**My Young Mind Was Disturbed By a Book. It Changed My Life.**

Viet Thanh Nguyen shares his opinions on the power of books on the young mind for The New York Times.

When I was 12 or 13 years old, I was not prepared for the racism, the brutality or the sexual assault in Larry Heinemann's 1974 novel, "Close Quarters."

Mr. Heinemann, a combat veteran of the war in Vietnam, wrote about a nice, average American man who goes to war and becomes a remorseless killer. In the book's climax, the protagonist and other nice, average American soldiers gang-rape a Vietnamese prostitute they call Claymore Face.

As a Vietnamese American teenager, it was horrifying for me to realize that this was how some Americans saw Vietnamese people — and therefore me. I returned the book to the library, hating both it and Mr. Heinemann.

Here's what I didn't do: I didn't complain to the library or petition the librarians to take the book off the shelves. Nor did my parents. It didn't cross my mind that we should ban "Close Quarters" or any of the many other books, movies and TV shows in which racist and sexist depictions of Vietnamese and other Asian people appear.

Instead, years later, I wrote my own novel about the same war, "The Sympathizer."

While working on it, I reread "Close Quarters." That's when I realized I'd misconstrued Mr. Heinemann's intentions. He wasn't endorsing what he depicted. He wanted to show that war brutalized soldiers, as well as the civilians caught in their path. The novel was a damning indictment of American warfare and the racist attitudes held by some nice, average Americans that led to slaughter and rape. Mr. Heinemann revealed America's heart of darkness. He didn't offer readers the comfort of a way out by editorializing or sentimentalizing or humanizing Vietnamese people, because in the mind of the book's narrator and his fellow soldiers, the Vietnamese were not human.

In the United States, the battle over books is heating up, with some politicians and parents demanding the removal of certain books from libraries and school

curriculums. Just in the last week, we saw reports of a Tennessee school board that voted to ban Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust, "Maus," from classrooms, and a mayor in Mississippi who is withholding $110,000 in funding from his city's library until it removes books depicting L.G.B.T.Q. people. Those seeking to ban books argue that these stories and ideas can be dangerous to young minds — like mine, I suppose, when I picked up Mr. Heinemann's novel.

Books can indeed be dangerous. Until "Close Quarters," I believed stories had the power to save me. That novel taught me that stories also had the power to destroy me. I was driven to become a writer because of the complex power of stories. They are not inert tools of pedagogy. They are mind-changing, world-changing.

But those who seek to ban books are wrong no matter how dangerous books can be. Books are inseparable from ideas, and this is really what is at stake: the struggle over what a child, a reader and a society are allowed to think, to know and to question. A book can open doors and show the possibility of new experiences, even new identities and futures.

Book banning doesn't fit neatly into the rubrics of left and right politics. Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has been banned at various points because of Twain's prolific use of a racial slur, among other things. Toni Morrison's "Beloved" has been banned before and is being threatened again — in one case after a mother complained that the book gave her son nightmares. To be sure, "Beloved" is an upsetting novel. It depicts infanticide, rape, bestiality, torture and lynching. But coming amid a movement to oppose critical race theory — or rather a caricature of critical race theory — it seems clear that the latest attempts to suppress this masterpiece of American literature are less about its graphic depictions of atrocity than about the book's insistence that we confront the brutality of slavery.

Here's the thing: If we oppose banning some books, we should oppose banning any book. If our society isn't strong enough to withstand the weight of difficult or challenging — and even hateful or problematic — ideas, then something must be fixed in our society. Banning books is a shortcut that sends us to the wrong destination.

As Ray Bradbury depicted in “Fahrenheit 451,” another book often targeted by book banners, book burning is meant to stop people from thinking, which makes them easier to govern, to control and ultimately to lead into war. And once a society acquiesces to burning books, it tends to soon see the need to burn the people who love books.

And loving books is really the point — not reading them to educate oneself or become more conscious or politically active (which can be extra benefits). I could recommend “Fahrenheit 451” because of its edifying political and ethical dimensions or argue that reading this novel is good for you, but that really misses the point. The book gets us to care about politics and ethics by making us care about a man who burns books for a living and who has a life-changing crisis about his awful work. That man and his realization could be any of us.

