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Banning of school books discussed by symposium

By Brent Walth
Of the Emerald

"It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." — **Mark Twain**

Samuel Clemens' words seem ironically appropriate as parents in Virginia try to throw his book "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" out of the local public schools.

Library and textbook censorship conjure images of book-fed bonfires and of enraged, righteous defenders of the First Amendment, but the issue is much more complicated than the stereotypical images imply.

"Freedom to Learn and Read: Who Decides?" a symposium held Monday night in the EMU Forum Room, allowed three persons with concerns, interest and background in the book-banning issue to discuss its complexities.

"The major differences over the issue arise in the understanding of how the First Amendment can be limited in the settings of public schools," said Barbara Bateman, University education professor.

Bateman said "book-banning" in schools "runs the gamut from burning and destroying books to the removing of required reading material."

"These people are parents and citizens concerned about the values that their children come in contact with at school," Bateman said. "The whole issue is much more complex than it outwardly appears."

Since the election of Pres. Ronald Reagan and the sudden visibility of the Moral Majority, Bateman acknowledged, the number of textbook challenges has increased sharply.

However, Sheryl Steinke, instructional material co-ordinator for Eugene School District 4-J, said her district has had only 10 challenges in as many years.

Many complaints arise over a book's sexual, racist or obscene nature, but other areas — divorce, death and child abuse — also have been listed.

"A lot of books are challenged because of their political nature," said Marc Abrams, an attorney and University journalism professor.

Books that have been challenged, including Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "Cat's Cradle," and Bernard Malamud's "The Fixer," have literary merit despite their controversial tone, Abrams said.

An upcoming U.S. Supreme Court decision may only cloud the debate.

The school board in Island Trees, N.Y., removed eight books in 1975 on the basis of their "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and just plain filthy" nature. The case reached the Court in December, and the decision should be handed down sometime in June.

"In the long run, this is the first shot in the battle,"Abrams said. "The Supreme Court is traditionally reluctant to take a specific stand on first-time issues."

"Hopefully the Supreme Court will speak forcefully," Bateman said, "so people can see that the First Amendment is still alive."

Neither Bateman or Abrams is optimistic of that, and both foresee the true complexity of the issue never showing through the media's gloss.

"The media tends to stay away from the law because it's perceived as complicated," Abrams said. "It tends to pose one side of an issue against the other and square them off.

"But it's more complicated than that," he continued, "with many characters playing roles and with as many twists as an 800-page novel. The issue deserves more attention than the 20 or 30 inches an editor may give it."

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