



## CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

January 3, 2006

To: Faculty/Staff  
Davidson Middle School  
San Rafael, CA 94901

From: Professor Robert Platzner  
Department of Humanities/Religious Studies  
CSU Sacramento

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert Platzner".

Re: Elizabeth George Speare, *The Bronze Bow*

Dear Colleagues:

It has come to my attention that Elizabeth George Speare's *The Bronze Bow* has been selected as an assigned reading in your literature classes, and I am writing to express my astonishment at your choice of reading matter. I am well aware that Ms. Speare's novel was awarded the Newbery Medal in 1961, and that her fiction is viewed as appropriate reading matter for young adults. I am amazed, however, that a novel of obviously sectarian views has been offered to students in a public school system as a work of religiously neutral values.

*The Bronze Bow* takes the portrait of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels as its point of departure, and then proceeds to surround it with a demonstrably Christian view of Judean society in the first third of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Judged as an historical romance – which is the only genre that seems at all relevant to this novel – *The Bronze Bow* offers us a view of political and religious conflict that is not only deficient in historical detail but, more importantly, that distorts and manipulates the historical subjects it tries to portray. No reader of this novel could possibly come away from it with any understanding of the underlying theology of the Zealot movement (to which its young hero is drawn), nor with any appreciation of Pharisaic teachings. Ms. Speare displays no awareness of the many questions that New Testament scholars have raised over the past half-century regarding the historicity of the Synoptic account of Jesus' life-portrait and teachings, nor does she seem to care. Her Jesus, complete with "flashing eyes ... dark with pity," is little more than a sentimental cliché, but references to his healing powers, or more pointedly to the "kingdom of God" move this portrait towards a more obviously dogmatic place where Christian doctrine becomes the focus of her narrative. In fact, the trajectory of character development in this novel leads inevitably to an embrace of Jesus as Christ – that is, as a redeemer-figure who stands apart from, and in opposition to, the spiritual and political

6000 J Street, Sacramento, California 95819-6083 • (916) 278-6444 • (916) 278-7213 FAX

values of his fellow Jews, which brings us back, once again, to the tendentious view of Jesus propagated by the early Church.

As someone who has taught both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, I have absolutely no objection to students being asked to read the Synoptic Gospels (or the Gospel of John, or any other book from the canonical Christian Bible, for that matter), so long as they are made aware, from the start, that they are reading the “scriptures” of a specific religious community. What I find objectionable, however, is any presentation of a religious work – or of an arguably secular novel that is informed by dogmatic religious views – as a merely artistically-conceived narrative. There are 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment issues here that I am reluctant to raise, but I should think that the staff of a public school would be sensitive to any appearance of promoting religious teachings under the guise of language instruction.

Thank you for the opportunity to address your faculty, and I am more than willing to discuss this novel further if you are interested.