

Too young to know? The censorship of children's materials in Canadian public libraries

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Résumé: *D'après une enquête menée auprès de mille bibliothécaires du Canada anglais, l'auteur analyse les constantes qui se dégagent des tentatives de censure des ouvrages destinés à la jeunesse. Il observe que le cas le plus fréquent, où l'on cherche à faire retirer de la circulation tel ou tel livre, représente 70% des plaintes. Or, seulement dix livres ont été retirés, ce qui prouve que le libraires défendent la liberté de lecture.*

In 1988, I conducted a survey of Canada's public libraries to measure community pressure for censorship of collections, and to document how public library staff respond to this pressure. To date, only one study in Canada has specifically focused on children and young adult users of public libraries (also included were school libraries); this research, by David Jenkinson, was restricted to Manitoba institutions ("The censorship iceberg").

The study reported here was motivated by a desire to understand more clearly the attitudes towards intellectual freedom that prevail in the public libraries of English Canada. While many Canadian residents believe that they and their children can get anything they might want to read, view, or hear through their public library, the Book and Periodical Council, formerly the Book and Periodical Development Council, has a quite different view of Canada as a nation of quiet censors and quiet censorship ("BPDC Sponsors Freedom to Read"). But to what extent does this accusation apply to the nation's public libraries and public librarians, and how are children and young adults affected? The impetus for this study was the realization that Canadian public librarians lacked national information on the scope and nature of community pressures to censor materials that are housed in the nation's public libraries. Also lacking was information on the ways in which public library staff across the country have responded to these pressures.

The questionnaire used in this study asked for comprehensive information on all incidents, whether verbal or written, that had occurred between 1985 and 1987. Censorship incidents involving materials for children and young adults were of particular interest to the study, as were institutional policies that involved the restriction of access to materials written for them.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the nature and extent of community pressures across Canada to deny or limit access to public library materials for

children and young adults during the period 1985 to 1987. In describing this phenomenon, I hope to draw attention to the larger philosophical and social policy issues relating to children's rights and liberties in the Canadian body politic. Are we ever too young to know? How old is old enough? Should children and young adults have a moral right of unrestricted access to information and literature? A constitutional right?

Methodology

A pre-tested questionnaire was mailed in early 1988 to all 1000 autonomous public libraries across Canada. Overall, 560 institutions responded, for a response rate of 56 percent. These 560 responding institutions served municipal populations of more than 19 million Canadian residents, approximately three out of four people in 1987. Because many more small than large public libraries responded to the study, the findings reported here tend to characterize smaller institutions across the country, with a median municipal population of 6,000 residents per library. They also tend to reflect the characteristics of English-language public libraries in Ontario (nine in ten questionnaire responses were in English and four in ten came from Ontario).

Findings

Responding institutions reported that approximately 600 people objected to 687 items in all age groups between 1985 and 1987. These challenges involved some 500 different titles. For a report of the study findings for both adult and children's materials, see the author's article in *Canadian library journal*.

One in five public libraries experienced challenges every year. While half of the challenges were verbal, this almost certainly understates their proportion because both documentation and staff memories of them tend to be less reliable, understandably, than for those challenges registered in writing. A total of 385 or 56 percent of all challenges were directed at materials for children and young adults.

Challenges to materials for children and young adults

In Quebec, one of the study respondents described how a parent had been scandalized to find his daughter reading a public library book on menstruation that was aimed at ten to fourteen-year-olds. The daughter was ten. The father was a doctor. In Newfoundland, another respondent reported that a patron wanted all of Kevin Major's books removed from the children's section of the public library. In Alberta, it was reported that a parent wanted *Trish for president* removed from the young adult section of the public library, on the grounds that it was "definitely unsuitable" for a young adult; however, the real reason behind

the objection, the study respondent noted parenthetically, was the liberated attitude of the girl in running for school president. In Ontario, a parent wanted *Kevin* withdrawn from the public library collection, on the grounds that her son had been counselled “for this gay problem” that she claimed he was confused and unhappy about, and she strongly resented the content of this book, which in her view glorified it. Also in Ontario, a parent requested the removal of *Where did I come from?* by Peter Mayle, which she felt was too explicit and “damaging to her nine-year-old son who was going into the priesthood.” In Nova Scotia, a parent wanted the public library to remove its copy of *Nightmares: Poems to trouble your sleep* because one poem, about a ghoul outside the school, “added to the things kids have to watch out for and be frightened of.” In Alberta, a parent wanted a book removed from the public library collection so that children would not have access to the obscene words in it. The book in question? *Webster’s new collegiate dictionary*.

