



The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn

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If you're an **actress** or a **coed** just trying to do a **man-size job**, a **yes-man** who **turns a deaf ear** to some **sob sister**, an **heiress** aboard her **yacht**, or a **bookworm** enjoying a **boy's night out**, Diane Ravitch's internationally acclaimed **The Language Police** has bad news for you: Erase those words from your vocabulary!

Textbook publishers and state education agencies have sought to root out racist, sexist, and elitist language in classroom and library materials. But according to Diane Ravitch, a leading historian of education, what began with the best of intentions has veered toward bizarre extremes. At a time when we celebrate and encourage diversity, young readers are fed bowdlerized texts, devoid of the references that give these works their meaning and vitality. With forceful arguments and sensible solutions for rescuing American education from the pressure groups that have made classrooms bland and uninspiring, **The Language Police** offers a powerful corrective to a cultural scandal.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn Details

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Jerry says

In a G.K. Chesterton book I recently read, *Heretics*, Chesterton quotes a pundit on the topic of the proper role of education:

He says, “Neither in religion nor morality, my friend, lie the hopes of the race, but in education.” This, clearly expressed, means, “We cannot decide what is good, but let us give it to our children.”

Diane Ravitch would recognize that mentality.

Publishers of educational materials do not want controversy (general publishers, of course, love controversy because it sells books in a competitive marketplace). ...And the best recipe for survival in a marketplace dominated by the political decisions of a handful of state boards is to delete whatever might offend anyone.

Ravitch does a great job of cataloguing the lengths to which textbooks have dumbed down the content for fear of any political pushback. What she does not do is much in the way of analysis. For example, while she mentions once that there is a difference between censorship and selection, and that schools must exercise selection because they can't have literally every book, she does not take it the necessary step further, which is, how does a state-run system exercise selection without it becoming censorship?

The book was published in 2003, and uses examples mostly from the late nineties. A good quarter of the book is an appendix with those examples. Most of them seem innocuous on their own, but combined, they create textbooks that don't actually say anything.

The two biggest offenders are California and Texas, because these two large states dominate the markets that publishers write for. She states that buying textbooks statewide “is cartel-like behavior” which is correct but, again, doesn't take the conclusion far enough. It is the *reason* states can have a statewide purchase process that is the cartel-like behavior. That there is a statewide government run education system which parents pay into regardless of where they send their children. This guarantees statewide control, because it guarantees that parents will do the only thing they can afford to do to improve their children's education and/or protect their children: lobby the people that run the statewide, and increasingly federalized, system.

Her list of the evils caused by the current textbook appropriate and approval system is nothing more than the evils we always get when we create a monopolistic system through law: corruption, skewed priorities, and lack of progress. Her solution for a process that was made possible by a faceless bureaucracy is to create a bigger bureaucracy. But that never works. Sunshine or no sunshine, when responsibility is diluted it is easier to go along with the loudest voices.

The obvious solution is to give parents choice, so that when they disagree with what their children are being taught they can run to another school instead of to their local and state legislatures. The only way that government censorship of school texts will go away is when parents have the choice of where their children go, and a choice of educational emphasis. Until that happens, any attempt at reform will only be hijacked by well-meaning people who have no other way to make their desires for the next generation heard.

Even with the lack of analysis, however, she still manages to predict the future:

We do not know how these trends may yet affect the quality of our politics, our civic life, and our ability to communicate with one another somewhere above the level of the lowest common denominator. The consequences can't be good.

Indeed not. Preparing students with no sense of history or perspective could produce a lot of the craziness we're seeing in select college campuses today.

While lacking in any real analysis of the problems, this book is worth reading for the examples she gives from several textbooks and bias review guidelines. It reminds me a lot of Richard Feynman's essay about taking part in the textbook review process in *Surely You're Joking* (which is why I picked it up) but with more details and wider scope.

