The Last Word

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Defend the Marketplace of Ideas

During the War of 1812, British forces burned the Capitol building and the 3,000 books in the library. When Thomas Jefferson read of this travesty in the newspapers he offered to sell his entire library to rebuild the Library of Congress — 6707 books.

According to the *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*, “Jefferson’s offer was met by warm support from many in the House and Senate; still, the bill introduced to authorize the purchase of Jefferson’s library faced congressional opposition, particularly from the Federalists, such as Cyrus King, who argued that Jefferson’s books would help disseminate his “infidel philosophy” and were “good, bad, and indifferent ... in languages which many can not read, and most ought not.”

On May 8, 1815, the last wagonload of books and their shelves left Monticello for D.C. Jefferson wrote to John Adams on June 10, 1815, he would miss his collection, but as he aged he realized, “I cannot live without books, but fewer will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object.”

Articles and activities in this guide present different perspectives on the removal and banning of books from school curriculum and libraries and from public libraries. The background on Jefferson’s rebuilding of the Library of Congress collection is a reminder of the existence of conflicting points of view about particular books, but there is no question of the need for a democracy to read, to know and to debate different perspectives.

Also included are reflections on audiobooks and the beginning of film in Paris. In “An L.A. museum pays homage to film’s birthplace (hint: It isn’t L.A.)” we have an example of film critic Ann Hornaday’s skill as a reviewer and respecter of this art.

We are reminded of the importance of the marketplace of ideas to a democracy, in its diversity of expression and exchange of ideas with respect.
The furor over ‘inappropriate’ books in schools is frightening. But there’s a thrilling subtext.

Part of me is secretly pleased when I read about recent attempts to banish books. You might have heard the stories. The Oklahoma legislature has just taken up a bill that declares schools must rid themselves of any book having to do with sex, under penalty of fines and firings. In Texas, the governor wants schools investigated for providing obscene materials to minors. South Carolina’s governor has asked the superintendent of education to remove “sexually explicit materials” from schools and also to explain how they came to be there.

It’s not just sex, though; it’s anything “inappropriate,” which usually means something that addresses gender, racism or sexuality, but also might mean something with mild profanity and a naked cartoon mouse.

At a school board meeting in McMinn County, Tenn., the offending book under discussion was “Maus,” Art Spiegelman’s graphic memoir about the Holocaust. Instructional supervisor Melasawn Knight pointed out that the book’s “inappropriate” language was actually

Originally Published February 14, 2022
appropriate: “People did hang from trees, people did commit suicide and people were killed, over 6 million were murdered. I think the author is … trying to portray that the best he can with the language that he chooses” to help readers “relate to the horrors of it.” The vote to remove “Maus” from the eighth-grade curriculum was unanimous.

This book-banishing fervor is frightening. But for me, it has a thrilling subtext: Books are still deeply powerful things.

Here we are in 2022, when most children carry Internet-delivery devices in their pockets, debating the potential danger of books.

One could argue politicians are just pathetically behind the times, trying to banish physical books (which, after all, can be removed from schools) even though today’s children are fully absorbed in the virtual world, as ungraspable and inescapable as the atmosphere.

But the sheer volume of new books on challenging and personally urgent topics argues otherwise. This supply wouldn’t exist without demand.

And oh, what a supply!

I read the lists of books under attack — Texas State Rep. Matt Krause’s 850-item list from his “inquiry” on school district content or the ones on the No Left Turn in Education website — and I am giddy at the options.

Look at all these books about racism! From “A is for Activist” to “What Does It Mean to Be White?” Books about gender, from “Ana on the Edge” to “Zenobia July.” If you’re a gay teenager in search of signs that you are not alone, you could read “All Boys Aren’t Blue” or “You Should See Me in a Crown” and dozens of books in between.

Books about sex? Too many to count. But “Doing It: Let’s Talk About Sex” would have been super useful when I was a child and all I had was “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” and my parents’ poorly hidden copy of “The Joy of Sex.”

So much has changed. The power of books has not.

Books are how I learned about sex (sort of) before having sex, how I learned about suicide, addiction, mental illness, war, child neglect. “Maus” is how I learned about the Holocaust in a way that no mere facts and figures could convey. What I craved in books was what no one would talk to me about in life. What I craved was no less than adulthood itself, the feeling that there was nothing I was not permitted to know.

And, yes, I also craved a satisfying resolution to Elizabeth Bennet’s romantic adventures. Offering a portal to uncomfortable truths isn’t the only thing books do well. But they do it better than anything else.

