

“RECOMMENDED” AND “APPROVED” BOOKS: AN EXPLANATION

"The Bronze Bow" was on California's "Recommended Literature List" in 1993. These lists are created by a panel of librarians and teachers. Their recommendations are meant to serve as a starting point for local districts, not as a substitute for a more detailed local review. "The Bronze Bow" is not on the latest state Recommended Literature List, but its absence does not imply that the librarians and teachers found fault with it in some way. Indeed, the state has continued to make the older lists available on its website.

"Recommended" status should not be confused with "approved". The only books which are officially approved by the state of California are state-adopted textbooks, which go through a much more rigorous review, public comment, and editing process. When the state adopts a textbook, it is affirming that the book conforms to all requirements in the state curriculum frameworks, Education Code and constitution. Accordingly, the review process is much more exhaustive. It was this process which resulted in state instructions to textbook publishers this year to remove all references to a Jewish role in the crucifixion of Jesus and to the notion that Christianity, as a religion based on love, is superior to Judaism, a religion based on law.

All materials used by local school districts other than state-adopted textbooks are known as "supplemental instructional materials". These materials are not required to conform to the state curriculum frameworks used for statewide textbook adoption, although the state recommends the frameworks as something districts may find helpful when evaluating other materials. Supplemental materials ARE required to conform to specific sections of the Education Code and constitution, and responsibility for making sure that they do so lies with local districts. In adopting "The Bronze Bow" in 1998 and in reviewing it now, the San Rafael City School District was / is obligated to ensure that the book does so. These regulations are specifically identified in written San Rafael school board policies.

We don't know if any of the issues we've raised were brought up when state librarians recommended "The Bronze Bow" in 1993 or when San Rafael adopted it in 1998. If they weren't, it's even MORE important to raise them now, not LESS, to rectify those oversights. Even today, most people don't notice these issues, and society has been far less sensitive to them in the past. "The Bronze Bow" won a Newbery award in 1962, but the American Library Association has acknowledged that some of the attitudes of older winners of its award can be "woefully out of date". In 1962, prayers were still required in many classrooms.

Some districts have established formal, standing procedures to deal with serious questions about curriculum materials. Some school boards have appointed

committees to review complaints and issue written reports, which are then acted on by the board. Both practices could be considered in San Rafael, since having a process in place could reduce confusion and tension. This was certainly the case in the Placentia - Yorba Linda school district (in Southern California), which received complaints about four supplemental novels in 1996. After reviewing the books and issues that had been raised and commissioning a written report, the school board retained three of the four books. The only one which the board voted to remove from the district's curriculum was "The Bronze Bow". We don't know if the San Rafael district was aware of this decision when they adopted the book two years later.

(Note: Beyond California, "The Bronze Bow" was also removed from the curriculum in Indianapolis in 2003.)