The war against intellectual choice is a war against thinking. Read this book and you will understand the importance of fighting for and defending intellectual freedom and choice.

—Stephen Krashen
AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE GATE
Lessons in Intellectual Freedom
At The Schoolhouse Gate
Lessons in Intellectual Freedom

Gloria Pipkin & ReLeah Cossett Lent

Foreword by Susan Ohanian

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Confrontation

It is the ferment of ideas, the clash of disagreeing judgments, the privilege of the individual to develop his own thought and shape his own character which makes progress possible.

—Calvin Coolidge

After the initial rage over Claudia Shumaker's challenges to *I Am the Cheese* and *About David* had subsided, we talked continually within the department about how to respond. We had defended our right to read and study the challenged books by preparing extensive packets for the review committees, but we needed a way to communicate more directly with the members of our school community and with the public at large. Although I believed we had the support of most of the parents, I was terrified at the prospect of a public showdown. What if our detractors were more numerous than we believed? We could be humiliated by lack of support and forced to concede everything. The specter of our critics taking passages out of context and reading them aloud hovered about us, and I was afraid to take any chances.

But Charles Collins' letter to the parents of our students galvanized us, and on a brilliant Saturday morning in May, Alyne, Beth, and I met at ReLeah's to talk more about strategy. Sitting around ReLeah's dining room table, we explored all the possibilities. From the beginning, Alyne had advocated a public meeting to gauge the level of support. She was confident that the complainants represented only a small portion of our school community, and she pushed for us to find out once and for all just how small. "I promise you, we'll pack
the place. My students are chomping at the bit to stand up for our books, and they’ll bring their parents, too.”

Alyne’s impassioned pitch persuaded us, and we decided to call for a meeting. The next week I met with Joel Creel and told him what we had in mind. With his permission, we sent home letters inviting students, parents, and staff to a meeting at Mowat on the evening of May 27, 1986, to talk specifically about the challenges to our books and about our curriculum in general.

As I was leaving school the day before the meeting, Creel motioned me into his office and shut the door. His round face was redder than usual as he told me, “Well, the superintendent had a fit when I told him about this meeting y’all are having.” Hall had told him to assemble the entire English department before school the next morning, when Hall himself would be there to talk to us. Images from my last confrontation with Hall, in the office where Creel and I now stood, flooded back, and I knew that what he had in mind wasn’t a professional dialogue.

Joel Creel accompanied Leonard Hall to the English workroom a few minutes before eight o’clock the next morning. Hall barely acknowledged my presence and paced silently around the room like a detective, examining teachers’ workstations as if they were crime scenes. We waited for the remainder of the teachers to arrive.

When Hall began to talk, he was so angry that his voice and his hands shook. It was clear he was speaking at us, not with us. “We have a mess down here,” he said, “and you people are responsible for it.”

He accused us of using the classroom as a bully pulpit. According to Hall, we had succeeded in inciting our students to rebel by telling them, among other things, that they could read whatever they liked, whether their parents approved or not. When I tried to counter his misinformation, he barked at me, “Don’t interrupt; it’s time you listened for a change.”

“I don’t like this meeting you’ve scheduled for tonight, but it’s too late to call it off. One thing I can do, though, is to keep the kids out of it—they’ve got no business there.” This is a matter for their parents to decide, Hall told us.

When I was finally allowed to speak, I told Hall that his decision to bar students from the meeting was likely to stir them up even more. I asked him if he would make the announcement on the public address system, and explain it, while he was at the school that morning. “No, ma’am,” he spat back. “You’ll tell them, and that it was your decision.”

Terry Rubin spoke up in her soft voice, with words that are forever engraved on my heart: “Mr. Hall, I won’t lie to my students.”

Hall advanced toward her and jabbed his finger in her face. “I order you as superintendent of schools . . .” Just as the tension became unbearable, the bell signaling the start of the school day rang.
When I got to my classroom and realized that in the midst of the turmoil I had left my roll book in the workroom, I had to walk past Hall again. He stopped berating ReLeah long enough to tell me, “And another thing—when I’m talking, I don’t want you shaking your head!”

Alyne had planning first period, so Hall, Creel, and she went to her classroom to talk privately. Her notes from the meeting indicate that Hall told her she should get a lawyer, that she was “on thin ice.” He also told her that English teachers had no business talking to students about the First Amendment; that was social studies curriculum, he said.

I went into my own classroom and faced my students to announce that they would not be allowed to attend the meeting that evening. A barrage of questions and protests followed, most of them centering on Why? As the students continued to press for more information and became increasingly frustrated by my robotic responses, I broke down and sobbed, the only time in more than twenty years of teaching that I cried in the classroom, except in response to literature.

Hall’s order and the tumult that followed left all of us feeling violated and demoralized. The department workroom that normally echoed with life and laughter was like a morgue. Did we have no recourse, we asked ourselves. Convinced that the superintendent had violated our professional code of ethics and maybe other laws as well, we talked about seeing a lawyer. Alyne took the initiative and called her cousin, Mac Fite, a partner in a prestigious local firm. He listened sympathetically and referred us to another firm, one that specialized in First Amendment issues.

That afternoon, Alyne, ReLeah, and I met Michel (Mike) Stone and his partner, Pamela Dru Sutton, for the first time. Mike had graduated from a local high school and met Pam, who grew up on Long Island, when they were both undergraduates at Harvard. After finishing law school, they moved to Panama City. When we met them, they had just opened their private practice a couple of months before. Both of them were also part-time public defenders. Their office was littered with legal notes, stacks of official-looking documents, and books. The walls attested to their backgrounds, with framed posters and prints from museum shops. Mike was short, tweedy, and professorial, his somewhat formal air softened by a ready wit. He listened carefully, much as a doctor might to a patient who had interesting symptoms. Instead of asking where it hurt, though, he asked who, when, why, and—always—“Did you document that?”