These are but a few of the hundreds of incidents that came to light in this study. Of the 385 challenges to materials for children and young adults, detailed information was supplied for 316 of them. These 316 challenges involved 125 public libraries across Canada, two-thirds of which served urban populations (median residents was 63,000).

All challenges to materials for children and young adults were initiated by adults, but it is curious that very few of these adults claimed to be acting on behalf of a child—fewer than one in five. Almost all the rest said that they were representing themselves. It is also curious that the majority of complainants wanted the offending materials removed from the library altogether, not just from the shelves for younger patrons.

By age level, 13 percent of all challenges were directed at preschool materials, 43 percent at materials for children aged approximately six to 12, and 44 percent at materials for those between 13 and 18. Fiction was much more commonly targeted than non-fiction, 249 challenges (84 percent) compared to 49 challenges (16 percent). Virtually all challenges involved books of one kind or another: picture books accounted for 27 percent of the total, comic books for two percent, magazines for one percent, and other books for 68 percent. Only one percent of the challenges were to materials in non-book formats such as video and audio recordings. Challenged titles were published over a wide range of years, but half had imprints in the 1980s and 40 percent in the 1970s.

Complainants objected to 257 different titles; four challenges were to “all titles” by particular authors or on particular subjects. The pattern of challenged titles is shown in Table 1.

Table

1. Challenged Titles, by Incidence, 1985-1987

Title	Challenges per Title	Titles Number	Percent
<i>Lizzy's lion</i>	11	1	
<i>Forever</i>	8	1	
<i>Wifey</i>	6	1	2
<i>Slugs</i>	6	1	
<i>Where did I come from?</i>	4	1	
<i>Outside over there</i>	4	1	
5 titles	3	5	2
21 titles	2	21	8
225 titles	1	225	88
Total		257	100%

Most frequently challenged was *Lizzy's lion*—written by Dennis Lee, and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay—with 11 complaints over the three years covered by the study. *Lizzy's lion* won the Canada Council's Children's Literature Prize for Illustration in 1984. In second place, with eight complaints, was *Forever* by Judy Blume. Tied for third were two titles that each received six complaints, *Wifey* by Judy Blume and *Slugs* by David Greenberg. As the table shows, however, most titles were challenged only once, while a few were challenged several times.

The pattern of challenged authors was similar to that of challenged titles: a few authors had several works challenged, while most authors had only a few challenged. Ten works by Judy Blume were challenged, seven works by Norma Klein, and five works each by Raymond Briggs, Roald Dahl, and Maurice Sendak. While the large number of offending titles identified in the present study suggests that it may not be possible to predict potentially vulnerable titles in the future, the study shows that there are several authors whose works have been challenged persistently in the recent past. It seems reasonable to predict that much of their present and new work will continue to be challenged—as long as they are alive to write and able to resist the chill of sustained censure by a small minority of Canadians.

Complainants gave 430 reasons for challenging these 257 titles. Their reasons reveal a fascinating, and at times bewildering, spectrum of community values, social attitudes, and ideological mindsets. The most common grounds for objections were violence, cruelty, and "scary" titles (24 percent of challenges). Second were titles deemed unsuitable for a particular age group (17 percent), almost always in combination with additional groups such as sex or

violence. Third were objections to sexual explicitness, nudity, and pornography (16 percent). Fourth were objections to titles deemed to promote negative moral values (14 percent).

