



*I believe human lives depend on intellectual freedom.
Let me explain why.*

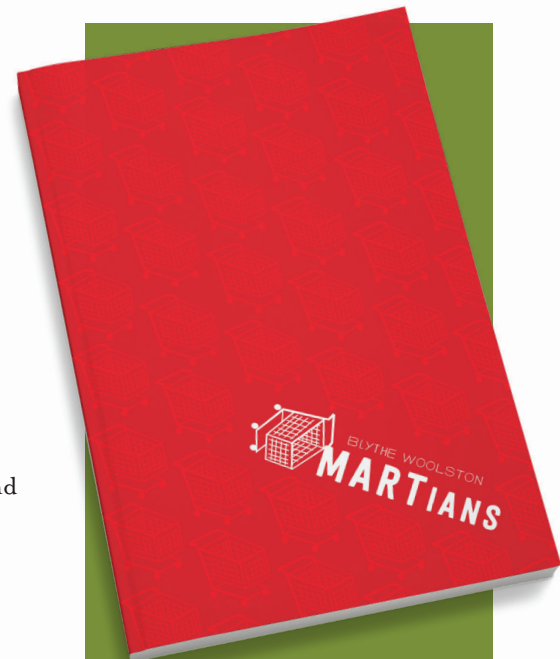
Books Unchained: The Protective Power of Access to Ideas

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When I wrote *Black Helicopters*, a novel about a teen terrorist, it was important that I expose why the main character, Valley, was willing to become a suicide bomber. She had emotional motivations, but there was another important reason that she was vulnerable to the doctrines of terror—she hadn't learned to think critically. In the interest of "protecting" his daughter, Valley's father restricted access to the outside world, including books. Deprived of intellectual freedom, Valley was unprepared to make independent choices in her own best interest.

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Recently, I indexed an important book: *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* edited by Alice Crawford (Princeton University Press 2015). It charts the human relationship to books—those marvelous inventions that preserve and share ideas. Book production was a huge investment of human labor and time. If you have ever had the pleasure of seeing an illuminated manuscript page you know why. It is little wonder that access to those rare and precious treasures was extremely limited. Books were kept under lock and key, sometimes chained to shelves. During the centuries since, many technological and cultural revolutions have affected



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access to books: the printing press, the institution of public libraries, inexpensive paperbacks, and e-publishing. Each of those changes resulted in increased access to books, and, not coincidentally, social changes that moved us toward greater liberty and equality.

What is it about access to books that engenders human freedom? To answer that question, I look to the times in my life when I've witnessed attempts to restrict access to books.

The first "censor" I encountered was my mom. I was a precocious reader, crazy for books, and always on the hunt for something to read. I had older sisters who were in high school before I went into first grade. They brought home books! I read the *Red Pony*. No problem. Then it was *The Scarlet Letter*. It was a far more challenging book, and not just because of the vocabulary and sentence structure. I didn't understand why everyone was so mean to Hester Prynne, so I asked my mother. Her answer was to take the book out of my hands and punish my sister for letting me have it. I was strictly forbidden to read any more "high school" books until I was in high school.

Was my mother wrong to deny me access to books meant for more experienced readers? I'm a mother now myself, and I understand her choice. But banning the books had

