

Children's book challenges: The new wave

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Résumé: *A la lumière des études de Jenkinson (1984) et de Shrader (1992), R. Brown montre que les écoles et les bibliothèques publiques ne sont pas les seules institutions qui ne disposent pas de moyens de défense contre les groupes de pression: les directives des instances gouvernementales restent arbitraires et inefficaces contre ces mêmes groupes. Il analyse toutefois l'impact positif sur la lutte contre la censure de certaines associations comme le Conseil du livre et des périodiques du Canada.*

It no longer shocks us to hear of efforts to ban books like the much panned *American psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis, or even the now classic *Lady Chatterly's lover*. We're used to that. It is, however, more startling to witness efforts to whisk the works of Dr. Seuss (*The cat in the hat*) or A.A. Milne (*Winnie the Pooh*) off the shelves. Yet in a trend that is gaining momentum, more and more children's books are being challenged, and for reasons that are far different than we have seen in the past.

It was almost old hat, for example, when the principal of Queenswood Public School in Orleans, Ontario cancelled a visit to his school by author Margaret Buffie. After all, her book, *Who is Frances Rain?*, contained words like "hell" and "bastard," words which in the opinion of a teacher and the principal, would certainly shock the ten-to-thirteen year olds Buffie was scheduled to meet. As those of us who are parents know, kids just don't use that kind of language!

Nor did we recoil in disbelief when a school principal in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, removed Bob Munsch's book *Thomas' snowsuit* because it is disrespectful to school principals (in it the main character, little Thomas, thwarts the combined efforts of his teacher and his principal to make him put on his snowsuit). While on the topic of Bob Munsch books, when was the last time anyone saw *I have to go* or *Good families don't* (the book about farts) in their local library?*

But parental paranoia over dirty bits and bodily functions is nothing new. What is new are the current bases for book banning. One stems from the new religious right and its fear over what it sees as creeping "New wave" occultism in children's books. This was at the crux of a bizarre drama played out in the remote town of Manning, Alberta, in September 1991.

Like many other schools in Canada and the United States, Rosary Catholic

School in Manning had decided to use the highly-regarded children's reading series, *Impressions*. Edited by Toronto education teacher David Booth, it contains more than 100 poems, short stories and books, among them works by A.A. Milne, and Dr. Seuss. But some parents became uneasy over its contents. They saw in them references to witches, devils and even cannibalism and attributed such contents to "New wave" occultist religions—a conspiracy by devil worshippers in other words. In early September 1991, 30 parents, members of a group calling themselves Parents for Quality Education, burst into the school and demanded, upon threat of burning them, that the *Impressions* series be dropped. The town, with its small population, was bitterly divided. Unwilling to further split the community, the school board agreed to remove the series. No arrests were ever made.

What was it that so upset otherwise sober and hard-working parents? They claimed that an illustration in one work contained a subliminal image of the devil which could be seen if the drawing were held upside down before a mirror, while a line in another work, "In Napanee I'll eat your knee" from a nonsense poem by Dennis Lee was, they felt, promoting cannibalism.

The series has been under heavy attack since its introduction to schools in the U.S. Leading the charge have been right-wing religious groups with names like "Parents for Quality Education" and the American Family Law Association. These groups, based in California and Mississippi, have recently expanded into Alberta and Manitoba.

In early 1992 the AFLA took the series to court in the U.S. arguing that if the First Amendment could ban Christian prayers from schools then it must also prohibit the religions of "witchcraft" and "neo-paganism" that the challengers contend dominate *Impressions*. In April of 1992 a U.S. judge disagreed that the series violated the First Amendment and allowed it to remain in the schools.

There are, it seems, two sides to every issue. In Tennessee, a self-proclaimed "witch" recently requested that "Hansel and Gretel" be banned because it portrayed witches in a *negative* light.

The other relatively recent basis for challenging children's books is called "political correctness." Loosely defined, this controversial new term means the act of censoring, or even self-censoring out of the *fear* of offending some group. And there seem to be a growing number of groups who are considered "offendable."