Kirsti says

"As a student in the Houston public schools, I had firsthand experience with the political pressures exerted by extreme right-wing forces. When I was a senior at San Jacinto High School in 1955–56, I worked one class period each day in the library. One day I discovered a pile of books stashed under the main circulation desk, all of which were about Russia and the Soviet Union. When I tried to replace them on the shelves, the librarian stopped me and said that they had been removed from circulation. My curiosity piqued, as soon as I had free time, I went straight for the banned books under the counter and read them. . . . I learned a lot about Russia, more than anyone else in my school, since no one else had access to any books about it."

A concise and highly opinionated explanation of how the right and the left censor textbooks, how we got into this mess, and what can be done about it. I agree that this is a very serious issue, although I disagreed with some of her complaints. For example, Ravitch considers terms such as "confined to a wheelchair" and "wheelchair bound" OK to use. I think anyone who has used a wheelchair or who knows a wheelchair user can understand how illogical those terms are. The wheelchair is the tool you use to get around, not the thing that confines you. If you didn't have the wheelchair, you'd be confined to bed. And what does "wheelchair bound" mean? Tied up in a wheelchair? Headed toward a wheelchair?

Anyway, although I didn't agree with her 100 percent, I enjoyed reading the book. The writing style is clear and no-nonsense. Ravitch even cracks a joke from time to time.

Kaethe says

Ravitch looks at one aspect of the American Public School Crisis: the lousy curricula. Because apparently EVERYONE has felt the need to tweak it. Maddening stuff.

Maurean says

"I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balsac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil" -W.E.B. DuBois

(great quote)

While I read this book, I wasn't sure rather to laugh or cry. It disturbs me that we, as a society, appear complacent with forfeiting our children's education for the sake of appearing "politically correct".

Speaking as someone who grew up in the hills of western Pennsylvania, I must say that at no time did the mention of alligators (which I had never seen) or the arid desert lands (to which I had never been) give cause for me to become "distracted" or "upset"; Although they were "outside the realm of my personal experience", typhoons, armadillos and faeries where not concepts I felt were difficult to comprehend; And, whilst I am NOT promoting stereotyping, I DO think its perfectly acceptable for our children to know that there ARE women who cook, that there WAS slavery in our history and that older people DO get wrinkles. Is it not, after all, the role of education to expose our children to a world beyond their own personal experiences, and broaden their horizons past their immediate circumstances?

To expect our youth to view the world through some rose-colored glasses, where no controversial subjects arise, is causing them to be ill-prepared for the real world that exists beyond the classroom.

To allow the elimination of Steinbeck, Twain, Hawthorne and Dickens (among others) from their literary exposure is, in my view, very short-sighted, indeed, and adds one more reason why my children will be home schooled.

Emily says

It was The Language Police, by Diane Ravitch. The matter it discusses will be familiar to New Yorkers because of a recent Regents Exam scandal: the systematic "editing" of test and schoolbook materials to excise any theme, word or implication that might offend anybody. Ravitch presents a searing analysis of publishers' bias guidelines and shows how they became more and more rigid and nonsensical, and how they are the product of publishers and school systems caving in pre-emptively to interest groups on both the left and the right.

Ravitch gives a brief history of the guidelines' original intent, which was two-fold. First, the guidelines were meant to save children from having to read stories in which every woman was a housewife, all maids were African-American, and the disabled were helpless cripples. Second, they were meant to avoid putting children at a disadvantage (particularly on tests) by assuming specific knowledge that some of them might never have been exposed to.

This was quickly twisted into a more draconian code: not only should writers and editors avoid portraying all women as housewives, they should actually avoid portraying any of them as housewives. "In the ideal world

of education-think, women would be breadwinners; African Americans would be academics; Asian Americans would be athletes; and no one would be a wife or a mother." Old people should be shown doing strenuous activities like jogging, or repairing a roof; and a story like the one lauding a blind man for climbing Mt. McKinley is forbidden because it implies that that feat would be harder for a blind person. A story about a snowman is biased against children from the South, who can't be expected to understand the nature of snow; a story about a regatta, no matter how explanatory, is biased against anyone too poor to own a yacht. Stories in reading books should not present bad behavior such as disobedience or arrogance, even if the characters get their come-uppance at the end. History texts put a positive slant on nearly everything; "some texts present Mao as a friendly, inclusive leader, who listened to the peasants and won their support, just like our politicians." Whenever women were not active in a historical event, which is often, this must be noted disapprovingly.