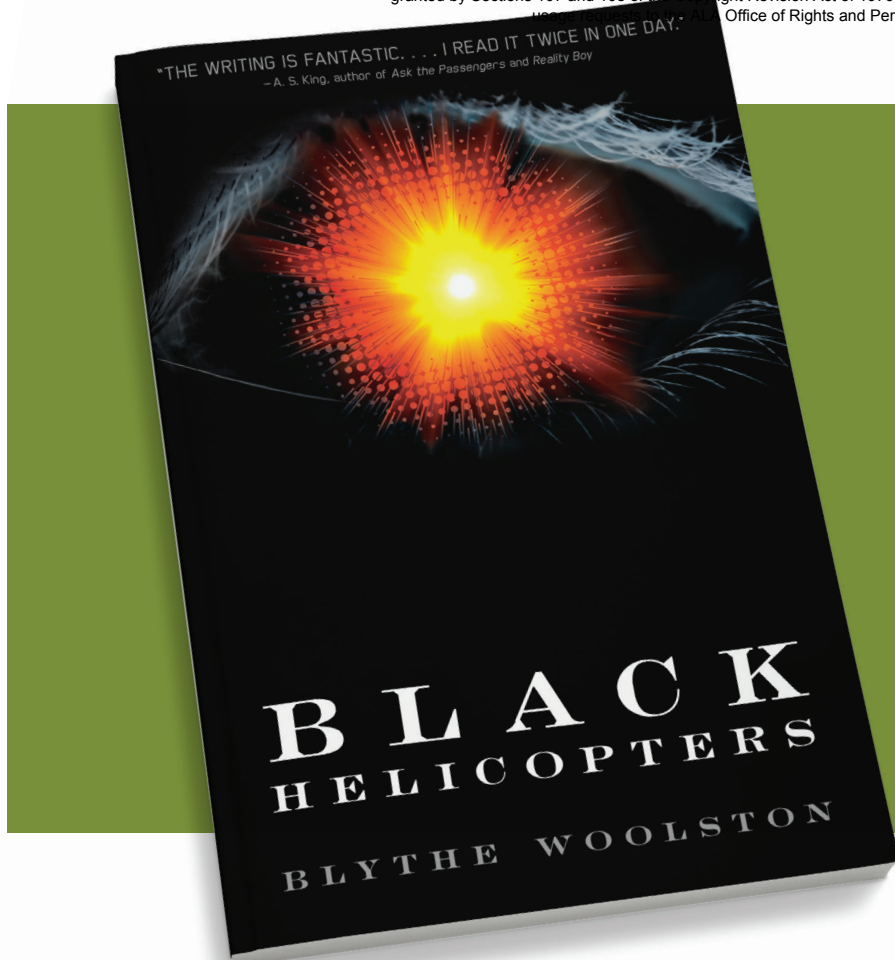
an unfortunate consequence. Even though little me wasn't "ready" to read *The Scarlet Letter*, I was ready to argue about justice and kindness. I wanted to have those conversations. Inadvertently, my mother deprived both of us an opportunity to talk and share ideas. Her attempt to protect me from an inappropriate book ended up limiting her own influence. Censorship often has that unfortunate result.

Years later, when I went to university, I studied library science. All of my professors emphasized intellectual freedom as a core value of the profession. We visited the special-collections rooms and saw a copy of that dangerous book, Joyce's *Ulysses*, along with the box used to smuggle it into the country. At that moment, multiple copies were in the open stacks, and

the book was required reading in several literature classes. Times had changed. The government was no longer seizing and burning books, but barriers to access still remained.

I don't recall any formal challenges to books in the university libraries while I worked there. What I do remember were the books attacked in the stacks: books glued together into unreadable blocks, pages sliced out with razor blades,

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illustrations blotted out with ink or typing correction fluid. Since the government wasn't willing to play censor, individuals were taking it into their own hands to protect others from "bad" books. Their actions, I believe, were as well-intentioned as my own mother's.

I wish I could talk to them and to others who seek to have books removed from classrooms and libraries. I'd like to make a case that we need all sorts of books in our lives—especially as children. To exercise free will, we need practice rejecting some ideas and

embracing others. We need books that make us struggle to understand. We need books that contain outmoded language and social standards. We need old books that don't jibe with current sensibilities because we need to understand that ideas can and do evolve. Without that knowledge, we will be less prepared to think independently and challenge the status quo.

Censors aren't wrong about the power of ideas, but they are wrong about the way to harness that power. We don't need to

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restrict access to ideas; we need to do a better job of sharing our own. Instead of taking the book away, take the time to talk. Our children will grow up in a world awash in information. We need to prepare them to negotiate that world. The best protection against a bad idea—like the doctrine of terror, for example—is access to many other ideas. We can make that happen. At this moment, some of those very manuscripts that were once chained to shelves are being digitized and made accessible to a global audience. We are unchaining the books. We will all be freer for it.

Blythe Woolston is an insatiable reader who found her niche as a back-of-the-book indexer. She also writes novels for young readers—an activity she thinks of as just another way of reading stories. Her debut novel, *The Freak Observer* (Carolrhoda Books 2010), earned the William C. Morris Debut Award and the 2010 gold medal Moonbeam Children's Book Award for general YA fiction, and was a PEN Center finalist. *Black Helicopters* (Candlewick 2013), a novel about suicide terrorism, earned a place on YALSA's Best Fiction for Young Adults list, is a Montana Book Award Honor Book, and received the 2014 High Plains Book Award for Young Adult Fiction. Her next novel, *MARTians*, will be published by Candlewick this October.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

("Average" figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; "actual" figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2014 issue). Total number of copies printed average 8,381; actual 8,383. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 7,227. Free distribution actual 1,081. Total distribution average 8,381; actual 8,383. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 75; actual 104. Total: average/actual 8,381/8,383. Percentage paid: average 89.31; actual 86.98.

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