The Book World Is Getting Way Too Politicized. Here's What To Do About That

'De-platforming' dissident voices is the new weapon de jure, and it's no longer confined to social media or university speaking schedules. It's affecting publishing and libraries as well.

By Anna Mussmann

My kids and I love our local library. It's small, but that's okay. Parents squeeze strollers between the stacks while toddlers spread wooden blocks over the floor. Every now and then, a train goes by, and children watch it through a window in the back door.

We enjoy browsing for books, and if we don't find what we want, nearly every children's title I've ever heard of can be ordered from one of the other branches. Our library is an awesome resource.

Yet even in our library I see echoes of cultural trends that threaten to separate readers from true diversity of ideas. Librarians, influential reviewers, and the folks in the publishing industry are gatekeepers to many people's reading, and these three groups are overwhelmingly progressive. This is hugely important, because progressives don't need to openly censor or ban books to encourage one view of the world and suppress another. Their dominance gives them the power to be more subtle.

Conservatives, particularly Christians, must reckon with this issue. By definition we are people whose beliefs are based on recordable, objective truth. Reading and writing books is what we *do*. It's how we learn to think and communicate in paragraphs and chapters instead of slogans. It's how we learn from the wisdom of people who have gone before us. It's how we share stories.

Above all, reading books is an expression of our belief that truth exists and can be taught through words. More than films, novels have a peculiar power over the imagination. Not only do we spend more time with a novel, we also interact with it on a deeply personal level by using our own minds to fill in all the visual and auditory details.

Progressives can't control which books we read. However, they do wield huge influence over which books are considered "marketable," which books are

published, and which books generate buzz, win awards, or get read during library story hour. In many cases this is enough to control whether anyone picks up a given title.

> “De-platforming” dissident voices is the new weapon *de jure*, and it’s no longer confined to social media or university speaking schedules. It’s affecting publishing and libraries as well. If we care about bibliophilic independence, we need to realistically assess ways to exercise the freedom to write, share, and read good books.

Problem A: Publishers Isolate Conservative Books

All of the Big Five publishing houses now maintain special imprints for conservative authors. In other words, liberals' nonfiction is handled throughout the entire publisher, but conservatives are a special genre to be handled in isolation by editors who don't mind it too much. This means conservative authors have a shorter list of places to which to submit their work and perhaps fewer chances of making it onto shelves. It's concerning, especially in light of what has already happened to the way fiction is published.

Once upon a time, many popular novels included extensive references to religion. Books like "Jane Eyre," "Ben Hur," and "Christy" come to mind. Nowadays, of course, we all take it for granted that mainstream fiction doesn't talk about Christian faith—*that* kind of stuff belongs on the romance shelf at a Christian bookstore.

Yet the ghettoization of so-called "Christian fiction" hasn't done much good for the excellence of either secular or religious literature. It also doesn't make sense from a marketing standpoint: Plenty of intelligent, thinking readers buy the rare mainstream books that engage well with religion, as evidenced by the reception granted to Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead."

> Certainly, the general public is less religious than in the past, but at the same time, the public's expectations and reading patterns have been shaped by the books publishers have given us.

What to Do: Actively Support Diversity

We can push back. Keep track of writers whose work adds depth and diversity to the conversation. Pre-order the hardcover of their next book. This is a useful way to help boost an author's sales because it influences how many paperback copies the publisher prints and may affect the resources allocated to marketing the title.

Don't stop there, though. Explore books that sidestep mainstream publishing. The world of small-press and self-published books is a little wild and wooly, true. Given the ease of self-publishing today, many books appear on Amazon without anyone having bothered to edit them, but excellent writers do publish independently. I am always on the lookout for indie authors whose fiction explores aspects of goodness, truth, and beauty while also engaging with life's hardships in a way Christian publishers might consider too gritty or intellectual.

How do we find these authors? Word-of-mouth is probably the most powerful promotion for any book. Ask people what they are reading. I use Goodreads to follow readers whose taste I trust and have found a wealth of new titles that way. Independent authors often support each other, so finding and following even one indie author you like will probably lead to others.

