Book Puts Spotlight on Censorship, Choice and Teaching of Controversial Popular Literature in the Classroom

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ORONO, Maine -- It's back. The debate, reflection and discussion surrounding the controversial issues of censorship, student choice and the place of popular literature in the classroom that highlighted last fall's Reading Stephen King Conference at the University of Maine are now available for reference and examination in a new book. The collection of essays from literary scholars, librarians, university faculty, and high school teachers and students, including a chapter by the best-selling author, is intended to help educators navigate the precarious line between community standards and who chooses what students read and teachers teach.

Edited by UMaine College of Education and Human Development faculty members Brenda Power and Jeffrey Wilhelm, and doctoral student and former high school teacher Kelly Chandler, the book stems from the Oct. 11-12, 1996 Reading Stephen King conference, and as the conference did, begins with the candid and provocative remarks of King sharing his views on writing, teaching, reading and censorship.

King's participation was essential to the book, according to Power, who also initiated and directed the conference. "His chapter is so honest, direct and fearless that it inspired the other contributors to be just as forthright," she says. But the book isn't just about King's writing, she points out. It's about crucial issues and debates in teaching adolescent readers today - about the value, use and differing opinions surrounding controversial reading materials and how to deal with them in the schools.

The 17 chapters portray the struggles of English teachers as they work to foster ideas and a love of reading in students, the benefits and pitfalls of using popular literature to nurture students' enthusiasm for reading, and how to deal with differing opinions and to be prepared for controversy.

In his chapter, "I want to be Typhoid Stevie," King, a 1970 UMaine graduate, describes his view of the censorship and choice controversy: "The best thing for me, and the most dismaying thing for would-be censors, is that kids have minds of their own and are engaged in learning how to use them. If you tell them Stephen King is good, they'll read me. If you tell them I'm bad for them, that I'll warp their little minds, they'll stampede to read me."

The student perspective is provided in a follow-up conversation with students from Noble High in Berwick, Maine, and their English teacher John D'Anieri who participated in the conference and incorporated the conference themes into a curriculum project. The students concur that fear seems to be a force fueling the debate over controversial books and driving those who would ban them. As one student summed it up: "It seems to me..."
that they're just trying to ban kids having open minds. They're just trying to close them down. And I think that's just because of fear, fear of what will come out of a kid that does understand these things, who makes up his own mind." The book also includes a reference list of literary works, resources to fight censorship and additional guidance for the classroom teacher.

*Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice, and Popular Literature* is published by and available from the National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill. (1-800-369-6283).

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