Unlike movies and TV and TikTok, books move at your pace. Unlike parents, books never lose their nerve when they set out to talk about something upsetting or personal; they aren’t embarrassed by your embarrassment. You can read books alone — or next to people who have no idea what you’re reading. You can reread a passage you don’t understand and close a book that upsets you.

Since the written word is a collaboration between writer and reader, books never show you what you cannot imagine. By definition, if you don’t understand a word, it cannot touch you. It waits for you to be ready. The child who reads “damn” and knows what it means has heard it before. The child who reads “damn” and doesn’t is … just fine.

The people who want to remove books from schools are trying to deny their children — and other people’s children — one of the safest, most reliable ways to grow up.

The books are still out there, though. Maybe teens in Tulsa will end up passing around “All Boys Aren’t Blue” the way we used to pass around “Forever.” I checked: The Tulsa public library has two copies, but if you want one you’ll have to place a hold. “All copies in use,” it says. Some other children are reading them right now.

Kate Cohen, a Washington Post contributing columnist, is a writer from Albany, N.Y. Her book “We of Little Faith” is forthcoming from Godine in 2023. Cohen grew up in Virginia and has a bachelor’s degree in comparative literature from Dartmouth College. Her essays — whether print, online, radio or live — seek to distill observations of family, politics and culture into moments of clarity and insight. She also writes nonfiction documentary scripts, including the Emmy Award-winning “Rising: Rebuilding Ground Zero” and the Gold Panda award-winning “How China Works.”
Book bans are canaries in coal mines

BY AZAR NAFISI

"First they burn books, then they kill people!"

That line often came to mind when I was living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, every time the regime closed a bookstore or a publishing house, every time it censored, banned, jailed or even killed authors. It never occurred to me that one day I would repeat the same sentiment in a democracy, in my new home, the United States of America.

I’m aware that the United States is not Iran. Its government is not an Islamist regime, and it is not a totalitarian state. But totalitarian tendencies are unquestionably on the rise within segments of this country. We see this in the attempts to curtail women’s rights, in the rise in racism and antisemitism, and in the assault on ideas and imagination best exemplified in the banning of books.

Books are a threat to those who seek to rule through absolutism. Especially dangerous to the totalitarian mind-set are great works of fiction — such as Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” and Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale,” both perennially challenged — because fiction is democratic in structure. Written well, it cannot be reduced to a preconceived message or ideology.

Good authors give their fictional characters, even villains, their own voices. (Conversely, a bad author, like a dictator, imposes his own voice upon those of his characters, stifling them.) In this way, fiction becomes a space where readers can encounter people they might otherwise never meet, create a dialogue with them, and become curious and find empathy with those who are different.

While teaching in Iran, I became vividly aware of how important this is.

Young people such as my students, when deprived of contact with the world, connected to it through its golden ambassadors: art, music and literature.

One student in particular keeps reappearing in my writing and talks. Her name was Razieh. She was a small, thin girl with huge, dark eyes, and we met at the university where I was her instructor. Her favorite author was Henry James. Once, when talking about him, she said with a smile, “I think I am in love!” She adored Catherine Sloper and Daisy Miller, two very different Jamesian protagonists, both rebels in their own ways.

When I left that university, I lost touch with Razieh. Years later, another former student told me about being arrested in the 1980s, during the protests against the Cultural Revolution. While in jail, she had met Razieh. They reminisced about my classes and spent many hours talking about F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” and James’s “Washington Square.”

“We had fun,” she said. “Fun?” I wondered. There was a pause in our conversation. “You know,” she finally said, “Razieh was executed.”

I didn’t know. Never when I was her teacher could I have imagined that Razieh would someday be in jail, thinking and talking about Henry James, awaiting her execution. But perhaps jail was the kind of place to evoke James. He could not save Razieh from death. But he could remind her of life’s beauties.

It is alarming to think that American communities in 2022 are actively seeking to deprive people of the reading experiences for which my students in Iran paid such a heavy price. For I can tell you: Book bans are canaries in coal mines — indicators of the direction in which a society is moving.

In recent years, we have seen how truth is replaced by lies, and how dangerous a cultivated ignorance can be, especially when it is embraced by our
political leaders and our loudest media commentators, those with the largest bullhorns. Book-banning is a form of silencing, and it is the next step along a continuum — one that I worry even in the United States presages a further slide toward totalitarianism.

It is essential that communities unite to resist this trend. I have been grappling with how this might be accomplished, especially in places where bans are already underway. And what I keep coming back to is: We cannot be indifferent. We must read, and share, and press into the hands of students any books we believe it is young people’s right to encounter.