This book isn't just about bewailing these most outrageous examples, however; the second half contains a fascinating exploration of the textbook adoption process, which shows how the big states (Texas and California) exert disproportionate control, how interest groups hijack the interpretation of the guidelines, and how publishers became so litigation-shy that they succumb to nearly any request. The book's weakest chapter is Ravitch's discussion of what to do about the situation: the practice is so deep-rooted that even she seems flummoxed.

Some readers, going through the appendices of Ravitch's book, will think "well of course textbooks shouldn't use phrases like 'career girl' or 'midget.'" But Ravitch is just reproducing the lists in full, not suggesting that the prohibition of any particular item is unreasonable. She puts everything on the table and allows the reader to decide what is or is not appropriate, which is much more than can be said for the "language police" themselves. What impressed me most about this book is that Ravitch persuaded me that common sense has flown out the window, even though I disagree with her about some of the specifics. (Her list of recommended reading at the end strikes me as too reactively Eurocentric, for example, lacking enough contemporary voices to hold a student's interest.) But perhaps that is because my own education took place under this regime.

I've always found that education is one of those topics that interests nearly everyone. This book also boasts a sharp writing style that makes it a pleasure to read. I would definitely recommend it.

Scott Rhee says

"For it is a mad world and it will get madder if we allow the minorities, be they dwarf or giant, orangutan or dolphin, nuclear-head or water conversationalist, pro-computerologist or Neo-Luddite, simpleton or sage, to interfere with aesthetics." ---Ray Bradbury, "Fahrenheit 451"

Long before her excoriating examination and dissection of the current state of affairs in U.S. education policy, including a caustic critique of the No Child Left Behind Act (the George W. Bush-era education bill which she herself originally endorsed), in her 2010 book "The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education", Diane Ravitch had been ringing warning bells and finding red flags in our incredibly flawed (and some may say broken) educational system for years as an education historian and Research Professor of Education at New York University.

Her resume tells a tale of a hard-working, dedicated leader in educational policy analysis: Under George H. W. Bush, she was a U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education; appointed to the National Assessment Governing

Board by Bill Clinton; co-wrote a weekly blog on the Education Week website from 2007 through 2012; and she now has her own blog (dianeravitch.net), in which she discusses anything and everything having to do with education.

In her 2003 book “The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn”, Ravitch uncovered a frightening policy of institutionalized censorship going on right under the noses of everyone working in the field of education. Even more frightening was the fact that it had been going on for decades by seemingly well-intentioned but overzealously cautious members of so-called “bias and sensitivity” committees, who were originally given the daunting task of poring through questions and readings for standardized tests and determining whether they were racially or gender-biased but who, gradually over time, caved to the pressures of right-wing and left-wing groups in order to avoid controversy.

Conducting research into standardized testing and the “cartel-like” industry of cut-throat textbook publishing, Ravitch uncovered a routine policy in which seemingly innocuous and inoffensive text readings were being cut from tests because of language that could, potentially, “offend” or “confuse” a young reader. Examples include:

****A passage about the history and significance of quilting by pioneer women during the mid-nineteenth century was removed because it contained stereotypes of women as “soft” and “submissive” and would give young girls a negative image, despite the fact that the article was historically accurate.

****A passage about a blind mountain climber who hiked to the peak of Mount McKinley was taken out because of “regional bias” (some children may not understand what mountainous terrain was like, owing to the fact that they may not live near mountains) and because it suggested that blind people may be slightly disadvantaged compared to those with sight.

****A historical passage describing life in ancient Egypt was stricken because it included images of the extremely wealthy living in palaces and farmers and city workers living in hovels. To the bias and sensitivity reviewers, this was clearly classist (despite its historical accuracy) and may have offended or upset children living in lower-class dwellings.

According to Ravitch, this ridiculous and dangerous institutionalized censorship is pandemic to the entire testing and textbook industry, creating dull literature textbooks that succeed in making children who already dislike reading hate it even more and white-washed history textbooks that give students a distorted and often completely wrong examination of historical events.