Specific grounds for objections, ranked by frequency of mention, were as follows:

- unsuitable for age group (74 times)
- violence, cruelty (69 times)
- sexually explicit, nudity (66 times)
- promotes negative moral values (59 times)
- scary, frightening to child (35 times)
- coarse language, profanity (30 times)
- promotes the occult, witchcraft (22 times)
- sexist, demeaning to women (12 times)
- racist (10 times)
- in bad taste (9 times)
- offensive to religion (9 times)
- promotes homosexuality (9 times)
- badly written (8 times)
- pornographic (7 times)
- other (11 times)

These patterns are somewhat similar to those found in several American studies of public libraries in individual states or regions. Noticeably absent from the American studies, however, were challenges on the basis of violence, cruelty, and scary titles. It is interesting that violence did not figure prominently in recent American studies of school library censorship either. In a nationwide study recently completed by Dianne Hopkins of challenges to materials in secondary school libraries, responses showed that violence was at the bottom of the list of concerns, while sexuality, profanity, obscenity, and morality ranked highest (4,24).

Although the statistical pattern in grounds for challenges looks relatively straightforward, it nonetheless masks a great deal of ideological complexity in the thinking of complainants. It masks their attitudes towards other citizens, especially towards children and young adults. Above all, it masks their beliefs about the power of ideas to persuade and tempt, and it masks their fears about the power of reading and the power of words.

Ideology, attitudes, beliefs, and fears are revealed in part through the words of the complainants themselves as they communicated to public library staff their grounds for challenging materials. Complainant objections to representations of violence and what they considered to be excessive or inappropriate violence were expressed in the following verbatim comments (bracketed information about titles and reading categories was supplied by the survey respondents):

- “Morbid and contains several senseless murders...Teaches children to solve their problems by using violence and murder.” [*Big Claus and Little Claus* by Hans Christian Andersen, children’s fiction]
- “Violence gratuitous and distasteful. Children torture, rape and finally murder babysitter and successfully blame it on a transient farm worker.” [*Let’s go play at Adams’* by Mendal W. Johnson]
- “Encourages children to feel violence will solve problems, encourages revenge—terrible qualities to teach.” [*I’ll fix Anthony* by Judith Viorst, picture book for ages three to ten]
- “Promotes disunity between brothers. There is no love or forgiveness but only hatred and revenge.” [*I’ll fix Anthony*]
- “Violence condoned. Not a good role model for young children.” [*Beast of Monsieur Racine* by Tomi Ungerer, fiction for ages five and up]
- “Makes nuclear war sound like fun.” [*The butter battle book* by Dr. Seuss, fiction for ages three to eight]
- “Fighting, hating and selfishness.” [*Mine’s the best* by Bonsall Crosby, easy fiction]
- “Emotional content, rape scene, death and cremation may be too intense for junior YA (ages eleven to thirteen). Might be more suitable to senior YA (fourteen to sixteen).” [*Crabbe* by William Bell]
- “Babysitter wanted to eat kids. Story is violent, inappropriate for three-year-old being left with babysitter.” [*Mr. and Mrs. Pig’s evening out* by Mary Rayner, picture book fiction]
- “Child was visibly upset by the pictures of eating a live cat and bird and the final basement picture. Upset by wording and torture scene on pages 23 and 24 especially.” [*The Werewolf family* by Jack Gantos and Nicole Rubel, picture book for ages four to ten]
- Too violent for patron’s child—fox snapped off the heads of his victims. [*The story of Henny Penny* illustrated by Tom and Blonnie Holmes, easy fiction]
- Patron objected to the second verse of London Bridge, specifically “chopped off their heads.” [*Sally go round the sun* by Edith Fowke, preschool fiction]
- “This book is gross! It’s violent to eat humans—cannibal, and violent to fall apart and split open.” [*The greedy old fat man* illustrated by Paul Galdone, preschool picture book]
- “Frightening for a child because the vain queen eats the heart of Snow White (she thinks it’s her heart, actually a wild boar’s heart).” [*Snow White and the seven dwarfs* retold by Wanda Gag, junior fiction]
- “Child was upset by Tittymouse and Tattymouse because Titty was scalded to death.” [*Tales to tell* by Harold Jones, preschool picture book]
- “Body being beaten, hanging.” [*The Punch and Judy book* by Ron Mann, juvenile/easy fiction]
- Patron was offended by the illustrations in which some faces are grotesque, the

giant is scary, and Tom comes out of a cow in a cowpat. [*Adventures of Tom* by Freire Wright, picture book]

