

Book banning: A how-to guide for beginners

Charles Montpetit

Consider sex education. AIDS. Pornography. Safe sex. And government-sponsored campaigns to promote contraceptive devices.

No matter how you look at it, we've reached a crossroad in history. Unless today's parents happened to be at the forefront of the sexual revolution, back in the '60s and '70s, there has never been a greater rift between one's memories of youthful love and the way the next generation looks at sex.

This is particularly obvious in Quebec when we take a look at the incidents which have surrounded the publication of certain books for adolescents (This is not meant to say that the following cases would *only* have occurred in this province. In fact, when it comes to explicit material, Quebec's publishers are among the most *progressive* in North America.):

- in 1990, Governor General Award-winning author Michèle Marineau was almost barred from visiting Princeville's classrooms to talk about her light-hearted teenage romance *L'Été des baleines*. It took a survey analysing the extent of the students' sexual habits to convince everyone that the book wouldn't traumatize anybody;

- another GGA laureate, François Gravel, was equally surprised when his prize-winning novel *Deux heures et demie avant Jasmine/2 1/2 hours to Jasmine* was said to be unfit material for high school students. Yet as the title of the book suggests, the entire story is a soliloquy which takes place *before* the main character meets his beloved. We cannot be sure that a romantic episode will occur once the tale has ended, but apparently, allowing for such a possibility was already too much for some people;

- artist Darcia Labrosse (GGA 1987) also had to face bitter criticism for the cover illustration of *The amazing adventure of LittleFish*, which features a naked little girl as part of an exposé on birth and evolution—strangely enough, nobody



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complained about the inside illustrations, which are much more explicit;

• and I have myself encountered a similar situation with my anthology of true stories about first sexual experiences, *La première fois*. Two boxfuls of these books did get purchased for a lecture tour in secondary schools, but unfortunately, they never got to the teenagers: though the Ministry of Education had already paid for everything, the packages were returned almost immediately—and in one case, the books hadn't even been opened (keep in mind that these places are supposed to teach sex education from Secondary I through V. (The volumes were eventually replaced with a Canada Council-nominated novel of mine, *Temps perdu*. Since its heroine is alternately murdered, eaten and crucified, should we infer that this is less controversial than true coming-of-age stories?)

What is happening here?

Since I've *also* won a Governor General's Award, one might be tempted to establish some sort of connection, and blacklist everyone who has benefited from this dubious distinction. But mitigating circumstances prevent such drastic measures: for all the above authors, sales reports have been quite enthusiastic; in the last instance, the books were going so fast that a second printing had to be ordered twenty days after the launch date (a virtual breakthrough in our children's book industry).

Then again, maybe the documentary nature of *La première fois* has allowed it to avoid any hassles during the production phase. But that can't be the only key to success, for all the works mentioned here have evaded the wrath of their editors (something for which the publishing companies should be commended—after all, instances of large-mindedness deserve as much credit as the opposite needs flak).

Psychologists, sexologists and social workers dealing with related community issues were also called in to evaluate some of the projects, and the books passed these tests with flying colours. These experts went even further: in their opinion, there was a definite *need* for this material in the mainstream market.

Furthermore, the media reactions were overwhelmingly positive. At the risk of sounding immodest, here's a sample of the reviews which were written about *La première fois*:

Magnificent. A chance for young and old to share their thoughts about an important transition. Get hold of these gems! (*Des livres et des jeunes*)

La première fois is the kind of book that school libraries should display on their most prominent shelves. It will be as useful as, if not more useful than condom-vending machines. (*Le Soleil*)

A lot of myths are debunked. First attempts are not always glorious, and this is precisely what teenagers will enjoy recognizing in these stories. (*Le Devoir*)

A Molotov cocktail in the field of children's literature. Well-written and well-balanced... A daring *première* indeed. (*Le Droit*)

And these weren't exceptions, either. The event was covered by just about

every francophone reviewer (even those who usually don't handle kid lit); over the entire year in which this took place, not a single put-down was uttered. In fact, the anthology ended up being selected by the International Youth Library in Munich for its 1992 *White Raven* honour roll.

So if the authors, the publishers, the experts, the media, the readers and the prize-givers agree that a book is worth reading, what exactly are the weak links that prevent this material from reaching its target audience?

As everybody must know by now, there are two: a small percentage of parents and a large percentage of people who fear these parents (and act accordingly).

As we have seen, the actual welfare of children is not a factor—at least it's not in the opinion of the most knowledgeable specialists in these matters. It's *adult* feelings that are to be spared here, so there won't be any obstacle when their values are passed on to the following generation.

Now, I believe that boycotts and protest campaigns are the greatest tools that consumers can use to make themselves heard and improve their lot. People who are offended by a particular product should not buy it, and they certainly shouldn't be forced to do so. If the sum total of these reactions convinces authors or companies to change their ways, fine. Democracy has spoken.

But that's where I draw the line. If one's personal sensibilities are jarred by a given story, it doesn't follow that this individual has the right to restrict *other people's* access to the same material.