In Toronto, the Race Relations Committee of the Toronto Board of Education recommended that William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* be dropped from the school's curriculum over the use by one of the characters of the word "nigger." The board refused the recommendation. However, *Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, were both restricted in New Brunswick. There a group calling itself PRUDE (Pride of Race Unity and Dignity through Education) argued that the books presented a negative image of blacks. Meanwhile, a native in Kamloops, British Columbia, objected to the portrayal of natives in the chil-

dren's book *Indian in the cupboard* by Lynn Reid Banks.

Politically-correct challenges extend well beyond race. In England, the London County Council banned Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* from London schools. The reason: the book portrayed only "middle class rabbits." Meanwhile in Empire, California, near America's foremost wine-producing region, 400 copies of "Little Red Riding Hood" were locked away from school children because, in the view of one school official, such a young child ought not to be carrying wine to her grandmother. Loggers in Sechel argued that the pro-environmentalist *Maxine's tree* by Diane Leger should get the chop.

While the school board in Manning was one which caved in under the pressure (we "wimped out" was how one official described it on the "Fifth estate" episode that covered the event), both *Maxine's tree* and *Indian in the cupboard* were retained.

The processes for banning or restricting children's literature are almost as perplexing as the reasons themselves. In a 1991 *Globe and mail* article, Elizabeth MacCallum provided detailed insight into how one book became "offensive" to a group and how it ended up banned. The book is the acclaimed *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* by Ian Wallace. It all began with casual comments in a local community centre in east end Toronto to the effect that some costumes in the book's illustrations were not how the Chinese would wear them, a remark repeated later at a meeting of a library book selection committee. Suddenly, school librarians were removing the work for fear of "offending" the Chinese, and hailing the offensive as a fight against racial discrimination.

This "fear of offending," often dubbed "chill," can emanate from any number of sources. Consultants to the Toronto Board of Education regularly advise public school librarians which books are to be considered "sexist, racist or violent." Among the titles recently recommended for "weeding or reviewing" are "Little old automobile," a 1948 tale of a car that bumps into things (it was deemed to be too violent) and *I'm glad I'm a boy, I'm glad I'm a girl*, criticized for its "sexist" stereotyping.

And how are libraries and schools holding up to these censorship challenges? Not as well as they could, at least according to a pair of recent censorship studies.

A survey by David Jenkinson of the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education in 1984 concluded that "More than half of all challenges in school libraries resulted in the items being removed."

Books like *How families live together* by Malcolm Provus, *Comment je suis né*, *The me nobody knows*; *Children's voices from the ghetto*, by Stephen Joseph, virtually all of Judy Blume's books, and, of course, "Little Red Riding Hood," were all considered troublesome by parents, teachers and other readers and were taken off the shelves.

Jenkinson's study, which covered only Manitoba, made a number of disturbing observations. The greatest number of challenges, for example, came from teachers themselves. Those who are mandated to teach children the role of

literature were instead imposing their own biases. In the survey, a school principal admitted "I have destroyed books I felt did not reflect the community's or my own personal taste or values." The chill effect is also unsettling. Jenkinson quotes one public school librarian as saying: "I try to ensure that books which would cause controversy are never placed in the library."

School libraries appeared to be strangely blasé about the seriousness of the threat to artistic freedom posed by children's book challenges. Some refused to consider books outright if they were by a certain author, Judy Blume's books being the most frequently banned. Few schools even kept records while one respondent sneered, "Some books we have garbaged. I can't even recall titles and authors." Words like that by educators should give everyone serious cause for concern.

In a separate study conducted in 1988, and published in 1992, Alvin M. Schrader asked public libraries across Canada to assess how they coped with book challenges.

One of Schrader's most serious concerns was the reaction by libraries to children's book challenges. He found that libraries lacked any defensible national policy on reacting to children's book challenges. (School boards, on the other hand, have been shown to have policies to deal with books on their curricula that are challenged.) Nor did they exhibit any philosophical foundation for restricting access of patrons aged thirteen and over. Why, he wonders, do some libraries shelve sex education books that are written especially for children with the adult books?

