



August 2006
 Volume 9, Issue 8
 Publication of the
Sacramento
Organization for
Rational Thinking
 (SORT)

Inside This Issue

- 1** August 29 SORT Meeting
BOOK BURNING
- 2** AROUND THE BOOK BEAT
- 3** DIRECTIONS
- 4** THE RATIONAL
COMMUNITY CALENDAR

©2006 by Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser. All rights reserved.

For past issues, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website: <http://home.surewest.net/kitray>
 For more about the co-founders of SORT, see www.spangenburgandmoser.com

August
SORT Meeting
Tuesday, August 29, 2006
7:30 P.M.
 La Sierra Community Center
 Room 800, 5325 Engle Road
 Carmichael, CA
 (See driving directions, p. 3)

The *SORTified* NEWS

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”
 —Clarence Darrow

August 29 SORT Meeting BOOK BURNING?

All right, we'll be honest. We are not really talking about the burning of books, but the banning and censorship of books. We just thought that “burning” might be a better attention grabber for an issue that mostly keeps itself hidden until the media, stuck with a slow news day, do a quick splash on it, or Barnes and Noble observes its once-a-year “Banned Books” window display. Whether burned, banned, or censored, though, the issue is still the same: Someone has made a decision as to which books or parts of books you can or cannot read. Are there ever legitimate reasons for banning or censoring books? Should Madonna's *SEX* be allowed in secondary school libraries? What about Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*? Both are books that, like many others, have been banned or censored in one place or another in the United States in the last few years. The excellent Internet site Forbidden Library (<http://www.forbiddenlibrary.com/>) gives a small sample with excerpts taken from the *Banned Books Resource Guide* by the American Library Association.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

REMINDER:

SORT Meetings
are now at 7:30 p.m.
on the last
TUESDAY
of the month
LA SIERRA
COMMUNITY CENTER
Room 800

and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, both by Mark Twain, have been banned by many school libraries. The reason: too full of racially charged language. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* has been attacked by censors. Reasons: “sexually offensive” passages and “a real downer.” *Brave New World* has been removed from a classroom in Miller, Missouri, and challenged at a Yukon, Oklahoma, high school. The reason: The book “centered on negative activity.” *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* was pulled from the library in Wild Rose, Wisconsin. The reason: according to a district administrator, for being “slanted.” Further deep thinking from the same administrator: “If there's a possibility that something might be controversial, then, why not eliminate it?”

While J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in*

the Rye published in 1951, has been a constant target for censors and would-be censors for charges ranging from “profanity” to “anti-Christian attitude,” Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* found itself secured in a locked reference section at the Boulder, Colorado, public library because the book, to quote Forbidden Library, “espoused a poor philosophy of life.”

Finally, this is our favorite example of Neanderthal thinking: *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury’s great novel about the dangers of book burning and censorship, was allotted to students of Venado Middle School in Irvine, California, with, according to Forbidden Library, “scores of words—mostly ‘hells’ and ‘damns’—blacked out.” There is some hope, though. Forbidden Library goes on to tell us, “Thankfully, after receiving complaints from parents and being contacted by reporters, school officials said the censored copies would never be used.”

Although some of the above examples are scary as well as being absurd, the problems of banning and censoring books are not simply resolved. Are there conditions or situations when banning or censoring a book is “acceptable” or even “necessary”? Being intelligent and enlightened thinkers, we would like to think not. But if so, what are those conditions or situations and what care needs to be taken in making such decisions.

Join us then at the August 29 SORT meeting and take part in

our open round table discussion. As usual free coffee (decaf and regular) cookies and soft drinks will be available throughout the meeting. Think of it as a good, intelligent evening talking with friends. In today’s hectic world that’s not so easy to find anymore.

See page 3 for directions.

THE BOOK BEAT

We had been looking forward to reading Deborah Blum’s *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death* after reading a couple of positive reviews on the net, so when we found a copy at Tower Books we hurried home to jump into one of our favorite topics. Along with our science writing in the last twenty years, we have been equally involved in the skeptic movement and have acquired a massive library of books on stage illusionists, magic, the occult, the paranormal, and the supernatural so we were prepared after reading the book to give it an honored place in our already crowded library. After all, Blum is a science writer with good credentials and the particular approach of her book (covering not only James but also the founding fathers of England’s intriguing British Society for Psychological Research) was for us the proverbial carrot before the mule.

