago and predates Homer’s “Iliad,” tells the story of a king and his many adventures.

When a parent complained about certain sexually explicit passages, Osborne consulted with Johnson, and the decision was made to mark through the section in question.

The passage talks of the character Enkidu laying down with a harlot, and includes phrases like “stripped naked” and “she made herself naked and welcomed his eagerness.”

Osborne declined to comment for this story. However, in an e-mail she sent to Marijo Poujade explaining the incident, she said she felt the version of the epic she gave to her students was less explicit than other versions.

“I felt that my choice to delete passages that were considered offensive to some was far less intrusive into the process of teaching this class than removing the book altogether,” she wrote in the e-mail.

Marylou McDowell, library media program assistant for the Salem-Keizer School District, said the district rarely gets official complaints from parents about books.

But in the “Gilgamesh” case, neither teacher nor principal contacted the two district officials who normally are advised of such complaints, raising the question of whether there may be other cases of censorship that administrators don’t know about.

“I wish they would’ve given someone a call,” McDowell said. “That is not a recommendation I would have made to black portions out.”

The district has a policy about how it handles official complaints to administrators about books.

If a parent files a complaint to the district, a committee of teachers, parents and administrators is convened. That committee reviews the book and the complaint and then makes a recommendation to the school board about whether to retain the book as is, keep the book but make restrictions or remove the book completely.

If parents object to a book their children are assigned to read, they can also ask for a different assignment.

According to McDowell, the board usually rules to keep the book without restrictions. The Salem Public Library has a similar policy when a book is questioned. Library officials take a look at questioned books, how often they are checked out and whether other libraries carry them.

Dahlgreen, with the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse, said she has seen instances where libraries choose to black out passages or move books to different sections of their shelves, but they are rare.

“I believe there are perhaps other options rather than removing an author’s book,” she said.

Students like Ellie Poujade also have problems with censorship, especially because she and her friends have read “stuff that’s worse than this.”

“They’re books,” Ellie said. “You shouldn’t blot it out because other people might want to read it.”

Excerpt from "The Epic of Gilgamesh," Chapter 1

The following is the passage that was blacked out in books handed out in an advanced literature class at Parrish Middle School:

"When next he comes down to drink at the wells she will be there ~~stripped-naked~~ and when he sees her beckoning him, he will embrace her, and then the wild beasts will reject him."

"The trapper spoke to her: 'There he is. Now, ~~woman make your breast bare. Have no shame, do not delay, but welcome his love. Let him see you naked, let him possess your body. When he comes near uncover yourself and lie with him; teach him, the savage man, your woman's art, for when he when he murmurs love to you the wild beasts that share his life in the hills will reject him.~~'

~~She was not ashamed to take him; she made herself naked and welcomed his eagerness; as he lay on her murmuring love she taught him the woman's art. for For six days and seven nights they lay together, for Enkidu had forgotten his homes in the hills; but when he was satisfied he went back to the wild beasts.'~~

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Life

Students defend teacher — not censorship

Carol McAlice Currie

Statesman Journal

October 1, 2002

Three cheers for the movers and shakers of tomorrow.

Last week, a group of seventh- and eighth-grade Advanced Literature students from Parrish Middle School descended on the Statesman Journal's newsroom.

They carried a petition defending their teacher, Frankie Osbourne, whom they felt had been unfairly characterized in a Sept. 27 news story for blackening passages in a required reading assignment. It was signed, mostly in pencil, by dozens of the young teens.

The teacher, at the behest of principal Michael Johnson, had resorted to the quasi-censorship after one parent had objected to passages in the poem "The Epic of Gilgamesh" as offensive and inappropriate.

The students were animated and agitated. They tossed around phrases like "violating our First Amendment rights" and demanded that the paper print a written apology on the front page of the newspaper, where the article appeared.

These students appear wise beyond their young years, and it's pretty apparent the lessons they learned last week will serve them far beyond the somniferous story about a Mesopotamian king from around 2000 BC.

I read the Gilgamesh gig my sophomore year in college and could barely get through the lore about the part god, part human who, along with an equally strong nemesis and a hapless harlot, behave like something out of an overwrought Hollywood action film.

The students also were more amused than alarmed by the banished passages containing the words "breast" and "sexual intercourse." We get more than that from an average episode of TV's "Friends," one said.

"It's a pretty fun class, and Mrs. Osbourne is really cool," said Cody Ryan Sheets, 13. "We're assigned the reading and then we write in a two-sided dialectical journal, although we sometimes call it a diabolical journal. We write what we think happened and then on the other side we ask questions and discuss it. It's one of my favorite classes."