Conferences and award organizations are another useful source. Last year I attended Doxacon, a conference for Christian geeks aimed at exploring how faith intersects with speculative fiction. Their lineup of speakers included both traditionally and independently published authors. I also plan to keep an eye on the Grace Awards and The Realm Awards. Once you discover fresh voices, don't forget to support them, starting with an Amazon or Goodreads review.

I asked Suzannah Rowntree, an indie author whose work I enjoy (this one is my favorite) for ideas about how readers can help independent authors. She brought up the idea of patronage. It might sound a little old-fashioned, but patronage has always been an important bridge between the public and artists of all kinds.

I often hear conservative readers lament the dearth of one type of book or another. Rowntree points out that awards could be created to find, encourage, and publicize specific kinds of books or stories. She also said, “A review site dedicated to reviewing and promoting high quality indie literature would also be an excellent form of patronage. … [It] might uncover a truly high quality work with poor editing and cover design,” and “could help fund those things, giving the book a better chance in the marketplace.” I like her idea. In-depth patronage isn’t possible for everyone, but it is an investment that would benefit all of us.

Problem B: Publishers Let Activists Limit What's Published

In 2016, Scholastic released a picture book about Hercules, an enslaved African American who was also the first celebrity chef in America. Influential reviewers and activists slammed the book as racist because they thought the slaves in the illustrations smiled too much. That might give impressionable children "a dangerously rosy impression of the relationship between slaves and slave owners."

The author counter-argued that even though many people fear "that if we deviate from the narrative of constant-cruelty we diminish the horror of slavery," the truth is that "if we chose to only focus on those who fit that singular viewpoint, we run the risk of erasing those, like Chef Hercules, who were remarkable, talented, and resourceful enough to use any and every skill to their own advantage."

Such an atmosphere helps us understand why authors like Laura Ingalls Wilder are now deemed racist.

However, activists didn't want merely to engage in debate: They wanted to keep kids from being able to read a book they'd prejudiced themselves against. Scholastic soon yielded to the viral campaign and pulled the title. It is no longer available for purchase except as an extremely expensive second-hand book. This was hailed by activists as a "wonderful victory."

Perhaps it is no surprise that publishers and authors increasingly employ "sensitivity readers," especially in children's and young adult literature These consultants evaluate whether a book contains words that might qualify as a microaggression, stereotyping, or otherwise offend racial and sexual minorities. Sensitivity readers might flag anything from mainstream phrases like "low man on the totem pole" to entire plot concepts deemed offensive. Such an atmosphere helps us understand why authors like Laura Ingalls Wilder are now deemed racist.

Compassion and research are good, but too much fear of saying the wrong thing feeds the idea that readers cannot be trusted to evaluate ideas for themselves, or even to read a variety of books and form a complete picture over a period of time. Instead, each book must present a completely correct picture of the world according to certain progressive principles. Let's hope those sensitivity readers are familiar with the plot of Ella Minnow Pea.

What to Do: Use Older Books to See People Are Complicated

A key principle in progressive morality is the belief that an individual's happiness is paramount—so long as achieving it doesn't make a person not nice to others. Not only should people should do what makes them happy, but being a nice, happy person proves one is right.

For instance, gay marriage is demonstrated to be morally good by presenting stories about nice gay couples whom marriage makes happy. That is why it is immoral from a progressive standpoint to let children read stories in which nice, happy people believe the "wrong" things. Ultimately this line of reasoning is cruelly intolerant, because it forces society to accept that anyone who clings to socially unacceptable beliefs is obviously miserable and not-nice (i.e., evil).

Progressive activists are missing something big: The whole point of reading literature is to learn about the beautiful, frustrating, crazy complexities and nuances of life. Even children need stories that begin to help them address questions such as, How can nice people do horrible things? How can flawed people do beautiful things? How can we show love to each other even if we're all flawed? as well as, Why should we do the right thing even if it makes us feel unhappy?