We would gladly have reported that the carrot was delicious, and it was for the first few bites. Blum does an excellent job of bringing

The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT) . . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in *all* areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions--is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from “alternative medicine” to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

all the intriguing cast to life—scientists, scholars, intellectuals, poets, and dreamers—all shocked into seeking some proof of immortality after death to counter what they saw as the emptiness and futility of existence in Darwin's world. She also handles quite colorfully the pretenders and fake mediums who claimed communication with the dead through spirit intermediaries—people like Daniel Dunglas Home, Madame Blavatsky, Henry Slade (the slate reader), Eusapia Palidino (the heavy and extremely gross Italian who liked to turn séances into orgasmic pleasures), Leonore Piper (the model of respectability who became William James's "white crow"), and Florence Cook (who, along with her "spirit" entity "Katy King," brought a touch of romance into the lives of her male sitters).

The problem is that we weren't far into the book before some discomfort arose. Long anecdotal tales are told about so-called spirit activities during séances that for the most part Blum leaves unquestioned. The incredible claims of Daniel Dunglas Home, including levitation, are passed on uncritically. Blum outlines the spirit knocking of the famous Fox sisters without more than a passing reference to the oldest sister, Leah, who managed, some say forced, her sisters to pass from simple practical joking to claiming real spiritualist powers, learning for herself how the trick was done, and charging fees for her sisters' services. Blum also tells about the famous "confession" of Mar-

garet Fox (later repudiated) without mentioning that, as part of the confession made before a large audience, she demonstrated how the famous knockings were produced by snapping the joints in her toes.

As easily guessed halfway through the book, in Blum's concluding comments at book's end she makes that overused and trite statement, uttered in dozens of books pushing the paranormal, that she had gone into her study of spiritualism critically but after her investigation had emerged with a newly opened and more accepting mind.

We expected better.



BOARD OF ADVISERS

Terry Sandbek
Psychologist

Robert Sheaffer
UFO Specialist, Author

Bob Steiner
Magician, Author,
Bunco Expert

Lauress Wise
Mathematical Psychologist

About the Founders

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are coauthors of more than 50 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former coeditors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

For more information, contact:
SORT (Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking)
Phone (916) 978-0321
Email: kitray@quiknet.com

GETTING TO LA SIERRA COMMUNITY CENTER

From Highway 50: Take the Watt Avenue exit and head north. Turn right on Marconi, by the Raley's store. Travel east on Marconi to Walnut and turn left. Travel north on Walnut to Engle and turn right. Turn left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road past the main parking lot and along the east side of the building. Room 800 is in the second building on the left (just past the open, grassy area). Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

From I-80: Take the Madison exit and head east. Turn right on Garfield and head south. Turn right on Gibbons and left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road along the east side of the building. Room 800 is in the last building before the open, grassy area. Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

RATIONAL COMMUNITY CALENDAR

August 29: Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT)

Topic: “Book Burning?”

Time: Tuesday, 7:30–9:00 p.m. (social period until 9:30)

Place: La Sierra Community Center, Room 800, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael
Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

September 10: Atheists and Other Freethinkers (AOF)

Speaker: Dr. Parvin Darabi. Dr. Darabi was born in Tehran, Iran, on September 16, 1941, and she left in 1964 for California, where she became an electronic systems engineer, an executive, and a human rights activist. With her son Roman P. Thomson, she is co-author of *Rage against the Veil, the Courageous Life and Death of an Islamic Dissident*, published by Prometheus Books in 1999. Check <http://aofonline.org/events> and <http://aofonline.org/generalmeetings> for more details.

Time: Second Sunday, 2:30–5:00 p.m.

Location: Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10, 2791 24th Street (So. of Broadway). The public is welcome.



*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

**Sacramento Organization
for Rational Thinking
P.O. Box 2215
Carmichael, CA 95609-2215**

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED