


CONTROVERSY,
CENSORSHIP, AND THE
STUDENTS' RIGHT TO READ

Millie Davis, Former Director, NCTE Intellectual Freedom
Center
OLLI Presentation 11/21/2022

- 
- ▶ Classroom texts are selected by educators.
 - ▶ They are selected to meet and help students attain the ends of the curriculum.
 - ▶ They are often whole class reads—e.g. one text for the whole class.

It's the student's **RIGHT** to **READ!**



- ▶ Libraries aim to have a book for each patron.
- ▶ Patrons choose their own books.

CLASSROOM TEXTS VS. LIBRARY TEXTS

“So, students’ rights to write and read serve as a catalyst to think about ... our teaching – not just curriculum, not just pedagogy, but the thinking, talking, and listening that we as ELA teachers do together with our students...”

--Jonna Perrillo, NCTE Historian

(NCTE Blog, 9/22/17,

<http://www2.ncte.org/blog/2017/09/more-than-the-right-to-read/>)

WHAT NCTE DOES


- ▶ NCTE handles from 30-300 challenges a year
 - understands reading and writing in terms of English language arts curriculum and instruction.
 - knows and regularly works with all the other First Amendment organizations.
 - rarely tries to solve the problem alone but do so with those organizations whose expertise can help.

▶ NCTE BASES ITS RESPONSES TO CHALLENGES ON

- procedures--what the district policies say about curriculum, texts, and instruction,
- whether the procedures have been followed,
- the value of the text—there are ready-made, adaptable rationales for hundreds of books and a form to create your own rationale, and most important,
- NCTE beliefs about good curriculum and instruction in English language arts.

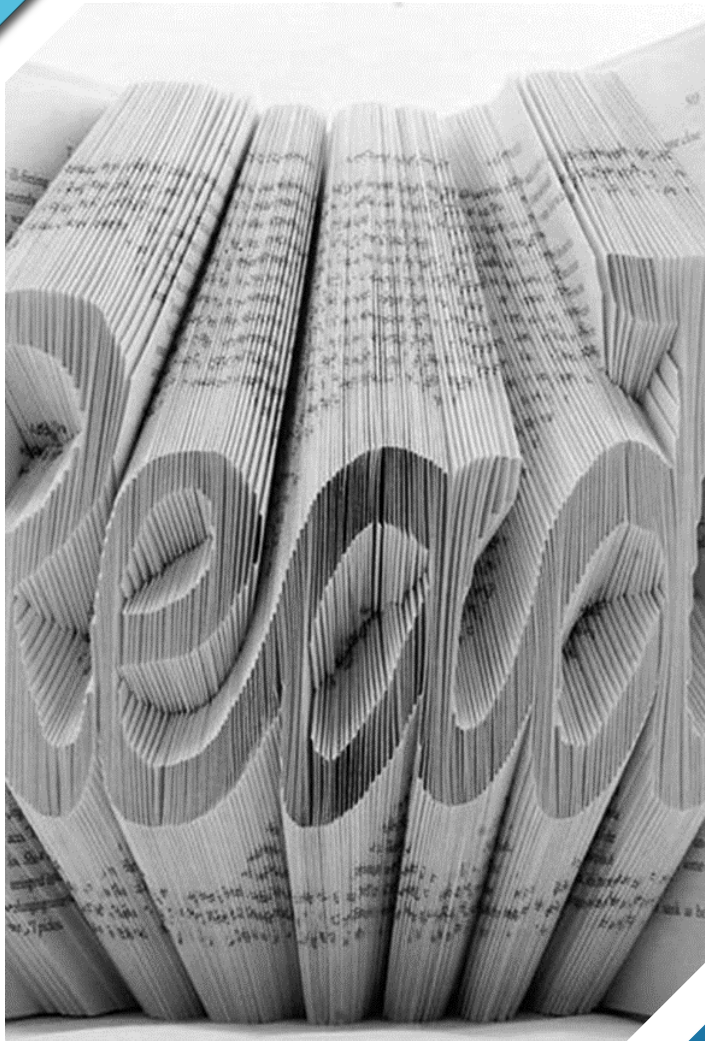
- ▶ THE WHOLE THING
- ▶ Everyone who selects a text—teachers, students, citizens—selects the WHOLE text to read.
- ▶ What happens on pages 32 or 50 or 166 are the events put into play by the characters,
- ▶ real-world “written people” whose lives and language are their own
- ▶ Not recommendations for anyone else’s behavior.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT TEXTS USED IN CLASSROOMS

