

WHY THE BRONZE BOW SHOULDN'T BE USED IN SAN RAFAEL SCHOOLS

(by Tom Allen)

Is it OK to teach about religion in public schools?

Absolutely. Religion is an important part of our world and its history, and students need to learn about it, today more than ever. That's why it's required by state standards.

Can excerpts from religious scriptures be used to teach about religion in public schools?

Scriptures can help illustrate key aspects of religions and can also be studied as literature, but passages must be chosen carefully, and teachers must provide proper context. For example, California's 6th grade standards say that "through selections from Biblical literature, such as the Sermon on the Mount, ...students will learn about those teachings of Jesus that advocate compassion, justice, and love for others."

*Then why isn't it OK to use **The Bronze Bow** in class?*

By law, schools must teach facts about religion, without preaching sectarian doctrine or denigrating any faith. *The Bronze Bow* fails both tests. The author's stated goal for the book was to convince young people to follow Jesus, and she designed it entirely to drive toward the final scene, in which the hero experiences an ecstatic religious conversion and sees his sister brought back from death. At the same time, the book contains derogatory depictions of Judaism that are unacceptable in public schools, many of them adopted from gospel passages which would themselves never be used in a classroom, such as the episode where Jewish leaders plot to kill Jesus. Clergy from the Marin Interfaith Council have called this stealth proselytizing "offensive" and "insidious".

Can't the teachers just "teach around" these issues?

No. The regulations are clear. Materials can't preach sectarian doctrine or denigrate other faiths, no matter what else happens in the classroom. When material similar to that in *The Bronze Bow* was submitted in a textbook for state approval, the publisher was required to remove it. But *The Bronze Bow* can't (and shouldn't) be edited.

*Hasn't **The Bronze Bow** been approved for use by the state?*

No. It was on a state list of books recommended by a group of librarians and teachers, but those lists are only meant as suggestions, and other librarians and teachers don't like the book at all. The only books that are approved by the state are textbooks. Some people still seem to be confused about this, but don't let it be used as a smokescreen.

Didn't the book win the Newbery medal?

Yes, but it's unlikely that any author today would tell the American Library Association that their book was meant to convince young people to "offer all [their] loyalty" to Jesus. And some older Newbery winners have even worse problems, such as blatant racism.

Why is this book being used in a unit on ancient Rome, anyway?

The state of California has 11 curriculum standards concerning ancient Rome, 2/3 in the 6th grade and 1/3 in the 7th grade. Eight are about Rome's territories, government and law, arts, and science and technology, and *The Bronze Bow* contains virtually nothing about these. The other three concern Jewish life in the Roman Empire and the origins, teachings, and spread of Christianity. *The Bronze Bow* deals with the origins and teachings of Christianity but paints a false and damaging picture of Jews and Judaism.

Are there other young adult novels that could be used for the Rome unit?

We haven't been able to find any that deal with the origins, teachings, and spread of Christianity in an unbiased way, but there are excellent books that touch on many of the eight non-religious Rome curriculum standards. We've suggested that the school consider *Outcast*, one of several excellent historical novels by Rosemary Sutcliff. But strictly speaking, it's not even necessary to use a novel to teach about the Roman period - that's up to the teachers. The textbooks cover all the standards.

If the school district stops using the book, isn't that "book banning"?

No, it's not. The legislature sets the rules in the Education Code. School districts decide all the time not to approve or to stop using books. Just because parents brought this up doesn't suddenly make it "book banning".

Why haven't these issues been raised before?

When the book was written in 1961, they didn't draw much notice. It wasn't until two years later that the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark decision on school prayer. But a lot has changed in 45 years. In 1996, two years before San Rafael adopted *The Bronze Bow*, a southern California school district removed it from their curriculum because of its religious bias. Recently, teachers in another Marin district decided to stop using the book on their own, after seeing the information on our websites.

Parents in San Rafael have complained about this book in the past. If the district has never considered these issues before, it's critical to raise them now. **At Davidson, so far, 22 families whose kids will be in 7th grade advanced Core next year, almost a third of the total, will be exercising their right to "opt out" of reading the book.**