

LITERACY, POLITICS, AND RESISTANCE: MOFFETT'S STUDY OF CENSORSHIP

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Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness is James Moffett's examination of the textbook censorship case that took place in Kanawha County, West Virginia, in 1974. Moffett calls it "the most tumultuous and significant schoolbook controversy ever to occur in North America" (x). What makes this case the "most tumultuous" is the methods of protest—demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, even bombs; what classifies it as "most significant," Moffett argues, is its national impact and the restrictions on the content of schoolbooks which have followed ever since.

As I read Moffett's *Storm in the Mountains*, I kept thinking of another book about West Virginia, Denise Giardina's novel *Storming Heaven*. (It probably isn't coincidence that two recent books about West Virginia have the word *storm* in the titles.) Giardina's novel chronicles the West Virginia coal wars in the early part of this century. It begins with the coming of the coal operators who used phony documents to take the land from unsophisticated, often illiterate mountaineers and climaxes with the Battle of Blair's Mountain in 1921, after which the striking miners chose to surrender rather than to face not only charges of treason but also the full might of the U.S. Army. One particular scene in Giardina's *Storming Heaven* serves as background to Moffett's account of the Kanawha County book-

banning case: a conversation early in the novel between narrator Rondel Lloyd, a young resident of a coal camp, and C.J. Marcum, an old family friend:

“I’m a-memorizing the Declaration of Independence for Class Day. Can I practice on you? ‘When in the course of human events . . .’”

I spoke proudly and confidently. I had already practiced before the class and Miss Radcliffe said I have “presence.”

I stopped breathless with “the pursuit of happiness” and waited for his praise.

“That it?” he asked, like he was disgusted.

I nodded, hurt.

“Aint it just like them,” he said. “Where’s the rest of it? Where’s the part about overthrowing the government?”

“I dont know nothing about that. Miss Radcliffe just wrote this here out for me on a scrap of paper.”

“Declaration of Independence says we got a right to overthrow the government when it gits worthless,” C.J. said grumpily. “I’d like to hear about that there sometime.” (30-31)

Read against the little-known history of West Virginia summarized in this scene, Moffett’s *Storm in the Mountains* is not just about censorship, conflict, and consciousness, as its subtitle indicates; it is also about literacy, politics, and resistance. Moffett’s account of the West Virginia textbook controversy can in fact be read as evidence for the view that literacy is always a function of ideology, rather than a neutral, classless technology. The central conflict of the Kanawha censorship case, Moffett makes clear, concerned who controls literacy in the schools and thereby who controls what children think.

Arnove and Graff’s work on national literacy campaigns suggests that even the most efficient, most motivated literacy drive (such as the one in Cuba) seems able to bring literacy to only about 85% of the population; the other approximately 15% do not learn to read and write. Among this minority, Arnove and Graff suggest, are those who resist literacy either because of the world view it inculcates or because of the affiliations of the persons attempting to teach it. *Storm in the*

Mountains illustrates both types of resistance, but more, resistance raised to open and violent rebellion. In West Virginia, literacy has aided big business in seizing land and resources. Taught by teachers brought in from the outside and paid by the coal companies, literacy has kept West Virginia miners and their families from knowing their rights. With this history, literacy can't be anything except political. Some segments of the population of West Virginia still believe that literacy is controlled by outsiders, and it is outsiders, remember, who have for generations exploited and silenced the region.

I.

Though Moffett extends the range of his analysis far beyond Kanawha County, his account of the 1974 schoolbook controversy begins by noting West Virginia's history: "No region of the United States has been so plundered and taken over by outsiders" (xi); "One good thing about the dispute was that rural Appalachia had spoken its mind too, for about the first time" (x). In a prologue titled "West—by God—Virginia" Moffett sets the scene, laying out some of this history and explaining the complex situation of Kanawha County, where the population ranges from state government officials in Charleston, to chemical plant workers in towns with names like Nitro, to coal miners in remote hollows and valleys. Kanawha County is a single school district. Moreover, at the time of the textbook adoption there was virtually no mechanism for parents to express their opinions on school policy. Built not just on historical resentments, this case was surrounded by contemporary class tensions as well.