Yet this is what book banning is about. Of course, the arguments are never laid out in those terms; cries of censorship are not reactions one strives to arouse. So in fairness to the self-appointed watchdogs who are just starting to "protect our children," I've compiled an inventory of the excuses that are most often proffered on such occasions. Use them wisely.

1. The kids are too young for this.

I'm always amazed to see how quickly we forget our past sexual fumbblings when we become parents. Didn't we all know what a nude body looked like by the time we were eight? Weren't we all curious about sex before we even got to puberty? If we think that the new generation can be damaged by this kind of information, does it imply that today's kids are stupider than we were, or are we trying to keep them from becoming as twisted as *we* have become?

Let's get a few things straight: according to a recent Queen's University Study, 12% of the boys and 8% of the girls in Grade 7 are no longer virgins. These figures grow to 26% in Grade 9 and nearly 50% in Grade 11. That's right: while we are trying to prevent them from *reading* about sex, half of all fifteen-year-olds are already making love behind our backs.

Instead of ignoring these numbers, maybe we should revise the old equation according to which "explicit scenes = adult-only material." In fact, not to do so would be foolish now that sensual imagery has spread all over popular culture—from music videos to commercials to Disney pictures.

If we consider the pressures that teenagers are facing in the sexual arena, the least we can do is *increase* our supply of adequate information; if we don't, the only sources that will be readily available are the distortions provided by media fantasies and schoolyard banter.

2. We are not ready for such material.

Ah, that's more like it. Unfortunately, whenever someone concedes that "we" are to blame for censorship, that person is always pointing at *other* people. "The priest in charge of our sex education classes cannot bring himself to say the word condom," a school director explained as he was returning my books. Am I to understand that this statement is all that's needed to make the problem go away?

I'll be the first to admit it: it's not easy to stay in tune with the times. As an author for adolescents, I should know: in spite of an extremely tight research budget, my entire livelihood depends on being "cool enough" to stay relevant in a topsy-turvy world. Aren't educators in the same position? If we were talking about geography instead of sex, what would anyone think of a teacher who chose to ignore the changes in the Eastern Block?

3. We've been criticized for less than this.

So have I, but it didn't stop me from doing what I thought was right. And the same argument goes for all the individuals who have made significant contributions to the human race (instead of trying to remain unnoticed, the avoidance of trouble being their only purpose in life).

Don't get me wrong: I don't advocate raising hell for hell's sake. It's just that there will always be people who get offended, no matter how bland a project turns out to be—when we reduce this *ad absurdum*, breathing our neighbour's air might even be construed as an invasion of privacy.

Therefore, trying to anticipate all types of criticism only makes things worse: if school administrators, teachers and librarians keep trashing their plans every time they imagine that Someone Somewhere *might* take exception to them, what we're going to get is not progress, but a reduction of all learning experiences to the lowest common denominator. In other words, we can kiss civilization goodbye.

Once again, this does not mean that all forms of explicit material should become required reading, regardless of the students' religion, culture or creed. But the exceptions shouldn't dictate the rule, either; if these books are part of a list of suggestions, or if they are made available through the school library, what can possibly be wrong with teenagers consulting them of their own free will?



I like Helen. And I like going into their room when they are still sleeping and playing on their bed

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4. We can't encourage premature relationships.

Premature by whose standards? Our ancestors used to marry at the onset of puberty, and they were none the worse for wear; why is it that we, by contrast, panic at the sight of a bare *shoulder* in the Gauthier/Sylvestre *Yuneek* series?

Besides, despite outcries to the contrary, it has never been demonstrated that a glimpse of skin—or straight talk about sex—leads to a life of depravation and promiscuity. In fact, the evidence tends to run in the opposite direction; well-informed kids do not need to make reckless experiments of their own.

By the way, in the case of *La première fois*, four of the sixteen stories extolled the virtues of abstinence, and the average age of the characters was seventeen and a half years (two of them being more than 22 years old). Would anyone prefer the messages that teenagers find on every street corner?

5. Sexual materials do not belong in a writing course.

And why not? Other educational readings are not issue-free: they deal with ecology, feminism, racial harmony and other subjects that are relevant in modern society.

I know it's an old saw, but even in our classrooms, stories dealing with explicit violence are tolerated to a far greater extent than displays of affection between consenting partners. The latter are certainly *very* far from menacing our collective survival, so what is it that makes them more objectionable than a bullet between the eyes?

All right, it's true that romantic novels for young adults are not always sanitized for educational purposes. But then again, neither are the works of Homer, Shelley, Hugo, Steinbeck, Atwood and Richler. Should all masterpieces be banned from the classrooms, then? What will be left of a kid's introduction to literature when made-to-measure readings become the only tolerable art form in our schools?

ORIGINAL VERSION



© Roger Paré 1985

6. The stories are too crude.

Before we tackle this one, notice that the consequences of such crude “excesses” are never explained. Are certain words empowered with mind-rotting energy? Are non-sexist, anatomically-correct images bad for the eyes? Which is the most hurtful: frank portrayals of reality, *or the sheltering of artificially-created sensibilities?*

It's hard to get a handle on crudity anyway, for the concept varies with every person, time-frame and context in which the issue is raised. A



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fully-dressed Madonna (the Warner Brothers kind) might offend some people, while a nude Venus (the Botticelli kind) will remain acceptable to others. And vice-versa.