Who’s to blame for all of this? Ravitch points her fingers at two culprits: the religious right and the far left. Both extreme ends of the political spectrum seem to have converged into a perfect storm of censorship.

Censors from the right “aim to restore an idealized vision of the past, an arcadia of happy family life, in which the family was intact, comprising a father, a mother, and two or more children, and went to church every Sunday. Father was in charge, and Mother took care of the children. (p.63)” Social problems---divorce, dishonesty, criminal behavior, homosexuality, etc.---are anathema to a good education, so no mention of any of these subjects must appear in textbooks.

Censors from the left “believe in an idealized vision of the future, a utopia in which egalitarianism prevails in all social relations. In this vision, there is no dominant group, no dominant father, no dominant race, and no dominant gender. (p. 63)” Anything that may hurt a student’s self-esteem or give him or her the impression that there exists inequalities in the world is something that must be avoided in textbooks.

Ravitch provides a three-fold solution to this problem: 1) Eliminate the state textbook adoption process thereby allowing for more competition among publishers. 2) Educate the public by shining a larger spotlight on the issue. 3) Create a system that better educates teachers, making them masters in what they teach.

Anyone who thinks that the censorship that Bradbury was writing about in his dystopic future world in which the government destroys books because of their fear of people getting ideas was simply science fiction is sadly ignorant. Censorship and thought control is a reality. Thankfully, we have whistle-blowers like Ravitch fighting the system from within.

Jessica says

My Amazon review: While Ms. Ravitch's topic and discussion of textbook and testing censorship is a stunning revelation and a fascinating topic, her book does not do justice to all of the issues. Ms. Ravitch could probably have benefited from a good editor, and some organization to condense much of the information of the first six chapters into one or two. Many of her points about the influence of gender specific groups, nationality specific groups, religious organizations, and others, as well as some of the specific examples of test and text-book wording and/or topic changes are repeated in these first six chapters on several occasions. The summary of this repetition seems to boil down to the fact that censorship of tests and textbooks is so similar they may as well be identical, with only the names of the groups who are creating them and influencing them changing slightly.

As Ms. Ravitch continues her discussion of the new regime of "politically correct" terminology additions and "stereotypical" or "offensive" description removals in texts used to teach literature and history, she discusses the important facts surrounding the perceived need to "sanitize" literature and history for children but she fails to acknowledge the difficulty(or offer solutions)in determining what "literature" is. She also seems to completely overlook the challenge of discussing an additional fifty years worth of history (from the time of the post-WW2 textbooks she appears to hold a fondness for) without eliminating or condensing SOMETHING.

Finally, her suggestions for thwarting the "language police" are obvious and although she suggests that we work to stop the practice of statewide textbook adoptions, particularly in Texas and California, she does not supply us with names or organizations to contact or suggestions for HOW to do so.

An extremely important topic for parents, educators, librarians, writers, readers, and anyone concerned about the education of the youth of the United States, Ravitch's book is a bit repetitive, somewhat lacking in focus, but is a good introduction to some of the problems educators are facing today.

Alanna says

TL;DR version: If you're interested in the subject matter, pick up Joan DelFattore's *What Johnny Shouldn't Read* instead.

I'm actually upset that I didn't like this book, but it just isn't good. False equivalencies abound. Ravitch spends six pages complaining that high schoolers don't read enough of the canon (read: dead white guys) then says she isn't saying we should canonize. She implies that students aren't as influenced by textbooks as

people think, then later says students will be confused if their textbooks don't match up exactly with reality. She fails to define what she considers a great or good history standard, aside from, apparently, detailing EXACTLY which historical figures are to be mentioned. The so-what question is barely addressed.

I could go on (saying that a Donne sonnet is better for grief than "teen fiction about a death in the family is just weird), but I'll just leave it by saying that Joan DelFattore's *What Johnny Shouldn't Read* is much better-written and actually goes into facts and events that Ravitch spends little time on, rather than focusing on example lists.

