

Guilford County schools, parents debate over reading lists

BY HAEJIN SONG
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Students, parents, teachers and board of education members from Guilford County Schools have found themselves at the center of a heated controversy.

A few weeks ago, some residents asked Guilford County's Board of Education to eliminate controversial books from their students' high school reading lists. They claim that some of the books offend Christianity and contain graphically violent and inappropriate sexual content.

"When I analyzed the 11 books, my heart was grieved and honestly somewhat angered with what I found," said Lisa Reid, Grimsley High School parent, at a school board meeting.

Several of the controversial books were "House of the Spirits," "Cat's Cradle," and especially Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel "The Handmaid's Tale."

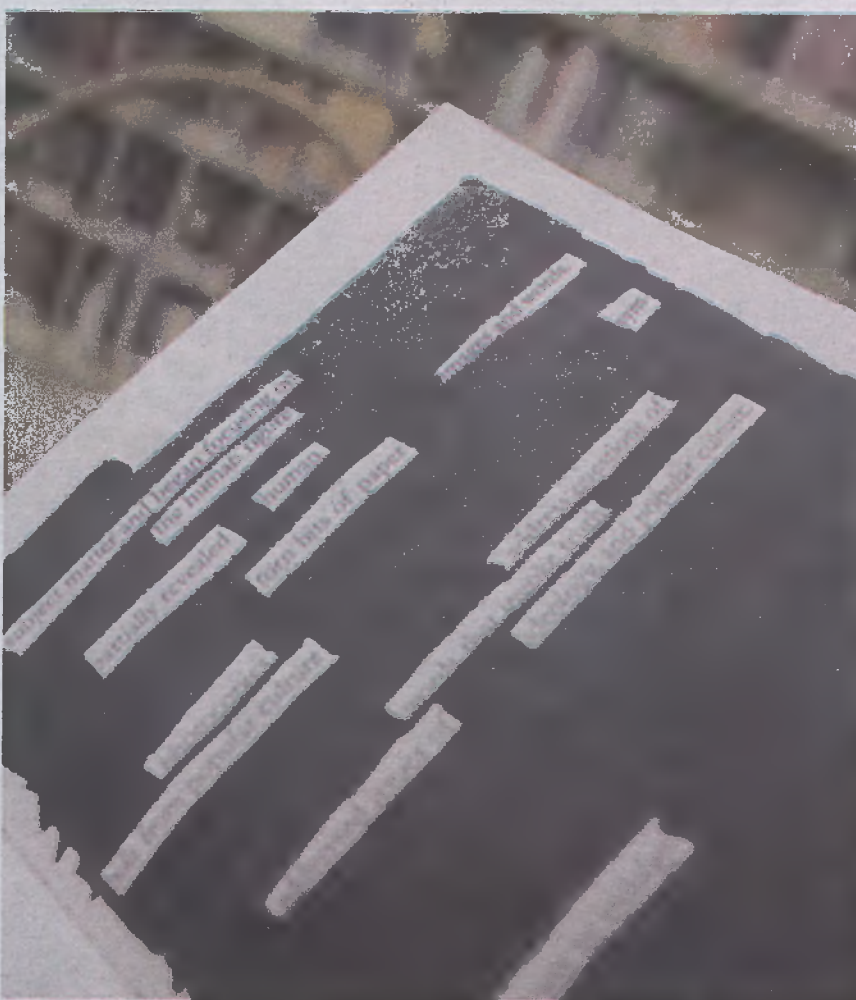
At the Guilford County School board meeting, Cathy Barnette expressed her disapproval of Atwood's novel.

"Among the many sexually explicit and vulgar scenes in this book is the quintessential theme which involves the process known as 'the ceremony,' during which the commander reads passages from the Bible out loud," said Barnette. "He then retreats to his bedroom where his wife holds down the handmaid, digging her rings into the handmaid's fingers while the commander rapes the handmaid."

