

We Keep Pedaling

ReLeah Lent and Gloria Pipkin

Editor's note: The censorship case described in this article by primary participants, ReLeah Lent and Gloria Pipkin, gained national attention in 1987. The January 4, 1987, issue of The Washington Post Magazine, contained a story on the events, using the headline, "A Chilling Case of Censorship," and the opening statement, "Last year, teachers in Panama City, Florida, got an award; this year they are getting death threats." The teachers have been nationally recognized and awarded for their strong support of students' and teachers' rights against censorship. -psc

We first came to know and love Robert Cormier through his books. Colleagues and collaborators in a junior high English department that worked hard to engage students as active readers, we read young adult literature avidly, always looking for books to add to our classroom libraries, and for the special ones that merited whole-class study. ReLeah was the first to bring Cormier into the curriculum.

ReLeah Discovers *I Am the Cheese*

People refer to themselves in many ways, but as cheese? Strange title, I thought when my sister, a high schooler and voracious reader, first told me about a young adult novel titled *I Am the Cheese* that she thought my seventh grade students might like. "It's fascinating," she said, and I knew from experience to trust her evaluation.

I read it aloud to my husband on a long trip to my parents' house in North Carolina. I could hardly stop reading when we stopped for gas or to make mandatory bathroom breaks for our small son. It was fascinating, but even more than that, it was different, spicy, challenging. It wove a narrative amid a question-and-answer style interview that kept me alert for signals and, like a tugboat captain peering through the fog for the next buoy, I strained my faculties trying to see what was ahead. Even when I finished, I wasn't sure of what I thought I had seen, so I started over, taking the time to snugly fit the pieces of the puzzle securely into place.

With the educational buzz-phrase "critical thinking skills' dominating teacher circles, I knew I had found the perfect critical-thinking tool to help my students achieve those skills. I introduced the book to my classes of honors seventh graders, students who were used to the young adult genre-and used to having extended time in class to read and discuss. They were interested when I showed them the title, more interested as I described how I read the book out loud all the way to North Carolina, and positively enthusiastic when I mused who might be the first to figure out what happened at the end.

We developed reading circles and they recorded questions and thoughts in their response notebooks. They pondered, predicted, argued, sometimes in small groups, sometimes with the entire class. They became pensive as they read about Adam's family, frustrated as the chapters seemed to follow no logical progression, thoughtful as they listened to others unravel the mystery.

I knew I had found it. *I Am the Cheese* was the perfect book to hone skills, but more importantly, it provided my students with a reading experience they would never forget. My hunches were confirmed as I read their final responses:

While reading it, I developed a new sense of respect for Mr. Cormier..I like the sessions between "T" and "A." They were just another example of Mr. Cormier's talents; they showed the forcefulness and pressure of T, and the pain in remembering for Adam.

Another thing I liked was the ending. It was neat how he used everybody in the institution, such as Whipper & the two wise guys, Junior Varney, who always stole things, and Arthur. One other reason I liked the ending is because of how Adam was going to start his life all over again with the same paragraph that he used at the beginning of the book.

The book has an ending that makes you know that it hasn't ended and may not ever end.

Gloria's Students Choose *The Chocolate War*

During the 1983-84 school term, my eighth graders argued persuasively that they should be allowed to select one of our class novels, since I had chosen the others. Students made nominating speeches for books they wanted to study and campaigned for their personal choices before the class voted. Two classes chose *The Chocolate War*. Many of my students had studied Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* with ReLeah, as seventh graders, and they wanted to try another Cormier book.

Knowing that Cormier was at the top of the national lists of most frequently challenged authors, and that this novel in particular often drew censors' fire, I first talked to our principal about the book and my plans for using it. With her approval, I wrote to parents and told them that their children had chosen a book with strong themes and language. I urged them to read the book for themselves, to respond in writing if they wished, and to join us in class for our final day of discussion. I also reminded them of our department's alternative selection policy, which ensured their right to opt for another book.

I took all parental responses and typed them up anonymously, as the basis for our culminating discussion of the novel. One of the letters was from a parent who said that reading the novel made her "extremely concerned about the material our children are being given in the school system." Why didn't we read more classics, like *Huck Finn*, she wanted to know. She objected to the language and to the lack of adult role models in Cormier's book, although her tone was more thoughtful than threatening.

On the final discussion day, the mother who wrote this letter was the only parent to attend the discussion. As students read the handouts with parents' comments, they zeroed in on the one described above, not knowing it was written by the parent in the room. Berrin Beasley, a tall, dark-haired girl who had delighted me all year with her insight and her passion, squared her shoulders and spoke out from her seat with the confidence of a seasoned public defender. "First of all," she began, "we've already read *Huck Finn*, and if you want to talk about role models, we could start with Pap, who beats Huck and leaves him alone for months at a time. And then there's Miss Watson, who sells Jim away from his family."

The mother's eyes never left Berrin's face, even when an exuberant kid across the aisle from her cheered Berrin on with a raised fist and a sharply exhaled "Yes!" When the defense rested, there was nothing left to say. *The Chocolate War* had been acquitted, without my saying a word. If I had written the script, I couldn't have presented a more eloquent summation.

The next day the class received an open letter from the parent:

I'd like to thank you and your third period class for a most interesting and well spent hour this morning. It is very encouraging to hear teenagers being encouraged to express their ideas and feelings. As you know, parents don't often have the chance to know what other teens are thinking. We seem to always hear our own teen, but I sometimes find myself not "listening." My opinion (#11) of *The Chocolate War* has not changed, but I definitely have changed my view or thinking, as to the children's (teens') response. When I read the book and wrote you my response I was giving a very biased, parental view.

