

Opinion: High school was wrong to ban Stephen King book

By Alexander Nazaryan, New York Daily News

Banning books is a dumb idea, but that hasn't stopped people from trying. On the heels of Banned Books Week comes the news that a high school in Rocklin is considering a ban on a Stephen King book because it contains a passage in which a woman is raped with a sex object.

The news was first reported by a Sacramento CBS affiliate.

The school in question, Rocklin High School, removed King's story collection "Different Seasons" from shelves after a parent complained about "Art Pupil." In that story – which was made into a 1998 film starring the late Brad Renfro and Ian McKellen – Todd Bowden, a young man in California befriends an elderly man, Kurt Dussander, who is a Nazi war criminal. In the supposedly offensive passage, Dussander watches as Todd cruelly rapes a woman. The rape is graphically described in a passage of one-and-a-half pages. The book also contains well-known stories like "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" and "The Body," which became the film "Stand by Me."

According to CBS, Rocklin school officials removed the book from the library after the complaint. However, one level-headed student, Amanda Wong, raised an objection to the committee in question.

Here's the kicker: "Wong was also on that committee, and was the only one opposed to pulling the book. She was outnumbered, but it didn't stop her from being outspoken, especially because she's the only one who read the entire thing."

Well, then. If you're going to ban a book, then you should at least read it. Otherwise, you risk looking like a self-righteous fool.

As a former English teacher, I would probably not give "Art Pupil" to my students – but only because I don't think it's good literature, not because it contains a rape scene. Rape does happen. Cruelty does happen. Nazis happened. If you don't want your kids to know these things exist, buy an island in the South Pacific. Or, at least, get rid of your television and Internet.

At the very least, read the book in question. After the rape, Todd has the following realization: "There was only one way he could get himself back again. He would have to kill Dussander. It was the only way. Games were done; storytime was over. This was survival."

Again, I think this is heavy-handed, clumsy prose. But it is clear that King is trying to make a moral point, with Todd at least wanting (if not achieving) redemption. I am fairly confident a seventh-grader would recognize that King is not glorifying rape or any other aspect of Dussander's revolting character.

Over in Rocklin, though, the fate of King's book hangs in the balance. After the school committee voted to pull the book, Wong went to the local school board, where her argument convinced the district to rethink the ban. According to CBS, the book is available at Rocklin High School again while the district weighs what to do.

Either way, we commend Amanda Wong for having a mind of her own.