- Patron found offensive the part where the tiny woman goes to the graveyard and removes a bone from the top of a grave and then uses it to make soup. [*The teeny tiny woman* by Barbara Seuling, fiction for ages three to eight]

- “Story is gory, very unhappy ending, disturbing to young child.” [*Big monster* by Shane Zarowny, easy fiction]

- Dialogue had frightened child when parent read the book to him. Crocodile eats child. Wanted us to warn parents that book would scare children. [*The enormous crocodile* by Roald Dahl, easy fiction]

- “Moral dubious, violent, not educational, scary.” [*Five Chinese brothers* by Claire Bishop, children’s picture book]

Complainant objections to materials with themes involving sex and sexual taboos were expressed as follows:

- “The flap on book did not at all even hint to the abundance of sexual information my child was suddenly confronted with—pg. 15, 20, 45—I do want my children to be aware of all this, but not at age eight and certainly not by accident.” [*Naomi in the middle* by Norma Klein, fiction for grade four]

- It would upset her children, who don’t know about these things. The patron does realize this occurs in some homes. [*Don’t hurt me, Mama* by Muriel Stanek, fiction for ages seven to eight]

- Felt book was too mature for patron’s eight year old daughter. [*Are you there God, it’s me Margaret* by Judy Blume, fiction for ages ten and up]

- “Suggestions are very explicit. Work is too revealing for young teens and seems to condone sexual freedom.” [*Beginner’s love* by Norma Klein, teen fiction]

- “Severely lacking morals; advocates abortion, sleeping around.” [*It’s not what you expect* by Norma Klein, young adult fiction]

- “Inappropriate classification—YA novel about gay teenage boys. Language and subject too crude for early teens who gravitate to YA-designated books.” [*Boys on the rock* by John Fox]

- “Discovering the mother and father had sex and the feelings of girls for girls etc.” [*Flick* by Wendy Kesselman, fiction for age thirteen]

- “Implied lesbianism and vulgar terms.” [*Bouquets for Brimbal* by J.P. Reading, fiction for ages fourteen plus]

- “Book dealt with lesbianism.” [*Annie on my mind* by Nancy Garden, fiction for ages eleven to fifteen]

- Wrong cataloguing; concern over “changing” Hercules to (female) Heraclea. [*Heraclea* by Bernard Euslin, juvenile fiction]

- “I find the profanity objectionable as well as the explicit description of sexual intercourse on p. 109. It seems to me that both of these make the book unsuitable for young teens at whom it seems to be aimed.” [*Dark but full of diamonds* by

Katie Letcher Lyle, young adult fiction]

- “Specific description of masturbation made children want to try it.” [*Deenie* by Judy Bloom, juvenile fiction]
- “Female nudity would corrupt children.” [*Tell me grandma, tell me grandpa*, author not given, preschool]
- “Their only relationship is sleeping together—there is no normal relationship.” [*Family secrets* by Norma Klein, young adult fiction]
- “Incredibly sexually graphic pictures. They were truly pornographic. The breast, the vagina as a source of violence. This is a sexual nightmare come true.” [*The tin pot foreign general and the old iron woman* by Raymond Briggs, fiction for ages twelve and over]
- “Small children might not get the message about the effects of war and could incorporate these ideas into their play.” [*The tin pot foreign general and the old iron woman*]
- “Sexual comments—condoms mentioned—not necessary in collection, not even a good story.” [*Where has Deedie Wooster been all these years?* by Anita Jacobs, young adult fiction]
- “Book described boy’s sexual experiences with girl friend.” [*Juggling* by Robert Lehrman, young adult fiction]
- Patron had read a critique which claimed book was an allegory of rape. [*The witches* by Roald Dahl, fiction for ages eight to twelve]
- Graphic representation of birth of puppy offended mother. [*The last puppy* by Frank Asch, preschool picture book]
- “Gives children the wrong impression about sex.” [*What’s Best for you* by J. Angell, young adult fiction]
- “Nudity, unpleasant story no child could enjoy.” [*In the night kitchen* by Maurice Sendak, preschool fiction]
- “Sexual references re prurient interests of male adolescents.” [*Starring Sally J. Freedman as herself* by Judy Blume, fiction for ages ten to thirteen]
- “Book too graphic about genital parts in a *negative* way—making fun of genitals, etc.” [*Les aventures magiques de Corentin au pays de PipiCaca*, author not given, juvenile fiction]