I imagine subversive book groups connecting via the Internet and in schools, libraries and bookstores where people can gather to read and debate. In some states, this is already occurring: From librarians and Black parents in Texas, to bookstore owners in Tennessee, to middle and high school students in Pennsylvania, to suburban moms nationwide, Americans are resisting. They are doing this because they know precisely what is at stake.

As Ray Bradbury once said: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

The inspiration for the popular children’s picture book *Everywhere Babies* came to author Susan Meyers more than 25 years ago, after the birth of her first grandchild. It was around Christmas, she recalls, and she kept seeing Nativity scenes everywhere — baby Jesus embraced by his doting mother, surrounded by kindly visitors. Meyers, deeply smitten with her 5-month-old grandson, was struck by the everyday, extraordinary miracle of babies in their earliest months of life, how their development touches the lives of everyone around them. So she decided to write about it.

Since its publication in 2001, *Everywhere Babies* — a whimsical, lyrical ode to infancy, illustrated by Caldecott Medal-winning illustrator Marla Frazee — has become a staple of family bookshelves, a common recommendation in new parent groups, and a celebrated title on Best Books lists.

But for the first time in its history, *Everywhere Babies* was featured this week on an entirely different kind of list: The book was among dozens of works recently targeted by an advocacy group called the Florida Citizens Alliance, which cited the picture book in a report identifying “extremely age-inappropriate and pornographic books … in the K-12 classroom.” In a document titled the “2021 Porn Report,” the group said the list of 58 books was sent to every school district in Florida. In Walton County, Fla., school staff searched media centers throughout the district and found 24 titles from the list, all of which were removed “for the purposes of reviewing and re-evaluating age-appropriateness and content,” according to a statement issued late Friday by Walton County School...
Superintendent Russell Hughes.
Hughes did not respond to multiple requests for comment from The Washington Post before publication. A spokesperson for the Florida Department of Education referred questions to Walton County, noting that individual school districts are responsible for making these decisions, and did not respond to follow-up questions.

The decision made Walton County the latest jurisdiction to join a growing number of communities across the country that have removed books that address subjects such as race, LGBTQ people, sex or other topics deemed offensive by the books’ critics. A slew of titles — many of them classic and award-winning works of children’s and young adult literature — have been stripped from shelves in school buildings and public libraries in states including Texas, Montana, Louisiana and Florida.

Meyers and Frazee each spoke to me about their book, the experience of seeing it banned from public school libraries for the first time, and what they hope parents might take away from what’s happening in Walton County and beyond. Their responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What message did you want “Everywhere Babies” to convey to little kids and the parents who would read it to them?

SUSAN MEYERS: The opening line “Every day, everywhere, babies are born” is important to me because it’s the most common thing in the world, but it’s also the most miraculous. So I really just wanted to write about these babies and how they affect everybody around them. It always struck me that babies have to make in terms of how narrow or broad I wanted to go. My first sense of the manuscript was that I was going to set it around a park, and I was imagining a park in New York City — Gramercy Park or something — and then follow a few families that lived around this small park. But I realized that I was narrowing it too much, that there are so many more kinds of families, and I wanted to show as many kinds of families and kids as I could. I think my basic feeling has always been that I want a child who is reading a book of mine to feel at home there, and to relate to it, and feel like it belongs to them. That’s my role as an illustrator.

Q: When did you learn about this book being targeted in public school libraries in Walton County? Tell me about your immediate reaction to that news.

SM: I hadn’t heard about this until I checked my email this morning and saw your message. And I thought, “Oh, my God, I’m banned! Wow!” I mean, I’ve been following all this book-banning stuff and wondering what is wrong with these people. And they’re only bringing more attention to these books — there are plenty of people who will then seek them out and want to read them. So I wasn’t really upset. There are various LGBTQ children’s book sites that have included our book in their lists, so I suspect that might be how [the school officials in Florida] found it.

MF: I saw it Wednesday night on Twitter. I wasn’t surprised, given what is going on right now. It’s abhorrent to me, but it’s not surprising. To be honest, I don’t know that I’ve ever been on a list with Toni Morrison before, or Judy Blume — I mean the people on this list, I’m thrilled to be on any list with these people!

When I first saw the news, I grabbed a copy of the book and flipped through it in search of what might have led to it being included on this list. All I noticed were a few illustrations that might be depicting same-sex couples, which are not specifically identified in the text. What is your take on what prompted this? Because the story itself doesn’t delve into LGBTQ issues — all it does is visually present the possibility of different kinds of people and families existing in the world.

SM: Yes, and it’s so odd — I think there’s one illustration they don’t like, where it’s two men. But how do they see this, that any time a man puts his arm on another man’s shoulder, it means they’re gay? It doesn’t seem obvious to me. I don’t know who they are! It seems odd to me that this is banned, because it’s a preschool book, a family book. You read it to kids when they’re 2. But maybe they think we’re trying to indoctrinate kids from the cradle on. I don’t know. I mean, you can’t figure out this mind-set.

