

## **Banned In Boston**

**October 4, 2009**

The breakfront in my living room held a plethora of family treasures, passed on from generation to generation. There were three small porcelain mugs in particular that I always admired. They had been my grandmothers and her mothers before her. Each delicate white gold rimmed mug had a beautifully hand painted figure on the front that applied to a nursery rhyme. My mother cherished those mugs and referred to them as memoirs from childhood stories and the Grimms fairy tales her mother used to read to her. In 1996 my mother passed away and the carefully labeled items from the breakfront were being divided up, I took down the three mugs and as I dusted them I realized the rhymes were on the back. One was Peter Piper, the second was written in Old English which I would decipher later, thinking these need to be passed on to my niece and nephews, and on the third was a striking painting of a little boy standing by a cat-tailed pond holding a walking stick. I turned it around and read the rhyme...and it said...

*“There was a little man and he had a little gun, his bullets were made of lead. He went to the brook and saw a little duck and shot it through the head!”*

My mothers cherished mugs? You gotta be kidding, she was one of the kindest most, compassionate, loving individual I ever knew, who wouldn't hurt a living thing and she loved this mug? Thinking back I realized we had all grown up with Grimm's Fairy tales, looked upon by the later generations as most inappropriate for kids, too much violence and horror...I never felt that way about them at all.

As I delved further into the bookcases I found all kinds of books, dog eared and well read, many of which I discovered were labeled back then as banned books.

I could not figure out why this most moral and peace loving of ancestors Would have such material most of which I had read totally unaware of their “banning.”

As I looked into the reasons for banning such books it became apparent that through the ages the list of Banned Books is quite extraordinary. Just accessing the very long list That was read this week in Boston by the Coalition for Freedom of Expression is staggering. The partial list includes many of the works on my family bookshelves, such as the play Lysistrata which was banned, in 411 BCE. The author Aristophanes was put to death as an atheistic corrupter of youth and the ban was not lifted until 1930. In 1525, William Tyndale was burned at the stake for his English translation of the Bible put into the vernacular. In 1539 protestants under Martin Luther burned the Koran, and Pope Paul 1V burned the entire works of Calvin. Along with our more modern deletions from libraries such as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer we can add 1984 by George Orwell, who was accused of being pro communist; Alice in Wonderland, for portraying animals and humans on the same level. The Diary of Ann Frank for being depressing and sexually explicit. Gone with the Wind for using the name of God and Jesus in vain. Editions of Harry Potter were burned by churches in Massachusetts, New Mexico, South Carolina and Iowa, for encouraging the use of magic and witchcraft. I wish to note that in 2002, my copies of Harry Potter series, donated to the Library in Bryant Pond, Maine were removed by the Librarian. In their place on the counter appeared literature on Born Again Christianity! My donated copies never re-appeared on the library shelves.

Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee, was removed from the bookshelves in Wild Rose Wisconsin for being “slanted.” To quote the district administrator, “if there is a possibility that something might be controversial, then why not eliminate it.”

**Our own history of the “Banned in Boston” era began with a man named Anthony Comstock, born in Connecticut in 1844, he served in the Union Army during the Civil War.**

**His distain for profanity led him to create the New York Society for the Supression of Vice in which he sought to supervise the public morality by abolishing “obscene , lewd and lascivious behavior.”**

**He managed to coerce the US Congress into creating the Comstock Law which criminalized the delivery or transportation of obscene, lewd and lascivious materials through the US Postal service including anatomy textbooks and information regarding birth control. Ironically Comstock had a strange but secret hobby. He loved to draw the human buttocks!**

**Influenced by Comstock’s vendetta, a Boston city censor named Richard Sinnot picked up the cause resulting in the Boston City Council authorizing The Boston Watch and Ward Society to monitor the growing influence of immoral entertainment “ Theatrical shows were run out of town, books confiscated and sometimes movies were stopped mid-showing, after an official had seen enough.” As the first Amendment forbade Congress from restricting freedom of the press as it implies “an atmosphere of coercion and the threat of governmental force” it did not specify the role of State, County or city government. My first hand experience of a local banning happened in the mid 1970’s. Before my home town theatre, in Stoneham, MA., was renovated into the respectable form of entertainment that it now supports, it was a porn theater.**

**The last show, “The Devil and Miss Jones” was so offensive to one of our selectwomen that she passed out cold during the film. I really don’t know what she was doing there to begin with, however such an alarming and newsworthy occurrence could not go unnoticed. The authorities needed to check this out first hand.**

The selectmen decided that each member of the committee must view the film multiple times in order to rule on the seriousness its offensive qualities!

They were soon followed by the police department and all other town officials whose devotion and commitment to the well being and morality the community surpassed any personal discomfort they may have experienced by enduring such a distasteful obligation.

Many months later, after anyone and everyone had seen “The Devil and Miss Jones,” the theatre was closed but the offending marquee visibly remained as a Stoneham landmark for many years thereafter.

The Comstock Law, The Banning of Books in Boston and the many state and local interventions that soon followed suit, began a widespread controversy over the boundaries of censorship, further clouding the intent of the Constitution in acknowledging free speech in language, the printed word and in the arts, and led to an ongoing battle over the political and legal limits which once defined the moral and ethical barrier between church and state.

Today we may laugh or sadly shake our heads at the puritanical suppositions of our early leaders, at their foolishness over a few words or phrases that for them, obliterated the value of the whole and threw the baby out with the bathwater.

But are we as a society any further along than our forefathers and mothers in our pursuit of free speech?... in our definitions and tolerance of censorship or in our constitutional rights that protect and respect our religious choices? As the list of banned books continues to grow, books such as “My two Dads” has heralded another era of bannings toward those who have great difficulty with any idea that two people of the same sex could have a happy healthy relationship and remain productive members of society. I believe they could spend their opinions more wisely.

**Is it possible that we may have missed the boat and have gone too far in fostering an 'anything goes society' where too many of our children grow up under the captivating influence of violent and sexually explicit music and video games while we are busy arguing over the morality of the Bible? I think back to my own upbringing surrounded by violent fairy tales "Banned books" and shocking rhymes printed on deceptively prissy gold rimmed mugs and ask myself how does this compare with the bannings of today? Or the lack thereof? What about the American way of life?**

**One only need to pick up a TV guide or check out the latest video or computer games or movies to realize that the continued banning of books is a real joke, a leftover from days gone by when books were the only source of personal entertainment available to the public. Books were discussed and as we were read to, the events that frightened us were talked about and shared, our real life fears were dealt with in an open and healthy way.**

**Overwhelmed with the amount of media available, that advocates killing and violence, horror and corruption, we are still banning books and ignoring the events and images that are influencing our kids today as they venture into their cyber worlds alone, or with their friends.**

**These times have overwhelmed us with the misplaced consequences of censorship as well as with the freedoms of those who cite the First Amendment as they produce horrific examples of life as violent, dishonest and dangerous, solely for the profit margins they produce. They flourish while "Harry Potter" goes into the trash.**

**This portrayal of life as viewed from the fringes of a laptop or video game is most assuredly not one that we wish for the next generation to understand and act upon as truth.**

**We cannot stop the profit mongers from creating images for our kids of life as exciting only if it is fast moving, violent or horrific. We can talk about what is real and true, we can invade this secret world if we choose to find the time to do so.**

**Banning is not the answer, truth, honesty, community conversation,  
interaction, love...**

**Is, reality is....fantasy identified... is**

**So be it amen**

**Rev Helen C. (Holly) Baylies ©**

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