

### Article of the Week (AoW) Directions

1. Mark your confusion – either highlighting or underlining.
2. Mark up the text. Annotate the article with comments, questions, inferences, etc. You can use a variety of sentences, phrases, and symbols to show your thinking.
3. Write a developed paragraph response to one of the prompts below.

## Highland Park ISD suspends seven books after parents protest their content

Source: Melissa Repko/Dallas News/September 21, 2014

Highland Park High School students were told to put down their books last week.

*The Art of Racing in the Rain* — the book they were reading in a 10th-grade English class — was suspended from the school district’s approved book list. The novel about a race car driver grieving the loss of his wife includes a sex scene that made some parents uncomfortable.

It was among seven books suspended last week after parents challenged their content because of sex scenes and references to rape, abuse and abortion. In emails and at meetings, parents said high school students should not be exposed to some of the hardships and controversies of adulthood.

For decades, school districts and teachers have grappled over literary choices for teens. The debate can be even fiercer over young adult books that describe sex or violence in contemporary language, said Carol Wickstrom, a former English teacher and an education professor at University of North Texas.

“If we look at Shakespeare, we can find those issues in those texts,” she said. “There are allusions, or we don’t always understand the language used because it’s language from another era.”

In Highland Park, more than 100 people packed a school board meeting this month. Parents and grandparents brought books flagged with sticky notes. They read excerpts of sex scenes, references to homosexuality, a description of a girl’s abduction and a passage that criticized capitalism. They sent hundreds of emails to district officials.

Superintendent Dawson Orr and high school principal Walter Kelly informed parents last Monday that the seven books will be reviewed by committees of parents, teachers and students. Orr said the process may take several months.

Wickstrom said school districts and teachers walk a tightrope: They must respect the choice of parents who request other reading materials and protect other students’ rights to read them.

“It isn’t easy,” she said. “You have the parents who don’t want their child reading X-Y-Z and you have the parents saying ‘That’s wonderful. I didn’t want to have that hard conversation.’ So teachers are put into difficult situations, and they have to make difficult decisions.”

In high school especially, she said, the English class curriculum goes beyond teaching literary elements.

“Everything that happens in the classroom should be directed to students learning how to live an effective life, a life that has meaning, a life that gives back to the country or community,” she said. “It’s about developing citizens for our world. You have to be able to think on many levels.”

### **Author responds**

The seven suspended books are *The Art of Racing in the Rain*; *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*; *Siddhartha*; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; *An Abundance of Katherines*; *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*; and *Song of Solomon*.

“I made the decision — given the volume and the tenor and just the continual escalation of this issue — that we would pause, take the time to go ahead and create the reconsideration committees and do the work,” Orr said.

*The Glass Castle* is written by Jeannette Walls, who is scheduled to be keynote speaker at the district’s annual literary festival in February. Walls said she was heartbroken to learn that her book was on the list. Her memoir is about growing up in poverty with a father who spent his money on alcohol and a mother who became homeless.

“My book has ugly elements to it, but it’s about hope and resilience, and I don’t know why that wouldn’t be an important message,” she said. “Sometimes you have to walk through the muck to get to the message.”

Walls said teenage readers have told her the book gave them courage to overcome their own troubled childhood or seek help.

“A lot of teachers told me someone reported an abusive relative after reading it in my book. How valuable is that?” she said. “People tell me about their drug-addicted parents. There are so many complicated situations out there. And we can begin to give kids the tools they need to deal with it, if only to say, ‘You are not alone.’”

But she said she respects and admires the Highland Park parents who are trying to protect their children. “What I worry is that in order to protect them, we may be taking away the tools they need to protect themselves later on,” Walls said.

Some of the parents who object to the books say they also monitor what their children see in movies, on TV or online — and so do parents who support use of the books.

Tavia Hunt, a parent who raised objections, said she doesn’t want her sophomore daughter or any students to feel uncomfortable in English class because of graphic sex scenes. She said the books should be allowed in the library, but not required in English class.

“This is not about banning books. No one is advocating that,” Hunt said. “We want the kids to have access to the books in the library. The problem is having obscene literature mandatory in the classroom and for discussion.”

Hunt said parents should also get a clear warning about mature content so they can make informed decisions for their children. In some cases, students can choose from a list of options for classroom reading.

Natalie Davis said her daughter was more distressed about not being allowed to continue studying *The Art of Racing in the Rain* than about the book's short sex scene.

Davis defends using the books and feels the classroom is the appropriate place for teens to explore controversial issues. "I am very comfortable with my children discussing tough topics in a moderated discussion with a teacher I respect," she said.

### **Changing standards?**

Thad Smith, a parent and Highland Park graduate, said at a school board meeting that he was "frightened by the changes to recommended reading that have happened since I graduated." Smith said his company's email filter prevented him from sending an excerpt from one of the books.

Aimee Simms, another parent, urged the English Department to use classics rather than young adult books that "dumb down" literature. She said classics can address complex topics, such as poverty, with fewer sexual references and curse words.

One of suspended books — *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, written by Pulitzer Prize winner David K. Shipler — is about Americans in low-skilled jobs who struggle because of economic and personal obstacles. Some parents objected to the nonfiction book because it has a passage about a woman who was sexually abused as a child and later had an abortion.

High school English teacher Darcy Young cautioned board members that passages from the books had been taken out of context. She said the district's educational mission compels teachers to introduce challenging and sometimes uncomfortable topics to teach critical thinking.

"Our motto is to prepare the child for the path, not prepare the path for the child," she said.

More than 200 books are on the high school's approved book list. Each is reviewed by a committee of teachers and parents. Teachers chose books from the list for their curriculum. For certain books, they ask parents to sign permission slips because of mature content. They also let students choose a book from several options for class assignments.

If parents object to a book, they can request another option for their child. If they think it should be removed from the list, they can formally challenge the book with a one-page form.

Over the summer, Denise Beutel, the district's director of assessment and English Language Arts, audited the approved book list and reviewed rationales for their selection. She removed 18 books from the list because there was no documentation of their review. One book, *Nineteen Minutes* by Jodi Picoult, was removed by administrative action.

The updated book list is on the English Department's website.

Beutel said the department sometimes struggles to find parents to participate in the selection committee.

"I don't think that we are going to find ourselves in that position anymore," she said.

**Respond to one of the following prompts. Use the back or a separate sheet of paper.**

1. Who should decide what students should read – teacher, parents, or students? Why?
2. Do you think books should be banned from classrooms because of content? Explain.
3. Choose a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph from the article and respond to it.