At the outset Moffett explains his own connections to West Virginia and to the textbook case. His wife is from Fairmont, in the northern part of the state, and so he has visited there for thirty years or more. Moffett's familiarity with the region contributes to a sympathy for the book protesters difficult to find among other academics. His understanding is not sentimentalism, however. Moffett knows the culture of poverty: "Country locals fight over outside money like dogs over a bone" (8). The most important relationship between Moffett and this case is his status as chief editor of the Houghton Mifflin *Interaction* series, one of the textbook adoptions which drew heavy fire from the book

banners. Moffett says, “The book protesters put me in a bind. What do you do when those you stand up for denounce you as the enemy and act in ways you can’t approve?” (xi). Moffett never claims neutrality for his analysis of this case, though he certainly can claim fairness.

It may surprise those who regard Moffett as an advocate of personal expressive writing, and therefore apolitical, that his book includes so much political analysis. But Moffett’s expressionism rests clearly on his belief in the value (even sanctity) of the individual, and those who know Moffett’s thought will see a continuation here of the implicit message of his pedagogy: a critique of practices, customs, and institutions that limit the individual intellect and voice. *Storm in the Mountains* begins in fact with this critique, in the form of an overtly political statement about the nature of censorship in contemporary America. The government does not need to censor the content of either trade books or textbooks, Moffett says; the publishing industry does it.

Having suffered profit-damaging attacks by the political and religious right, textbook companies now publish only what is safe, which too often turns out to be what is dull. Moffett argues near the end of the book that such “safe” content is one reason for the reading failure of many American children; the books we ask them to read are boring them into illiteracy. This is not an isolated part of our literacy instruction, Moffett charges. The phonics method, fanatically popular among “back-to-the-basics” adherents and book banners alike, concentrates on small linguistic units, not on meaning. It is, after all, not some abstract “literacy itself” that is dangerous to the status quo. What is threatening about literacy is, to borrow from Berthoff’s definition, the meaning that literacy allows human beings to construct and construe. It doesn’t take statutes or laws to prevent certain groups from learning to read and write; all it takes is the right pedagogy. Safe, dull materials and methods seem to be working well in the United States.

Moffett extends his political analysis of the West Virginia schoolbook controversy by documenting book banners’ ties to right-wing organizations across the country—to, for example, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., and the millionaires of Orange County, California,

who support right-of-center causes and candidates all over the country. In fact, Moffett sees the Kanawha controversy as a significant step in the rise of the New Right. By treating this case not as an isolated incident but as part of a national pattern, Moffett raises serious and disturbing questions for those of us who teach reading and writing at any level. Most alarming is his prediction that, since much current pedagogy asks students to construct their own meanings, to “own” their texts, the next focus of the censorship forces will be student writing.

II.

Moffett’s political discussion is both grounded in and given credence by his construction of a “psychology of censorship.” Some of the most interesting parts of *Storm in the Mountains* are the explanations of specific objections to the schoolbooks. Indeed, most of the book focuses on the kind of consciousness that protests, for example, “Lord Randall” because it contains violence and Althea Gibson’s autobiography because it includes profanity (the kind known to all American children over age 8) and references to stealing (something that happens among children in Harlem and elsewhere). In a long section called “What’s in the Books,” Moffett devotes seven chapters to the various charges made against the books—pornography, negativity, racism, evolution, lack of patriotism, among others. Moffett explains how particular passages offend the political and religious beliefs of the book protesters and what values lie beneath the charges.

