



Pat Conroy
516 Remora Drive
Fripp Island, SC 29920

October 26, 2007

Dear Mr. Conroy,

We recently responded to a local controversy in Charleston, WV over the removal of two of your novels, *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music*, from English classes at Nitro High School. We were delighted to read your letter to the editors of the *Charleston Gazette* on Wednesday and thought you might be interested in reading the attached letter which we sent to the school board.

We are in touch with members of the school board and local press and have been informed that the board will make a final decision on November 5.

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) is an alliance of more than 50 national non-profit organizations, including religious, educational, professional, artistic, labor, civil liberties and civil rights groups, committed to defending freedom of thought, inquiry and expression. The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE) is the bookseller's voice in the fight against censorship and provides education about the importance of free expression to booksellers, other members of the book industry, politicians, the press and the public.

Both organizations frequently work with authors facing censorship controversies of this kind. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joan Bertin".

Joan Bertin
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National Coalition Against Censorship
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Finan".

Chris Finan
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National
Coalition
Against
Censorship



Superintendent Ronald Duerring
Members of the Kanawha County Board of Education
200 Elizabeth St.
Charleston, WV 25311

October 17, 2007

Dear Superintendent Duerring and Members of the Kanawha County Board of Education,

We are troubled by the recent removal of two books, *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy, from the Advanced Placement (AP) English classes at Nitro High School. We understand that that the books were removed following complaints by at least two parents who objected to graphic violence including sexual violence, and that the books are being considered by a review committee before a final decision is made by the Board.

The sexual content and themes in *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* represent essential parts of the novels, consistent with the kind of material that high school students frequently read. Indeed, if students were precluded from reading literature with sexual content, they would be deprived of exposure to vast amounts of important material, including Shakespeare, major religious texts such as the Bible, the works of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Joyce, Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, and Nabokov, and contemporary books such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Beloved*, and many of the texts regularly assigned in high schools throughout the State of West Virginia.

The Prince of Tides and *Beach Music* are indeed concerned with mature, complex themes including suicide, mental illness, and domestic abuse. These are realities that many students themselves may be dealing with in high school. The books also confront significant historical events such as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. Class discussion of literature that addresses violent, complicated and deeply disturbing historical moments gives students a forum for grappling emotionally and intellectually with these events. Indeed, confronting difficult themes in literature like those presented in *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* is part of the

educational mission of the AP program. The school district would potentially put its students at an educational disadvantage in college if it did not introduce them to challenging literature of this sort in high school.

The views of the parents who object to the book are not shared by others, and banning the book violates their First Amendment rights and those of their children. As many courts have observed, public schools have the obligation to "administer school curricula responsive to the overall educational needs of the community and its children." *Leebaert v. Harrington*, 332 F.3d 134, 141 (2d Cir. 2003). No parent has the right "to tell a public school what his or her child will and will not be taught." *Id.* Any other rule would put schools in the untenable position of having "to cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the school's choice of subject matter." *Brown v. Hot, Sexy and Safer Productions, Inc.*, 68 F.3d 525, 534 (1st Cir. 1995), cert. denied, 516 U.S. 1159 (1996). See also *Swanson v. Guthrie Indep. School Dist.*, 135 F.3d 694, 699 (10th Cir. 1998); *Littlefield v. Forney Indep. School*, 268 F.3d 275, 291 (5th Cir. 2001).

The practical effect of acceding to any parent's request to remove materials will be to invite others to demand changes in the curriculum to reflect their beliefs, leaving school officials vulnerable to multiple, possibly conflicting, demands. The normal response to a parent or student who objects to a particular assignment is to offer an alternative assignment. This addresses the concerns of those who seek to limit their exposure to certain words and ideas, without infringing the rights of the many others who are eager for a more inclusive and expansive education.

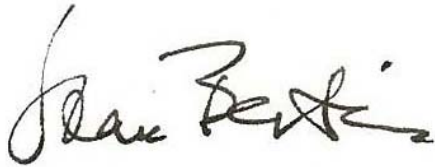
We understand that *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* were pulled from the curriculum prior to the initiation of a formal review process. Most schools require anyone who objects to curricular materials to submit a written request for review identifying specific objections in the context of each book as a whole. A review committee consisting principally of teachers and school administrators then addresses the complaint and makes a recommendation based on the books' educational value and interest to students. If it becomes necessary for the school board to review their decision, its members have the benefit of a thorough and thoughtful review of the book conducted by the professionals most familiar with students' educational needs and interests. Such a process is essential to guard against reliance on subjective judgments and to insure that books are removed only for pedagogically sound and legally sufficient reasons. Books should never be removed from classrooms unless complaint procedures are filed, and materials should never be removed prior to the completion of the review process.

For your information, we are enclosing copies of a booklet on school censorship that was produced by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) in collaboration with the National Education Association. We also suggest you refer to "The Student's Right to Read," a guideline established by the National Council of Teachers of English and available online at: <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/cens/107616.htm>. In addition, NCAC offers an online Guide to the First Amendment in Schools, available at: <http://ncac.org/education/schools/>. We hope these materials will be useful to you and perhaps to teachers and parents involved in this discussion.

We strongly urge you to return *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* to the AP English classes at Nitro High School. Those who object to this book are entitled to their view, but they may not impose it on others. They have no constitutional right to restrict students' access to a book because it conflicts with their personal values. We urge you to stand by the principle that is so essential to individual freedom, democracy, and a good education: the right to read, inquire, question, and think for ourselves.

If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



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CC: Davin White, *The Charleston Gazette*