

***The Bronze Bow* -- Address to the Sept. 28, 2006 CAC Meeting**

by Tom Allen

My name is Tom Allen. My daughter is a sixth grader at Davidson. I would like to offer a brief historical perspective on *The Bronze Bow*.

When Elizabeth George Speare accepted her Newbery medal in 1961, she described her original plan for the book:

I knew what I wanted to do. I was teaching a Sunday School class at the time, and I longed to lift the personality of Jesus off the flat and lifeless pages of our textbook.... I wanted to stir in [my pupils] some personal sharing of what must have been the response of boys and girls who actually saw and heard the Carpenter from Nazareth..... I longed to have them see that the preacher who walked the hills of Galilee was not a mythical figure, but a compelling and dynamic leader, a hero to whom a boy in any age would gladly offer all his loyalty.

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I wanted my young people to meet Jesus. But how could I portray Jesus, when many years of searching to understand his life and teachings left me still facing a mystery?..... The quest for the historical Jesus has never yielded the surety for which the scholars hoped. The incontestable facts of history barely established his having lived at all.

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In the end, I realized the [historical] research was defeating my purpose and only clouding my vision..... But I set myself to do, to the best of my ability, one small thing. I would show the change wrought in just one boy who came to know the teacher in Galilee. This is the story of *The Bronze Bow*.

Historical research was clouding her vision, so Speare based her book directly on Christian scripture. This drew little notice at the time, but it must not be ignored now.

The Bronze Bow professes several key Christian doctrines, including:

- Jesus' claim to have been specially anointed by God
- his ability to heal the sick and restore life to the dead
- his disciples' belief that he is the Messiah

Points like these, as well as radiant depictions of Jesus, are used to explain Daniel's attraction to him and to draw in young readers.

The Bronze Bow also contains condemnations of Jewish practices and Jewish leaders drawn solely from negative gospel portrayals. Daniel is increasingly repulsed by Judaism, culminating in his belief that Jewish leaders want to kill Jesus. Many middle school students learn about Anne Frank. When Davidson students read *The Bronze*

Bow, do they learn that her death and the deaths of millions of other Jews over the last 2,000 years were caused by exactly this blood libel?

The first Christians were practicing Jews, but within a few decades Christianity converted non-Jews directly and parted ways with Judaism. All serious religion scholars recognize that the Christian scriptures were used to create a clear distinction between Judaism and Christianity, in part by criticizing Jewish practices and blaming the Jews, rather than the Romans, for Jesus' death. Students must learn the difference between religious claims and historical facts. Yet a Davidson teacher said (quote) "it is history that some of Jesus' people were against him, as they feared reprisals from the Romans". Like *The Bronze Bow* itself, this statement is based only on the gospels.

It is disingenuous to wave away all objections to the book, as some at Davidson have done, with the vacuous statement that "you can't teach history without teaching about religion". According to state standards, when discussing the influence of religion on history, schools must teach facts about religions, not preach the doctrines of religions. *The Bronze Bow* crosses that line. It is not historical fiction -- it is a Bible story for middle school students. Spere's other novels promote the ideals of cultural and religious understanding. But in writing *The Bronze Bow* she was blinded by her religion, and she thoughtlessly incorporated its hurtful polemic into her own book.

Forty-five years later, we have no excuse to remain thoughtless ourselves. In 1961, the first Supreme Court decision on school prayer was still two years away, and the Vatican had not yet repudiated the concept of collective Jewish guilt. Since then, while our country and world have changed greatly, the book has not. Protected by its Newbery medal, it has rarely been re-examined.

But today it is clear that by promoting Christianity and disparaging Judaism, *The Bronze Bow* violates Category 1, criterion 10 for instructional materials in California, which requires religious neutrality and prohibits the use of examples from sacred texts that are derogatory or accusatory against other religions. Just this year, this standard resulted in specific instructions to textbook publishers to remove references to "any Jewish role in the crucifixion of Jesus" and to "the outdated replacement theology idea that Judaism is a religion of law but Christianity is a religion of love". *The Bronze Bow* contains both of these concepts.

We who raise these issues may be singled out and accused of demeaning Christian beliefs. That is not our intention. But a public school should not force students to choose between having other people's religious doctrine forced on them and challenging the authenticity of that doctrine. Trying to present a "Jewish perspective" in Davidson's 7th grade advanced Core class would inevitably degenerate into questioning parts of Christian scripture. The state standards were designed precisely to keep these dilemmas out of schools in the first place.

Our objections have also been misleadingly characterized as "book banning". This is a total canard: we are not suggesting that the book be removed from the Davidson

library, only that it not be required class reading. We ask that the standards for selecting, not banning, instructional materials, a task which you yourselves perform constantly, be enforced. Better books about this period are available, such as Rosemary Sutcliff's *Outcast*, set in Roman-occupied Britain. *Outcast* teaches a great deal about Roman history, while *The Bronze Bow* teaches almost nothing.

I ask you to remove *The Bronze Bow* from the curriculum. One factor in your decision should be the recognition that it violates state standards. But I would hope that the main reason will be that it's just the right thing to do. That's what all of us try to teach our kids -- do what you know is right even when no one is forcing you to.

Thank you.