MF: If you were a child being raised by two moms, you might look at that image of two women together in one way. If you were a kid with a mom whose best friend or sister or aunt was always around, you might look at it a different way. The two men on the street — that could be seen in a variety of ways by a variety of cultures. Honestly, I’m not that concerned with
what adults think about the pictures in the books, I’m concerned about what the children think. I want them to follow the story and understand what the picture is saying. Regardless of what the book is, or what kind of picture story is being told, I often sort of feel like adults miss the mark in a big way. I don’t think adults read pictures all that expertly, but I think kids do. I trust a child’s perception way more.

Q: Is this the first controversy you’ve had surrounding this book?

MF: *Everywhere Babies* has been targeted a few times over the years, but never something like this. It was predominantly right after it came out, and it was maybe a few Amazon reviews, customer reviews. Or maybe I would be in a bookstore in a particular town, and they would tell me they didn’t want it on their shelves, that kind of thing. It was more localized. And always disappointing, of course. I feel pretty strongly that the illustrations can be read in a variety of ways.

SM: There were a few negative Amazon reviews early on, and once I had a website finally, I would occasionally get messages with somebody saying, “your filthy mind,” or something like that. To which I would often respond “you apparently think about sex a good deal more than I do.”

Q: What do you hear most often from parents and educators?

SM: *Everywhere Babies* has been overwhelmingly embraced. It’s been celebrated. I’ve talked to women who run childbirth preparation classes, and some of them give out a copy of that book to every new mother in the class. And it’s been selling well since 2001. There have been many different editions. The 25th anniversary is coming up.

MF: The predominant voices that I’ve heard from, through all these decades — so many emails and letters and all kinds of responses — are so grateful that their child has seen their family in a book, so grateful that nontraditional families are represented in the book. So that is the predominant feeling. The majority of responses have been so positive.

Q: What would you want to say to parents about what’s happening with books like yours and so many others being removed from school libraries and public libraries?

SM: Parents have to open their eyes and see what’s going on around them. If you don’t agree with this take, what these people are doing, you better show up at your local school board meeting. Authoritarian and fascist communities, this is what they always go for, they always burn the books. It actually shows the power of books. If they didn’t have any power, they wouldn’t be burning or banning them. So that’s one thing to remember and celebrate: The power of books.

MF: I watched Mallory McMorrow’s speech the other day, the state legislator in Michigan. I feel like what she said — how either we oppose the rise of this hate or we enable it — that is absolutely the truth. I think that’s exactly where we are. So for parents, I just think what’s important is to stand up for the children who don’t have any voices. Even if you’re not in a county like Walton County, Florida, even if you’re in a county where you don’t think this is going to happen, it very well could happen. I think we all have to be very aware of that possibility and start speaking out. We can’t leave it to marginalized groups to speak out. We all have to speak out.
Ban guns, not books, to save kids from harm

• Originally Published April 25, 2022

As far as we know, neither a new addition to a beloved series on famous Americans titled “Who is Barack Obama?” nor “Muffin Wars,” a book about a kid detective, has harmed any children.

Bullets, however, do measurable harm to kids. And while the pace of gun violence in and around schools is on the rise, one of the most aggressive and effective efforts, led largely by White conservatives, in shaping the American classroom right now is the banning of books. Our nation looks totally insane.

“One of my friends was shot!” a rattled teen told my son Friday afternoon, after a sniper opened fire near a school in Northwest Washington. This was, as measured in the grim arithmetic of our national gun violence epidemic, a minor incident. No one was killed.

Three adults and one child, the classmate of my son’s friend, were injured by bullets a sniper fired from an apartment filled with guns and ammunition across the street from Edmund Burke School.

But the scarring toll that something like this takes does more tangible damage than any book about a kid wondering if he is gay. The books that address sexual orientation, in a nation where same-sex marriage is the law of the land, are among the most targeted in this movement, which tried to link sexual and gender identity to pedophilia.

American schools issued at least 1,310 book bans in the last five months of 2021, including “Who is Barack Obama?” and “Muffin Wars,” according to the Pen America index of school book bans.

During that same period from August to December, roughly 28,170 children were inside a school when bullets were fired, according to The Washington Post database on school shootings.

“The effects of gun violence ripple far beyond the child who was struck by a bullet,” Sarah Burd-Sharps, senior director of research at the advocacy group Everytown for Gun Safety, told WebMD last week. “Children might grieve their friends who are now lost or worry that they will be next.”

