

**Facing Our Fears  
Integrating Challenging New Books Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curricula  
by ReLeah Cossett Lent**

In his remarkable first-person account titled *The Translator*, Daoud Hari, a tribesman in the Darfur region of Sudan, tells in heartbreaking detail the story of his survival after Sudanese government-backed militia groups attacked his village. Hari persevered by living according to his motto, “You have to be stronger than your fears if you want to get anything done in life.” While the issue of censorship is not tantamount to Hari’s life-or-death crisis, the fear of censorship, often referred to as the “chilling effect,” influences curricular choices more than we might like to admit. Even books that have been in the curriculum for decades hold no guarantees: the American Library Association confirms that classics such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been challenged and censored all over the country. So, the question censors often ask themselves, “Is this book safe?” may be rhetorical; the real question becomes “Is this book important for students to read?” Daoud’s stark and disturbing portrayal of genocide, for example, is essential in helping students recognize the enormity of such tragedies, and understanding how one group’s quest for control can lead to the unfathomable suffering of those who are oppressed. The raw power and vivid detail of his text, however, may cause some teachers to be reluctant to include it in their curriculum. Our responsibility as educators forces us to address what is important for our students in spite of our fears. David Warlick, in his book *Redefining Literacy for the 21st Century*, notes, “Our job as educators is to prepare our students for their futures. This job today is especially challenging because, for the first time in history, we cannot clearly describe the future for which we are preparing our children.” Today, that future is a global one, and students who have little understanding of an existence outside their own sphere, or lack the ability to empathize with others whose lives are in stark contrast to their own, will not be equipped to interact compassionately and wisely with a wider world. In fact, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills lists the following abilities students will need in the future, most of which can’t be assessed on a standardized test: creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration skills, social and cross-cultural skills, leadership, and responsibility. If we want students to become thoughtful citizens capable of facing a world we cannot yet describe, they must read, think, discuss, and write about events, ideas, and language that may, indeed, spark censor’s fires. How can teachers protect students’ rights to know and, at the same time, not

**Write a Rationale**

For every book that you intend to use with the entire class, or for those that you will assign for small group reading, write a rationale that explains clearly and in detail why the text is the one that will meet your pedagogical needs and increase learning for students in your content area. Such a rationale might include answers to the following:

1. Why have you chosen this particular book to use with this particular group of students?
2. What content standards or learning goals will this book address?
3. How will the book be used in class? (i.e. silent or oral reading, whole class or small group discussion.)
4. What instructional activities will accompany the study of the book? How will such activities further learning goals for this topic of study?
5. What reviews, awards, or recommendations support the use of the text?
6. Do you or other teachers have previous experience with the book that supports your use of it?
7. What potential objections to the book do you foresee? (i.e. violence, sexual content, language.)
8. How does the educational value or literary merit of the book outweigh possible objections?
9. How do you plan to handle sensitive issues within the work?
10. What alternate selections will you provide for those who might find the book objectionable?

fall victim to a public censorship incident? While there is no simple answer to this complex question, there are specific steps teachers and schools can take to reduce the risks of a challenge from the censors.

### **Give Students Choice**

In addition to being a powerful motivator, choice may also pre-empt a challenge. When students understand that they, not the teacher, are in charge of adhering to their family standards (or personal values), the responsibility circles back to the student—where it rightly belongs. Only then will students feel empowered, perhaps even compelled, to defend what they have chosen to read. It follows that no student should ever be forced to read something he or she finds offensive, and everyone, students and parents alike, should be reassured on that point from the first day of class. With every assigned text, an alternate selection should be available to any student or parent who finds a text objectionable. Choice also enriches and expands content areas, which should be supported with a variety of texts (often in the form of classroom libraries) that will appeal to students with differing learning styles, reading abilities, and background experiences. Once teachers experience the advantages of students' increased engagement and learning as they make choices, it may be difficult for them to return to the one-text-for-all practice. For example, although a book such as Albert Camus' *The Plague* may be a curriculum staple for English or social studies classes, teachers could also provide a similar but more current offering like *The Last Town on Earth*, a mesmerizing historical novel about a town that quarantines itself during the 1918 influenza outbreak and faces complex moral questions. In this way, students may choose between two compelling texts that will prompt meaningful and deep study while decreasing the possibility of a challenge for either book.

### **Build Foundation for Intellectual Freedom**

Engage students, faculty, parents, and community in study groups, forums, and informal discussions about the nature of censorship and intellectual freedom, and review the rights of parents, students, and teachers in choosing materials for classroom use. Such a dialogue will create a framework for understanding, and may well shift a potentially volatile challenge to simply another important talking point. You may find students in government or English classes who would agree to host community book clubs using books that address censorship issues, such as Chris Crutcher's *Sledding Hill* or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Your community may also decide to read and discuss books that have been frequently censored. Check out the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's First Amendment Center for information on becoming an affiliate or project school. ([www.firstamendmentschools.org](http://www.firstamendmentschools.org))

### **What To Do If A Challenge Occurs**

Despite the most careful preparation to avoid a challenge, one may still occur. If a procedure is in place to handle the issue respectfully, thoughtfully, and calmly, the situation can be turned from a "battle" into an opportunity for growth and understanding.

1. Know your district's Challenged Materials policy. Make sure that all steps in the process have been followed. For example, the complainant may not have completed a Reconsideration of Materials request form, which should instruct him or her to read the work in its entirety before submitting the form.
2. Request a meeting with the person filing the challenge and listen carefully to his or her concerns. Try to understand the underlying reasons for the challenge and address those as fully as possible without being defensive or condescending.
3. Provide your written rationale for using the book, explain the book's importance to the unit of study, and discuss alternate selections. Invite the complainant to sit in on a class discussion of the book.
4. Prepare a folder that contains reviews and awards related to the challenged book and include student

comments, if possible. Make copies of the folder available to students, parents, and other interested parties.

5. If the challenge continues beyond the classroom level, be prepared to repeat the above procedure with the Challenged Materials Review Committee as well as the principal, school board, and/or superintendent.

6. Discuss the issue with others in your department or on your faculty, requesting their support. This is an issue that affects the entire school community, not just one teacher.

7. Contact organizations that have experience with censorship and can provide resources, support, and advice, such as American Library Association ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)), the National Coalition Against Censorship ([www.ncac.org](http://www.ncac.org)), or the National Council of Teachers of English ([www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)).

Facing a challenge, and even dealing with one, does not have to be disastrous; in fact, it may open the door for intellectual and civic growth throughout the entire school community. In our deepest hearts, of course, we hope that our community will agree with Voltaire, who so wisely said, “Think for yourselves and let others enjoy the privilege to do so, too.” If students are to think for themselves, they must be provided with fodder that sparks thinking through texts that challenge, probe, disturb, confirm, and enlighten. And perhaps it is through such texts, along with our students’ responses to them, where we will continue to find the courage to become stronger than our own fears.

### **About the Writer**

ReLEAH COSSETT LENT, a secondary teacher for many years, is now a national consultant and author of several books and articles on censorship and adolescent literacy, including *Engaging Adolescent Learners: A Guide for Content-Area Teachers*. Her first book, *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*, coauthored with Gloria Pipkin, tells the much-publicized story of a Florida town that censored both students’ reading and writing. ReLeah was the 1999 recipient of the PEN Newman’s Own First Amendment Award.