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; this position is now known as Poet Laureate. Book burning is a form of censorship in which people set fire to books they find objectionable or distasteful. As you read, take notes on how the form of the poem changes throughout. Then, note how these changes affect the development of the poem’s theme.

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.

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 words in the ashes.

And some books ought to burn, trying
for character
but just faking it. More disturbing than book ashes are whole libraries that no one got around to writing—desolate towns, miles of unthought in cities, and the terrorized countryside where wild dogs 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 through burning
2. Desolate (adjective): deserted; in a state of dreary emptiness
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. The worst threat of censorship is its ability to erase prominent authors and poets from history.
   
   B. We are all guilty of perpetuating censorship and the rejection of ideas that do not align with our own.
   
   C. Willful ignorance of new ideas is a greater threat to society than censorship.
   
   D. There would be no need for restrictive actions such as burning books if people were more tolerant of each other’s ideas.

2. **PART B:** Which line from the poem best supports 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 11-14)
   
   C. “If a book / isn’t written, no one needs to burn it” (Lines 18-19)
   
   D. “So I've burned books. And there are many / I haven't even written, and nobody has.” (Lines 21-22)

3. **PART A:** As used in line 15, what does the word “unthought” mean? [RL.4]
   
   A. lacking in ideas
   
   B. hostile toward knowledge
   
   C. lacking in literacy
   
   D. accepting of book-burning

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 9-11)
   
   B. “whole libraries that / no one / got around to writing” (Lines 12-14)
   
   C. “desolate / towns” (Lines 14-15)
   
   D. “the terrorized countryside where / wild dogs / own anything that moves” (Lines 16-18)

5. Which statement best summarizes the structural shift of the poem? [RL.5]
   
   A. The poet describes the burning of a book in the first stanza, but uses a philosophy-oriented couplet to conclude the poem in stanza 3.
   
   B. The poem shifts from the formlessness of stanza 2 to a closing couplet in stanza 3 that is focused on a more abstract idea.
   
   C. The form of the poem swings between iambic pentameter and free verse.
   
   D. The poem shifts from using lines of the same length in the first stanza to the more free form, enjambed lines of stanza 2.
6. Explain how the structure of the poem supports the development of its themes and tone. Cite evidence from the poem in your response.
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 ignorance 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?

3. In the context of this poem, what is the goal of education? How does the production of books aim to advance that goal and how does the burning of books threaten it? 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.