

The Giver by Lois Lowry is an anti-utopian tale aimed at young readers. The novel explores themes of knowledge, awareness, death, freedom, and totalitarian social control. The protagonist is 12 year-old Jonas who is selected for a special task from his strictly homogeneous community. The society has been engineered so that people do not experience emotions, pain, colours, feel the burden of memory, or disobey the rules of the social order. Jonas' role is to receive and bear the memories of the community, and in the process of "receiving," he gains awareness of the realm of feeling that he had previously been denied. He comes to understand terrible, ultimately unbearable truths about the workings of his world and in the end, escapes to freedom.

The 1994 Newbery Medal winner, *The Giver* remains a staple on many school reading lists and has inspired critical thought in countless readers. In addition to praise, though, the work's suitability for young readers has been challenged. Depictions of infanticide, suicide, and euthanasia are the most common source of objections to the novel. Although the actions are condemned in the narrative, the subjects are judged to be too disturbing for young readers. The irony, however, is that a major theme of the novel is the consequences of over-protection and denial of knowledge.

Lowry has spoken out against censorship in general and against *The Giver* specifically. In the FAQ section of her website (Lowry, 2002), she has eloquently articulated her opinion about the importance of free access to books:

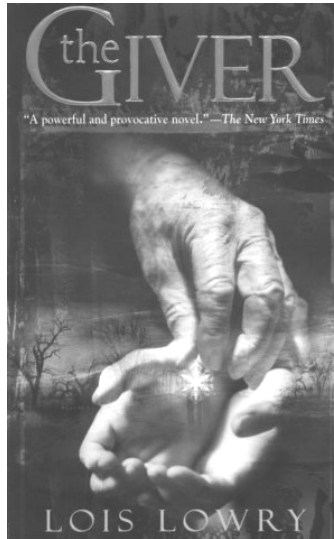
"I think banning books is a very, very dangerous thing. It takes away an important freedom. Any time there is an attempt to ban a book, you should fight it as hard as you can. It's okay for a parent

to say, 'I don't want my child to read this book.' But it is not okay for anyone to try to make that decision for other people. The world portrayed in *THE GIVER* is a world where choice has been taken away. It is a frightening world. Let's work hard to keep it from truly happening."

Other challenges to the work have cited violence and sexual content, which are somewhat inexplicable considering the lack of any such activity in the novel's sanitized world (Associated Press, 2001; Eder, 2005; Lancto, 2003). One prominent challenger to the book mentioned the explicit absence of normal sexual activity, which ostensibly downgrades the importance of family units, missing the fact that the novel portrays this negatively (Ramsey, n.d.). This individual also objected to the feminist philosophy underlying the work. The contradictory nature of the challenges suggests that something more may be behind objections to this novel.

In a March 2005 speech at the University of Richmond, Lowry postulated that the larger reason behind challenges to *The Giver* flowed from a fear of "re-examin[ing] our most deeply held beliefs." Librarians who adhere to professional codes of ethics, such as those articulated by ALA, CLA, and IFLA, have a responsibility to provide access to materials that allow people to experience ideas of all types, whether mundane or dangerous. This is especially important for readers (i.e., young people) who are particularly targeted by restrictions to access. Lowry concludes:

"I feel very strongly that we should question our own beliefs and rethink our values every single day, with open minds and open hearts. We should ask ourselves again and again how we are connected to each other. And we should teach our children to do so, and not to turn away."



References:

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