Even though I do not care for the book, I found it refreshing to know that the class could read the book and not be as close-minded as I had been. Yes, teenagers, you can teach parents and adults something.

Thank you for such an enjoyable lesson.

This fairy tale ending wasn't, however, a portent of things to come. A few parents launched a campaign against young adult literature in general and Robert Cormier's work in particular. Our chief critic took out a half-page ad in the Sunday paper, featuring disemvoweled excerpts from *I Am the Cheese* and *The Chocolate War*. "Life is s h _ t," followed by a page number, was typical of the quotes ripped from context. The ad's headline read: "YOUR CHILD'S TEXTBOOKS -HAVE YOU READ THEM?" A coupon invited parents to petition the school board to remove "obscene" books from the school system. One parent took the invitation seriously and filed a formal complaint against *I Am the Cheese*. She objected to the theme, which she characterized as depressing, to "vulgar language," and to "inappropriate sexual references." In keeping with our department's longstanding policy of providing choices for all readers, we left the decision to the families of our children. Those who found the book objectionable for whatever reason would be given other options.

We were devastated when, despite the fact that 91 of 95 parents gave informed consent for their children to read and study *I Am the Cheese* with ReLeah, the superintendent banned the book anyway. There was never any question that we would defend our program, young adult literature, the challenged books, and our students' right to read. ReLeah wrote to Robert Cormier, whom we had spent the evening with a few months before at the fall conference of the Florida Council of Teachers of English. He responded immediately, offering support and providing a much-needed boost to our beleaguered department. He wrote:

I'm writing to you so you'll know that I am very concerned about what is going on at Mowat Junior High School and that I'll do my very best to help.

The material you sent me shows that you have done a terrific job in defending your position. In fact, it seems to me you've gone beyond what anyone could expect in amassing positive statements. At the same time that letter from Mrs. C_____ reveals how weak her position is. And yet, it's chilling because so many people apparently feel that way. A case on Cape Cod has just concluded although it involved *The Chocolate War*. (This is the first time *I Am the Cheese* has been under attack and those out-of-context pages circulated by the opponent would seem to clinch our case and be self-defeating for them).

Cormier stayed in touch with us, and his offers of support were not just empty words. With the help of our public library, we put together a series of seminars on young adult literature, which we billed as "A Family Reading Experience." I led the first session, an overview of young adult literature, and then each of the four remaining seminars was devoted to a specific book, ending with *I Am the Cheese*. We asked Cormier to join us for the evening, and he didn't hesitate. ReLeah was the moderator.

Cormier Reaches Through the Fire

I couldn't wait to introduce Cormier to these Bay Countians, many of whom had signed petitions against his books, to show them his gentle spirit, his wise and tempered words reflecting an introspective life. I was nervous, but it was an excited anxiety, as if I were about to introduce Ghandi. I trusted him to calm the masses, to face narrow-minded fear with honest openness. And, indeed, as the auditorium filled beyond capacity, as people stood in the aisles looking at this man who had "started this whole mess," they seemed a bit pacified. Then, like Moses coming down from the mountain, he spoke and they listened. He spoke about how writing a book is both terrible and wonderful, about how he went to a boys' school and wrote what he knew, about how life isn't always bright and glorious; the darkness exists even as we "dare to disturb the universe." His words seemed to diffuse the hostility and I could see many of those who had prejudged him drinking in his tonic of reason. They had confronted the monster and he turned out to be a gentle, kind man with appropriately large owl glasses, speaking about his Catholic upbringing and how we all experience the same emotions: fear, love, insecurity. As he spoke, it was clear that he was perplexed as to how his words had ignited such a burning controversy. Robert Cormier sparked a connection with the audience just as he had connected with millions of readers. Gloria and I looked on with pride and hope.

After the program, Cormier came to my house for a gathering of those who had been supportive of his books. One of my fondest memories, one I passed along to his wife Connie after his death, was a small slice of life I will never forget. It is one of those moments encapsulated, as a snowman in a Christmas glass ball, and I often turn the memory over to watch it come alive. He needed to use the phone to call his wife, but it was too noisy in the front of the house, so I offered the one in our bedroom where our five-year old son, Aaron, had been relegated while the adults were talking. Aaron was in his pajamas, watching television with his favorite blanket when he and Cormier met. After the phone call, Aaron apparently told Cormier he was hungry. Soon, the famous author was in the kitchen, filling a plate with all kinds of goodies and returning with it to the bedroom to share with Aaron.

He left soon after, and although we corresponded, I never saw him again. While I still mourn his passing, his brilliant words, his compassion, and his courage will mean that, at least for me, I will never be the cheese.

Cormier's Legacy of Hope

It took five years and a federal law suit to get the banned books restored. In the process, I (Gloria) made two more appeals to the school board on behalf of *I Am the Cheese*. The superintendent and our chief critic marshaled their strongest arguments, including the claim that the book left the reader without hope. Hope is in the heart of the beholder, I told the school board, and the crowds that packed the meeting room. At the end of the novel, when Adam Farmer gets back on his bike once again, I am flooded with hope and inspiration. If a mere child, with incredible institutional odds arrayed against him, can keep pedaling, so can I. So can I.

*ReLeah Lent teaches English, speech, and debate at Bay High School, Panama City, Florida. She and Gloria Pipkin, a former public school teacher, have written *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons on Intellectual Freedom* and hope to see it published next year.*

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