

THE RESOLUTE VOICE; RESISTING CENSORSHIP

WRITTEN BY RUBY CONWAY

'He needed, now, to be clear of what he was fighting for. Freedom of speech, freedom of the imagination, freedom from fear, and the beautiful, ancient art of which he was privileged to be a practitioner. Also, scepticism, irreverence, doubt, satire, comedy, and unholy glee. He would never again flinch from the defence of these things.'

Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*

For as long as the written word is distributed and shared, there will be those who are resolute to write about controversial topics and those who are resolute to ban them. The censorship of writing is a violent act that has, during many turbulent times in history, culminated in the burning of books. The so-called 'dangerous' and 'antithetical' ideas are firelighters for rage and containment; words fiery and blazing; divisive ideas sent up in sparks. But if anything, such violent acts reveal the power of literature; its undeniable influence and ability to shape minds and ideas, to provoke reform and, in some instances, to spark revolution.

Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* is thought to have ignited the fire that drove the French Revolution; essayist Lung Ying-tai's *The Wild Fire* is credited as part of the force that led to the democratization of Taiwan; Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* arguably rallied second-wave feminism; and Abraham Lincoln is even rumoured to have said to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "is this the little woman who made this great war?"

We know that Nazis burned books and that the Cultural Revolution destroyed great works of literature, that book banning is on the rise in America, and that we are living in an age of polarisation and a new era of censorship. The books that are banned tend to be those that contain 'controversial' ideas or explicit scenes around violence, sexuality, race, religion, and gender, but who decides where the tipping point of controversy lies? And who decides which voices are silenced and which are magnified? Censorship tends to be a desire to maintain the status quo, oppress minority viewpoints, and halt progressive thinking; it is a physical manifestation of the attempt to suppress intellectual freedom

and social change. And if we take censorship to its ultimate conclusion, democracy becomes eroded and totalitarianism gains headway.

It is also inherently dangerous to only be faced with the ideas you believe in – to never confront the ideas you don't agree with – and the issue becomes ever more complex when radicalisation and violence-inducing material enter the mix. And even though progressive thinkers are also guilty of censorship – cancel culture is somewhat prolific and nuance is arguably dwindling – the banning of books should not be the answer, as it fundamentally denies readers the opportunity for critical thinking. Yet the question remains, how should society deal with offensive books, especially when they were written in an incredibly different social context?

These questions and ideas are explored by three of the writers featured in this magazine. Author Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai spoke to Ruby about how a book titled *The Sorrow of War* was banned in Việt Nam as part of a widespread denial of the trauma experienced by those involved in the Việt Nam War, highlighting how censorship is often motivated by an effort to cover up messy truths and uncomfortable realities. Our feature on Salman Rushdie explores how his life has been cloaked by risk, danger, and threat as a result of a legal ruling that sought to silence him and his controversial work of fiction. And a different perspective is provided by our guest editor, Priscilla Morris, who wrote about how the very creation of art is also very often an act of defiance in itself, whether as the physical manifestation of joy and humanity in the face of adversity, or as a more explicit expression of insubordination, reminding us that works of literature are, in many cases, representative of an inherent resolve to make one's voice heard.

Below is a list of the ten 'dangerous' books that were banned, at some point in history, in the western world – all great works of fiction that we urge all of our readers to pick up in their reading lifetime.

Fahrenheit 451

Ray Bradbury

The irony will not be lost on anyone that a book about a post-literate world of book burning was itself banned. *Fahrenheit 451* is the classic dystopian novel that is centred on fireman Guy Montag. His job is to burn books that are forbidden, as they are thought of as the source of all discord and unhappiness. 'It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*.'

Lady Chatterley's Lover

D.H. Lawrence

Published in 1960 by Penguin, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* caused scandal due to its racy portrayal of sexuality and class. The book was infamously put on trial, with Penguin enlisting writers and academics to defend the book's literary character. In the book's trial, the judge remarked, "Is that how the girls working in the factory are going to read this book?"

To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee

Banned by various American school boards, Harper Lee's classic work of fiction is a portrait of racism and class in the 1930s Deep South, told from the youthful innocence of Scout and Jem Finch. First banned for its depiction of rape, yet more recently banned for its use of racial epithets and white saviour tropes, the cultural history of this book is a testament to changing attitudes and the complexity of censorship.

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison

Morrison's powerful modern classic was banned repeatedly for its depiction of child sexual abuse and sexually explicit material. Exploring notions of beauty in a white-washed world, *The Bluest Eye* interrogates race, class, and gender.

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde

Astonishingly, it wasn't until 2011 that the full, uncensored text of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published as Wilde intended. A classic narcissus tale, Wilde's one and only novel of decadence, hedonism, and vanity follows Dorian who, enthralled by his own exquisite portrait, sells his soul for eternal youth and beauty. It was condemned in the British press as being 'vulgar', 'unclean', and 'poisonous', and censored greatly for its homoerotic tendencies and homosexual implications. In fact, when Wilde was brought to trial in 1895, the book was used as evidence against him in court.

The Colour Purple

Alice Walker

Set in the deep American South between the wars, *The Colour Purple* is the searing story of Celie - a young black girl born into poverty and segregation. It explores her traumas and triumphs as she navigates racism and the violent black patriarchy, and was banned for its depictions of homosexuality, graphic violence, and explicit language.

1984

George Orwell

George Orwell's stark imagining of an authoritarian future is one in which Big Brother stares from every poster and the Thought Police uncover every act of betrayal. Ironically, while it was prohibited in America for its political themes and for being 'pro-communist', it was also banned in the Soviet Union until 1988.

The Satanic Verses

Salman Rushdie

Rushdie's fictional account of the history of Islam is satirical, playful, and deeply impactful. This book sent waves around the world with its controversial subject matter, inciting riots and the damnable fatwa that sentenced him to death and led to the murder of the book's Japanese translator.

Lolita

Vladimir Nabokov

Eliciting shock and awe, *Lolita* is the twisted tale of poet and pervert Humbert Humbert and his obsession with the twelve-year-old Lolita. Banned in England, France and elsewhere for its obscene themes of paedophilia and incest, *Lolita* will undoubtedly make you uncomfortable, but isn't that the case with many of the best works of literature?

The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood

A dystopian work of feminist fiction, Atwood's Gilead is a violently oppressive, Christian, patriarchal, authoritarian state, and a poignant commentary on 21st-century America. Banned for being 'anti-Christian', Penguin Random House created an 'unburnable' version of Atwood's classic last year. The publisher commented: 'Across the United States and around the world, books are being challenged, banned, and even burned. So, we created a special edition of a book that's been challenged and banned for decades.'

