

IMMERSED IN BOOKS

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE

While writing this, I learned of the stabbing of Salman Rushdie.

Immersed in books . . . art, culture, and nature . . . a great way to grow up, a great way to live. The benefits start early—acquire knowledge, improve one’s vocabulary, stimulate curiosity, train the memory, expose oneself to diverse ideas, thoughts, and opinions. The benefits never end—expand one’s viewpoint, be challenged by difference, develop a sense of history, experience beauty and wonder, be inspired.

Our sense of self is shaped by what we experience in our early years. But beyond personal experience, reading and other art forms teach children what happens elsewhere, how other people live, and, very importantly, what is possible. But the opportunity to develop oneself never ends, so children must be taught the value of reading and the arts; it’s the key to a happy and fulfilled life and the key to an informed and open-minded citizenry.

A few years ago, a friend of mine told me he couldn’t remember the last time he had been in a bookstore. He thought a bit more and then said he couldn’t remember the last time he’d read a book. Is this a problem with time or a problem with interest? Good question. I wish I’d thought to ask it when I had the opportunity. I fear it was the latter.

Throughout my childhood, my mother and I walked to the local library at least one evening a week. My mother valued learning, probably because her own learning as a child was cut short when her father died. She wanted me to

do well in school, but she didn’t have to work too hard to make that happen. I loved school, and I loved books. Growing up an only child, I had plenty of time to immerse myself in the dreams and fantasies that books inspire.

In high school, I was introduced to the classics—Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allen Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, James Joyce. But it was curiosity that led me to J. D. Salinger, Upton Sinclair, T. S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Jack Kerouac, Philip Roth, Betty Friedan. I cried. I smiled. I was awakened. My world expanded and my dreams got bigger.

Victoria L. Davis, in her piece in this issue, [“An Avid Bookworm,”](#) tells us that her mother was one day called to meet with Victoria’s seventh-grade teacher because the teacher was concerned about the content of the books Victoria was reading, specifically, *Five Smooth Stones*, a best-selling novel by Ann Fairbairn about interracial marriage. Victoria’s mother made it clear to the teacher that she didn’t censor what her daughter read; she trusted Victoria. My mother trusted me too. No boundaries. No censoring. I don’t think it ever occurred to her to question what I was reading.

The first book banned on this continent was [New English Canaan](#) by Thomas Morton, published in 1637. Morton arrived in New

England in 1624, four years after the Pilgrims established the Plymouth Colony in what is today Plymouth, Massachusetts. Morton soon became the pilgrims’ main competitor in the fur trading business. Morton’s business plan was quite different from that of the Pilgrims. Morton worked to forge “friendly relations with the Native Americans, whom he regarded as equals. His liberal interpretation of Christianity also welcomed people of any faith, or none, which provided a seemingly popular alternative to the conservative Plymouth Colony and those like it. Morton enraged his puritan and separatist neighbors through his blend of Anglicanism, Paganism, and Native American beliefs, an eighty-foot Maypole in the town square, frequent use of alcohol, and celebratory dances.”¹

Morton wrote *New English Canaan* as a critical review of the colonization methods being used by the English. The title alludes to the biblical account of the Israelites, under their general Joshua, conquering the land of Canaan. To Morton, the English colonists were doing a similar thing by destroying the Native American culture, taking their lands, and justifying it all in the name of God. The Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies managed to arrest Morton and send him back to England, which took care of several problems—Morton’s challenging ideas about colonization, his critique of the religious beliefs of the Pilgrims, his seeming acceptance of Native American spiritual practices, and, of course, his success in the fur-trading business. The story was told in Morton’s book, *New English Canaan*, and the Pilgrims saw it, too, as a problem, spreading ideas that they thought sinful. So it was banned.

This, of course, took place long before the founding of our country and the established right of all citizens to free speech. Under our constitution, the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because someone in society finds the idea offensive or disagreeable. Still, there is content that most people would agree is not appropriate for children, and typically that content falls into one of three categories—material that uses foul language, is sexually explicit, or excessively and graphically violent. These same categories are also used to rate movies, TV shows, and song lyrics, helping parents to make informed decisions about what their children are prepared to consume. Today, however, books being challenged sometimes fall under the loose and questionable category called “professing wokism”—books that touch on topics like inequality, racism, sexual preference, women’s place in society, capitalism, scientific methodology, even separation of church and state. Further, book banning has typically been handled at the local level—the school board or town library. Today, however, book challenges are coming from state governments themselves, some even getting involved in what books may be used in schools to teach everything from history and literature to mathematics and science. The goal seems to be to promote a very specific ideology and, ironically, squash free speech, public debate, and even truth.

It seems fitting to close with words from Salman Rushdie: “Free societies . . . are societies in motion, and with motion comes tension, dissent, friction. Free people strike sparks, and those sparks are the best evidence of freedom’s existence.” ∞

1. <https://www.worldhistory.org/review/238/new-english-canaan-text--notes>