

# Explicit assignments

Too many teachers seem ready to insult the sexual sensibilities of students and parents.

by Dale Buss

*Editor's note: Some of the content in this story may be disturbing to some readers.*

**A**s school was ending last year, Sue Ann Johnson came across a copy of a short story that was assigned reading for her son's Advanced Placement English class. "I Like Guys" is a homosexual

coming-of-age tale set in a summer camp.

Horrified, the mom and real estate agent in Litchfield, N.H., dug into her son's book bag. She found three other short stories that were extremely dark and sexually explicit.

"These stories were just shocking," Johnson recalled. "I am reading these stories and freaking out. They are affecting me negatively, so I'm wondering, 'How are they

affecting 17-year-old kids?'"

So the Johnsons launched a complaint process that ultimately saw the high school principal toss some of the stories out of the curriculum. And, like Christian parents and students across the country, the Johnsons learned that too many public school educators are more than ready to insult — often outrageously so — the established sexual sensibilities of children.

Assigned tomes include *The Bluest Eye*, by famed author Toni Morrison — which depicts in disquieting detail a father's rape of his 11-year-old daughter on the kitchen floor. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a novel about a boy who copes with his abject situation on a reservation through pornography and masturbation. *Queer 13: Lesbian and Gay Writers Recall Seventh Grade* evokes the memory of a rape by a man in a public restroom. *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* describes first-graders meeting in a school bathroom to practice oral sex.

"Some of the material being recommended for use in schools by national gay-activist groups includes what I would consider Triple X-type material," said Candi Cushman, education analyst for CitizenLink. "These depictions are so extreme that you wouldn't expect to find them anywhere but a porn store."

Students may be forced to confront these texts as mandatory reading in a literature or social-studies class. Or they may be suggested by teachers, or available as options. Sometimes, such material appears on summer reading lists either as required or available reading. Often, objectionable books simply occupy shelf space in school libraries.

In any event, the insistence of many public educators to bring brazenly sexual, often homosexual-themed, books and stories into the mainstream is a

growing threat to the moral maturation of American high-school students.

This material doesn't just yield the relatively harmless peccadilloes of a previous generation of scandalizing literature, such as the occasional profanity in *Catcher in the Rye*. Much of the modern variety appears to have no other purpose than to centralize homosexuality or to sensationalize edgy heterosexual practice in ways that young readers can't easily forget.

"Parents have the right to object to sexually explicit material that their child isn't emotionally or psychologically ready to handle, and many students are being inundated by this stuff," Cushman said.

Urging parents to intervene against such assignments isn't a common message these days. "Parents are told that they have no control over their kids in the public schools, that states will decide these things," said Phil Burress, president of Citizens for Community Values, a Cincinnati-based affiliate of Focus on the Family. "And that kind of thinking is gaining even more speed."

In part, parents face the growing success of homosexual-advocacy organizations in infiltrating public schools to promote their lifestyle and ideology. But at least this agenda is relatively easy to identify. The use of required-reading lists to transfuse older students with bad ideas can be far more insidious.

Promotion of homosexuality — and, for that matter, the rawest aspects of heterosexuality — in

"Some of the material ... includes what I would consider Triple X-type material."

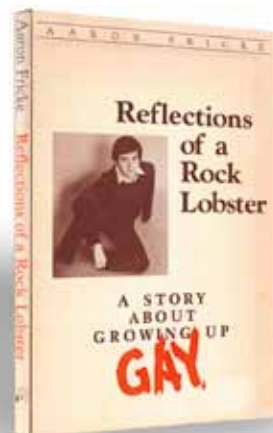
— Candi Cushman, education analyst for CitizenLink

these texts can be subtler, more underhanded and as or more effective than simple and direct stories like *Heather Has Two Mommies* for small children. Couched by teachers as meaningful prose containing lessons about life, such stories can carry weight with impressionable teenagers eager to demonstrate their literary sophistication.

"Parents should not be intimidated from speaking up about explicit books that desensitize their children," Cushman said. "They have

the right to point out that taxpayer-funded books in public schools should be age-appropriate and consistent with community standards, state law and school policies."

Added Burress: "Most times, students don't come home and talk about it because they end up being ostracized at school if their parents take action."



## Rated R reading

But public educators in Colorado Springs, Colo., are definitely having a harder time of it after Lisa Bevere got a look at *Part-Time Indian*, which one teacher had made required reading for her freshman son.

