

Censorship in Children's Literature

What Every Educator Should Know

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Should award-winning artist Trina Schart Hyman's (1983) version of *Little Red Riding Hood* be banned because the child brings a bottle of wine to her grandmother?

Should the most popular children's book author-illustrator Tomie dePaola (1975) have his Italian folktale *Strega Nona* pulled from the school library shelves because the main character practices "witchcraft" with a magic pasta pot?

Should Frank Asch's (1980) gentle story *The Last Puppy* be removed from the children's collection at the public library because the first cartoon-style picture shows the last puppy being born?

Children's literature controversies like the ones raised by these picture books are not unusual. But before educators assume that conservative, right-wing groups are the only ones who attempt to influence which books are purchased and circulated in libraries and schools, consider three additional objections to children's literature:

The book *Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1898) was banned because of its connection with racial slurs (Yuill, 1976).

Richard Scarry's books have been severely criticized by femi-

nists for their sex-role stereotypes.

During the Vietnam war era, fairytales and folktales were revised to eliminate the violence. The witch in Hansel and Gretel, for example, ran away instead of being burned in the oven.

Admittedly, efforts to influence children's reading material come from all directions (Zuckerman, 1986). But which practices are censorship? Which practices constitute book selection? Educators cannot smugly assume that it is always *censorship* when a group unlike themselves exerts its power and that it is always *quality control* when educators raise objections to a book. Both conservative and liberal censors have some legitimate concerns and wish to reform society (Shannon, 1989). Conservatives who want to remove books that emphasize the secular or denigrate the family are criticized for being out of pace with contemporary society. Liberals believe that neutrality toward "isms"—racism, sexism, classism, militarism, ageism and so forth—will promote social inequity; they are criticized for being "guardian angels" of the new social order (Moore & Burrell, 1981; Shakford, 1978).

This article will address those

standards of practice that can be used to guide and inform educators as they confront the complex issues surrounding book censorship. We will: 1) differentiate between censorship and selection; 2) review historical and research trends; 3) describe the consequences of censorship and 4) suggest strategies for taking a stand on the censorship of children's literature.

CENSORSHIP VERSUS SELECTION

Censorship is the removal, suppression or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational material (images, ideas and/or information) on the grounds that they are morally or otherwise objectionable (Reichman, 1988). The distinction between censorship and selection is fundamentally rooted in our views of three things: the child, the book and the society at large.

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View of the Child

The printed word is one of many influences upon an individual (Gambell, 1986). Children do not simply absorb the values presented to them via literature. Rather, children's literature confirms or fails to confirm attitudes from the larger world (Bauer, 1984).

But from the censors' points of view, childhood is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. They want to keep the slate clean (childhood as idyllic) or perhaps emblazon it with the new social order (childhood as a vehicle for social change). Take, for example, the furor over Judy Blume's (1970) book *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* which discusses menstruation. Even though this is a concern of young girls and it is not uncommon for 10-year-olds to be physically mature, many parents felt that it was inappropriate to discuss this issue in a book intended for children of this age group. To the censor, children are above all impressionable, and books are capable of corrupting them: "*Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil* gives rise to the fourth inevitable monkey, *Read no evil*" (Bradburn, 1988, p. 37).

A selection point of view is quite different. Adults continue to have the right to object to books, but they do not insist upon removing them from the shelves for everyone else. Adults who advocate selection rather than censorship of children's books respect the child's intellectual freedom and believe that adults have an obligation to be honest with children (L'Engle, 1987).

This selection perspective does not argue that all books are equally appropriate for children of all ages nor does it deny the fact that children are influenced by the things they read. Book selection invokes standards for literary quality, guidelines of nonpartisan professional groups and knowledge of child development/child psychology when rendering decisions about children's books. A selection

point of view would also leave the application of those guidelines to parents and professionals.

View of the Work

From a selection perspective, the goal is to give children access to the best that literature has to offer. Mark Twain's (1884) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a good example. Censors would advocate that it be removed because it reflects the racial stereotypes of its day. Those who view the same work from a selection perspective argue that it retains its value as quality literature in spite of conflict with modern sensibilities. They would contend that Huck Finn *should* be shared with children, but introduced with a "disclaimer" about the social context and followed by discussion.

