

We can't allow our freedom to read to fall

Saturday begins Banned Book Week, an annual observance by the American Library Association. It's a good time to think about mental democracy in our country.

First of all, let's look at the ALA's terminology. "Challenges"

are when people try to remove books from libraries or classrooms. "Bans" are when challenges succeed.

When I read the list of the 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000 on

the ALA's Web site, I found many of my favorites there. "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Huckleberry Finn," "The House of Spirits" and "James and the Giant Peach" sit on the roster as uneasily as books about sexuality or those questioning the existence of God.

The message here: Books are challenged for neo-conservative as well as politically correct motivations.

"Bless Me, Ultima" is there, too. Rudolfo A. Anaya's seminal work has been met with banning attempts ever since its first publication in 1972.

"It's terrible. They got me before they got 'Harry Potter,'" says Anaya, who taught at the University of New Mexico from 1974 to 1993.

He's referring to one of the main themes of his book: New Mexican-style witchcraft. Anaya says he wrote it to explore and explain the folk ways of a different cul-

ture, but some people said the book promoted devil worship. And so the challenges began.

Anaya doesn't take these attempts lightly.

"This is what the Nazis did," he says. "It's never appropriate to ban books. Once you set a precedent, where does it stop? It gives people a right to challenge a book on any subject matter."

As a parent myself, I know there are certain books I'd prefer my children read later in life. But I can't imagine trying to strip them from a school or library. "Bless Me, Ultima" is used in classrooms around the country and has been met with praise and ire.

"Parents should exercise a role in what their children read, but in the public arena no book should be banned," Anaya says. "You can't give this power to any one group, because no one group has the truth."

Challenged and banned books represent a particularly important subject right now. As our country champions democracy in other parts of the world, we need to be very sure mental democracy is well protected at home.

People have a right to disagree here — and it's a crucial right. We can vote with our dollars to support or ignore literary works. At the library, we can choose not

ON THE NET

For more information about the American Library Association and Banned Book Week, go to www.ala.org.

to check out books that offend us. In our schools — both public and private — we can talk with teachers and find solutions that best meet our children's personal and academic needs.

Democracy itself is at stake when people challenge or ban books. Whether it's "Captain Underpants" or "Native Son," "The Stupids" or "Of Mice and Men," your opinion and mine may differ.

"We need free access to every kind of information," Anaya says. "A democratic society learns from freedom to read."

The other day, I helped in the library at my daughter's school. Along with the pleasure of being with kids who were excited about reading came the realiza-

tion that many of the books — "Goosebumps," "A Wrinkle in Time," "Harry Potter" — have been challenged or banned elsewhere. Though perhaps not the highest literature, their loss to minds — both young and old — comprises more than mere words.

Pari Noskin Taichert is an Albuquerque author and freelance writer. Reach her at www.badgirlspress.com or pari@badgirlspress.com



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Commentary