It’s not only books that depict horror, war or totalitarianism that worry would-be book banners. They sometimes see danger in empathy. This appeared to be the fear that led a Texas school district to cancel the appearance of the graphic novelist Jerry Craft and pull his books temporarily from library shelves last fall. In Mr. Craft’s Newbery Medal-winning book, “New Kid,” and its sequel, Black middle-schoolers navigate social and academic life at a private school where there are very few students of color. “The books don’t come out and say we want white children to feel like oppressors, but that is absolutely what they will do,” the parent who started the petition to cancel Mr. Craft’s event said. (Mr. Craft’s invitation for a virtual visit was rescheduled and his books were reinstated soon after.)

Mr. Craft’s protagonist in “New Kid” is a sweet, shy, comics-loving kid. And it’s his relatability that makes him seem so dangerous to some white parents. The historian and law professor Annette Gordon-Reed argued on Twitter that parents who object to books such as “New Kid” “don’t want their kids to empathize with the black characters. They know their kids will do this instinctively. They don’t want to give them the opportunity to do that.” The historian Kevin Kruse went a step further, tweeting, “If you’re worried your children will read a book and have no choice but to identify with the villains in it, well … maybe that’s something you need to work through on your own.”

Those who ban books seem to want to circumscribe empathy, reserving it for a limited circle closer to the kind of people they perceive themselves to be. Against

this narrowing of empathy, I believe in the possibility and necessity of expanding empathy — and the essential role that books such as “New Kid” play in that. If it’s possible to hate and fear those we have never met, then it’s possible to love those we have never met. Both options, hate and love, have political consequences, which is why some seek to expand our access to books and others to limit them.

These dilemmas aren’t just political; they’re also deeply personal and intimate. Now, as a father of a precocious 8-year-old reader, I have to think about what books I bring into our home. My son loves Hergé’s Tintin comic books, which I introduced him to because I loved them as a child. I didn’t notice Hergé’s racist and colonialist attitudes then, from the paternalistic depiction of Tintin’s Chinese friend Chang in “The Blue Lotus” to the Native American warriors wearing headdresses and wielding tomahawks in the 1930s of “Tintin in America.” Even if I had noticed, I had no one with whom I could talk about these books. My son does. We enjoy the adventures of the boy reporter and his fluffy white dog together, but as we read, I point out the books’ racism against most nonwhite characters, and particularly its atrocious depictions of Black Africans. Would it be better that he not see these images, or is it better that he does?

I err on the side of the latter and try to model what I think our libraries and schools should be doing. I make sure he has access to many other stories of the peoples that Hergé misrepresented, and I offer context with our discussions. These are not always easy conversations. And perhaps that’s the real reason some people want to ban books that raise complicated issues: They implicate and discomfort the adults, not the children. By banning books, we also ban difficult dialogues and disagreements, which children are perfectly capable of having and which are crucial to a democracy. I have told him that he was born in the United States because of a complicated history of French colonialism and American warfare that brought his grandparents and parents to this country. Perhaps we will eventually have less war, less racism, less exploitation if our children can learn how to talk about these things.

For these conversations to be robust, children have to be interested enough to want to pick up the book in the first place. Children’s literature is increasingly diverse and many books now raises these issues, but some of them are hopelessly ruined by good intentions. I don’t find piousness and pedagogy interesting in art, and neither do children. Hergé’s work is deeply flawed, and yet

riveting narratively and aesthetically. I have forgotten all the well-intentioned, moralistic children's literature that I have read, but I haven't forgotten Hergé.

Books should not be consumed as good for us, like the spinach and cabbage my son pushes to the side of his plate. "I like reading short stories," a reader once said to me. "They're like potato chips. I can't stop with one." That's the attitude to have. I want readers to crave books as if they were a delicious, unhealthy treat, like the chili-lime chips my son gets after he eats his carrots and cucumbers.

Read "Fahrenheit 451" because its gripping story will keep you up late, even if you have an early morning. Read "Beloved," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "Close Quarters" and "The Adventures of Tintin" because they are indelible, sometimes uncomfortable and always compelling.

We should value that magnetic quality. To compete with video games, streaming video and social media, books must be thrilling, addictive, thorny and dangerous. If those qualities sometimes get books banned, it's worth noting that sometimes banning a book can increase its sales.

Banning is an act of fear — the fear of dangerous and contagious ideas. The best, and perhaps most dangerous, books deliver these ideas in something just as troubling and infectious: a good story.