A fascinating cluster of challenges centred on portrayals of less-than-perfect adults and dysfunctional families. Specific themes found offensive by complainants were disrespect of children for parents, unacceptable behaviours such as incest, abuse, violence, and suicide, and inappropriate role modelling. These complaints were usually expressed as promotion of negative (read “unacceptable”) moral values.

- “Material depicted youths exhibiting disrespect for parents.” [*Angel dust blues* by Todd Strasser, young adult fiction]
- “Taught children disrespect to relatives and other adults when parents were

trying to teach manners.” [*Dinner at Aunt Rose’s* by Janet Munsil, fiction for preschool to eight years old]

- “Too violent. Showed parents in a bad light.” [*Jim who ran away from his wife and was eaten by a lie* by Ailaine Zelloe, picture book for ages three to eight]

- “I felt the main message to kids to be that violence, abuse, disobedience, disrespect, etc. are not offensive—injurious to kids’ minds.” [*Hector Protector* by Maurice Sendak, preschool fiction]

- “Swearing, smoking marijuana, teen attitudes towards adults.” [*Wheels for walking* by Sandra Richmond, young adult fiction]

- “Too scary for children, too violent, seems to condone child abuse.” [*Daddy is a monster...sometimes* by John Steptoe, picture book for ages three to seven]

- “Child abuse.” [*Tom Thumb* by Charles Perrault, picture book for ages six to twelve]

- “Book discussed family cruelty (wife abuse), violence.” [*Cracker Jackson* by Betsy Byers, young adult fiction]

- “Book deals with incest, child abuse.” [*Abby, my love* by Hadley Irwin, young adult fiction]

- “Book not suitable for children’s library (or indeed any library) because of graphic description of sex, violence, child abuse.” [*Barbe-bleue* by Jacques Martin, a comic book for ages eight to twelve]

- “Content and violent pictures show incestuous behavior.” [*Le Petit chaperon rouge* by Bruno de la Salle, fiction for ages six to eight]

- “The relationship between the brother and sister is simply not a healthy relationship mostly when they are sleeping together, last page and also putting the baby on the mantelpiece. Really.” [*My crazy sister* by M.B. Goffstein, preschool fiction]

- Patron felt book was for 10-12 year olds, indirectly about suicide. Not suitable for children at all. [*Le Petit chien* by Jean Prignaud, picture book for ages four to seven]

- “Total despair in the conclusion—child commits suicide.” [*The brothers Lionheart* by Astrid Lindgren, fiction for ages eight to twelve]

- At one point in the story, it states the hero’s parents “were so worried they were ready to kill themselves.” Patron was horrified that such a statement should be in a kid’s book. [*Gorky rises* by William Steig, picture book for preschool to grade three]

- When son is lost, mother is so distraught she says she will kill herself. Talk about people committing suicide NOT appropriate for small children.” [*Gorky rises*]

- Patron felt boy’s response was overly violent—not true to life. Disliked the ending where the mother fantasizes she would be able to watch soap operas while her son fed the baby. [*When the new baby comes, I’m moving out* by Martha Alexander, preschool picture book]

- Patron said the book had unfeeling treatment of the subject of death, and

disturbed her child who chose it because of its blue cover, in response to our summer reading game. It should be moved to non-fiction. [*Cookies for Luke* by Sheila J. Bleeks, juvenile fiction]