The slide features a solid blue background. On the right side, there are several white, parallel diagonal lines that create a sense of movement and depth, extending from the bottom right towards the top right.

- Know your school's policy – you can usually find this on the district website under school board policies on instruction and curriculum.
- Let parents know how you feel about literacy – see [Why Penny Kittle Won't Censor Books](#).
- Have a rationale for the text you're teaching.
- Use many texts, student choice, and reading circles.
- Remember that parents can object to a text for their own student but not for everyone else's.
- Take time to listen to the parent—often that's all they want—and to assuage their fears about the power of words over their student—help them see this as a positive.
- Be prepared to offer an alternative if necessary and warranted (note: IB and AP texts probably should stand).

What
Teachers
and
Others
Should
Know



“The world of literature has everything in it, and it refuses to leave anything out.”

--Pat Conroy

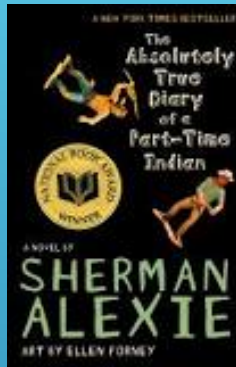
occult
vulgarity disrepect
self-harm race profanity
mental rape
illness **sex** LGBTQ
transgender sexuality politics
drugs conflict violence
gender suicide

BUT THE “EVERYTHING”
CAN BE TOO MUCH
FOR SOME.

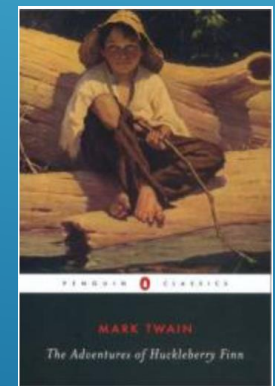
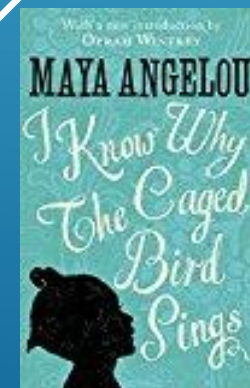
TOPICS IN TEXTS THAT
TEACHERS TELL US
CAUSE THEM THE MOST
DIFFICULTY

- ▶ SEX, OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE, UNSUITED FOR THE AGE GROUP
- ▶ Anything someone finds to object to—usually it's a piece of a text but they object to the whole text.
- ▶ The text conflicts with the challenger's personal values and beliefs or the challenger thinks that children will imitate fictional characters and engage in undesirable behavior.
- ▶ Sometimes the challenger saw the movie and bases the challenge on that.
- ▶ Sometimes people want a book to be rated like movies are—note that MPAA ratings are NOT ratings of educational value. NCTE stands against such ratings: [NCTE Position Statement Regarding Rating or “Red-Flagging” Books](#).

WHY ARE TEXTS CHALLENGED?



Ironically, some of the most frequently challenged books are the very books that young readers say are especially important and meaningful to them (2016 NCTE/NCAC Report, See “Kids explain how banned and challenged books helped them and even saved their lives.”)

