

Book banning and book burning—who would have expected so many individuals and local/state governmental groups to be involved in this activity in the twenty-first century?

Growing up in a family where reading was encouraged without censorship, I am puzzled about the growing practice of removing books from library and school shelves. I believe our parents had the right ideas about books and reading. 1. Reading should always be encouraged. 2. If we were too young and naive to understand a book that was “too old” for us, we would have no interest in it. 3. Reading leads to more reading, and that, hopefully, leads to at least a smidgen of enlightenment. 4. Reading is not a waste of time.

My childhood reading choices were not highly sophisticated. I spent much of my youth captivated by “cowboy” literature, though actual cowboys were seldom much of a presence in the books. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers/Dale Evans were my favorites, and whenever I was lucky enough to have fifty cents—not often—I bought one of those cheaply made, but very entertaining to an aspiring cowgirl—novels. And the old classics of the Wild West were also alluring. My uncle Lester probably had every Zane Grey book that was published, and I read a good share of them.

The novels of that genre were, no doubt, full of prejudice and racism that targeted the Native American population. But, for some reason, that did not negatively color my views of those groups of people. In fact, I often felt more in sympathy with the native groups than with the cowboys that opposed them. And in actual history, I never, even in childhood, considered General Custer a hero. An egotistical white child of privilege seemed to clearly be on the wrong team.

I suppose, cowboys, native warriors, and cavalrymen aside, none of them really held my interest all that much. It was their horses that I coveted, dreamed about, and pretended to ride like the wind while trotting sedately on the fat sorrel mare Flicka. And that life of the mind and imagination, so important for children, developed during those years of my youth and eventually resulted in broader interests, deeper reading, and, hopefully more understanding.

I hope that anyone who has ever considered banning or burning a book will rethink that option. Instead, a further broadening and deepening of reading practices, opening one’s mind to unfamiliar subjects, and focusing on learning might even bring

about that tiny bit of enlightenment that was my family's hope.