- “Lesson indicates that greed, craftiness and laziness pay off.” [*Tom Fox and the apple pie* by Clyde Watson, picture book for ages five to seven]
- “Gross habit: putting in picture and writing a grandpa blowing his nose without a handkerchief. Disregard just that one particular page.” [*My old grandad* by Wolf Harrant, picture book]
- Patron found illustrations and poetry offensive and of poor quality, offbeat, eg p. 15 “urine” picture of grandmother. [*High wire spider* by George Swede]
- Patron felt the male/female relationship in the book was an extremely negative influence on students: “Burn book (seriously!).” [*One on one* by Jerry Seigel, fiction for grades nine and up]
- Patron thought book condoned forced marriages, i.e., teen pregnancies. [*Pennington’s heir* by K.M. Peyton, young adult fiction]
- Patron felt the book was showing a bad boy who, although he did misbehave, was never punished. Children reading it would think it was cute to be naughty. [*Bad Thad* by Judy Malloy, preschool picture book]
- “Stereotyped. Reinforces acceptance of problems rather than encouraging action.” [*New friend* by Charette Zolokow, preschool fiction]
- Patron felt book encouraged children to trust strangers. [*Will you cross me*, author not given, fiction for grade one]
- “The child in the story is wearing a t-shirt with her name on it, which is not recommended practice because of danger from child molesters.” [*The other Emily* by Gibbs Davis, picture book for preschool/primary]
- “Not proper for a child to read about having to look after a sibling because they are handicapped; children do not understand about people being different.” [*Ben* by Victoria Shannon, juvenile fiction]
- “Didn’t think it right that an adult could take over from children and didn’t like tone of book.” [*The rotten old car* by Geraldine Kaye, fiction for preschool to seven years old]
- “Book shows Santa drinking alcoholic beverages.” [*Father Christmas* by Raymond Briggs, picture book for ages five to ten]
- “Did not like children forgetting about dead bird for which they had had a funeral.” [*The dead bird* by Margaret Wise Brown, fiction for preschool to grade two]
- “I was very disappointed to hear the endless stream of insults...I’m trying to teach good vocabulary.” [*Two stupid dummies* by Mark Thurman, fiction for ages three to seven]
- “Picture of dog defecating on floor.” [*Some swell pup* by Maurice Sendak, picture book for ages four to eight]

Several complainants objected to the use of profanity in literature, often urging

removal or restriction of material on the basis of a single word. Examples are the following:

- use of the word ‘fuck’ [*Freddy’s book* by John Neufeld, fiction for ages eight to twelve]
- reference to a penis as a ‘hot dog’ [*Blue trees, red sky* by Norma Klein, picture book for ages three to seven]
- use of ‘slit’ instead of ‘vagina’ [*Thomas is different* by Gunilla Wolde, picture book for ages four to eight]
- use of the word ‘slut’ [*Cinderella* illustrated by Bernadette, juvenile fiction]
- reference to a cat called ‘Fluffybum’ [*Badjelly the witch* by Spike Milligan, junior fiction]
- use of the expression ‘Oh my God’ [*Les aventures de Benji* by Disney, cassette-book for ages six to eight]

Other complaints were about more extensive offence:

- “Inappropriate language (fucking, whore’s guts) and explicit graphics (couples copulating, naked females). The theme (that God is a depraved old man) is equally offensive.” [*The vagabond in limbo: The ultimate alchemist* by Ribera Godard, fiction for young adults and adults]
- “Encouraged swearing.” [“Soap-Box Derby” by the National Film Board, juvenile video]
- “Might make coarse language seem acceptable—damn, bull, up yours, go to Hell.” [*Alan and Naomi* by Myron Levoy, children’s fiction]
- Patron complained about language—bastard, pissed, Hot Damn, and some we could not find. [*Starring Sally J. Freedman as herself* by Judy Blume]
- “Coarse language—‘Mrs. Minish is such a bitch’ (p. 30). ‘Damn that Blubber!’ (p. 50). ‘Damn!’ Mom said (p. 69). Categorize the book so that children under age eleven are less likely to read it.” [*Blubber* by Judy Blume, fiction for grades four to six]

Several complainants opposed portrayals of the occult, witchcraft, and religion in literature for children and young adults.