Jason says

I found this book to be fascinating. I've actually participated in a workshop on test passage analysis, which, looking back on it, was basically censorship. We were told if any of the passages could be upsetting to any student, we should eliminate it. I remember one of the passages we were left with that would actually end up on the test was a dumb rhyming poem about a slice of lemon pie.

Diane Ravitch traces the history of censorship on K-12 tests and textbooks in this illuminating book that includes a glossary of banned words and topics. She makes plenty of good points about the insanity of banned items, such as geography bias, which means a passage about the beach would not be fair because some students have never visited the beach and therefore would be at a disadvantage. Please. She does seem to go a little too far when she complains that our current textbooks aren't entirely composed of authors from the 18th and 19th centuries. She doesn't seem to agree with NCTE that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of texts--she just wants them reading Hemingway and Poe and Shakespeare. Despite that, I seemed to agree with most of her points.

I would highly recommend this book to any educator.

Bob Anderson says

I first saw this book in the context of the current trend of writers complaining about kids these days, and how PC an SJW can be. Since Ravitch has earned my respect as a thorough and passionate researcher, I figured I'd get her take on the issue. But it's not about that subject; published in 2003, it is much more about the way that the process of textbook and standardized test writing and approval sanitizes the content that children experience. A lot of her argument makes sense: guidelines fought for by interest groups and parents that restrict what kinds of reading children are expected to do can result in a pretty boring education if teachers don't fill in the gaps. I'm still on the lookout for something that actually researches and discusses the supposed pernicious effect of 'PC culture' in higher education.

Lize says

Awesome, frightening book about censorship in education, coincidentally one of the few things that both sides in the 'culture war' manage to agree on--they both favor it, although for different reasons. The appendices alone made it a must buy, and I've worked through several of the works she cited since then.

Quote: *"The goal of the language police is not just to stop us from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts. The language police believe that reality follows language usage. If they can stop people from ever seeing offensive words and ideas, they can prevent them from having the thought or committing the act that the words signify. If they have never read a story about suicide or divorce, then they will never even think about killing themselves or ending their marriage. If they abolish words that have man as a prefix or suffix, then women will achieve equality. If children read and hear only language that has been cleansed of any mean or hurtful words, they will never have a mean or hurtful thought. With enough censorship, the language police might create a perfect world."*

Joe says

Good overview of how ideologues try to silence opposing perspectives and open dialogue. Always using "common sense" fairness restrictions and labeling words and writing as offensive and biased without regard for context and value.

Karen says

Long Story Short: This book makes some excellent observations and arguments about bias, sensitivity, censorship, and textbook publishing, but it makes them in a semi-hysterical and sloppy way.

Why I Chose This Book: I used to be a teacher and I currently work within educational publishing, so the topic interested me personally, and I am always curious to read arguments from both sides of the political correctness movement.

The Book's Strengths: If the author's intent was to get a reaction, it succeeded. The book presents a thorough explanation of how the bias and sensitivity standards of textbook censorship have developed over time, and presents a definite insider's view of the textbook industry and its relationship to the government's control of school curriculum. Ravitch provides specific examples of the kinds of deselection and excising of materials from textbooks that exist, the names of the companies that engage in it, before and after portrayals of how books and stories have been changed after bias and sensitivity review, the process of textbook adoptions and what states have the largest influence on the market, how individual state standards influence textbook editors and publishers, which pressure groups lean on textbook publishers to make changes, how they effect such changes, and how the idea that bias and sensitivity review is important has become commonplace and remains unexamined by industry participants. After the main body of the text, there are more than sixty pages of appendix materials: a list of banned words and a list of the author's recommendations for instructional materials to supplement textbooks.

The book feels comprehensive, and it is an easy read. The author uses straightforward, non-academic language that draws you into her emotions and astonishment for a shared experience; she makes you feel you are being personally betrayed, so the reader-text connection is very strong. I think she also does a very good job of writing a history book according to rules she implicitly sets (there's no outright definition): she presents an interesting topic and makes you want to research it even more so that you can come to your own conclusions of events. The book highlights a real problem, and runs through the steps of providing evidence to support her claim that the problem exists, that it is getting worse, and that it has a profound affect. The

author's credentials and experience lend weight to her claims—she is a historian and an educational publishing consultant at very high levels—and she takes a stand on why this problem matters and what people can do to fix it.

