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.