

Name: _____ Class: _____

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.

- [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 charred¹ 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—desolate²
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.



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