

William Stafford (1914-1993) was an American poet. In 1970, he was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a position known now 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.

Burning a Book

by William Stafford

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.