Pam was mercurial and incredibly articulate, speaking in great flawless paragraphs. Her low Mae West–like voice contrasted sharply with her energetic exclamations and occasional swearing as she listened, apparently appalled by what we were saying. Pam made bold notes on a yellow legal pad, writing furiously until our words flew faster than her pen; she would then hold up her hand like a police officer and yell in a commanding tone, “WAIT!”
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We stayed with them more than three hours, pouring out our anger, fears, and frustration, frequently interrupting each other to add details or flesh out an anecdote. As we said our good byes, I felt somehow cleansed, as if the legal conference had been a confessional and Mike and Pam’s sympathy a kind of absolution. Mike volunteered to attend the meeting at Mowat that night, and I had to restrain myself from hugging him.

From the law offices of Stone and Sutton I rushed home to get ready for the meeting at Mowat. Although fashion was usually the last thing on my mind, I had bought a new dress—crisp royal-blue linen, with gold accents—Mowat’s school colors. When my husband Kenneth and I drove up to the school a half hour before the meeting was scheduled to begin, the parking lot was already filled. My heart threatened to explode in my chest as my Southern Baptist childhood supplied images of Daniel entering the lions’ den.

All eleven members of the English department sat at a long table in front of the podium, facing an expectant crowd. An audience member asked me about the presence of the media—the two local television stations and the daily newspaper had reporters there. “We didn’t invite them, but since we’re the folks who believe in the First Amendment, they’re welcome to stay,” I said. My remark was greeted with generous applause from the audience, and I started to relax a little.

The format that Creel had approved began with my giving a brief overview of our language arts program, followed by five-minute talks by ReLeah and Alyne addressing their use of the challenged books. Creel had also made a wise and courageous decision to modify Hall’s edict that banned students from the meeting. At Creel’s insistence, students accompanied by their parents were allowed into the cafeteria where we met, although they were not allowed to speak. As adults entered the meeting room, they were given the opportunity to draw numbers if they wanted to speak during the open forum that would follow the introductory part of the program.

Although people were still filing in, at seven o’clock sharp I took the microphone and opened the meeting. In the ten minutes allotted to me, I wanted to convey four years of professional accomplishment and extraordinary student achievement, and the part that good books and the right to choose among them had played. I also briefly recapped the challenges and the review process, establishing a context for the unprecedented meeting that was now unfolding.

Then it was ReLeah’s turn:

My sister, who is now in high school and a voracious reader, told me about a new young adult book she discovered, I Am the Cheese. She said I had to read it; that it was one of the best she had ever read. I began to read it on a family trip and I found that I couldn’t put it down. When I finished it, not quite sure I had “gotten it” I turned back to the first page and began again. I couldn’t
wait to share it with my students, and guess what? They found it just as intriguing. The first time we read it as a class, they were asking questions, making predictions, losing themselves in discussions—all about this book. This novel is a handbook for critical thinking, but more than that, students love *I Am the Cheese*. They struggle to figure out the complicated plot and together, we work to find meaning—which isn’t always the same, by the way. Every year they surprise me with their interpretations, their willingness to dig their heels in and try to unravel the mystery. Then, at the end, we discuss important issues about government, family, trust, security. This is the best novel I have ever used with students to get them to think and read critically.

Looking regal and composed, Alyne spoke next. She had chosen *About David*, she told her rapt audience, to complement *Romeo and Juliet* and to address her students’ beliefs that the themes and issues of Shakespeare’s classic were outdated and unrealistic. After summarizing the plot, she spoke of an emotional note from a former student, who wrote that the novel had led her to reconsider a suicide attempt.

After ReLeah and Alyne had spoken, I went over the ground rules for the public hearing: Each speaker would have three minutes, with strict time limits observed, and the forum would end after two hours. I took a deep breath and asked for the person holding the first number to come to the microphone.

The first speaker, father of a seventh-grade boy and a ninth-grade girl, said he had read *I Am the Cheese* and disagreed with the way Charles Collins, our chief critic, had characterized it in his letter to the families of Mowat students. He went on to say that some of the so-called objectionable language in the book could be read in the newspaper. The next speaker, mother of a ninth grader, talked about the value of books that help our “upcoming adults” learn to “flex their emotional muscles” and sort out their feelings. The third parent was Dennis Dykes, the father of one of my eighth graders. He said that until his son came to Mowat, he hated reading and writing. “Now he reads continually,” Dykes went on with a wry smile, “and I even found him writing a letter to his grandmother.”

There were, of course, critical voices. One parent complimented our methods and successes but complained strongly of books that were available in class libraries for independent reading. Echoing Charles Collins’ theme of “quality control,” he urged us to choose carefully and establish controls on class libraries. Claudia Shumaker’s husband, Robert, walked to the microphone stone-faced and demanded tighter control over book selection. He rejected alternative selections as an option because, he said, any child who chose another book would be ostracized by peers.

The local newspaper estimated there were 250 people present. In the allotted time we heard from thirty-eight parents. According to Alyne’s count,
twenty-three of those were strong supporters of the books and of the department, while eight were strong opponents. In her inimitable fashion, she characterized five others as “straddlers” and two more as “totally off-the-wall.” The newspaper assessed the nonspeaking members of the crowd as two-to-one in favor of the books, our curriculum, and our methods.

At the end of the evening we were dragging with exhaustion but also jubilant. We had taken our case to our community and put our cards on the table, and we were still in the game. And we felt vindicated in our stand. Now we could defend our books and our students’ rights to read them, confident that a strong majority of parents backed us.
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