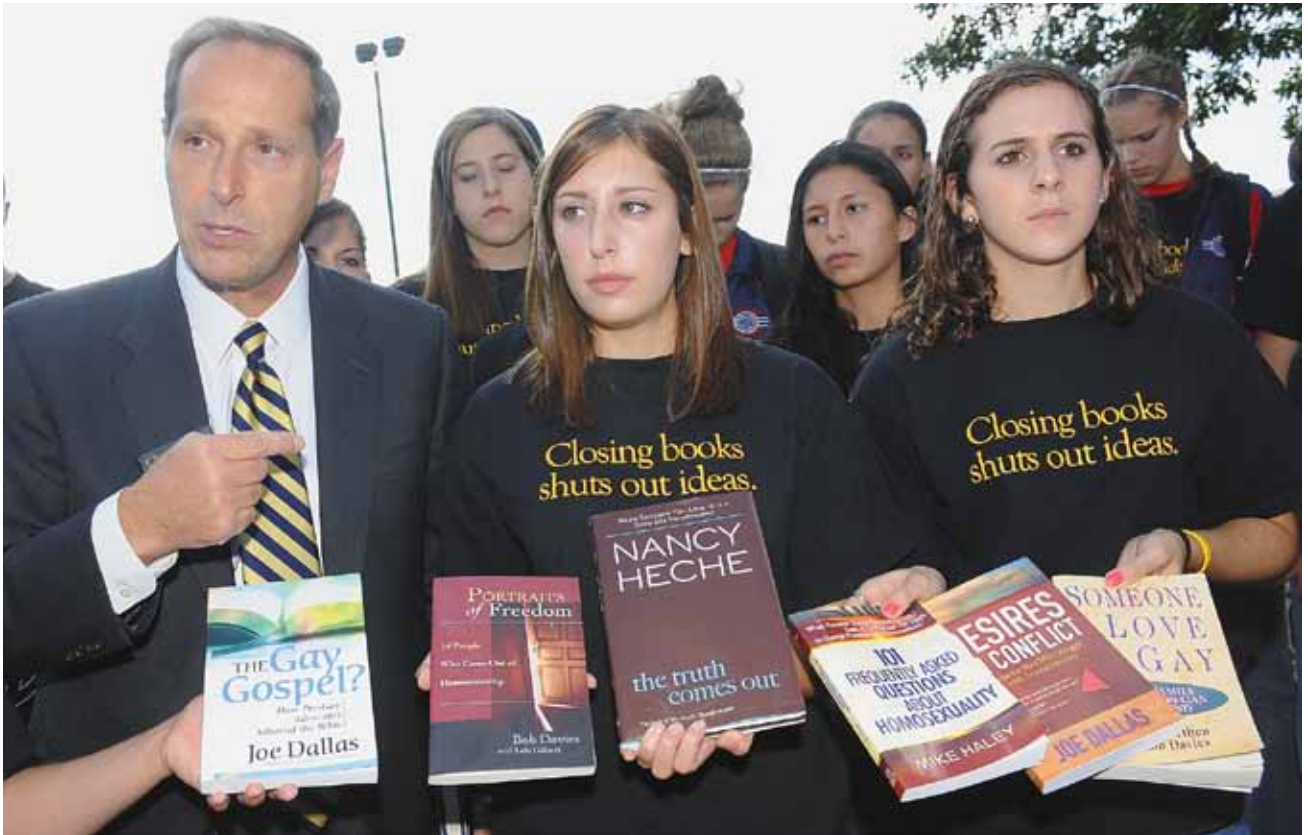
The book by Sherman Alexie depicts a 14-year-old boy in a highly dysfunctional family rife with alcoholism, shoplifting, domestic abuse and suicide. "Junior" copes in part through pornography and masturbation, which the author describes casually and explicitly (and which the Colorado teacher reportedly discussed by telling her class that "They all do it").

"This material would be considered sexually explicit in a movie theater and would require an R rating, but it was given to my son without any warning or parental permission," said Bevere, who is a principal in the ministry Messenger International along with her husband, John. "The things in that book are the gateway to prostitution and even sex trafficking."

"I also told [the teacher] that, as a partial descendant of American Indians, I found this depiction the absolutely worst pictorial of everything that has been a downfall for our culture."

The teacher proposed an alternative: reading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. In class, the teacher reportedly explained to her students that some parents had complained about *Part-Time Indian*, told them that alternatives were available — and

then embarrassed the Beveres' son by slamming *Of*



One way to work for a better literary environment in public high schools is to help stock their libraries with better books. Donate age-appropriate books that communicate a Christian and socially conservative viewpoint on hot-topic issues such as homosexuality and abortion.

*Mice and Men* and another book on his desk as she walked out of the room.

Bevere researched the district's curriculum policies online and found just cause to believe that the teacher had violated them. "I went to the vice principal and said, 'I'm sorry, but you've done this to the wrong person,'" Bevere said. "I said, 'I guess I'm going to have to make this about every son in that class.'"

