

Chapter One – Forbidden Topics, Forbidden Words

1. Read through various anecdotes that Ravitch offers to illustrate the rationale for rejection of specific passages, images, etc. per the bias and sensitivity criteria. Select at least one that stands out to you and tell what you think about it.

Chapter Two – The New Meaning of Bias

1. What implications for education and teaching does Riverside’s definition or conceptualization of “bias” have?
2. Should adults assume that because some topics upset adults that they will, in turn, upset children? How does this affect testing, textbooks, and textbook adoptions?
3. Using Riverside’s stereotyping categories, do you think it is possible or even desirable to avoid all stereotyping, and are all of their constructions indeed even stereotyping?

Chapter Three – Everybody Does It: The Textbook Publishers

1. Ravitch asserts, “...the desire to control writers’ language and thought processes has become deeply institutionalized in educational publishing. It is no longer an impulse; it is policy” (p. 34). Would you agree or not and why?
2. Read the extended quote from an artist on pp. 40-41. How does this strike you?
3. Ravitch lists a number of problematic words, expressions, phrases, and situations on pages 41-45. Read these and, using specific examples, provide an analysis of this, particularly as it “fits” the multicultural, pluralistic, postmodern mindset.

Chapter Four – Everybody Does It: The Testing Companies

1. When addressing testing companies, Ravitch observes, “Our society’s commitment to equality of educational opportunity surely requires that we seek to eliminate every expression of bigotry and that we teach people of all ages to respect others. But this does not mean that literature or history should be censored to remove anything that might make the reader uncomfortable” (p. 50). Is this goal [censorship in the name of equality of educational opportunity] even possible and is it desirable with respect to these means [censorship]? Or, has Ravitch misjudged the situation?

2. Is attempting to remove cultural biases as well as any “sensitivities” held by any particular cultural group, testing companies may in fact create meaningless tests, or at least tests that don’t capture the robustness of ideas and information. Would you agree or disagree with this statement and why?

Chapter Five – Censorship from the Right

1. How does Ravitch define *censorship*?
2. How does Ravitch describe the Right’s goals of censorship in textbooks? How does she describe the Left’s goals? Contrast and compare these goals.
3. After reviewing the list of “most frequently attacked books” on pages 74-75, do you find any that surprise you? Which ones would you have suspected? Should any of these books be banned or censored? Why or why not?
4. Ravitch states, “It may be impossible for a fundamentalist Christian [that would probably include many of us] (or Orthodox Jew or fundamentalist Muslim) to feel comfortable in a public institution that is committed to tolerance and respect among all creeds and promotion of none” (p. 77). (Recall Wood’s take on this in *Diversity: Invention of a Concept*.) Would you agree? Why or why not?

Chapter Six – Censorship from the Left

1. According to Ravitch, what is the convergence point for both Right and Left pressure groups?
2. If censors operate “solely to shape opinion” as Ravitch quotes Joan DelFattore [author of *What Johnny Shouldn’t Read*], how could this limitation of freedom to diverse ideas affect our children’s education as well as democracy itself?
3. Using *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, analyze the Left’s rationale and approach to censoring this book.
5. Citing some of the Left-wing groups to which Ravitch refers, describe their ideologies and tactics with respect to textbooks.

Chapter Seven – The Mad, Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoptions

1. Other than to sell textbooks, according to Ravitch, why have publishers of school textbooks willingly and enthusiastically imposed upon themselves the language codes that control what their authors are allowed to write”? (p. 97)
2. Ravitch asserts, “Ordinary people tend to assume that the textbooks in public schools are up-to-date, accurate, and useful. Unlike general books, textbooks are almost never reviewed in public by expert scholars. [With the exception of a couple of groups] there is no regular independent scrutiny of textbooks other than the pressure groups that have made textbooks their business” (p. 98). Is Ravitch’s assertion well founded, or does she use hyperbole here? What are the implications?
3. On page 102, Ravitch challenges a couple of typical parental assumptions about textbooks. What are those assumptions, and what are the implications of those assumptions *not* being true?

Chapter Eight – Literature: Forgetting the Tradition

1. Compare and contrast *censorship*, *abridgement*, and *Bowdlerization*.
2. Although Ravitch does not call for a “canonization,” what is her complaint about pressure groups’ effects on literature in schools? (What is “canonization”?)
3. How does Ravitch characterize today’s literature textbooks?
4. What is Ravitch’s position on the assumption that students can comprehend only the literature written by and about people who share their racial, ethnic, or gender identity?

Chapter Nine – History: The Endless Battle

1. When and why did American history textbooks begin to be overhauled and essentially decimated? (See FitzGerald’s description: ‘bewildering’ litany of problems, crises, and conflicts” [p. 133].)

2. After reading this chapter, reflect on the effects of revisionism and political correctness in history textbooks in American schools. What are your thoughts?

Chapter Ten – The Language Police: Can We Stop Them?

1. What is the irony of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* being expurgated without his knowledge? (And having this pointed out to him by students no less! Actually, this may be encouraging that students are reading and astute enough to recognize this fact!)
2. Ravitch asserts, “The goal of the language police is not just to stop us from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts. The language police believe that reality follows language usage. If they can stop people from ever seeing offensive words and ideas, they can prevent them from having the thought or committing the act that the words signify” (p. 158-159). Would you agree? Why or why not? What are the implications if this assertion is true?
3. According to Ravitch, what are some of the “pernicious and pervasive” (p. 159) effects of censorship in American education? In contrast, what should American schools be and offer?
4. What is Ravitch’s three-fold strategy to combat the language police? Do you think this strategy could work? Why or why not?

General Questions

1. After reading this book, would you recommend it to others? What would you tell them?