

What's Wrong With This Book

This is a very complicated issue and I realize that many people get lost in all the long articles on this website, so I hope to make this version as clear and simple a summary of our position as I can. For more detail and support go to other sources on our websites.

What we want:

While the *Bronze Bow* is a very well written tale and has been honored for that, it's badly compromised by outdated, biased religious attitudes and historical inaccuracy. It's promotion of one religion and derogatory depiction of another make it completely inappropriate for public schools. We are asking that it no longer be approved as instructional material in the classroom, though it can remain available in school libraries.

Synopsis:

The *Bronze Bow* (1961) is the story of Daniel, a Jewish boy in 1st century Judea whose father was murdered by the Romans. Obsessed with anger and revenge, he first joins a violent band of radicals, then encounters Jesus and his disciples. Daniel and his friends are deeply affected by Jesus who is extremely charismatic and hope he will lead a revolt against the Romans. Eventually Daniel has to choose between a life of anger and violence or the path of love and compassion that Jesus is preaching. In the end he makes a dramatic decision to accept Jesus and with that all his personal conflicts are suddenly resolved and his dying sister is miraculously brought back from death. Throughout the book nearly all the depictions of Jewish belief and clergy are negative (see below) and implicitly compared to the teachings of Jesus.

It conflicts with State guidelines:

"The *Bronze Bow*" conflicts with official State of California Criteria, and virtually every other written standards for evaluating instructional materials in public schools which mandate that they:

1. must be religiously neutral and teach facts about religion rather than the doctrine of any religion.
2. may not promote one religion over another.
3. may not denigrate any religion.

Furthermore it conflicts with 2006 State instructions to textbook publishers to specifically remove :

4. "references to any Jewish role in the crucifixion of Jesus".
5. depictions of Judaism that describe it as a religion of "law" and Christianity as one of "compassion" and "love"
6. Though not specifically mandated by law, we expect that historical novels used in our schools will be roughly historically accurate. In its depiction of Judaism, this book utterly fails that test.

"The *Bronze Bow*" also may well violate provisions of the State Constitution by indirectly teaching a sectarian doctrine (see the website).

Support:

Our arguments are supported by locally prominent mainstream Christian and Jewish clergy, as well as Robert Platzner - professor of religious history at CSU Sacramento, and Charles Haynes - one of the

nations foremost experts in the field of religion and public policy.

Mr. Haynes edited the principal reference guide to religion in the schools (Appendix "C") in the the History-Social Science Framework" adopted in 2000 by the California Board of Education. Mr. Platzner was a member of the "Content Review Panel" for updating that same framework.

Those supporting this book have not presented a single expert opinion in defense of the book and have only responded in a general way to the arguments on these websites. The San Rafael CAC in rejecting our request in November did not respond to any of the 6 points above.

We do know that it was removed from classroom use in both Indianapolis (2003) and the Placentia-Yorba Linda school district in Orange County in 1996.

Points to keep in mind before reading the critique below:

- None of the teachers at Davdison displayed any religious bias in teaching this book. We are concerned instead that the obvious religious elements of the story were ignored (at least in our children's classes.)
- The book is not anti-semitic, Jews are not demeaned as people or as a race at all, it is only the religion and clergy that are denigrated, and the author probably assumed it was accurate at the time.
- These issues may not seem obvious at first to the reader, particularly if they do not know much about the historical and religious background of the period or they were raised with a Christian understanding of events from this period. That's why it has flown under the radar for so long.
- We strongly endorse teaching about religion in the schools, but feel that materials should be factual, unbiased and historically accurate.
- Our position is based on mainstream modern religious scholarship that is commonly available on the web or in local libraries and bookstores. The book's view of Judaism is based only on the Gospels and teaching derived from them. We don't wish to quarrel with anyone's religious beliefs but this book plants itself firmly in the middle of perhaps the most divisive controversy in religious history.

Specific Complaints:

(For more examples go to "Selected Passages" on this web site)

1. RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY:

In her Newbery Award acceptance speech the author proudly explains that this book was written for the express purpose of helping "young people to meet Jesus" and to portray Jesus as "a hero to whom a boy in any age would gladly offer all his loyalty". She explains how the book was entirely structured around the final scene in which the protagonist comes to accept Jesus and his sister miraculously brought back from death. The scenes involving Jesus are taken directly from incidents in the Gospels and his presence dominates the novel with overwhelming charisma and miraculous healing powers that can only seem divinely inspired.