Generally speaking, censorship tends to take a reactionary stance; to take words, phrases or pictures out of context; to be essentially negative and to have book banning or labeling as its goal. Selection, on the other hand, operates from a set of standards agreed upon by the group, looks at the total work, is essentially positive and promotes quality literature (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982).

View of Society

From a censorship point of view, evil is lurking everywhere in society and needs to be eradicated in literature. Ways of accomplishing this task are to remove books from sale, to label certain books as "controversial," to circulate lists of "objectionable" books and authors and to purge libraries (American Library Association and the American Book Publishers Council, 1972). The goal of the censor is to make moral decisions for others, to indoctrinate and limit access (National Council of Teachers of English, 1982). To censors, everyone else should be prodded or coerced into thinking as they do.

From a selection point of view, quality is elusive and needs to be supported in a wide variety of forms in society. To the person applying selection standards, the purpose is to advise, educate and increase options; individual differences are respected and others can "agree to disagree" without becoming adversaries.

Fiction and nonfiction books on the topic of AIDS are a good example. The censor would want this health issue ignored because the disease is usually transmitted through sexual contact. The person who operates from a set of professional guidelines would defend the right of children to have access to AIDS information as long as it is accurate and developmentally appropriate. Additionally, he or she would insist that understanding the physical and social consequences of the disease is essential to prevention.

CENSORSHIP: HISTORY AND RECENT RESEARCH TRENDS

The word *censorship* originated with the office of *censor*, a Roman official whose job was to uphold morality and restrict misconduct (Wynne, 1985). Censorship was noted as long ago as 389 B. C. when Plato recommended monitoring the tales of Homer and other fiction writers (Hansen, 1987). Censorship of children's literature is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1960s, there was "complacency and consensus" about children's literature because topics such as crime, violence, death, racial conflict, social problems or sexuality were either absent or given peripheral attention in children's books (Giblin, 1986; MacLeod, 1983). Striking changes took place in American society during the 1960s as the communication environment changed from a print-dominated (book) culture to an image-dominated (television) one (Postman,

1982). Children became aware of the world at a younger age, and eventually topics once thought unsuitable for children (or even forbidden) appeared in their books (Holland, 1980a; 1980b). In the 1970s and beyond, censorship shows every sign of increasing rather than abating (Tollefson, 1987). As the trend toward a literature-based language arts curriculum takes hold nationwide in the 1990s, this scrutiny of children's books will no doubt continue.

Research Trends

Although censorship research is basically descriptive, it does provide some insight into the extent of censorship, the identity of the censors, the materials deemed offensive and the fate of challenged books. Most research on censorship is one of two types: survey data or analysis of newspaper accounts.

Surveys that investigate the extent and nature of censorship in a school or library have been conducted by many individuals and organizations (Burruss, 1989; U. S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 1986). According to Hansen (1987), the major difficulty with questionnaires is their failure to differentiate between informal and formal complaints and the interchangeable use of terms with different meanings (e.g., *question*, *objection* and *complaint*). Studies that use newspaper accounts of censorship are obviously influenced by the news agency and the incidents they select for reporting (Hansen, 1987; People for the American Way, 1986). News service data have identified the most frequently challenged children's books nationwide (1982-1989) as:

- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—Mark Twain (1884)
- *The Chocolate War*—Robert Cormier (1974)
- *Go Ask Alice*—Anonymous (1976)

- *A Light in the Attic*—Shel Silverstein (1981)
- *Deenie*—Judy Blume (1973)
- *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*—Judy Blume (1971)
- *Forever*—Judy Blume (1975)

Both survey and newspaper account research suggest increases in complaints about children's books. The percentage of libraries receiving complaints rose from 20 percent in 1966 to 34 percent in 1982 (Burruss, 1989), and there has been a 30 to 35 percent increase in the challenge rate since 1980 (American Civil Liberties Union, 1986; People for the American Way, 1986).

Censorship research also provides information about who the censors are. A survey conducted by People for the American Way (1986) found that 65 percent of the objections came from parents, 21 percent from school personnel or schools and 9 percent from organized groups. Parents and teaching personnel are the most frequent objectors to materials in school libraries, whereas groups or individuals objected to materials in public libraries (Jenkinson, 1986). In 1966 parents made 48 percent of the challenges to library materials; by 1977 parents' challenges rose to 78 percent of all the objections made (Burruss, 1989).

