

HESTER PRYNNE AND ME



BY DAVID EBERSHOFF

WHEN I LOOK AT THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION'S LIST of the 100 most challenged books at the end of the twentieth century, I marvel that we allow each other to read anything at all.

In addition to a number of undisputed classics—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* comes in at #5, while Steinbeck's poignant *Of Mice and Men* ranks # 6—the list is a showcase of children's books and young adult novels that, apparently, offend a few grown-ups while delighting millions of kids: Alvin Schwartz's bestselling *Scary Stories* series tops the list and *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite—well, who's really surprised to see it at #2? In a more recent list—the top ten challenges from 2006—not much has changed. *And Tango Makes Three* (the famous gay Penguins) gets the gold for “featuring” homosexuality and a message that is “anti-family.” In fact, nine of the ten books on this list have been challenged for homosexuality and/or sexual content. The only book on the list whose offenses aren't sexual? The *Scary Stories* series, for “occult/Satanism, unsuited to age group, violence, and insensitivity.”

It's enough to make you cry or laugh, or both. Yet whenever I encounter the various lists of challenged and banned books, I always look to see if one of the most widely read yet subversive books in American literature, *The Scarlet Letter*, has landed in the dog house. Wondrously, mysteriously, thankfully, it rarely does. How to explain that some parents and community leaders get worked up about a tale of two penguins taking in an orphaned chick, while a novel that ridicules religious authority gets assigned again and again in sophomore lit? This is not to say *The Scarlet Letter* never goes unchallenged. A quick Google search turns up cases from the 1990s when the book faced challenges for “conflicting with the values of the community.” (How Hawthorne would have relished the irony of that language!) In fact, ever since the book's publication in 1850, various people have spoken out against its sympathetic portrait of an adulteress. Yet given the book's unmistakable message about the fallacy of religious authority, and the hollowness of piety, how is it this book goes mostly unbothered when so many others face outcry?

I first read *The Scarlet Letter* when I was fifteen. In it I found a familiar vision of religious intolerance to the one around me. I grew up in the 1980s, when

televangelists, with their fluffed up hair and their tears, self-righteously denounced all kinds of sinners, reserving a special, full-throated enthusiasm for gay people. No matter how outrageous the televangelists' claims, or how tacky their clothes, many Americans, including much of the media, allowed the TV preachers a moral authority simply because they were of the clergy. (This was before they began to fall, one by one, inevitably ensnared by sexual hypocrisy and unpaid taxes.) Once, I remember flipping the channels, counting the number of men at the pulpit condemning gays. We didn't have a remote, and I sat cross-legged before the TV, pressing the channel button again and again. On one Sunday afternoon in 1984, five men of God were simultaneously broadcasting to millions of Americans that I better pack my handbasket—for I was on my way to hell.

Which is why when I read *The Scarlet Letter* that year in sophomore lit, I felt a surge of recognition. It's no accident that the first people to speak in the novel are the Gossips—the sanctimonious women of the Puritan community, “self-constituted judges” Hawthorne calls them, who show no capacity to forgive. These women open the novel like a Greek chorus, wailing on and on not about a great battle lost or a hero destroyed, but about Hester Prynne's sin of adultery, calling her a “brazen hussy”, a “malefactress”, and, most bitchily, a piece of “naughty baggage.” As one old woman puts it, “I'll tell ye a piece of my mind.” Boy, does she ever.

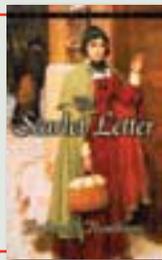
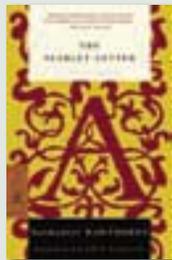
And they're just the warm-up! Next come the senior clergy, who, of course, also have a few things to say. And finally, timid, pallid, “godly” Arthur Dimmesdale, the “tremulous” reverend whom the Puritans adore, as much for his religious eloquence as for his soft, pretty, nearly feminine features. The entire community—all of Puritan America, it seems—turns to him to cast judgment on Hester Prynne standing defiantly before them on the pillory. Indirectly, the good Reverend Dimmesdale tells the people what they want to hear: she is a sinner and the rest of you are superior because of it.

And yet brilliant Hawthorne has a little secret up his narrative sleeve: of course Hester's lover is the good

reverend himself! Of course he is the father of bastard Pearl. Who else could it be? As a teenager, what I loved about Hawthorne's vision—and still love today—is how he makes the community terrifying (I have to believe Shirley Jackson loved this book too, and wrote “The Lottery” in homage), but also manages to insert irony, so that readers like my fifteen-year-old self can interpret. It's not easy to scare the bejesus out of a reader while simultaneously making him laugh, but that is what Hawthorne does, even when I re-read the novel's opening chapters today. How cool he seemed to this sophomore all those years ago: at a time when the country let those TV preachers go on and on shilling hatred, Hawthorne was there to tell me my instincts were right. Those guys on TV? Full of crap. The mass media remained silent, while a book almost 150 years old spoke out forcefully.