From the climax:

"Against the sunlight stood Jesus in his white robe...He saw only that luminous figure. Jesus had come! He struggled to believe. Jesus had come to his house! He wanted to cry out to him, to go down on his knees...

He knew that he would give everything in his life to follow Jesus...

... To know Jesus would be enough.

Almost with the thought the terrible weight was gone. In its place a strength and sureness, a peace he had never imagined, flowed around him and into his mind and heart."

This is not teaching about religion, but promoting a specific religion. The author was very clear about her intentions.

2. PROMOTING ONE RELIGION OVER ANOTHER and DENIGRATING A RELIGION

Throughout the book Jewish clergy, practices and beliefs are presented in a distorted, inaccurate, negative manner that is compared unfavorably to the teachings of Jesus.

- One consistent theme is that Judaism is alienated from and doesn't care about the poor. Its rituals are onerous to the poor and its clergy are wealthy and look down on the poor as unclean. Jesus by comparison is close to the poor and his teachings preach equality.

- A similar theme mistakenly equates Jewish teaching with "Law" rather than "Love" (associated with Jesus).

"Mark my words boy. Israel has one great strength... It is the Law... It is to the Law that our loyalty must be devoted."

"But the Law was for the wealthy, for the scholars, not for the poor."

"How can he call those people children of God?" [referring to the poor] ... "They have never heard of the Law. They are unclean from the moment they are born."

"Curse their finicky rules [referring to rituals before dinner]. Had they never felt the knowing of an empty stomach?"

"Jesus has made me see that we don't need to wait for God to care for us. He does that now." [the words of a Rabbi's daughter]

"He saw four elders of the Pharisees, the phylacteries bound to their proud foreheads, walking with great care that their tasseled robes did not brush the passers-by, lest the merest touch might make them unclean."

"[The rabbi] gazed with distaste at Daniel's unlawful garment [it was dirty and poor]. A camel would be as welcome Daniel thought. The man will have to purify his whole house when I leave!"

4. The most disturbing moment in "The Bronze Bow" comes when the children decide they need to warn Jesus that the Rabbi's want to kill him. This idea, though commonly accepted by many people, is both widely discredited by modern scholars and the origin of all subsequent anti-Semitism. Thousands have died as a direct result of this charge. It is an extremely sensitive issue for Jews and has absolutely no business in a public school.

"I mean the elders of the synagogue. The rabbis and the scribes, they can't understand him. They're furious at the things he says and does. He is too free with the Law. ...Some even say he is in league with the devil. [historically, there was no Jewish concept of "the devil"]... Some of them hate him so much - I think they would kill him if they could..."

(While its widely accepted that the central priests in Jerusalem probably were involved in turning Jesus over to the Romans (after a public disturbance at the Temple on Passover), this book goes way beyond that into implying a deep and extremely angry religious dispute between Jewish clergy and Jesus that many scholars consider highly unlikely.)

5. There is not a single Jewish adult who has anything positive to offer in this book other than those who follow Jesus.

6. Oddly, at Davidson, this is not being used as a novel to parallel the study of Christianity, (that would at least make sense), but to parallel the study of Ancient Rome. However there is very little about Rome in the book.

What's wrong with making the book "optional" and developing curriculum to address the problems

Making this book "optional" as a compromise does not address the fact that it violates State standards. It could divide the class into reading groups along religious lines and repeat this divisive controversy every year. Imagine a letter going home asking parents to choose between the pro-Jesus, anti-Jewish book or another.

Some have suggested that these issues could be addressed in special curriculum designed for this book. This is an ill-considered idea because:

a) Any serious discussion of these issues will have to question whether the Gospels are historically accurate and why many scholars find a consistent bias against Judaism in them. This would put Christianity on the defensive and just doesn't belong in the 7th grade.

b) The historical and religious questions are far too complex for 7th graders and probably too complex for most teachers. Developing curriculum for it would be a daunting task requiring experts and making judgements on highly controversial subjects.

c) Putting Judaism on the defensive with special curriculum or speakers is inappropriate.

d) It shouldn't be necessary to develop special curriculum and or speakers simply to discuss a book that has no overwhelming value as a literary or historical work. This is not Huckleberry Finn or Shakespeare.

e) If you feel the book needs special curriculum then you must agree that it isn't neutral and that it denigrates Judaism. That means it violates State guidelines and should be dropped.