Further, he teases out the logic by which all kinds of written discourse seem to threaten the world view and self-concept of the book banners. According to Moffett’s analysis, the specific charges against the schoolbooks derive from the objectors’ insecurities. In other words, the protesters transfer their own racism and negative perspective onto the books. It is in this explanation of transference from objector to text that Moffett supports his contention that the Kanawha County book protest was motivated in large part by racism.

What sets Moffett’s interpretations apart from most other discussions of schoolbook controversies is that his political and psychological analyses are undergirded by the spiritual perspec-

tive he brings to this work. Unlike most mainstream academic commentators, Moffett does not dismiss or patronize fundamentalist arguments. Instead, he takes seriously what he sees as the “heart of their [the book protesters’] outcry—their religious beliefs” (xi): “To their credit, the underlying concern of the book objectors was religious” (236). In addition, Moffett takes seriously the intelligence of the book banners, the majority of whom were “mountaineer fundamentalists who have seldom received any attention but ridicule” (xi). During his research for this book, Moffett interviewed a number of persons who participated in the controversy. Using those tapes, he lets leaders of the protest speak for themselves; two chapters in a section called “Voices from the Fray” are almost entirely the words of ministers who took active roles in the controversy.

Moffett does not, however, exempt the ideas of the protesters from critical analysis. Consequently, much of *Storm in the Mountains* is devoted to examining the spirituality of the book banners. Often agreeing in general principle, Moffett does not hesitate to take exception to particular beliefs and to offer alternative interpretations. The result of this scrutiny is threefold. First, Moffett’s book is informative; what has seemed inexplicable now seems at least logical. Second, Moffett gives those of us opposed to censorship direct counter-arguments to use as defense against book banners (and protests against books, Moffett maintains, are very similar no matter where in the U.S. they take place). Thus I expect *Storm in the Mountains* to become required reading in education courses—both those on teaching literature and those on administration. Third, the audience is blurred: Moffett’s concern with the thinking of the protesters makes some parts of the book sound as if he is talking to *them*, instead of to the teachers and professors whom I had envisioned as his audience. He explains things that English teachers wouldn’t need to have explained, and sometimes this irritated me. Moffett obviously wants book protestors to read *Storm in the Mountains*, but somehow I doubt that a book published by a university press will find its way to people who want to control the reading not only of their children but of everyone else as well.

And even if the book protestors did read his book, most of them would not wish to learn what Moffett has to say. It is in fact the explanation of this condition, this wanting *not* to

know, that may be Moffett's major contribution in *Storm in the Mountains* to discussions of literature, textbook selection, reading pedagogy, and ultimately the politics of literacy. What leads Moffett to the concept that he calls "agnosis" is his study of the book banners' misreadings of the schoolbooks. Two chapters, one called "Reading Comprehension" and the other "Petrified," are particularly important in laying the groundwork for Moffett's explanation of agnosis, the "avoidance of knowing." Almost without exception the objectors failed to see irony in a text and took words "literally," missing metaphor and symbol entirely. Almost always the protesters failed to distinguish between the words of a character and those of the author. The protesters saw any deplorable action included in a literary work as evidence that the author was actually advocating that behavior for others. Interestingly, they consistently read poems about Christ as blasphemous and sacrilegious. Moffett's answer to why intelligent adults would read this way is agnosis.

We all experience this "self-limitation of the natural human faculties of understanding" (184), and it seems true that "since fear increases agnosis in any type person, the more that conflict, want, crime, environmental poisoning, and other negative forces gain strength the more the mind tends to retrench" (187). Moffett argues that fundamentalist Christianity's negative view of humanity combines with the equally negative self-concept of certain groups to augment this "avoidance of knowing." Anything that threatens their tenuous identity must be denied validity, marked as evil, driven out. In view of this explanation, the attitude of West Virginia's long exploited, under-educated, fundamentalist working classes makes sense. As Moffett puts it, "Book censorship is only an outer symbol for this inner state of siege" (187).