- Parent objected to devil being blamed for child’s unacceptable behavior—felt this went against learning to accept responsibility for own actions. [*The Devil did it* by Susan Jeschke, fiction for preschool to grade three]
- “The devil becomes a girl’s friend. Becoming a friend of the devil is not good entertainment especially for kids.” [*The Devil did it*]
- “Witchcraft is represented as being a real and vital threat to the lives of children...The resolution of the story leaves the witches and underworld figures in the same powerful and threatening position.” [*Hag head* by Susan Musgrave]

and Carol Evans, fiction for ages six to eleven]

- “Introducing the occult in a matter-of-fact, supposedly innocent way.” [*Bumps in the night* by Harry Allard, picture book for ages three to eight]
- “Devils juxtaposed with church, religion.” [*Out of the oven* by Jan Mark, picture book]
- “Ridicules religion by creating an extra-terrestrial being.” [*Les Huits jours du diable dans “Super Tintin”* by D. Convard, comic book for ages nine to thirteen]
- Patron said that God was depicted as vengeful, not loving. [*Moses—the escape from Egypt* by Geoffrey Butcher, board book for preschool-grade one]

Although challenges to non-fiction for children and young adults were less common than challenges to fiction, some of the grounds indicated by complainants were as follows:

- “Objection to the title—this is not a book for the young and teenagers are young. Sin is never something to be proud of. I would think this book might result in a very sick society in the future.” [*Young, gay and proud* edited by Sasha Alyson, young adult non-fiction]
- “Some vulnerable teenager entering puberty might actually believe that homosexuality is okay and give it a try and reap some serious consequences in later years.” [*A way of love, a way of life* by Frances Hanckel and John Cunningham, young adult non-fiction]
- “Mention of masturbation, periods, wet dreams could make children experiment early (prepuberty).” [*What’s happening to me: A guide to puberty* by Peter Mayle, young adult non-fiction]
- Patron objected strongly to one sentence on masturbation being pleasurable, ie, okay. [*What’s happening to me: A guide to puberty*]
- “Material was very explicit and actually encouraging of teenage girls to experiment with pre-marital sex.” [*Girls and sex* by Warde! B. Pomeroy, young adult non-fiction]
- “I object to the tone of the chapter on sex. You as librarian are in a perfect position to set a high moral standard for the community.” [*The teenage survival book* by Sol Gordon, teen non-fiction]
- “Will initiate curiosity, resulting in sexual experimentation by the children.” [*Did the sun shine before you were born?* by Sol Gordon, non-fiction for ages three to seven]
- “My son brought this book to my attention and was upset and embarrassed.” [*The body book* by Claire Rayner, junior non-fiction]
- As a Catholic parent, patron was concerned that child would have access to such material, especially about birth control. [*Learning about sex: A guide for children and their families* by Jennifer Aho]
- Patron specifically objected to a sentence that used the word “penis”—parent of grade three girl felt that she didn’t want her daughter to know what a penis was

at this early age. [*The joy of birth* by Camilla Jessel, described as non-fiction for preschool to grade three]

- Mention of “chastity belt.” [*Alexander the Great* by Constance C. Greene, non-fiction for ages ten to twelve]

Not only was there wide variation in the grounds that complainants offered to justify requests to remove or restrict materials, there were also differences in point of view on the same title. For example, although violence was a recurring theme in complaints about *Lizzy’s lion* there were many different interpretations given to this theme among the eleven complainants who sought its suppression:

- “Very violent—may frighten children aged three to six”
- “Unnecessary exposure to violence that a young child does not need to be subjected to”
- “Lion eating up robber—frightening—inappropriate material for young children”
- “Whole book objectionable—caused children to have nightmares”
- “Too violent—a depressing book”
- “Violence was too graphic”
- “Violence—body parts dumped in trash”
- “Violent and scary”
- “Break and enter ideas; insensitive and uncaring about people in general.”