The Book's Weaknesses: The book really works you up into a right state; I was ready, after reading the prologue, to go get my pipe wrench out of the garage and start smashing cars. The examples she uses of expunged text are probably true and definitely outrageous, but they are so outrageous that it just makes me a little suspicious that she is presenting us the most effective anomalies (cherry-picking data, if you like). Her tone is often snide, and there are very long passages where she overwhelms the reader with too many examples and hammers at the same point over and over again. She paints the villains (feminists, ethnic groups, and religious sects) as giant monolithic groups who behave and think exactly alike across time and geography. For example, at the start of Chapter 4, “Everybody Does It: The Testing Companies” (on pg. 51 in my book), she writes that

Feminist critics maintained that this gap was caused entirely by sexist language.

Not only is this a gross generalization, she provides no sources or references to even one specific feminist who maintained that ALL test score differences were to blame ENTIRELY on sexism in test scores. When authors start to hyperbolize like that, it makes the book seem like its own kind of biased screed. In the middle of Chapter 8, “Literature: Forgetting the Tradition,” on a single page—pg. 118—she implies first that most teachers rely only on textbooks to select materials for their class and then claims that students experiencing grief do not benefit from reading teen novels about adolescents also coping with grief and that they would be better served by the classic poets, yet cites no sources for either. This is on the same page!

In Chapter 9, “History: The Endless Battle,” she gives a very compelling reason that these changes to textbooks are so detrimental to students’ understanding of historical events:

The books frequently quote historical figures or offer data without giving any sources for teachers and students who want to learn more, failing to demonstrate by deed the importance of presenting verifiable evidence. The reader must take it on faith that the information presented to them is accurate, because there is no way to check up on it.

This is very important, and everyone should realize this flaw in the textbook paradigm of the current age. Sadly, Ravitch repeats this problem in her own book, and it makes the book too easy to pick apart and dismiss—even when you feel in your heart that probably every word she says is true.

What Should Have Happened: The book did not need so many examples of textbooks and test items that were expunged. There should have been far fewer lists and far more explanation of why this is a serious problem, and far more data to support the claim that it actually is a problem. Is it true that most teachers rely on the textbook and introduce no other materials? Does it matter if standardized test questions are devoid of artistic or literary content? Is the role of the school to teach classics? Does it matter if students read novels by minority and women authors who will be forgotten in ten years? Her criticisms of how important classics have been “cleaned up” to please pressure groups are justifiably scathing, but she goes off on authors that are outside the established canon without ever really defending the value of the canon. It’s a pretty big

assumption that everyone agrees the European classics are basically the best thing for everyone to be reading. At least she should have made the argument that the artistic merit of these works has stood the test of time!

The big question—So what?—needs a much better answer.

Short Story Shorter: I would definitely recommend this book. It's readable, and it raises awareness to a topic that most people are probably interested in for one reason or another.

Cyndi says

It's scary how we are controlled so much in school. I liked this book but I'm considering that ignorance is bliss.

This book discusses how the American government and pressure groups changes things or deletes stuff in our history curriculum to make things more likable and politically correct. What ever happened to learn from the past? Many more topics are covered in the book that make me want to get up and go fight the whole messy process.

