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From American Hunger to Black Boy

Black Boy is a classic autobiography written by Richard Wright. It was published in 1945 by Harper & Brothers. Wright wrote about his life in Mississippi and the hardships that he faced. He wrote about struggle of racism, and poverty, as well as the struggles of everyday life. Despite being a distinguished author, Wright’s book was banned in some states because of vulgar language, violent imagery, and sexual explicitness. It was also banned for being anti-semitic, anti-christian, and obscene. Black Boy is an extremely controversial book that has been banned and challenged in some states for its vulgar language, violent imagery, and sexual explicitness.

Because Richard Wright was a part of the Communist Party, he was not a stranger to Censorship. His other book, Native Son was banned in many places because of many of the same reasons that Black Boy was banned. However, the other members of the Communist Party felt that the party’s views and the views in his book, Native Son, conflicted. The party couldn’t kick Wright out of the party because his book became very famous and received much praise. In other words, his popularity boosted his social status up significantly, making him a major part of his party. Sometime later, Wright left the Communist Party because he felt like they were keeping him in a creative box. Because of his affiliations with the group, Wright was a target in some investigation with the FBI, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, and the Dies Committee. (

Originally, Wright wrote a book entitled American Hunger. However, some things changed during the publication process.

Although it was initially accepted by Harper and Row, his editor later informed Wright that the book would be divided: The ﬁrst two-thirds, the experiences in the South, would be published separately from the experiences in the North, Chicago, and New York (Karolides, Bald, and Sova 25).

So, Wright listened to his publisher and that was how the book was published. After some copies of the book were sold, people were only interested in the first fourteen chapters, so his publisher advised him to eliminate the other chapters besides the first fourteen and he agreed. After another round of selling, people gained more interest in the latter six chapters, so Wright decided to combine all twenty chapters into one book. He renamed it Black Boy.

Despite having many acclaims, the autobiography received a lot of hate from Senator Thomas Bilbo of Mississippi. Senator Thomas wasn’t a fan of this book. He thought that

The purpose of the book is to plant the seeds of hate in every Negro in America against the white men of the South or against the white race anywhere, for that matter (Theodore G. Bilbo on Richard Wright's “Black Boy”).

This is why Black Boy was banned in Mississippi. Theodore Bilbo went in front of the Senate and convinced them to censor it. He claimed that this book lied about the South and its culture as well as encouraged racism between blacks and whites.

Soon it was banned in Tennessee. Black Boy and five other books were almost banned in Louisiana, the Concerned Citizens and Taxpayers for Decent School Books Group. However, the ban wasn’t successful. That May, there was a new policy that dealt with objections. So, in an effort to ban these books, the school set out a search that looked for any material that contained any pornography, or obscenity. The teachers did not allow this search to happen because they complained that it would just be a reversal of the policy that was completed in May.

In Nashua, a concerned parent wrote to the editor of a local newspaper, The Telegraph, about his concern about Black Boy. He felt that it was wrong for the Nashua School District to ban the autobiography. He felt that it taught children life lessons about many controversial topics during that time. He also felt that the language wasn’t as vulgar as they made it out to be.

In Jacksonville, another parent spoke out against the band of Black Boy. She claims that Reverend, Dale Shaw, misunderstood the book. The beginning of the article starts out with the parent, Julia Wright, explaining that the ban had been called the “American Tragedy”. She and her mother, Ellen Wright, argued that it had important historical value. The teacher who taught the class argued that the book had literary value and that she received no other complaints when she taught it.

However, Reverend Shaw didn’t agree. He tried to get a teacher, Olivia Zilahy, fired for assigning the book to children for school. This was brought to his attention by another parishioner, who was furious about what her son had to read. Reverend Shaw spoke in front of the Duval County School Board saying that it is profane and the way that African Americans were referred to was extremely derogatory.

Another student in New York felt that it wasn’t right for their school to ban these books. They felt like the characters in the book Fahrenheit 451, where the government

looked for "illegal literature" and burned the "illegal" books (Island Trees School District v. Pico 1982).

The students felt that their first amendment rights have been taken away from them. The students also argued that they needed to be exposed to all types of literature. Since Black Boy was simply a library book, not one required for a class, the student could put the book down and stop reading if they were offended.

So questions arose about the school’s power to deny students the right to read some books and passages and to what extent that power is held. The Island Trees School District felt that it was their right to withhold anything that had any obscenity, claiming that the parents of the children don’t want their children to read these things. They also argued that because they were the ones who ran the school system and that because of this, they were allowed to regulate the schools.

As a result, the Court voted in favor of the students, saying that

Local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek, by their removal, to prescribe what shall be orthodox in matters of opinion (Island Trees School District v. Pico 1982).

From then on Black Boy was constantly challenged by several other states. In California it was challenged because of the questionable language in 1977 but the ban failed. In 1994, people complained about the violence in the book because it talked about the killing of a kitten. This complaint took place in California. the people also said that the book doesn’t teach like how it should and that it doesn’t teach how civilized people should act. It was challenged again in 1994 in North Carolina because of the vulgar language and sexual content. However, they also mentioned that a complaint about how the book degrades all types of people, not just blacks.

Lastly, in 1996, it was challenged because it described the beating of three people to death. It took place in Round Rock, Texas.

I believe that the book should not be banned because it not only has historical value to it, but also because it is a personal account of Wright’s life as a child. Also, it teaches important life lessons about controversial topics such as racism and discrimination. However, I think that I am biased because I have read the book before and I liked it. I thought that told a good story that a lot of kids can learn from. It taught me that people should take advantage of whatever opportunities that they are given because they might not get it again.

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