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How novels get into Tri-City classrooms

By Jacques Von Lunen, Tri-City Herald

Richland school officials have grappled with book controversies three times in the past year - while nobody seems to complain about novels elsewhere in the Tri-Cities.

Last month, the Richland School Board voted to pull *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, an acclaimed young-adult novel by Sherman Alexie, from the classroom. It has since reversed its decision after the public blasted the board.

The campaign season might reignite the discussion - one of the challengers in the upcoming school board election is part of the book selection process and another challenger has said he is running because he opposes the incumbent's liberal stance on books.

And a committee charged with checking a long list of novels already in use in the Richland School District still has 28 titles left to sift through, some of which also may invite opposition in the coming months.

Meanwhile, nobody has challenged books used in Pasco or Kennewick schools for some time.

A look at the three districts' reading lists shows that Richland's includes the most novels written within the lifetimes of the students it teaches. Those books tend to invite challenges, as many modern authors describe life with "more candor," as one Richland teacher put it.

All three districts require high school kids to read something from a short list of American classics - works by Steinbeck, Twain and a few others. All districts also require students to absorb some Shakespeare. And all three districts allow students to opt out of reading any book they or their parents find offensive.

The potentially offensive titles mostly lurk in the supplemental reading lists, which give teachers options outside the required titles. That list is particularly broad in Richland.

Lit circles

The two high schools in Richland have always differed a little in how they teach literature beyond the required titles, said Jim Deatherage, who taught in the district for 36 years until he retired this summer.

At Richland High School, where Deatherage taught English, teachers always reached first for the core reading list that has been vetted by the district and parents.

At Hanford High, many teachers in advanced English classes make use of literature circles, a teaching method that gives students a range of choices, said Nancy E. Smith, who has taught English there for 15 years.

Classes are split up into small groups. Each group selects a novel from a short list prepared by the teacher. These small-group lists long had not been subject to inspection by the district's Instructional Materials Committee.

That is, until controversy centered on a book from a lit circle last year. That prompted the district to require all novels go through the committee process, no matter how many students read it.

Few teachers at Richland High use lit circles, Deatherage said. But that doesn't mean they're chained to the core list - teachers can add books to the list by piloting them in their classrooms.

The teachers ask their school to buy a classroom set of the novel in question, and then send letters to parents explaining why they want to introduce the novel.

After reading the book, student and parent reviews are gathered and the title makes its way through the district permitting process - all at the behest of a single teacher.

Deatherage followed that process with Alexie's novel, which he piloted in a class last year.

Slow to change

Very few books have been added to Kennewick's supplemental reading list in recent years, said Chuck Lybeck, associate superintendent for curriculum services. An entire department, not an individual teacher, would have to

request a novel for it to be included on the district reading list, he said.

Kennewick's departments routinely go through a curriculum revision every seven years. This coming school year is language arts' turn.

"People are probably saving up some books for this year's major adoption," Lybeck said.

The process in Kennewick makes it difficult for a single teacher to introduce a book into the classroom, acknowledged Betti Gregg, English teacher and department head at Southridge High.

"You have to have enough teachers who've read it and feel it's worth going through the process," she said.

The process is similar in Pasco. A teacher would have to justify a novel to the department, showing that it fits thematically with the required titles for that grade, said Kathleen Barton, who heads the English department at Pasco High. The book also would have to be approved by administrators.

Most of the supplemental books teachers use in Pasco have been in the district for years, Barton said. "Teachers usually use what's available in the district," she said.

That's in part because the district uses fewer whole supplemental novels in its English classes since it adopted the Springboard curriculum. That program, prepared by the same nonprofit responsible for the Advanced Placement and SAT tests, relies heavily on smaller bits of text, such as excerpts from novels, magazine articles and poems.

This means that most Pasco teachers pick from the short list of Springboard novels - only one of which has been considered controversial elsewhere - in addition to using short texts and the time-tested books from the required lists.

Reading lists

The list of required reads is nearly identical in all three districts and include no controversial titles, unless you count classics such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which have run into opposition for language true to their racially charged settings.

The supplemental lists show the biggest differences between the districts'

approaches to literature.

Richland's supplemental novels cover topics ranging from Greek heroes to modern-day drug-running and terrorism. Many of the included authors are still working today.

Kennewick and Pasco's lists offer some titles written in the last 20 years, but much fewer than Richland.

Both feature a few books that have been challenged in places, including in Richland. But most of Kennewick and Pasco's novels have been taught in schools without for decades causing a stir.

Limited or not?

Educators in Pasco and Kennewick maintain they can get everything they need out of decades-old literature.

Gregg, the Southridge teacher, never felt limited by having access to few recently written books, she said.

Kids love good literature, no matter when it was written, said Barton, the Pasco High teacher. "One of the kids' favorite books is Dante's *Inferno*," she said.

That was written in the 14th century.

Literature can teach what is common in humanity, rather than what is different, Barton said. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, shows students that human nature hasn't changed much over time, she said.

A longtime Kennewick teacher echoed that.

"*Grapes of Wrath*, for example, still spells out a pretty harsh truth," said Kurt Clemmens, who has taught English in Kennewick for 27 years. "You can find whatever (theme) you want in there - prejudice, isolation, narrow-mindedness."

Richland teachers said they cherish the variety of books at their disposal.

Smith, the Hanford teacher, two years ago ran a lit circle in her English honors class. Using modern novels, students were asked to explore if the authors treated history accurately in their fiction.

One of the books was *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The novel deals with the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. It drew the ire of some parents, who objected to the language used in the book, and was the reason why Richland revisited its book policies.

Despite that controversy, Smith maintains teaching modern books is essential to teaching critical thinking. Modern authors often imagine alternate realities in their fiction, she said.

After Dan Brown's bestseller *The DaVinci Code* hit the stands in 2003, students asked her if Jesus was really married, for example.

"How (else) do I prepare students for what's in modern books?" Smith said.

Modern books also are a good way to keep kids interested in reading, said Deatherage, the retired Richland High teacher.

Clemmens, from Kennewick High, said he has been a big proponent of teaching the classics, in part to preserve what he considers "cultural touchstones."

But he also said that he's had great success with *The House on Mango Street*, a 1984 novel about a young Latina girl in a Chicago ghetto. The book has been "really therapeutic for kids" in his class and has helped him build trust with Hispanic students, he said.

"We have hung on to some of (the classics) to a fault," Clemmens said. "We do need to mix it up."

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