Nate says

Language Police is a book describing the various ways left and right pressure groups determine what enters textbooks and curricula with special emphasis placed on California and Texas to their large state organisations and agencies that deal with this for the whole market. Leftist groups, for example, tend to go over board in banning common images and stereotypes like female nurses and poor black people, as some ridiculous ones, and fighting for the inclusion of every negative aspect of US history to the detriment of any positives that are not "inclusive." Right leaning groups on the other hand over emphasise the stereotype of a perfect family home and overpatriotise historical texts. Honestly, both groups sound despicable and help explain why the crap that I had to read in our reading textbooks and reading tests was so bland and useless. There seems to be some effective change, the SAT, for example, now including real scientific passages and historical documents of great relevance, but still this needs to be stopped. I really liked that Ravitch included a list (60 pages!) of every single thing banned by a textbook and test maker with the company being indicated. The book can be a little repetitive however because, after a while, you just want to strangle the groups for being ridiculous, and every example within the book itself (appendix being a separate source of frustration) loses its place among so many. Although I disagree with her on certain points like the inclusion of slurs in texts not written in the era when they were acceptable, she makes a very good case against both sides, moreso against the left, because science is sadly not really included in here, so there was little description on how certain right groups fight against evolution and other scientific concepts. Additionally, I wish she cited things a lot more thoroughly because while the appendix and quotes are cited, I do wish there was empirical data in here as well citations for paraphrased anecdotal evidence, as it would have made the book more scholarly and stronger. I'm also really glad that she included her recommended reading list for each grade because I thought it was well balanced in terms of content and difficulty.

Nathaniel says

I tend to hate activist writing, because reading a book classed as "nonfiction" for me is meaningless if the author is not trying to be objective, and activists rarely are. Most "nonfiction" writing of people with an agenda has less truth to it than many "fiction" books inspired by real life.

However, Ravitch is a rare exception to this rule. Though she obviously has an agenda, it's a pretty benign version of "I want to raise awareness to the dangers of the textbook adoption process to American public education". Crucially, she makes a strenuous effort to avoid as much bias as possible and to cite her extremely broad array of sources, and for that, this rises above most "activist" books, even though it is trying to effect change. If Ravitch doesn't cite a source it's because it was an industry contact who could face career retribution for speaking to her.

With that said, this is the best concise summary of what's wrong with the textbook adoption process in this country that I've ever read. It flies by - I finished it in about a day - but still presents a compelling case for how we as a country are flushing our kids' educations down the toilet for the sake of ridiculous special interests on both left and right, simply because those are the only people who actually participate in the process in any meaningful way. The author also includes an extensive bibliography of literary and historical works that are suggested to supplement curricula at various levels. Overall, a worthy read for anyone who cares about the integrity of American education in the 21st century.

Angela says

Before Anton Chekhov and Mark Twain can be used in school readers and exams, they must be vetted by a bias and sensitivity committee. An anthology used in Tennessee schools changed "By God!" to "By gum!" and "My God!" to "You don't mean it." The New York State Education Department omitted mentioning Jews in an Isaac Bashevis Singer story about prewar Poland, or blacks in Annie Dillard's memoir of growing up in a racially mixed town. California rejected a reading book because The Little Engine That Could was male.

Diane Ravitch maintains that America's students are compelled to read insipid texts that have been censored and bowdlerized, issued by publishers who willingly cut controversial material from their books—a case of the bland leading the bland.

The Language Police is the first full-scale exposé of this cultural and educational scandal, written by a leading historian. It documents the existence of an elaborate and well-established protocol of beneficent censorship, quietly endorsed and implemented by test makers and textbook publishers, states, and the federal government. School boards and bias and sensitivity committees review, abridge, and modify texts to delete potentially offensive words, topics, and imagery. Publishers practice self-censorship to sell books in big states.

To what exactly do the censors object? A typical publisher's guideline advises that

- *Women cannot be depicted as caregivers or doing household chores.*
- *Men cannot be lawyers or doctors or plumbers. They must be nurturing helpmates.*
- *Old people cannot be feeble or dependent; they must jog or repair the roof.*

- A story that is set in the mountains discriminates against students from flatlands.
- Children cannot be shown as disobedient or in conflict with adults.
- Cake cannot appear in a story because it is not nutritious.

The result of these revisions are—no surprise!—boring, inane texts about a cotton-candy world bearing no resemblance to what children can access with the click of a remote control or a computer mouse. Sadly, data show that these efforts to sanitize language do not advance learning or bolster test scores, the very reason given for banning allegedly insensitive words and topics.

