Morley, John Steinbeck, J.K. Rowling, and the guys who wrote And Tango Makes Three. Calls for bans on your books just don’t compare when stacked up against a book-banning controversy like Child of God, a controversy in Texas that led to the disciplinary investigation of an English teacher and – because everything is bigger in Texas – the threat of criminal charges for the alleged distribution of harmful material to a minor.

What happened? Kaleb Tierce, 25, an English teacher at Jim Ned High School in Tuscola, population 700, was suspended on pay while officials investigated his distribution of a recommended reading list that included Cormac McCarthy’s novel, Child of God, to Year 9 students. The list was compiled by all of the high school’s English teachers for a pre-advanced placement class, but Tierce copped the suspension because one of his students actually decided to read the book.

Why?

Because Child of God ‘plumbs the depths of human degradation’ to tell the story of Lester Ballard, a dispossessed, violent man who eventually ends up murdering people and living with his victims’ decomposing bodies – and doing other things – in a cave.

That’s bad.

More than 120 parents and students, however, met in a show of support for Tierce, according to Associated Press (AP). ‘He’s a great teacher and coach and motivates the kids like no one else can,’ Chris Garcia, whose daughter was in one of Tierce’s classes, told AP. ‘If you’re trying to protect your kids from things in books, you may as well turn off the TV and video games.’ They read books in funny ways, apparently, in Texas.

Students supported their teacher by wearing armbands to school under their clothing and meeting in secret – since secretive support is very big in Texas. ‘He was the only one who understood us,’ Year 9 student Patrisha Ramirez secretively told AP. ‘He would joke around. He would make English interesting, for once.’ Expect Peter Weir to begin filming a Dead Poets Society version about Tierce sometime soon, but let’s hope without any Marlon Brando impersonations.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to clean out the cupboard of the western canon, the Last Word offers the following advice on books to take off your reading list.

Strike off The Odyssey, since it involves scenes in which a one-eyed cave dweller eats people, while the survivors retaliate by gouging out his eye and hanging off the undersides of his goats – weird.

Strike off Oedipus the King, since it involves scenes that depict murder and all that stuff between Oedipus and his mother – also weird.

Strike off Seneca’s blood-soaked tragedies – all of them – for all the blood-soaked, tragic carnage.

Strike off Beowulf for all that fighting, and the scary monsters.

Strike off Boccaccio’s Decameron for too much hanky panky. Likewise The Canterbury Tales.

Strike off Macbeth for the same reason as Seneca.

Strike off Goethe’s Faust, well Part One anyway, for letting the baddies win.

Strike off Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, not for any fault of the novel but for the musical, especially Les Misérables: The dream cast in concert, which ends with 17 Valjeans – 17 for crying out loud – on stage, all dying while singing in different languages.

Also strike off Bram Stokers’ Dracula for promoting a high-protein diet, Nietzsche’s The Will to Power for being incomprehensible, everything by Dostoevsky for leaving everyone feeling miserable, Samuel Beckett for every damn meaningless moment, William Faulkner for influencing Cormac McCarthy and McCarthy’s The Road for the yucky cannibal scene.

Oh, and strike off Of Mice and Men, Harry Potter and And Tango Makes Three as well, just to be on the safe side.

This month’s Last Word is written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher.

The list provided on this page does not purport to be, and is not intended to be, comprehensive or to provide legal advice as to the specific titles that should or should not be on required or recommended reading lists. If in doubt, readers should seek specific legal advice or – what the heck – just ban all actual books.