Strangely enough, no one allows for such variations when we come to children's literature. Any degree of explicitness is suddenly too much, even if it occurs in a clinical setting. Kids are supposed to be asexual. End of discussion.

But if our intent is to keep certain concepts from reaching young people's ears, we might as well confess that we've already lost the battle. Like

most banning attempts, our efforts to suppress these ideas are bestowing a special status on them, thereby promoting their worth instead of letting sleeping dogs lie.

If we really wanted to keep our offspring from focusing too much attention on their genitals, we should be treating these like any other body part.

7. The contents are not always optimistic.

Of course they aren't. I'll grant you that unilaterally negative coverage of sexual issues is utterly irresponsible—but pretending that everything out there is safe, comfortable and nice doesn't make more sense. We don't censor *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cyrano de Bergerac* because they end in tragedy; why should we treat modern romances any differently?

It's odd that the people who object to an occasional tale about our world's imperfections are often individuals who will tolerate sex education only if the teachers stick to warnings about sexually-transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Isn't it our collective duty to view emotions as more complex than human plumbing?

When adolescents learn that love can be fallible from time to time, they are more likely to abandon fairy-tale notions, and become more responsible. Now *that's* what true prevention is all about.

8. Too many options could be disorienting.

This is often a euphemism for "we will not tolerate any deviation from the norm," chief among such deviations being depictions of homosexuality. The only texts that are acceptable are those which toe the party line, and the party line is based on what is *already* acceptable in current literary production. You want an example of perversion? Try this incestuous circle of self-fulfilling prophecies!

Sexual identity is nobody's business but one's own. There is no—repeat, no—excuse for ramming a personal standard down people's throats. By the

same token, banning information about the alternatives is just as despicable, for it leaves *no other choices* than the approved, “voluntary” decision. Coercion can be disguised in many ways, and this is definitely one of them. Whenever kids become old enough to procreate, I agree that we should guide them through this new development. But that also means crediting their minds with enough intelligence to deal with this. Teenagers’ brains do not short-circuit as soon as they are presented with more than one possibility!

9. All the options are not covered.

Believe it or not, this objection was once offered to me in the same breath as the previous one.

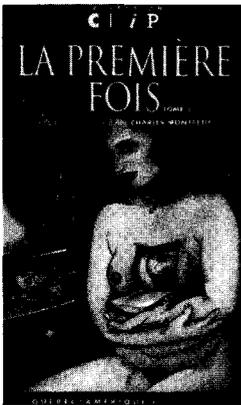
Whether it is written in the first or the third person, a novel is usually constructed so that you can share a particular being’s point of view. Unless you’re dealing with the ultimate “Choose-your-own-adventure saga,” you cannot expect that book to weigh every imaginable opportunity in an objective and egalitarian fashion. No writer alive (or dead) could withstand such a tall order.

As long as authors do not present their scenarios as the *only* solutions to certain conflicts, there is nothing wrong with having a given character follow a given path in given circumstances. If the readers are interested in exploring alternate avenues—I can’t believe I have to explain this—they can always look for other documents on the same subject!

10. The text may be o.k., but the illustrations won’t do.

In spite of everything we have just said, writers have it easy. For some reason, illustrators will not get away with material that’s one-tenth as daring as the texts which are currently being accepted.

Speaking as an occasional illustrator, I cannot see the difference in shock value between yarns that are encoded with alphabetical characters, and those which are told via pencil lines and colour splashes. In both cases, we’re talking about ink on a sheet of paper, but there you have it: the word “breast” will very

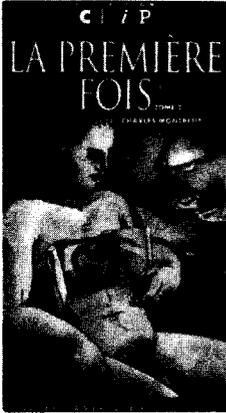


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rarely cause a fuss, while a cartoon drawing of the same will send the censors scurrying for their OBSCENITY stamp.

It’s not as if the idea was to protect illiterate children from an “improper” visual assault; if the written equivalent is acceptable to grown-ups, then why would it be repugnant to youngsters, especially if the kids have yet to learn about social taboos? When a five-year-old spotted an enlargement of *La première fois*’s cover in a book fair, he didn’t even notice that the character was in the buff. All he said was “Mom, look! That man’s got an apple in his body!”

The mother was horrified, though. Now, which is the healthier attitude?



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Let's not push this any further. In spite of censorship, in spite of the book bans, in spite of the shifts to the Right in our national priorities, there is still hope for quality books which do not pander to the we-don't-want-any-trouble formula. Incremental changes in attitudes are all pointing the way to sunnier, brighter tomorrows.

Who knows? If they end up sharing the activities of their emancipated children, the book-banners might even read the stuff one day!

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Charles Montpetit is a cartoonist, a young writers' workshop organizer and the award-winning author of *Lost time* and *Temps mort*. He's presently working on the English-Canadian version of *La première fois*, as well as an international edition with contributions from twenty different countries.