III

The Kanawha County book controversy, then, seems to me clearly a case of resistance to the dominant mainstream culture, a culture which uncritically assumes that literacy and literature are mildly beneficial to everyone equally, but also a culture which has at best disregarded the felt needs of the local Appalachian population. The book banners saw their movement as resistance; one of their songs contains these lines: "Yes, we

turned our cheeks seventy times seven, we did not resist/Till they came for the souls of our precious ones, and now we're gonna resist" (48). This case is not, however, an example of resistance to the dominant culture and its literacy that will please left-leaning scholars, since it comes from the far right. In the last few years, *resistance* has become an "in" word among radicals like Ira Shor and Henry Giroux and their followers. The kind of resistance they call for is predicated on a Marxist critique of our culture. Does it count as resistance if it is based on a fundamentalist Christian perspective?

As Moffett points out, the Kanawha County book banners often allied themselves with factions that have historically contributed to the exploitation of the region. They accepted financial support from businessmen whose main interest in the "American Way" is free enterprise and profit. The protesters have mistaken their enemies, as a line from a song about the book dissent shows: "Well, the liberals will come, and they'll stripmine the land" (91); West Virginians know full well that stripmining is an activity of companies which support right-of-center positions. Perhaps the Kanawha case suggests that resistance without a critical awareness of politics serves only to reproduce the system. But this leaves us with more questions: Is a Marxist stance required in order to be politically conscious and to protest the values of American culture? Is a critique from a more universal spiritual perspective, like Moffett's, valid?

If West Virginia fundamentalists prevent certain books from being taught in the schools and we label their thinking as agnosis, what then do we call it when groups more attractive to academics protest the inclusion of certain works in the curriculum? Recently at the MLA conference "The Right to Literacy," Deanne Bogdan used Moffett's agnosis concept to begin her examination of the impulse of feminist graduate students to ban Updike's short story "A & P." After the panel (which included both Bogdan and Moffett), the discussion ranged from making distinctions between censorship and textbook selection, to identifying situations where the need for group solidarity or affirmation of students' identities should override academic freedom, to examining our own stances on literacy, teaching, and censorship.

Moffett's explanation of agnosis reminds us that beliefs, emotions, and intelligence are connected and interact. Most

teachers learn this with experience, but too often our theoretical discussions of literacy overlook this vital connection. Discussions that treat literacy as if it is only a problem-solving activity divorced from the complex identities of human beings lead us to simplistic views of literacy, which in turn lead to impoverished pedagogies. Literacy is never just cognitive, or emotional, or social, or political; simultaneously it is all of these and more.

With *Storm in the Mountains* Moffett adds another voice to the on-going conversation about the central issue of schooling in our multi-cultural society: who controls what students read. Into this discussion Moffett introduces an explanation of how spiritual values can become intertwined in literacy and its politics. He calls for education to take seriously the spirituality of students and parents. As American academics we are trained both to dismiss the spiritual and to separate religion from civic life. But what is becoming increasingly clear to me is that the language of the academy is all too often inadequate for discussion of the things that are closest to us. Perhaps we need to develop a language that permits us to talk about the inter-connectedness of the cognitive, the emotional, the political, and the spiritual parts of human beings. After all, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed arises as much from his Catholicism as from his Marxism. Some readers will fault Moffett's ideas on accounting for the spiritual; it seems to me significant that someone has raised the issue.

For as many scholars have shown, spiritual and religious motives have historically impelled us to literacy and in America to statutes that require it. Ethnographic studies by Heath and others reveal that religious and spiritual reasons continue to constrain and influence the uses of literacy. Is there a way to use this impulse toward the spiritual to help students make their own meaning through literacy?

This, finally, is the question that Jim Moffett asks of his profession, not an easy question for those of us who teach reading and writing in a pluralistic, ostensibly secular society. What can happen when we don't confront such questions and when we ignore the contradictions in our own ideologies of literacy is the lesson of *Storm in the Mountains*.

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