Burning a Book
By William Stafford
1986

William Stafford (1914-1993) was an American poet. In 1970, he was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position now known as Poet Laureate. In this poem, the speaker describes book burning, a common method of censorship in which people set fire to books they object to on political, cultural, or religious grounds. In a 1991 interview, Stafford once said that he wrote this poem after purposefully burning a book that he found “attractive, shallow, [and] misleading…” “Why should I keep it around?” he thought. As you read, identify the main idea of each stanza.

I want you to highlight two parts of this poem that you think show the main idea the author is trying to get across to the reader.

1. Protecting each other, right in the center
   a few pages glow a long time.
   The cover goes first, then outer leaves
   curling away, then spine and a scattering.

5. Truth, brittle and faint, burns easily,
   its fire as hot as the fire lies make—
   flame doesn't care. You can usually find
   a few charred\(^1\) words in the ashes.

And some books ought to burn, trying for
   character

10. but just faking it. More disturbing
   than book ashes are whole libraries that no one
   got around to writing—desolate\(^2\)
   towns, miles of unthought in cities,
   and the terrorized countryside where wild dogs

15. own anything that moves. If a book
   isn't written, no one needs to burn it—
   ignorance can dance in the absence of fire.

So I've burned books. And there are many
I haven't even written, and nobody has.

1. **Charred (adjective)**: blackened or discolored from burning
2. **Desolate (adjective)**: deserted; in a state of dreary emptiness

\(^1\) "Book burning" by pcorreia is licensed under CC BY 2.0.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes the theme of this poem? [RL.2]
   A. Ignorance and a lack of new ideas are greater threats to society than burning books.
   B. Book burning creates ignorance and chaos in societies; free speech should be encouraged.
   C. The worst threat of censorship is its ability to erase prominent writers from history.
   D. We are all guilty of censorship when we reject ideas that do not align with our own.

2. PART B: Which lines from the poem best support the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
   A. “The cover goes first, then outer leaves / curling away, then spine and a scattering” (Lines 3-4)
   B. “More disturbing / than book ashes are whole libraries that no one / got around to writing” (Lines 10-12)
   C. “the terrorized countryside where wild dogs / own anything that moves” (Lines 14-15)
   D. “So I've burned books. And there are many / I haven't even written, and nobody has.” (Lines 18-19)

3. PART A: As used in line 13, what does the word “unthought” mean? [RL.4]
   A. hostility toward censorship
   B. an inability to read
   C. acceptance of book-burning
   D. lack of ideas

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
   A. “trying for character / but just faking it” (Lines 9-10)
   B. “whole libraries that no one/ got around to writing” (Lines 11-12)
   C. “terrorized countryside” (Line 14)
   D. “where wild dogs / own anything that moves” (Lines 14-15)
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why does the poet believe that “whole libraries that no one / got around to writing” is “More disturbing than book ashes?” Do you agree with him?

2. During the Nazi occupation of Germany, countless books were burned, including many by Jewish authors. Among those writers whose works were destroyed was Heinrich Heine, whose famous play, "Almansor," includes the following line: "Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people." In the context of this poem and the events of history, what are the dangers of censorship? Are these dangers more or less important than the dangers Stafford writes about?

3. In the context of this poem, what is the goal of education? How does the production of books aim to advance that goal? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of this poem, which is more important: freedom or security? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.