WHAT IS CENSORABLE?

Generally speaking, books or elements of books are objectionable to parents, teachers or groups for one or more of three reasons: 1) The content is considered too mature/realistic; 2) The language is profane or obscene or 3) The sexual content is considered inappropriate.

Mature/Realistic Content

Most complaints about children's literature stem from a desire to protect children from the harsh realities of life. Take, for instance,

two books in which the main character dies tragically: *Where the Lillies Bloom* (Cleaver, 1969) and *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952). Adults may feel that death and bereavement are not suitable for children, that the topic is too mature. Or, they may object to the first book in which a parent dies but not to White's book because in it a personified spider dies.

Profane/Obscene Language

Another frequently cited objection is language, especially profanity and obscenity (Green, 1990). One of the first criticisms of profanity came in 1962 from a librarian who attacked a reviewer for failing to warn her readers that a book contained the word *damn* (Darling, 1974). Currently, Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978) and Zindel's (1968) *The Pigman* (which actually uses symbols to denote profanity) are both on censors' lists.

Sexual Content or Theme

Another strong objection to some children's books is the presence of sexual content or theme (Burruss, 1989; Hansen, 1987). In some instances, parents have demanded removal of Norma Klein's (1972) *Mom, the Wolfman and Me* for its portrayal of a single mother whose boyfriend moves in. Homosexuality is another taboo topic, if reaction to *Trying Hard To Hear You* (Scoppettone, 1978) is any indication. Nonfiction books on human sexuality have been challenged as well, such as volumes 14 and 15 of the *Childcraft Encyclopedia* (Field Experiences Educational Corporation, 1982).

THE AFTERMATH OF CENSORSHIP

Teachers, administrators and school boards may avoid controversial books targeted by the censors to avoid conflict (Cullinan,

1986). What are the consequences for institutions, for the books themselves and for the publishing industry when a book is challenged?

For Schools and Libraries

A librarian reads a book about dinosaurs at storytime. Afterwards, a mother files a complaint because the book suggests that the giant reptiles' extinction may have been attributable to drastic environmental change rather than Divine intervention. Although librarians are urged to select books according to literary standards and avoid reacting to pressure from critics (Silver, 1980), it is easy to understand why they might seek to avoid such disputes. With challenge rates hovering around 30 percent, librarians report that they frequently censor themselves rather than become confrontational with a library patron (American Civil Liberties Union, 1986; United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Sciences, 1982).

For the Books Themselves

The outcome of challenges to children's books varies. Studies suggest that if parents filed a complaint, books were removed about 40 percent of the time. When the school personnel objected to a book, however, it was removed about 75 percent of the time (Jenkinson, 1986; Burrell, 1989).

Removal is not the only response to censorship. Books are sometimes "put in the back room" so that children do not have free access to them. One librarian expressed the belief that the reshelving of books regarding human sexuality amounted to "quiet" censorship because most teens would be reluctant to request the books in person (Jenkinson, 1986).

In addition to removal, books may be physically altered; that is, offensive parts such as profanity may be obliterated. One famous

"cover up" occurred when a librarian painted diapers on the nude baby in Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* (Darling, 1974). Her actions created an outcry among writers, illustrators, librarians and publishers of children's books who joined to fight such censorship.

Consequences for Authors

Censorship can create an atmosphere of fear that results in "silent" censorship by publishers and "formula" books from authors. Publishing houses' anxiety about controversies may prompt them to reject a manuscript or insist that it be changed before it is accepted. The crux of the matter is whether authors are traveling in the well-worn ruts of their predecessors to "play it safe," doing artistic groundbreaking work or simply trying to sell books by being sensationalistic.

What effects does censorship have on the authors of children's books? Even if authors do not experience censorship in the original publication of their books, they are sometimes asked to make changes when the books are published in paperback "school editions" or in basal series (Goodman, 1988; Keresey, 1984). Barbara Cohen experienced censorship of her book *Molly's Pilgrim* (Cohen, 1983) when it was selected for inclusion in a basal reader. In journal style, she relates the negotiations that took place as editors attempted to alter the story to remove references to Molly's Jewishness and to the Bible (Cohen, 1987).