Reid has currently gathered around 2,300 signatures to petition the Guilford County School Board to set standards that will not degrade religion.

However, following some of the protests, there was another public outcry by a group of parents who protested the possible book banning.

"I enrolled my two daughters in Grimsley's IB program because I value a rigorous education that exposes students to challenging literature from around the globe," said Caroline McAlister, Guilford College continuing part-time lecturer in English and parent of Grimsley High School students. "As a college literature professor myself, I know they will need these skills to succeed in college ... I want my daughters to have the opportunity to engage with the ugliness of the world in literature before they meet it head on in real life."



Censorship became a heated topic in Guilford County when residents asked to remove a book from a reading list.

Several weeks ago, parents who voiced their concerns against possible censorship marched from the Central Library to the School Board meeting insisting upon the freedom to read. The group carried signs that read "More books, not less!" and "Let Our Children Read."

Christina Purgason, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate program coordinator at Grimsley High School, wanted to clarify several controversies surrounding the novels.

Firstly, she noted that selections such as "The Handmaid's Tale," "The Things They Carried," and "The House of the Spirits" are all part of the AP and IB programs.

"These courses are not mandatory and are themselves a 'choice' for students and parents within our system and are college-level classes with corresponding materials at that same level," said Purgason in an email interview. "So if their titles are not deemed worthy, then is the ethos of these respective programs to be doubted as well?"

Secondly, she mentioned that those works are included on official title lists from the AP and IB organizations. Atwood has also been cited in free response questions from both the 1993 and 2000 AP English Literature exams.

"Considering the wealth of information about Atwood in Advanced Placement's own site and official materials, it would seem that AP English Literature instructors would be remiss if they did not include Atwood on their syllabi," said Purgason.

The debate and controversy surrounding Atwood's novel is certainly not the first of its kind.

In fact, "The Handmaid's Tale" was ranked 88th in the American Library Association's "Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009."

Interestingly in 2006, a San Antonio-area school superintendent pulled Atwood's novel after a parent complained it was sexually explicit and offensive to Christians.

Shortly afterwards, the novelist Margaret Atwood wrote an open letter to the Judson Independent School District.

"I would like to thank those who have dedicated themselves so energetically to banning my novel 'The Handmaid's Tale,'" said Atwood. "It's encouraging to know the written word is still taken so seriously ... The remark 'offensive to Christians' amazes me — why are some Christians so quick to see themselves in this mirror?"

Some parents have also voiced that the reading material is not more violent or pornographic than other accepted texts.

"There's sex and violence in Shakespeare," said McAlister. "They didn't object to Romeo and Juliet or to Mercutio's jokes about 'prick song'."

"They took the sections of the book that they read out loud at the school board meeting out of context. And sure, out of context they can sound pornographic. But if you pay attention to who's saying what; they are art. They are no more pornographic than a nude painting by Rembrandt is pornographic."

SENATE UPDATE

This Week's Developments

IT&S gave a comprehensive presentation about the college's strategic IT infrastructure plan and took student feedback.

Next Week's Plans

Take a break from studying for finals with a pizza party sponsored by Community Senate in Boren Lounge!

Apply for the Guilford Ambassadors program — applications at the Information Desk!

Contact Us

We need to hear your voice! Got an idea? Concern? Great recipe? It's important to us. Join us Wednesday nights at 7:00 P.M. in Founders East Gallery. Questions? Email: senate@guilford.edu

Compiled by Tim Leisman, Community Senate President

Hey you! Yeah you. Do you happen to have a flat tire and don't have a pump to reinflate it? Do you have a rusty chain that needs replacing? Are you in desperate need of a tune-up? Well never fear, for the Bike Shop at Guilford College is here to take care of all that and more. When you need your bike fixed up, take it by the Bike Shop.



Location:

Basement Floor of Shore Hall

The entrance is right under the sign

Contact Info:

(336) 316 - 2435

Winter Hours:

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.