She spoke about this as the New England Journal of Medicine declared last week that gun violence is the top killer of kids in our nation. The homicides of children by firearm rose more than 30 percent between 2019 and 2020, according to the journal.

Survival is the issue that should be foremost on the agenda of anyone who says they lobby or legislate on behalf of children.

How many of us felt more normal about puberty after reading Judy Blume? The same goes for kids who can see themselves in books that address viewpoints beyond the predominantly White and male dominance of library shelves.

Instead, parents manipulated by politicians inflaming fears for their own gain are targeting books that address race, ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation.

Children are watching as parents scream at school board meetings and issue death threats against board members and librarians, and as adults call for books featuring stories about people who look or love like them to be burned. In Idaho, there is a proposal before the state legislature to fine and jail librarians who lend books that are deemed “harmful” to kids under 18.

This is not positive role modeling. Surely the shooting of four people at Timberview High School in Texas left lasting psychological trauma on the more than 1,750 other students who were at the school that day.

But never fear! Parents in that state have saved their youth from books more than 700 times. Among the banned books is “A Home for Goddesses and Dogs,” a story about an 8th-grade girl who recently lost her mother.

In Florida, home to one of the deadliest school shootings in American history, a school district recently silenced “Everywhere Babies,” a charming book celebrating infancy.

Some of the most impactful book bans happened in the greater Washington region, where Republican businessman Glenn Youngkin harnessed parental fears about literature and rode them all the way to the Virginia governor’s mansion.

“Virginia’s parents have had enough with the government dictating how they should raise their children,” Youngkin wrote earlier this year in an opinion piece in The Washington Post after a victory fueled by an illusion of parental empowerment.

If parents want a say over what their kids read, they need to build relationships with their children that include discussions about what they are reading. Parental involvement is hard work. It is not done by censoring and limiting what everyone has access to.

Youngkin ran a campaign ad using Virginia mom Laura Murphy, who dabbled in book bans a decade ago when “Beloved,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Toni Morrison, gave her high school senior night
If reading about a historically accurate account of the horrors of slavery gave that Virginia boy nightmares, imagine what is going on with the kids who had to curl up under their desks while gunfire shattered windows and people screamed on Van Ness Street last week.

The politicians wrongly focused on culture wars are right about one thing: America does need to wake up, but to the trauma its children are undergoing daily, and not just when journalists show up to document it.

That shooting last week got attention because of where it was. But the numbers show us that shootings in and around schools in less affluent areas are frequent. And children who live with gunfire carry that trauma throughout their lives.

The alarming rise in book bans, allegedly in the name of protecting kids, is misplaced energy that ignores real trauma that is a daily part of life for American kids, whether they are hurt by a bullet, scarred by witnessing gun violence, or hiding in a supply closet with a teacher in a lockdown drill, preparing for something that our nation has allowed to become a regular part of life.

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Censor or Celebrate?

Books. The availability of books. The appropriate time to read a particular book or subject. The role of parents in school curriculum. Books for the youngest children. The power of books and their authors to influence young adult readers. Books to be read — or not.

Many news articles, editorials and commentary pieces have been written on these topics. Read the following four pieces published in The Washington Post and respond to the questions.

“The furor over ‘inappropriate’ books in schools is frightening. But there’s a thrilling subtext.”
by Kate Cohen
1. What is the “subtext”?
2. Cohen writes that books are unlike movies, TV, TikTok and parents. In what ways?
3. According to Cohen, how do books help students to grow up?

“Book bans are canaries in coal mines” by Azar Nafisi
4. Read the headline of the guest commentary.
   a. To what practice does “canaries in coal mines” refer?
   b. Why is this a powerful metaphor?
5. Author Nafisi asks readers to think of books in political terms. In what ways are books:
   a. Threats to totalitarian tendencies?
   b. Connections to others?
   c. Evidence of freedom?
6. What lesson have her former students and her personal experience taught her about reading books?

“‘Everywhere Babies,’ a picture book celebrating infants, on list of banning targets in Florida”
by Caitlin Gibson
7. The author and illustrator of this children’s picture book answer questions.
   a. Why was their book banned?
   b. What was the book’s author’s reaction to being banned?
8. Look closely at the image from the two pages of the book.
   a. What do you see?
   b. What does Caitlin Gibson state she saw?
   c. What does Marla Frazee say was her goal as the illustrator?
9. What do you remember of picture books read to you? Do you still have any of them — or were they library books? Do you agree or disagree with the answers in the concluding question? Explain your answer.