To answer such questions one is tempted to turn to the provincial guardians of educational freedom, the various ministries of Education. Yet even there the prospects of preserving free expressions are gloomy. In Newfoundland in 1989, for example, two government bureaucrats stripped a high school anthology of 12 pieces (out of 171) by such authors as Margaret Atwood and Ernest Hemingway. In the minds of the two government censors words like "Hell" and "damn" and "For Christ's sake" were likely to offend some religious groups.

In Ontario, government censorship is less arbitrary. In fact, the criteria for censorship are spelled right out in a document known as *Circular 14*. According to these guidelines, material is deemed "sexist" if it does not show a balance of women and men and if it portrays women in such "sexist" situations as wearing an apron in the kitchen. In some cases, publishers have denied school anthology editors permission to use their material if it was going to be subject to censorship à la *Circular 14*. The publishers refused, as they put it, to participate in the rewriting of history.

One of the most insidious forms of censorship is silent censorship. Books that have been challenged simply disappear from reading or from curricula or school library shelves with no announcement. In Alberta, *Who has seen the wind* by W.O. Mitchell, *The diviners* and *Catcher in the rye*, all challenged, simply no longer appear on some school reading lists. It will be interesting to see where the

Impressions series disappears.

One organization that is trying to turn back challenges and dissipate chill is the Canadian Book and Periodical Council. When the difficulties that Ontario's *Circular 14* were causing publishers appeared on the agenda of the Council's Freedom of Expression Committee, the BPC acted. The chairman of the FoE committee submitted a letter to the Ontario Ministry of Education outlining changes that would allow educators to avoid legitimate sexism without rewriting history or biasing distinctive points of view. The ministry has yet to act on any changes to the guidelines.

The BPC's FoE committee also prepared a strategy to bring to the attention of the media the parent raid on the Manning school. As a result, the confrontation received wide media coverage, including a documentary by CBC's award-winning current affairs program, *Fifth estate*.

The BPC also hosts the annual "Freedom to Read" week. Kits prepared months in advance contain articles on challenges to Canadians' freedom to read and express and suggest activities for schools and libraries.

The Writers' Union of Canada, through its Rights and Freedoms Committee, frequently supports writers, both members and non-members, whose works face challenges at school boards. Letters of support to authors, letters of concern to school boards or libraries, and press releases all form part of the TWUC's response strategy. Most recently TWUC has entered into the frays surrounding *Maxine's tree*, and *Indian in the cupboard*, in both cases helping to thwart the challenges.

Despite such victories in battle, the war is far from finished. Indeed, book challengers appear better equipped than ever. Groups on the religious right are more widely organized, better financed, and, thanks to the economic downturn, seem to be able to broaden their base of support. "Political correctness" now has a firm footing, particularly on university campuses, and, despite widespread hostility to its impact, has had a "chilling" effect, intimidating newspapers into issuing "politically correct" guidelines.

A humorous and highly-publicized example of the extent to which "politically correct" actions can go was the banning by the City of Toronto (from city-owned venues) of the pop rock group "Bare naked ladies" over its name that some city officials thought "objectified" women.

If literature is to perform its true function, to challenge our views of the world we inhabit, if history and science books are to truly inform, and if children are to remain free to explore unfettered the world of fantasy that opens their minds and stimulates them to creativity, then the fight against children's book challenges must be fought harder than ever. School boards and libraries should adopt policies to deal with parent and teacher challenges. Teachers and librarians, writers and publishers, must all be more vigilant in bringing children's book challenges to the attention of the media and to expose the extent and tenacity of groups with pro-censorship agendas. And schools of education must try harder

to enlighten student teachers on the real role of literature. Otherwise *The cat in the hat*, or *The house at Pooh corner* may disappear with hardly a second thought.

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*Editor's note: *Good families don't* had sold over 100,000 copies by November 1992, which indicates its acceptance by the general public.

Ron Brown is a travel writer and landscape photographer living in Toronto. He is the Chairman of the Rights and Freedoms Committee of the Writers' Union of Canada and has served on the Book and Periodical Council for the last five years. His articles on book censorship have appeared in the BPC's Freedom to read kit and The Toronto star.