

Why Teens Should Read Challenged Dystopian Books

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Many of the books that are marketed to young adults contain “edgy” content, like sexuality, profanity, violence, or drug use (Ferguson, 2014). For this reason, most of the books that end up on the American Library Association’s (ALA) banned books list are written for young adults. In 2018, six of the top eleven banned books were young adult books, and the other five were written for children (ALA, 2013). These books are being banned due to the fears and concerns of parents (Ferguson, 2014). While it is good that parents are concerned about what their children are reading, it is not fair to have books removed for all readers based on these concerns (Ferguson, 2014). Dystopian fiction for young adults is often challenged or banned (Vance, 2016). These books are controversial because they usually contain morally flawed, and often violent, societies (Vance, 2016). However, there are many reasons that both dystopian fiction, and banned books in general, should be read by and promoted to teens.

Dystopian fiction is a genre that contributes to adolescent development (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). Scholes and Ostenson (2013), explain that as teens develop, they can more easily grasp abstract concepts. They also become better at critical thinking and more interested in issues that affect society (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). Teens are trying to form an identity and find their place in the world. Dystopian fiction is relatable because it usually involves a protagonist who is questioning the flaws in society and trying to find their place within it (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). These books promote critical thinking and agency and create many wonderful opportunities for discussion (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). Since dystopias center around corrupt societies, they are great for starting discussions with teens about human rights, the role of government, and what we as individuals can do to ensure justice is upheld (Scholes & Ostenson, 2013). As Vance (2016) points out, teens deserve more credit. They can distinguish reality from fiction (Vance, 2016). Just because there is violence in a book that they are reading, it does not mean that they are any more likely to become violent. Dystopias allow teens to experience and understand the pains of others without experiencing that pain themselves (Vance, 2016).

Sheltering teens from “edgy” content is counterproductive (Ferguson, 2014). A lot of the controversial issues raised in challenged books are issues that teens have either already encountered or will soon encounter (Ferguson, 2014). It is better to allow teens to read these books and then have a meaningful conversation with them about the “edgy” content (Ferguson, 2014). Teens are not children anymore; they are becoming adults and cannot be sheltered forever. It is better to deal with violence, drugs, and sex by allowing for a meaningful conversation instead of sweeping it all under the rug. A study on the influence of challenged or banned books on teens, found that “reading banned books was positively associated with civic and volunteering behaviors” (Ferguson, 2014, p.359) it also found no association between challenged or banned books and criminal activity (Ferguson, 2014).

Since dystopian fiction, and other challenged or banned books have so much to offer to their readers, libraries should be prepared to deal with challenges and to defend the books in their collections. One common occurrence is that the challenger has not actually read the book (Vance, 2016). Books are often challenged or banned because of a few sentences or even due to the cover art (Vance, 2016). How can librarians fight for the value of complex and abstract concepts conveyed in a book against a few problem sentences? The key is to create a well-defined collection development policy (Petrilli, 2009). Vance (2016) provides a list of strategies for dealing with book challenges based on the guidelines provided by the ALA (included below). The ALA also runs “Banned Books Week” each year, to promote the reading of challenged books (Petrilli, 2009). Petrilli (2009), explains that “Banned Books Week” reminds readers that the library is part of a democratic society and that equal access to books is an important value held by the library. This is crucial to remember when dealing with book challenges, and when promoting controversial books to teens, including dystopian fiction.

Strategies for dealing with Book Challenges (Vance, 2016)

1. Have a rationale written down for books that are frequently challenged (rationales include intended audience, a summary of the work, educational significance, and potential problems with the work).
2. Create a policy for when challenges occur. Include a requirement that concerns be written down and that the book in question has been read by complainant.
3. Have a sound selection policy in place.
4. Create a committee that includes librarians, teachers, administration staff, and community members. The committee is responsible for the decision and should base their decision on the educational value of the book.
5. Do not remove titles unless the correct policies and procedures are followed.
6. The complainant should be identified (not anonymous) and should request a specific remedy for the situation.
7. Contact the author or publisher of the book. They may be able to provide support for protecting the book.

References

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