She wrote a post on the ministry's blog, and soon several other parents of kids in the class allied with the Beveres. The principal called Lisa Bevere, and they worked out a solution. *Part-Time Indian* was pulled from curricula districtwide. The offending teacher called each parent and sent home a note. A few weeks later, administrators met with teachers to review the curriculum-selection process.

Here's how to approach similar situations:

**Do your homework.** Stay on top of what your kids are reading in class. Beware especially of AP English courses, in which high-school kids routinely get exposed to college-level texts. Get syllabi, and look up the books

and stories. Talk with the teachers about how they make reading selections.

If you find something objectionable, delve into district and state policies and laws; many schools and teachers are at risk of being in direct violation of their own codes. Before criticizing a teacher for a specific assignment, read the text cover to cover — and be specific in your critique, including page numbers and passages.

Also, learn what your kids think. They may not express concerns about what they're reading or understand how and why it is objectionable, but you may be able to pick up on any discomfort they feel.

Parents will find that their most effective argument is to focus on concrete, sexually explicit content.

**Cut through the darkness.** Horrific sexual material often is stitched in with — or even integral to — narratives that are psychologically and spiritually oppressive. While it's important to

be discerning about the entire context of the book, parents will find that their most effective argument is to focus on concrete, sexually explicit content that conflicts with state laws or school policies.

*Claws*, a 2003 novel by Will Weaver, for example, follows the 16-year-old protagonist “through his spiral as events spin out of his control,” according to *School Library Journal*. It also happens to be stuffed with profanities, explicit discussion of pornography, and teenage sex scenes.

**Band together.** There is power in numbers, so recruit allies.

“It’s best if you don’t fight this battle alone,” Cushman said. “The bigger coalition of parents you have — and the more diverse — the better off you’ll be.”

Social-networking tools can make communication with other parents and students easy. And when they see what you see in black and white, many others may get involved.

And as you work your way up the ladder of authority, insist on taking another person to any meetings you attend.

**Play the right cards.** When objecting to offensive books that are mandatory reading, parents can argue that they should have the right to determine when and if their children are psychologically and mentally ready to handle sexually-themed books. It’s a little trickier when tackling assignments or material that isn’t mandatory, but parents have the best chance of success when they stick to arguments based on sexually graphic or profane content.

“These types of arguments have the most legal backing,” explained Cushman. “Federal courts have indicated that obscenity or vulgarity could be legitimate reasons for removing books, but they have also ruled against schools that seemed to remove materials merely because

of controversial viewpoints.”

Julie Hagan, a parent in Weldon, Ill., objected when *Claws* was made available to her fifth-grader through a fund-raising book fair conducted by Scholastic — even though the book is recommended by the *School Library Journal* for Grade 9 and up.

**Let the “literature” speak for itself.** Concerned parents have found that “show” can be much more effective than “tell.” Get people to read the books.

“These stories were just shocking. I am reading these stories and freaking out.”

— Sue Ann Johnson, concerned parent

When Shawn Wilson’s daughter brought home a book from the library at Cooper High School in Abilene, Texas, he opened it up — and became incensed. The poems in *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop and the Poetry of a New Generation* included profanities.

After talking with the librarian, Wilson asked the superintendent to read the book. “His kids aren’t in school yet,” said Wilson, a phone-company worker and part-time pastor. “But he said when they get of age, he wouldn’t want them reading this book.” The superintendent reportedly agreed to pull *The Spoken Word* from the library.

**Reject the “censor” tag.**

Educators and their support organizations will fall back on charged terms such as “censorship” and “banned books” to discourage parents from getting involved.

“You need to put that instead into the context of parents having the right to protect their children,” Cushman advised. “And you can also point out that school officials act as ‘censors’ every day by selecting some books for curricula and rejecting others. So it’s hypocritical for them to call their actions ‘selection’ and parents’ actions ‘censorship.’”

**Get the school board involved.**

If you find your concerns ignored by those within the school, it might be time to take your case to elected school board members, who are accountable to voters. They might be more apt to respond to curriculum concerns raised by taxpaying, voting citizens — and more likely to connect with the common-sense concerns of parents about objectionable, sexually explicit materials.

**Start turning the tide.**

One way to work for a better literary environment in public high schools is to help stock their libraries with better books. Donate age-appropriate books that communicate a Christian and socially conservative viewpoint on hot-topic issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Visit [CitizenLink.org/bannedbooks](http://CitizenLink.org/bannedbooks) for tips on doing exactly that.

Cushman is encouraged by how many parents “are waking up and exercising their rights, and getting savvy about” the explicit materials their children are being ordered to read in the classroom. “But there still aren’t enough parents doing it,” she said. ●

*Dale Buss is a freelance writer in Michigan.*