“Ban guns, not books, to save kids from harm” by Petula Dvorak
10. What contrast does Dvorak make in her first two paragraphs?
11. In her columns Dvorak will often relate personal and family experiences. She also uses facts and figures. How effectively has she used these approaches?
Censor or Celebrate | continued

12. In the last five paragraphs Dvorak uses comparison.
   a. What does she compare?
   b. What is her final point in her argument?
   c. Do you find her persuasive? Why or why not?

13. What are three reasons given by those who want to remove certain books from curriculum and/or school and public libraries?
   a.
   b.
   c.

14. Explain your point of view about the books read in your classes, available in your school library or at the public library.

15. Select one of the following activities. Your goal is to communicate one or more ideas about reading books and/or using school and public libraries.
   a. Write a personal essay, poem or play dialogue about being in a library. You might include the quiet, the volume of books, earliest memory of selecting a book to read.
   b. Form small groups. Read Animal Farm by George Orwell. Add a chapter in which the farmer has a point of view about books. What do the animals say and do?
   c. Form small groups. Read the original Winnie-the-Pooh. Write an additional chapter to the book or a scene from a short play in which the characters come upon a pile of books or a bookmobile.
   d. Compose a song. You may be inspired by another song’s tune.
   e. Write a commentary on whether a community needs a public library.
Before I was a novelist, audiobooks taught me how to tell a story

Lizz Huerta didn’t get an MFA, but she did get an education while working on construction sites.

The white tiger had just emerged from the tree of life when a voice shouted at me. “No music in headphones on the job site! Peligro!”

I looked down at the blond foreman from my perch on the ladder, my paintbrush still. He was pointing at his ears and shaking his head back and forth: a physical no, in case I didn’t understand English. I hit pause.

“I’m listening to an audiobook. Are stories allowed?” I enjoyed the familiar clutch of confusion on his face. I was a brown woman in paint-splattered overalls on a construction site. I was used to confusing people.

“Just be careful,” the foreman muttered, walking away. I returned to the tiger.

There was a time I was ashamed of working with my body, not following my friends into higher education and careers that included sitting. My writing friends were learning how to tell stories in classrooms, sitting in discussion circles, deconstructing. They talked about craft, theory, who was dating whom in their cohort. I spent my days with those who constructed: plumbers, electricians, painters and the ironworkers of my father’s business. I learned to tell a story through listening. Audiobooks were the heart of my education.

I spent over 15 years devouring audiobooks across subject and genre. I painted the wrought iron surrounding gated communities while my mind and heart pulsed at the buildup in romance novels. I navigated my ladder around beautiful but thorny bougainvillea while Brené Brown’s kind voice spoke to me of resilience. I wept with Achilles’ beloved companion Patroclus behind an artificial waterfall, pulling the bandanna from my hair to wipe my tears. I was anticipating terror, shadowing Angela Toussaint in “The Good House,” when a client tapped me on the shoulder. I screamed. The client screamed. Paint spilled. When the mess and explanations were over, the client asked me which book had me so rapt, and I joyfully introduced them to Tananarive Due’s work. I painted to battles. I contemplated my prefrontal cortex as I applied cold galvanizing spray to rusted iron. I ate my lunch in my truck with Eduardo Galeano. Story was my constant companion. After work, I would go home and write.

I was learning what good writing sounded like — the cadence, flow and rhythm. I found myself drawn to certain audiobook narrators and the books they read to me. (Oh, Robin Miles, your voice is a miracle.) When writing stories, I spoke my words aloud, listening for the yes in my chest when I hit the right resonance. I became more confident in my writing. I became more confident in my life, appreciating the shape of it, how I could be in the sun daily, audiobooks always playing.

Summers I’d take time off from painting to attend writing workshops. I
enjoyed the atmosphere of most workshops and delighted in meeting other writers. And I began to notice discontent among a lot of the folks I met. Academia sounded like a farcical hellscape to me. I didn’t have to worry about course loads and tenure committees, office hours and the other complications of a life I thought I once missed out on. My brain was never fried after work. It was fresh with ideas, hungry to create. My creative time wasn’t in competition with the work that fed me. My painting never followed me home. I began to see my work as a gift. Who else was able to listen to books all day, in solitude? My work could be physically tiring, but there was a deep satisfaction to it. By late afternoon, a rusted, faded iron door was reborn by my hand. There is beauty in completion.

I carried a notebook with me while I painted. Throughout the day lines would come to me, scenes of tension, moments of love between characters. I’d jot down the ideas and weave them into the book I was writing when I came home. A fantasy. A book about girls who can enter Sacred Dreaming, a different dimension. I listened to books about writing, ignored what didn’t fit and trusted myself. A chance (divined?) encounter at a painting job led to my signing with a literary agent. The book sold. For the first time in 20 years, I was off ladders and writing full time.

