

You do Not Speak for Me

by Alexis Opper

(3rd place winner of the 2012 Youth Free Expression Project Film Contest)

Matilda by Roald Dahl was always one of my favorites and *Just Ella* and *Speak* and *Shadow Light* and especially *Harry Potter*. Yeah, always *Harry Potter*.

Those are the things that really made my childhood what it was for me. And I got really lucky because all of these books got to be in my life even though all of these books have been banned in different school districts for being too violent or for witchcraft or encouraging cussing or promiscuity which is crazy, because of what all of these books gave me...knowledge, insight, perspective and hope.

All the same, award winning books are de-shelved all across the nation for containing reading material that adults object to. In Hubble Texas, *Stuck in Neutral* was challenged. In Pennsylvania it was *Nickel and Dime* and in Green County, *Feed* by M.T. Anderson. *Feed* was called trash by its opponents. *Nickel and Dime* was said to promote drug use and *Stuck in Neutral* used foul language. But at the base of all these claims was a desire to cover up a problem because these adults didn't want their children looking at it; moreover, an intolerance towards the subject matter. Fortunately, each challenge was thrown out.

Which now brings us to Summer Lee's story. Summer is an author and an advocate against banned books. See, when Summer was growing up she knew her world from behind her locked bedroom door in her mother's house; her mother, a woman who made her living by operating an illegal drug dispensary inside of their home. Needless to say, Summer's adolescence was less than ideal.

Her salvation came in the form of books. The works of Christopher Pike, R.L. Stein, L.J. Smith, V.C. Andrews, and Stephen King; most of which are and continue to be banned or challenged books in school districts nationwide.

But Summer said that these were the things that she needed, the things that she relied on because the monster of these authors were her monsters. And the triumphs of their heroes were the triumphs that she fought for in her own life.

See there is an element of so called dark literature that sinks its roots into youth but that element is not dark. These books are not how-to guides. They don't teach a kid to do drugs, to drink, to have sex, to mutilate their bodies or throw up, or bully others. They are stories in which the monster, the darkness, the disease, the hatred, the racism is overthrown and overwhelmed.

No, the element that youth latches onto in these books is hope. Hope that we can overthrow our demons.

You do not make darkness disappear by covering it up.

You don't save us by taking away reality.

And you don't determine what helps and what hurts.

That's something for each of us needs to determine for ourselves.

You do not know who needs hope most,

who needs to know whose monsters need to be overwhelmed.

You do not know what each individual needs to shine light into their own life.

And because of that...

You do not speak for us.

You do not speak for me.