Protecting Holden Caulfield and His Friends from the Censors (abridged) by Edward B. Jenkinson

When Holden Caulfield checked into public school classrooms and libraries across America in the early fifties, he inadvertently brought trouble with him. In cities and towns, in so-called liberal communities as well as “conservative backwaters,” individuals and groups occasionally protested Holden’s presence in schools. In a few communities, teachers were fired for teaching Salinger’s novel. In others, teachers were admonished never to bring that “kind of trash” into their classrooms again, and their future literary selections were carefully monitored. In the majority of instances, however, those teachers who “were brave enough” to teach *The Catcher in the Rye* because they thought it was a very fine novel did so without protest, without negative comment, without any interference.

Such is the nature of schoolbook protest in America. No one can predict how any one community will respond to any novel, textbook, short story, poem, or play. No one can foretell what will precipitate the next censorship incident or how explosive it will be. No one can outguess the self-appointed guardians of the young who have formed hundreds of organizations that want to rid the schools of all they deem to be “anti-God, anti-moral, anti-family, anti-free enterprise, and anti-American.”

Since 1974, hundreds of skirmishes over textbooks, trade books, films, courses and teaching methods used in school have “sundered peaceful communities.” Disputes over classroom and library materials have erupted in every state, in rural as well as metropolitan school districts, in inner-city as well as suburban neighborhoods. The battles have left long-lasting scars and, in many instances, wounds that will never heal.

What excites the schoolbook protestor? During the last ten years, thousands of pages of criticism of schoolbooks have been printed. There are at least two hundred targets of censors who belong to organizations. Not all of the groups have the same targets. These are the ones that most directly affect teachers of English:

1. Novels, stories, poems, or plays that portray conflicts between children and their parents or between children and persons in authority. Also, literary works in which children question the decisions or wisdom of their elders.
2. Literary works that contain profanity or any questionable language.
3. Literary works that contain characters who do not speak standard English or what is considered “bad English.”
4. Black literature and black dialect.
5. Literary works and textbooks that portray women in non-traditional roles (anything other than housewife and mother).
6. Mythology—particularly if the myths include stories of creation.
7. Stories about any pagan cultures and lifestyles.
8. Stories about the supernatural, the occult, magic, witchcraft, Halloween, etc.
9. Ethnic studies (these were considered “un-American”).
10. Stories with any violence.
11. Stories that describe any sexual acts or refer to any sexual acts.
12. Literature written by homosexuals; literature written about homosexuals; any favorable treatment of homosexuals.
14. “Trashy” stories such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Go Ask Alice*, *Flowers for Algernon*, etc.
15. Any stories that do not portray the family unit as the basis of American life.
16. Any assignments that ask students to examine their personal backgrounds—family, education, religion, childhood experiences, etc.
17. Any assignments that lead the students to self-awareness and self understanding.
18. Any assignments that encourage or teach critical thinking skills.

My ten-year study of schoolbook protest, and my reading of the several articles on the subject of censorship have helped me draw some guidelines for teachers who want to protect Holden’s friends—Harper Lee’s Scout, Judy Blume’s Margaret, Paul Zindel’s Pigman, Carson McCullers’ F. Jasmine Addams, Stephen Crane’s Henry Fleming, Mark Twain’s Huck and Tom, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, and Swift’s Gulliver—among hundreds of others.