This experience partly explains why I became a fiction writer and, perhaps, what led me some twenty years later to write a novel called *The 19th Wife*. Several years ago I first heard about Ann Eliza Young, a once-famous woman who was derided and celebrated for being Brigham Young's outspoken 19th wife. Born into the Church of Latter-day Saints (or Mormons) and raised in a family with five wives, Ann Eliza in 1873 divorced her powerful husband, who was also her spiritual leader, and apostatized from the only church she knew. Leaving her family and her community, Ann Eliza embarked on a national crusade to, as she put it, tell the truth about American polygamy. She played a significant role in forcing the Latter-day Saints to abandon polygamy, one of the central tenets of early LDS belief. Ann Eliza was a controversial figure in her day, and remains so today. To some, she is a hero; to others, a traitor and a liar. Many Latter-day Saints believed then, and continue to believe today, that her stories about polygamy warped the truth about what was primarily a spiritual practice. On the other hand, many women and children who suffered in polygamous households believed she exposed only the half of it. As a teenager I found myself morally fortified by Hester Prynne. Twenty years later she inspired me to write about another woman who faced community ostracism for defying her religious authority. Like Hester Prynne before her, Ann Eliza Young is a powerful yet imperfect symbol for the cost of living according to one's beliefs.

A cynic might claim that people who challenge books don't really read them and therefore have misread *The Scarlet Letter's* message, wrongly believing it is about the punishment of sin. I'm not so sure about that. Rather, I think Hawthorne's ultimate vision of faith lets the book go, more or less, unchallenged by those who might



THE SCARLET LETTER

by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Introduction by Kathryn Harrison
Modern Library, TR,
978-0-679-78338-1, 304pp.,
\$6.95

Also: Bantam Classics edition
MM, 256pp., 978-0-553-21009-5,
\$3.95

otherwise be so offended by it. For despite the religious hypocrisy he exposes, despite the decidedly un-Christian Christians he portrays—even in the face of all this, Hester Prynne maintains her faith. After being released from prison, she has little use for clergy or a house of worship or any of the community rituals of religion, yet she still believes in God, in her own terms. When Pearl—named for the Pearl of Great Price, a parable in Matthew—asks who her father is, Hester answers determinedly, “Thy Heavenly Father sent thee!” Hester’s church has abandoned her, yet she continues to believe. Hawthorne’s message is a remarkable statement about the true nature of faith. This is the case, too, with Ann Eliza Young and many of the characters in *The 19th Wife*: even after encountering an overwhelming number of reasons to doubt, each maintains, in his or her own way, a unique sense of faith. Perhaps it is the ultimate testament of the power of belief: we can face scorn in the name of it or we can turn away from it, we can be lied to under the banner of it and we can deny it, and yet even after all these tests our hearts can remain full of private, powerful belief.

As we ponder censorship and rightly assess the dangers it poses, it is also worth noting the unnotable, a statistic that does not—in fact, cannot—exist. For every banned book, how many more millions sit proudly on the shelf, unchallenged and widely available to readers?

True, every time a book faces a challenge or a ban, all books are at risk. Yet even in today’s climate, our society can mostly tolerate the nuances and subtleties of a book like *The Scarlet Letter*, despite the painful truths it continues to reveal about that most sensitive of subjects, religion. And perhaps this explains why I have received so many warm responses from Latter-day Saints after they have read *The 19th Wife*. Not long ago I met the great-great-great grandson of Brigham Young’s 12th wife, a devout Latter-day Saint who sparred with Ann Eliza and publicly fought for the right to engage in polygamy. Although this young man, himself a Latter-day Saint, did not fully agree with *The 19th Wife*, he had read it fairly, commending it for what he said was its complex approach to a complex story. He didn’t want to challenge or ban *The 19th Wife*—he wanted to discuss it.

Recently I was re-reading *The Scarlet Letter* on an airplane. My seatmate, a man named Zach, said, “Oh my son is reading that in school.” I asked what grade he was in, although somehow I already knew the answer. Zach’s son, of course, was a sophomore. As I returned to my book, my mind wandered and I looked out the airplane window: we were 30,000 feet above the heart of America, and I began to imagine the classrooms and libraries below where, thankfully, thousands of fifteen-year-olds, one by one, are still free to encounter Hester Prynne. ■



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About the Writer

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