

BANNED BOOKS

Gordon J. Van De Water

A set of four books in my library fully considers banned books. Edited by Ken Wachsberger, they discuss works which have been banned in the distant past and up to the late 20th century. More than 400 titles are probed that have been censored for their social, erotic, religious or political content. It is easy to understand why some of the titles appear on banned book lists, such as Paine's *Age of Reason*, Ovid's *The Art of Love*, and Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Other titles made me wonder when I first saw them on the lists until I read why they were objectionable to many private groups and governments. Such titles include *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, *Doctor Dolittle* by Hugh Lofting, and a book loved by many young readers, Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*.

Two titles of special interest to me were *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair (a movie, *There Will Be Blood*, was made in 2007 based on this book), and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, both California writers.

Oil! was quickly censored when it was published in 1927. It was banned in Boston ostensibly because of negative remarks made about the Harding Administration and its involvement with the Teapot Dome scandal, and also for some sexual explicitness and discussion of contraception. According to Leon Harris, Sinclair's biographer, the real reason for the banning of *Oil!* was "its description of how the oil interests bought the Republican Convention that nominated Harding." Sinclair was actually pleased at the banning since this made for better publicity to sell the book. A photograph of him on the streets of Boston wearing a fig-leaf shaped sandwich board advertising the book appeared in many newspapers and helped make it an international best seller. In addition to being banned in Boston, the book was also banned from public libraries in Yugoslavia in 1929, and because of Sinclair's socialist views, it was consumed in the book-burning flames that were omnipresent in Nazi Germany in 1933. The book was banned as late as 1956 in East Germany since Sinclair was viewed as an "irate foe of communism."

The Grapes of Wrath was first published in April 1939. It was an immediate best seller in 1939, and continues to hold a high place in American literature seventy-four years later. Yet within four months of publication it was condemned in many parts the country. As early as August 18, 1939, it was

ordered removed from the library shelves of Kansas City, Kansas, and a few days later the board of supervisors of Kern County, California, passed a resolution banning it. Why? The reasoning now seems arbitrary, even perverse. Most of all, the book was considered a bad influence on the youth of America, specifically because of indecency, obscenity, repugnance in the portrayal of a woman giving birth, and the depiction of life in a “bestial” way. The Kern board justified their banning of the book by saying, “[It] has offended our citizenry by falsely implying that many of our fine people are a low, ignorant, profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious, filthy manner.” A prominent rancher even burned a copy of the book, an act which was photographed for *Look* magazine. In addition, the Kern County resolution requested that Twentieth Century-Fox not complete the film production then in progress.

There was a bright light burning in Kern County when Librarian Gretchen Knief courageously wrote these insightful words to the Supervisors:

“If that book is banned today, what book will be banned tomorrow? And what group will want a book banned the day after that? It’s such a vicious and dangerous thing to begin and may in the end lead to exactly the same thing we see in Europe today.

Besides, banning books is so utterly hopeless and futile. Ideas don’t die because a book is forbidden reading. If Steinbeck has written truth, that truth will survive. If he is merely being sensational and lascivious, if all the “little words” are really no more than fly specks on a large painting, then the book will soon go the way of all other modern novels and be forgotten.”

The letter had no effect, though the advice was sound then and now. Attempts to ban the book continue across the United States to this day mainly by school boards reacting to complaints from parents and fundamentalist ministers. As can be expected, the reasons continue to be that the narrative is “ungodly” and “obscene”. In 1993, in Union City, Tennessee, a parent wanted the title removed from the reading list for his daughter’s advanced placement class. He claimed that “Reading this book is against my daughter’s religious beliefs.” He also itemized the number of offensive passages: God’s name taken in vain - 129 times; vulgar language - 264 times; and reference to sex - 31 times. The school board had a two-hour debate on this and other books and then voted unanimously that *The Grapes of Wrath* would remain as a part of the reading list. One of the board members explained:

“There were books that could be deemed offensive by spokesmen for any number of religious, political, sexual, and racial agenda. But does that capacity to offend mean these books should be ignored for their ultimate value and thus removed from the list of required reading?”

Perhaps we are learning And why were *Oliver Twist*, *Doctor Dolittle*, and *Little House on the Prairie* banned? Primarily, it was because there was a perception of racism against Jews, Blacks, and red Indians.

3-1-2013