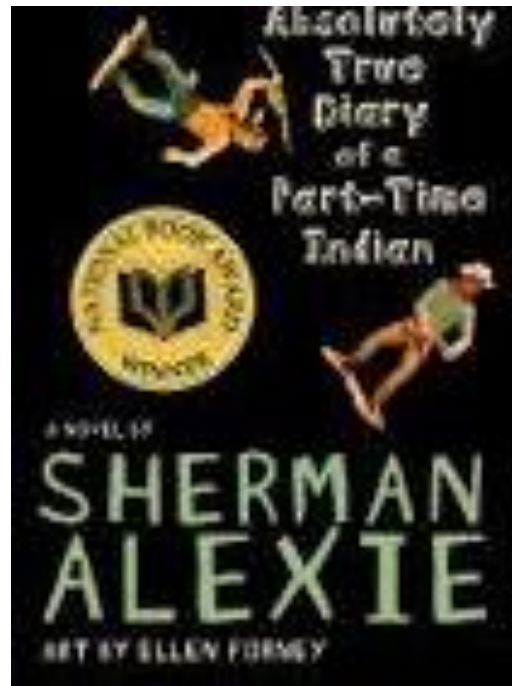
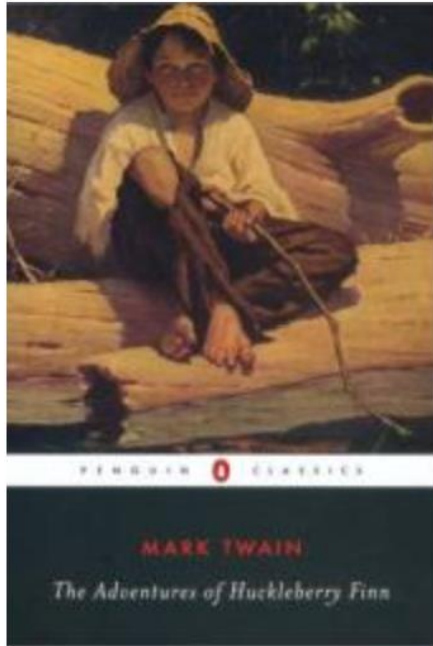




● THIS BOOK SAVED MY LIFE. IT HELPED ME CONFRONT A SERIOUS ISSUE AND DEAL WITH IT.

● THIS BOOK TURNED ME ON TO READING. IT WAS THE FIRST BOOK I EVER READ ALL THE WAY THROUGH.

● THIS BOOK UNDERSTOOD ME THE WAY NO ONE ELSE DOES. I DON'T KNOW HOW I'D HAVE GOTTEN THROUGH ADOLESCENCE WITHOUT IT.



TWO EXAMPLES OF FREQUENTLY CHALLENGED BOOKS

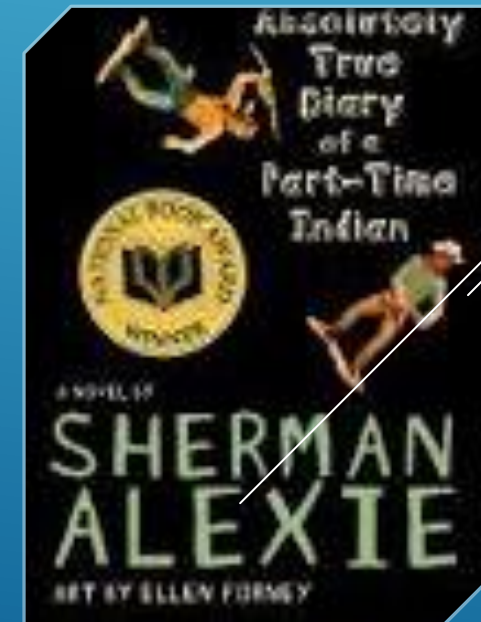
“Books like these [TKAM and Huck Finn] are meant to be troubling because that is a type of deep, personal thinking about a word, an issue, or a social more... I hope our children will be troubled by racist words, bad ideas, and society’s injustice. And I hope they will read about them before they experience them, so that they will have a good retort.”