And I missed audiobooks. I missed sunshine on my skin. My body rebelled against the stillness of my days, unused to sitting, to silence. I listened. I put my headphones in and pushed play while learning the ways I needed to move so story could come through. A few months ago, my publisher asked me to choose the narrators for the audiobook of my debut novel, “The Lost Dreamer.” I knew what I was listening for and selected narrators whose voices’ resonance gave me the yes in my chest I knew to be right. I loved hearing my words interpreted by Inés del Castillo and Elisa Melendez.

I listened to my audiobook for the first time while in the back seat of my sister’s car, sandwiched between two children’s car seats. When the narrator’s voice filled the car, speaking the words of my story, I burst into tears and was only able to listen for a few minutes before I had my sister turn it off. I was overwhelmed by the beautiful cadence of the voice, and by the shape of my story, not just the one on the page. I thought of the countless hours I’d spent on ladders with audiobooks. I imagined strangers in traffic, on walks, on construction sites, my words in their ears. When I got home, I put on my headphones and sat on my balcony, watching the birds play in the bamboo, grateful to my core, listening and in awe at what had emerged through me.

Lizz Huerta is the author of The Lost Dreamer.
CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

An L.A. museum pays homage to film’s birthplace (hint: It isn’t L.A.)

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ‘City of Cinema’ explores how film emerged in 19th-century Paris

BY ANN HORNADAY, CHIEF FILM CRITIC

• Originally Published May 8, 2022

LOS ANGELES — The sky is midnight blue, the crescent moon an equally vibrant yellow. On a secluded balcony, a lone figure dressed in the black half-mask of a commedia dell’arte Harlequin hides behind a column until a comely woman descends from an upper room, joined moments later by a suitor who serenades her between swigs from a bottle.

What unfolds is a triangular story of conflict, deceit, trickery and seduction every bit as complicated as a modern-day romcom. But this is “Pauvre Pierrot (Poor Peter),” an 1892 film by Émile Reynaud that has earned pride of place — not just as the first animated film ever made but as the first publicly projected moving picture. It’s an honor historically given to the Lumière brothers’ 1895 screening of “Workers Leaving the Lumiére Factory.”

The two-minute “Pauvre Pierrot,” which plays on a reproduction of Reynaud’s signature invention, the Théâtre Optique, makes for a beguiling centerpiece in “City of Cinema: Paris 1850-1907,” a lively and engrossing exhibition on view through July 10 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Organized by LACMA and Musee d’Orsay in Paris (where a slightly different version of the exhibit closed in January), “City of Cinema” illuminates — literally and figuratively — how film began as an extension of 19th-century European ideas and art forms, eventually morphing into the quintessential medium of the 20th century.

Plunging visitors into the spirited street life of Paris, with its poster-covered kiosks, attractive signage and commercial enticements, this modest but keenly focused exhibition aims to locate cinema within an established lexicon of visual spectacles and immersive amusements, including magic shows, circuses, tableaux vivants, department stores and “Expositions Universelles,” Paris’s widely admired world’s fairs. A series of 19 photographs documenting the construction of the Eiffel Tower for the 1889 Exposition exemplifies the “persistence of vision” that will allow human eyes to accept 24 frames per second as continuous motion, just as the dots that make up Georges Seurat’s pointillist painting of the unfinished tower bear an uncanny resemblance to the grain texture of celluloid and, further down the road, digital pixels.

Such are the intuitive connections that curators Leah Lehmbeck, Britt Salvesen and Vanessa R. Schwartz invite viewers to make throughout “City of Cinema,” which draws from painting, sculpture, photography and advertising to create a vivid sensory portrait of the city where cinema was invented — first as disposable...
software to help market the photography and projection hardware they were selling, then as one attraction among many within Paris’s bustling bazaar of diversions. It wasn’t until 1907, with the construction of the first salle de cinema, or single-purpose movie theater, that film came into its own as a discreet art form. “City of Cinema,” which ends that year, is far more interested in how film exemplified and extended a 19th-century Paris culture — rarefied and raffish, enthralled by movement and color and light — that was in a near-constant state of experimentation and ferment.

Compared with the bloated three-hour behemoths that currently pass for movies, “City of Cinema” unspools at a refreshingly concise clip: Composed of 195 objects, it rewards a wide range of museum-going temperaments. Visitors who choose to follow the show’s organizing principle will begin on the streets of Paris, then move into forms of entertainment including the Expositions Universelles of 1889 and 1900, continuing through artists’ and filmmakers’ studios, and finally entering a screening room where they can take in a 25-minute collection of vintage films by the likes of Georges Méliès, Ferdinand Zecca and the Lumières. Others will want to dip in and out of the exhibit as mood dictates.