A different response to censorship by a publisher is evident in controversy over *Jake and Honey-bunch Go to Heaven* (Zemach, 1982). This book received mixed reviews; praise for its watercolor illustrations, doubts about its stereotyped portrayal of an all-black heaven. When three major libraries failed to order the book, the publisher went to the media with claims of censorship. In this case the tables

were turned; rather than avoiding censors by producing only nonoffensive material, this publisher chose to attack library selection committees as censors (Brandehoff, 1983). Incidents such as this one suggest that the debate about children's books is here to stay—a debate that reflects America's changing vision of childhood and society.

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

Educators can take the following steps to handle the inevitable controversies sparked by children's literature:

- *Keep current in the field.* Familiarize yourself with the differing sides of this debate (Goldstein, 1989). What elements in literature are offensive to censors of the right? The left? What happens when personal beliefs and community standards conflict? To what extent are school materials censored by the selection of administrators, librarians and teachers? Which books are you personally willing to fight for? Why? What biases do you have? How do they influence you? Maintain a file of material on censorship including newspaper clippings, reference sources and policy statements from various organizations, both partisan and nonpartisan.

- *Obtain selection criteria from national professional organizations.* Assemble support from such professional organizations as the American Library Association (1983), the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1979), the National Council of Teachers of English (1982) and the International Reading Association (Delegates Assembly, 1988). All of these groups have published policies to assist those who provide library services.

- *Communicate with parents.* Although it is tempting to take a "less

said, the better" stance on children's literature controversies, open discussions about children's books can provide parents with the information needed to make informed choices about their children's reading material (Adams, 1986; White, 1974). Swibold (1982) describes the implementation of a discussion group for parents that examined changes in children's books. After advertising the event, parents and teachers read the books in question; children wrote reactions to books and adults participated in discussions together. Informed parents are less likely to become censors if they understand a book's value, the reason it was placed in the library and the appeal it has for children.

■ *Evaluate books with children.* Even young children are capable of making judgments about literature. If children are taught to compare/contrast different versions of the same basic story—e.g., Galdone's (1973), Brett's (1987), Marshall's (1988) and a grocery store rack version of *The Three Bears*—they can acquire a taste for the best that literature has to offer. As children mature, we can coach them further in critical judgment skills (Shakford, 1978). We can also inform children about the issue of censorship through nonfiction books on the topic such as Monroe's (1990) *Censorship*, which is suitable for children in the intermediate grades. When children who have had such experiences become the general public, they are more likely to appreciate the distinction between selection and censorship.

■ *Prepare a school policy statement.* In addition to becoming informed about censorship issues and sharing information with students and parents, educators must also prepare themselves for the challenges to children's books that will surely come (Huck, Hepler & Hickman, 1987; Palmer, 1982). Donelson (1984) makes five recommenda-

tions for dealing with censorship: 1) Develop a selection policy statement that establishes reasons for including a book in the collection (e.g., enjoyment, exploring human problems, opportunities for vicarious experiences, exposure to different value systems and acquiring insights about the real world, past and present); 2) Form selection committees that will report to the faculty about new acquisitions; 3) Enlist community support; 4) Inform the public about classroom/library procedures and 5) Draft a policy for dealing with attempts at censorship.

■ *Adopt a formal complaint procedure.* The National Council of Teachers of English (1982) guidelines for coping with censorship advise receiving objections courteously, then directing the individual to complete "The Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work." This form assumes that the individual is familiar with the work in its entirety and this alone may discourage minor objections. Completed forms should be reviewed by a committee that will report findings and recommendations to the person or group with responsibility for the library.

CONCLUSION

Censorship is an extremely complex issue. It is rooted in the universal desire to shape society and promote a personal point of view. We need to be mindful that "Censors do not consider themselves as censors; they are watchdogs, guardians, vigilantes, parents, concerned citizens, or simply individuals who worry about where the world is heading. Whatever the motivation, religious, political, financial, or strictly personal, the effects on the library tend to be the same" (Mika & Shuman, 1988, p. 314). Educators must be prepared to face those groups or individuals who demand that children's litera-

ture be altered, labeled, reshelved, banned or burned. Ultimately, preserving the intellectual freedom of children is the responsibility of well-informed, caring and responsible adults.

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