

# DO YOU NEED PERMISSION?



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love teaching syntax. Not because it's exciting, but because I've developed a syntax lesson that revolves around an edited excerpt from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (Mariner Books). My students love it. I provide a bit of information about the author, tell the students it's one of the smartest books I've ever read, and I show them the paperback I keep on my private bookcase. Inevitably, one or two ask to borrow it.

And I refuse.

"I can't let you borrow my copy," I tell them. "But tell your parents you want to read it."

Over the past several years, I can think of dozens of students who

returned to tell me they checked it out of the library, their parents bought it, or they got it for their birthday.

Two years ago, I ordered new books for my literature circles and, following the advice of online reviews, purchased 10 copies of John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (Speak). When the books arrived, the eyes of one young lady widened. "Ms. Cotillo! Have you read this?" I hadn't. I'd planned to read it the coming weekend, but when I witnessed the mix of distress and delight in this girl's eyes, I bumped reading up my priority list.

At the first f-bomb, I thought I would carefully screen which students received the book. After multiple



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he U.S. tradition of challenging books in the ELA curriculum has led educators down a slippery slope. Each time we turn to those outside our profession for permission to teach a text, we diminish our professional status. More important, we deny those without agency or voice an opportunity to speak through books, and we narrow the world in which our students live.

To avoid book challenges, teachers send out permission slips, offer alternatives to whole-class novels, and offer the lone student whose parents say "no" to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Alfred A. Knopf) an alternate text, often another book on the ALA list of challenged books.

Still, schools face book challenges, and districts capitulate to pressure to ban even approved books from whole-class study and from classroom libraries. Many challenge books without having read them, as has often happened with Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers). In North Carolina, Omar Currie read *King & King* (Tricycle Press) to his third graders for its anti-bullying theme. He faced calls for his dismissal despite an administrator preapproving the text, thus leading to his resignation.

Why not avoid controversial texts?, suggest some. But from The King James Bible to the Captain Underpants series,

## A look at how to approach introducing controversial books into the curriculum

f-bombs, I started drafting a permission slip in my head. When I reached the scene where the title character provides an intimate tutorial with a tube of toothpaste, I boxed up the books to be returned. If I can't figure out how to word the permission slip, the books go back to the bookstore.

In today's litigious society, I'd be able to defend myself if a parent objected to either *The Things They Carried* or *Looking for Alaska*, but only to a point. Are they good books?



finding a book immune from challenge is impossible. We can't avoid texts on the premise that the book might be challenged. Reasons for challenges change with political and cultural winds.

Understandably, teachers want to avoid parental complaints, but a permission slip and prior approval offer no guarantee a book won't be challenged. Omar Currie's administration knew about his plan to address bullying through *King & King*. I taught *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien for three years with

Absolutely! Are there lessons and morals to be learned? Of course there are. Are they appropriate for middle school readers? Ah, there's the rub. Who gets to decide the definition of appropriate? In a world where parents take complaints right to their lawyers and the superintendent's office, I'm content to leave the decision-making up to the parents.

This summer, I discovered *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins (Margaret K. McElderry Books). It's an incredibly

administrative approval and still faced backlash from a parent.

Educators should stop looking to those outside our profession for book approval. We should, however, inform parents early in the year about the variety of read-alouds students will hear in class. We should provide a list of approved books by our districts, in our dual credit, and in AP literature and composition classes.

Teachers can talk with students about controversial books, how to focus on universal themes, and how language

powerful novel, and I fully intend to use excerpts from it when my students explore poetry writing. Like I do with Tim O'Brien, I'll provide biographical information about the author, show students my copy of the book, and rave about how wonderful it is. But when they ask to borrow it, I'll say no and tell them to ask their parents.

Experience has taught me that discretion is the better part of valor. By using carefully chosen excerpts from valuable controversial texts, I whet my students' appetites just enough that they'll go seeking the books for themselves.

They'll get to read, and I'll get to keep my job. ■

structures work to develop themes. We can hook students into reading potentially controversial books through performance-based, front-loading activities. Students excited about a book are less likely to complain, meaning parents are less likely to challenge the book. We can also have students skip a section, such as the rape descriptions in *Blindness* by Jose Saramago (Harvest Books) and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (Riverhead Books).

Educators need to stop bargaining away their professional status. Rather than succumb to the pressure exerted from book challenges, we need a return to the belief that the best books challenge us and our students. ■