Cody said he and most of his classmates didn't appreciate the censorship, nor the suggestion their teacher acted unilaterally.

"It's messing with an author's works and with the First Amendment. It's not right, and if one person isn't mature enough to handle it, the rest of the class shouldn't be punished."

It's a point not lost on Parrish Middle School. Principal Johnson, who acknowledged that the censorship decision was ultimately his, said discussions are ongoing for dealing with the issue when it comes up again.

"We walk a tightrope when we get into the more sophisticated material these 12- and 13-year-olds are reading. In an attempt to eliminate one situation, we created another."

One possible remedy, he said, would be to offer parents an alternative reading assignment if they question a book's appropriateness. All censorship matters would be sent to the district for resolution, he added.

Three decades ago, Sister Calista taught my parochially plaid third-grade class that a signature wasn't worth much if it was signed in pencil. Training us in the Palmer method of cursive penmanship, she said if we cared enough to put our name on something, it should be written in ink so it could never be distorted.

But I think if she could see the carefully constructed penciled marks of Parrish's advanced lit class, she might agree that these signatures speak volumes.

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Opinion: Letters to the Editor

Let parents decide ‘appropriate’ reading

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Bravo! Frankie Osborne for exercising her civil rights regarding “age-appropriate” curriculum for her students (“School book censored,” Sept. 27). What age is appropriate for reading that perverted stuff? If I live to be 100, I still won’t reach it.

Ellie’s Mom, Marijo, hasn’t deprived Ellie of already reading the book once, did Ellie miss something? Is there an agenda here for “political correctness”?

Teachers constantly “select” curriculum for children. Government “censors” a book when they ban it from bookstores, libraries, schools, etc.

Parents want schools to teach their children how to read, write and compute math. It is a bonus when they gain some knowledge of geography, history and grammar, along the way.

Marijo, you really “think damage is done to kids’ thinking process” by excluding “Playboy”-type reading from them? Well, don’t fret, kids can think. The question is, “Whose values will they use when thinking?”

Schools are not responsible for training kids how to be “willing to think.” Parents have that responsibility.

Shame on the Statesman Journal! This “non-news” deserved front page? Think again.

Parents keep their kids from eating bad food, and it is our parental responsibility to decide what is “age-appropriate” reading for them, too.

—Marylin Shannon
Brooks

Dismayed at censorship

October 1, 2002

As a retired professor of literature, I am dismayed at the censoring of the Gilgamesh epic reported in the Statesman Journal (Sept. 27).

If this book had been considered totally inappropriate for an advanced eighth-grade class, it should never have been adopted as a text. But to accept it as a work of art and then proceed to mutilate the text is to destroy its unity, for the experience of Enkidu is crucial to the overall theme.

It is like painting shorts on the slides of ancient Greek sculptures (which I have seen done) or mutilating a Picasso.

—Richard D. Lord
Salem

Poem led to overreactions

October 3, 2002

Recently the Statesman Journal headlined a story about how the 5,000-year-old poem “The Epic of Gilgamesh” was censored by a Salem eighth-grade teacher who blacked out sentences which dealt mildly with a sexual episode, because one parent complained. Then, of course, another parent became angry because of the censorship. Both overreacted.

The objecting parent could have had her child assigned another book. The censorship objector could have bought an uncensored copy from Amazon for \$2.83 and presented it to her 14-year-old.

Most 14-year-olds today are sophisticated enough, thanks to television, to be indifferent to simple references to nakedness.

In the same newspaper, on the comic page, the cartoonist Tinsley (Mallard Fillmore) makes reference to another incident, in Hanover County, N.C., in which a teacher was fired for explaining that the word “niggardly” was not a racial slur, but referred to a stingy person. It was not the first time the use of the word, which is of Scottish origin, has resulted in someone losing their job.

To quote Shakespeare, “O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts, and men have lost their reason!”

—Joe Pierre
Salem

Book situation mishandled

October 5, 2002

Shame on the staff at Parrish Middle School for not following district procedures for dealing with challenged materials.

As a parent of two future Parrish students, I would have preferred to have a choice whether to allow my child to read the unedited version or to choose another book assignment.

I also highly object to the staff editing an author’s work, not to mention defacing books.

I hope all staff in the district will learn from this incident and familiarize themselves with the proper procedures to follow whenever a challenge is presented.

—April Conklin
Salem