I believe human lives depend on intellectual freedom.
Let me explain why.

When I wrote *Black Helicopters*, a novel about a teen terrorist, it was important that I expose why the main character, Valley, was willing to become a suicide bomber. She had emotional motivations, but there was another important reason that she was vulnerable to the doctrines of terror—she hadn’t learned to think critically. In the interest of “protecting” his daughter, Valley’s father restricted access to the outside world, including books. Deprived of intellectual freedom, Valley was unprepared to make independent choices in her own best interest.

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Recently, I indexed an important book: *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History* edited by Alice Crawford (Princeton University Press 2015). It charts the human relationship to books—those marvelous inventions that preserve and share ideas. Book production was a huge investment of human labor and time. If you have ever had the pleasure of seeing an illuminated manuscript page you know why. It is little wonder that access to those rare and precious treasures was extremely limited. Books were kept under lock and key, sometimes chained to shelves. During the centuries since, many technological and cultural revolutions have affected
Was my mother wrong to deny me access to books meant for more experienced readers?

To exercise free will, we need practice rejecting some ideas and embracing others.
illustrations blotted out with ink or typing correction fluid. Since the government wasn’t willing to play censor, individuals were taking it into their own hands to protect others from “bad” books. Their actions, I believe, were as well-intentioned as my own mother’s.

I wish I could talk to them and to others who seek to have books removed from classrooms and libraries. I’d like to make a case that we need all sorts of books in our lives—especially as children. To exercise free will, we need practice rejecting some ideas and embracing others. We need books that make us struggle to understand. We need books that contain outmoded language and social standards. We need old books that don’t jibe with current sensibilities because we need to understand that ideas can and do evolve. Without that knowledge, we will be less prepared to think independently and challenge the status quo.

Censors aren’t wrong about the power of ideas, but they are wrong about the way to harness that power. We don’t need to restrict access to ideas; we need to do a better job of sharing our own.

We don’t need to restrict access to ideas; we need to do a better job of sharing our own. Instead of taking the book away, take the time to talk. Our children will grow up in a world awash in information. We need to prepare them to negotiate that world. The best protection against a bad idea—like the doctrine of terror, for example—is access to many other ideas. We can make that happen. At this moment, some of those very manuscripts that were once chained to shelves are being digitized and made accessible to a global audience. We are unchaining the books. We will all be freer for it.

Blythe Woolston is an insatiable reader who found her niche as a back-of-the-book indexer. She also writes novels for young readers—an activity she thinks of as just another way of reading stories. Her debut novel, The Freak Observer (Carolrhoda Books 2010), earned the William C. Morris Debut Award and the 2010 gold medal Moonbeam Children’s Book Award for general YA fiction, and was a PEN Center finalist. Black Helicopters (Candlewick 2013), a novel about suicide terrorism, earned a place on YALSA’s Best Fiction for Young Adults list, is a Montana Book Award Honor Book, and received the 2014 High Plains Book Award for Young Adult Fiction. Her next novel, MARTians, will be published by Candlewick this October.