It's true that literature should teach us to hate evil ideas and fight against injustice, but it should also help us put our self-righteousness into perspective. Reading books from a range of time periods helps in this regard. When we look at the ways old stories mingle universal truth with attitudes or cultural beliefs we now reject, we can begin to realize that life is complicated enough to require a little humility.

It's not hard to imagine a day when books that conflict with progressive values go out of print, are pulled from library shelves, and become harder to find. They won't all be online—some will be too obscure, and some will still be under copyright.

So it's worth squirreling books away. Save history books that portray the world in an old-fashioned way. These include story books that celebrate the traditional family and memoirs that portray the dangers of communism or other belief systems no longer feared by the American masses. They might be quite a treasure someday.

Problem C: Public Libraries Are Being Weaponized

Even though libraries receive public funding to conserve books, librarians as a group are not conservative. My library system hosts a drag queen story hour for toddlers, explicitly designed to "broaden" their perceptions of gender roles. This reflects the recommendations of the American Library Association, which provides local librarians lists of LGBTQ books aimed at ages 2 through 5.

Apologetics materials for the new sexual revolution increasingly slip into mainstream library events as well. Each year, public and school libraries across the nation compile a list of titles for "Battle of the Books," a popular reading competition for elementary students.

This year, Alex Gino's "George" was included on the list used in Oregon. "George" cheerfully lauds sex-change surgery and hormone therapy for children and gives the false impression that those techniques have been proven simple, safe, and effective in allowing kids to look like the opposite sex. (It is ironic that even though the ALA hosts an annual celebration of books parents have challenged, mostly because of sexual content, they simultaneously determined Wilder's novels are too controversial!)

It's one thing when a library buys a copy of a picture book about same-sex parents. It is another thing entirely when political activists use libraries as megaphones. Politicized libraries no longer function as a common meeting place where families of every political persuasion can comfortably browse, mingle, and find fun reads. They become an environment that keeps some families away.

What to Do: Use Your Local Library With Caution

Regardless of the bulletin boards on display in the entryway, libraries are still rich in books. We can do small things to help those books stay around.

For one, libraries keep track of which books patrons check out. Volumes no one reads are more likely to be culled. The obvious conclusion? Go to your library and check out great titles and authors, especially older ones that may be out-of-print.

Librarians also consider patron requests when spending their annual book budget, so don't be afraid to request books by authors you think would benefit your community. And, of course, if your library does hold a book sale to get rid of those titles, you should probably stock up on them. They won't cost much.

My kids and I have found so many "meh" and downright dodgy titles in the children's section that I now use my favorite book lists before we go in. As they grow older and begin to browse more freely on their own, it will important for me to teach them to recognize the ideology in the books they read.

Good Books Do No Good Unless We Read Them

British children's author Geraldine McCaughrean won the prestigious Carnegie Medal this year, and focused her acceptance speech on warning the audience of a trend in children's publishing. She decried the push to make books "accessible"—i.e., easier to read—and said kids are being robbed of the rich language they need to learn to think well and to resist being easily manipulated.

She's right that reading books rich in vocabulary, ideas, and artistry are a huge part of learning to be someone capable of freedom. We need to read, and we need to read the right stuff. Current cultural trends aren't going to lead us to the right stuff. Finding good books today requires that we actively seek them out.

Once we do that, though, we aren't done. We still face the biggest challenge of all: good books often require hard work. Not just will-power, but the deliberate cultivation of skills and habits.

It's easy to decry the busyness of modern life and the distractibility of the smartphone era. Let's not turn that lament into an abdication of responsibility. We can choose to read. We can learn (or relearn!) how to actually enjoy Plutarch, "Frog and Toad," Dorothy Sayers, and the King James Bible.

The beauty of all this is that extensive reading will educate our taste. We will grow better and better at recognizing both artistic merit and profound thinking in books. That is the best single thing we can do if we care enough to fight for bibliophilic independence. And if we don't? Perhaps we should give up our claim to be conservatives.

Anna Mussmann is a stay-at-home mom who writes during nap time. She is fascinated by old books, ideas, and historic philosophies of education. Her work can also be found on the blog www.sisterdaughtermotherwife.com.