--Fatima Shaik



1. Usually taught in 8th or 9th grade
2. #1 on ALA's Top 100 List for the decade 2010-19 and on the 2020 and 2021 lists
3. Objections—from CSM (rates age 14+) Mature content: A woman is run over by a drunk driver, people are burned alive in a camper, a man is shot in the face by accident by his friend, and there's talk of his friend hanging himself in jail afterward. A suffering dog is shot and killed because the family can't afford to take it to the vet. There's a lot of fighting, too. Junior is often beat up. Characters swear frequently, using all of the usual suspects, though when one boy uses the "N" word as part of a racist joke, he gets punched in the face for it. Junior enjoys masturbation and looking at magazines with nude pictures. He also engages in bawdy talk with his friends and gets an erection while hugging a school counselor. There's lots of drinking in the story, but only by adults, and there's nothing glamorous about it.

THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN BY SHERMAN ALEXIE



“Why the Best Kids’ Books Are Written in Blood”



I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that. I write to give them weapons—in the form of words and ideas—that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.

--Sherman Alexie

- 2007 National Book Award winner for Young People's Literature in the United States
- *Best Book by Horn Book Fanfare (2007)*
- *Kirkus Book Review Stars (2007)*
- *Publishers Weekly Best Children's Books (2007)*
- *School Library Journal Book Review Stars (2007).*
- *National Parenting Publications Award (2007).*
- *February of 2008 nomination for the 2008 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Young Adult Fiction.*
- *2008 Book Sense Book of the Year Children's Literature Honor Book*
- *2008 Pacific Northwest Book Award*
- *2008 American Indian Library Association American Indian Youth Literature Award*
- *The New York Times Notable Children's Books of 2007*
- *Los Angeles Times Favorite Children's Books of 2007*
- *Amazon.com Best Books of 2007*
- *Barnes & Noble 2007 Best for Teens*
- *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon Winner*
- *Kansas City Star's Top 100 Books of the Year*
- *Literature for Today's Young Adults, Honor List 1980-2007*

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT *PART-TIME INDIAN*?

“If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing.”

“Life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community.”

“I used to think the world was broken down by tribes,' I said. 'By Black and White. By Indian and White. But I know this isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: the people who are assholes and the people who are not.”

“Do you understand how amazing it is to hear that from an adult? Do you know how amazing it is to hear that from anybody? It's one of the simplest sentences in the world, just four words, but they're the four hugest words in the world when they're put together...You can do it.”

“I suddenly understood that if every moment of a book should be taken seriously, then every moment of a life should be taken seriously as well.”

**FROM
THE
NOVEL**

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1. Usually taught in 11th grade—in unit on American Literature
2. #33 on ALA's Top 100 List for the decade 2010-19
3. Objections—"N-word," from CSM (rates for age 11+): The story includes abuse of whiskey, as well as child beating and other real and threatened violence (though little of it is graphic). Originally published in the United Kingdom in December 1884 and in the United States in February 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes constant use of the "N" word, and it is frequently banned by libraries and school districts for its racist language and attitudes.

*THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY
FINN BY MARK TWAIN*



- “That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know nothing about it.”
- “Jim said that bees won’t sting idiots, but I didn’t believe that, because I tried them lots of times myself and they wouldn’t sting me.”
- “Right is right, and wrong is wrong, and a body ain’t got no business doing wrong when he ain’t ignorant and knows better.”
- “That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know nothing about it.”
- “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.”

WHAT THE NOVEL HAS TO SAY

Three white diagonal lines of varying lengths and thicknesses are positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, extending from the right edge towards the center.

- ▶ From Wikipedia: Perennially popular with readers, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has also been the continued object of study by literary critics since its publication. The book was widely criticized upon release because of its extensive use of coarse language and racial epithet. Throughout the 20th century, and despite arguments that the protagonist and the tenor of the book are anti-racist,[3][4] criticism of the book continued due to both its perceived use of racial stereotypes and its frequent use of the [N-word].
- ▶ A story from Millie's classroom

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT *HUCK FINN*?

QUESTIONS?

DISCUSSION?

THANK YOU!