The dipping approach can result in moments of serendipitous delight. In a gesture worthy of any polite new neighbor, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, located just a few steps away from LACMA, has lent the exhibit optical toys such as phenakistoscopes and zoetropes — protocinematic innovations in the projection and animation of still images. In addition to “Pauvre Pierrot,” Reynaud’s “Autour D’une Cabine (Around the Beach Cabin)” plays on the Théâtre Optique — an animation projection system that Reynaud patented in 1888 — which operates on weekends only. Just around the corner from rarely seen films by pioneer Alice Guy-Blaché, recent visitors huddled around Charles-Marie Bourton’s oil painting “Diorama of the Camposanto” (1894), seemingly as captivated as viewers were more than a century ago. Illuminated from behind by an electric light, the painting predicted both the sofa-size luminism of Thomas Kinkade and the big-screen visual effects that still dazzle audiences today.

Amid these felicities run the contradictions and tensions that have animated film since its inception. Among the questions that “City of Cinema” raises are whether film is properly understood as art or commerce, whether it shapes reality or reflects it, whether it’s best suited to capture the human experience or provide frivolous escape from its most mundane realities. (The correct answer, of course, is all of the above.) Included in the 25-minute compendium of silent short films are reenactments of actual events that audiences accepted as truth years before newsreels or documentaries were invented (fake news: It’s the future!). Méliès’s 1902 classic “Le Voyage dans la Lune (A trip to the Moon),” featuring an all-male team of explorers being launched into space by a bevy of leggy soubrettes, indicates that the male gaze has been a foundational and particularly stubborn fact of cinematic life.

Similarly, in sections of “City of Cinema” devoted to “ethnographic” and travelogue films of the era, the dynamics of representation — who wields the camera, what bodies are erased or objectified or exoticized — look distressingly familiar. And we, the spectators, aren’t left off the hook. One of the curators’ goals for the exhibition is to chronicle how a new audience was formed alongside a burgeoning medium: how 19th-century viewers, primed by the visual cacophony of their times, reflexively accepted movies — as art, entertainment or both — and instinctively assumed their role in the liminal psychic space between passivity and engagement.

“People rubbed their eyes, stared straight ahead, felt embarrassed by the brightness and demanded the return of the dark,” Thomas Mann wrote in “The Magic Mountain” in 1924, “so that they could again watch things, whose time had passed, come to pass again, tricked out with music and transplanted into new time.” Today, of course, spectatorship has taken on new contours, as social media has empowered consumers to become makers and exhibitors in their own right. Some of the most telling moments in “City of Cinema” are fleeting ones, when passersby being photographed on Paris streets catch the camera’s eye and look straight back into it. It will take 100 more years, but a power shift has already begun.

City of Cinema: Paris 1850-1907, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through July 10. lacma.org/art/exhibition/city-cinema-paris-1850-1907
The Film Critic: Ann Hornaday and Film’s Birthplace

The Washington Post film critic Ann Hornaday is known for her love of movies and expressive vocabulary that brings them to life. In her review of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibit “City of Cinema: Paris 1850-1907,” she takes you to the museum’s rooms and to Paris where film was born.

1. Begin with defining vocabulary she uses in this review.

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<th>Bazaar</th>
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2. Hornaday begins with a descriptive lede.
   a. What is being described?
   b. Why is this a particularly appropriate beginning?
   c. How is Hornaday bringing past and present together?

3. “Pauvre Pierrot” holds two distinctions, according to Hornady. They are:
   a.
   b.

4. Since this is about film’s inception as much as a critique of the exhibit, what significant statement does Hornaday make about Reynaud’s film in relation to the Lumière brothers’ film?

5. What did Émile Reynaud invent?
6. The LACMA staff has transformed the museum’s rooms for this exhibit. Describe them using details from Hornaday’s description. How are they a “visual cacophony of their times”?

7. What are the following? What do they reflect of this time period?
   a. Expositions Universelles
   b. Théâtre Optique
   c. Pointillist
   d. Zoetrope
   e. Eiffel Tower

8. Hornaday suggests two ways to view the exhibit. What are they? How do they differ in the experience visitors get?


10. Hornaday writes: “One of the curators’ goals for the exhibition is to chronicle how a new audience was formed alongside a burgeoning medium: how 19th-century viewers, primed by the visual cacophony of their times, reflexively accepted movies — as art, entertainment or both — and instinctively assumed their role in the liminal psychic space between passivity and engagement.”

Rewrite her paragraph to communicate the ideas.