Ravitch offers a powerful political and economic analysis of the causes of censorship. She has practical and sensible solutions for ending it, which will improve the quality of books for students as well as liberating publishers, state boards of education, and schools from the grip of pressure groups.

Passionate and polemical, The Language Police is a book for every educator, concerned parent, and engaged citizen. (book description from Amazon.com)

Emma says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. I am a fan of Ravitch. She gets a bit strong-worded, but its good research and well-organized. I've learned so much from her stuff. For *The Language Police*, I enjoyed the first few chapters. Then there reached a section/handful of chapters which disappointed me. Then this was redeemed with the conclusions. For the beginning, I felt that Ravitch presented the facts well. She connects everything together and gives a clear argument. The chapters after that lacked that same level of credibility and facts. I disagreed with some points, found areas which I felt required more proof, and saw areas in which she misinterpreted information or chose to misrepresent information. This was frustrating for me as I agreed and followed her overall message.

It was those little things that kind of ate away at the book. For example, the chapter about Literature misinterprets NCTE, ELA standards, and the methods of teaching ELA. I know this because I have studied these as a secondary education major and teacher. Essentially she wants us to read "The Greats" (white men) again *eye roll* because kiddos ain't reading enough Hemingway. If they aren't reading Hemingway then they just wont understand good literature *gags*. She is very focused on aesthetics of reading, emphasizing content as the priority. This is bad teaching. Like one of the top five basics of teaching English is that you don't teach a book, you teach a unit. (1) if everyone in the the US read Hemingway, what would that teach? nothing. It doesn't guarantee understanding of the themes or the skills to read deeply and (2) Hemingway sucks. No one really likes Hemingway, let's be honest. Even though she argues that she trusts teachers and wants supports teachers in the conclusion, her chapter about Literature suggests that English teachers don't know what they are doing and are not to be trusted.

I also felt that Ravitch does not address her privilege as an educated, white woman. She makes good points when she points out ridiculous examples of censorship (like calling the night sky black), but there are some other areas where they aren't so 'ridiculous'. She might see it as ridiculous because she grew up with certain mainstream beliefs, but that doesn't mean it is the truth. For example, I recall her referring to Native American beliefs as 'imagination'. It put me in a hard place because now i'm censoring her in a way. I had these feelings multiple times. It made me think "Ravitch never really defines the line. When does something cross the line?" Ravitch is very bent on maintaining the status quo. Although intelligent and critical, she doesn't always acknowledge that what she learned might be wrong. If our version of history and literature

has truly been so edited, then we must admit that we have a skewed view of history. This made me often question her, writing "according to who? why" in the margins in response to whenever she declared a book/person/movement as mandatory to learn.

Overall, it is a useful book. Especially the beginning and last chapters. I would just encourage readers to be critical of Ravitch and not accept everything she says as the answer.

Janet Hey says

This book started slow and I skimmed quite a bit of it at first but I really liked the last three chapters, particularly the chapter on English literature and the one on history. Just confirms my beliefs that most textbooks are crap and only likely to get worse. The book is over 10 years old now so some of the current issues are different but many are still the same, or just come in different guises.

Does this sound familiar to any student, teacher or parent? "Today's literature textbooks are a pot pourri of fiction, nonfiction, social commentary, graphics, special features, and pedagogical aids. Even when the selections are good, the texts are almost painful to read because of their visual clutter and sensory overload". It certainly describes the new reading book and the science book adopted by Seminole County Public Schools for their elementary schools.

A few other great quotes:

"Great literature is not 'relevant' because it echoes the students' race, gender, or social circumstances, but because it speaks directly to the reader across time and across cultures".

"The soul of historical research is debate, but that sense of uncertainty and contingency seldom find its way into text books".

and finally "Intelligence and reason cannot be achieved merely by skill building and immersion in new technologies; elites have always known this and have always insisted on more for their children". Are you listening our political masters? You are insisting that public school systems teach one way whilst ensuring that your own children are taught a better way. No, silly me, of course you are not listening.

Toby says

Good points about the sanitizing of literature, but would have been better if she didn't make the same points over and over and over, to the point of writing almost identical sentences three or four times in succession.