Similarly, although sexual explicitness was a recurring theme in objections to *Forever*, several interpretations were also given to this theme by complainants:

- “My daughter’s romantic illusions have been shattered. Not suitable for an eleven-year old”
- Patron objected to this book being considered a children’s book when it had sex scenes
- Patron thought subject matter was teaching children to have sex
- Patron did not want his teenaged daughter reading a sexually explicit book
- “Too much sex, no remorse on girl’s part”
- “Too sexually explicit”
- “Too explicitly sexual.”

The grounds for objections to *Wifey* were also expressed in a variety of ways:

- Unsuitable for children—adult material written by popular children’s author
- Patron felt that it was inappropriate for YA—cover listed book as adult, too explicit sexually
- Not for children
- Patron was extremely upset as to sexual nature of book and very angry as to

placement

- “Unsuitable for young people”
- “Entire content.”

The reasons for objections to *Slugs* were as follows:

- Too violent for children
- “The book is a bad influence on child-animal relationships and is generally in bad taste”
- “Gross content, extreme violence indicated, would promote violence and cruelty in children, etc.”

Objections to *Where did I come from?* were as follows:

- Patron felt book was too explicit and damaging to her nine-year-old son who was going into the Priesthood
- “Unsuitable for children without parental supervision...writing in poor taste...pictures presented in a poor manner... encourages children to experiment”
- Patron said chapter “Making Love” was too much of a how-to and inappropriate for age of readers to which it was directed
- Patron felt book should be housed in office because children shouldn’t be able to get at it themselves; subject matter should be dealt with by parent.

Objections to *Outside over there* were as follows:

- “Desensitizes children to accept ugly; shows children expected to take on an adult’s responsibility; the magic has an occult flavour; the illustrations make the gnomes look like adults”
- “Terrifying pictures”
- “Unnatural, scary story, not educational”
- “Simply weird, not suitable for children...doesn’t make sense.”

The multiplicity of grounds that have been advanced to justify challenges to library materials is best explained by reference to reading theory, or more precisely, reader response theory. The reader (or viewer or listener) inevitably participates in creating the meaning of a text. Indeed, sometimes the reader’s interpretation of its meaning is so divergent that it appears the reader has created his or her own text quite independent of whatever the author intended. As Aidan Chambers explains it, response to a text is based in a coming together of the reader’s personal history, the reader’s reading history, and the text itself (*Introducing books for children*). A reader’s personal history includes the formation of cultural, moral, and esthetic values. These values play a part in determining a reader’s response to a text, and are among the criteria that a reader

uses, consciously or unconsciously, to decide whether a text is good or bad. If a text is judged on its literary merit, esthetic values should be the dominant criteria. But literature has always been understood to be a force for socializing individuals, and the moral and cultural values that a reader brings to and finds in a text will influence the reader's judgment of the text. These complex interactions are nowhere better illustrated than in the frequently divergent reasons that people give for disapproving of the same title.

Regardless of the varying reasons for challenges, what action did the complainants want carried out between 1985 and 1987? Seventy percent wanted the offending material removed from the public library collection—some even wanted it burned or destroyed as well! And a fringe element also wanted the library staff punished in draconian ways. Other more benign actions requested by complainants were internal relocations, usually from children's to adult or young adult sections but also from young adult to adult, restrictions on borrowing or in-house use, and placement of a warning label on materials.

In spite of the overwhelming demand for withdrawal of items from collections, however, the offending material was retained on library shelves in nine out of ten cases. In only 34 out of 309 challenges was it withdrawn. Five challenges were unresolved at the time of the study. Almost all challenges were resolved within three months of initiation, and in fact many were resolved on the same day that they were lodged. Only two percent of all challenges ever reached the local news media.

Institutional policies

An important aspect of patron access to public library collections is the existence of written policies for selecting materials and handling objections. Also important for children and young adults is whether the institution has age-related restrictions on borrowing and in-house use of materials.

Among respondent public libraries that reported challenges to materials for children and young adults between 1985 and 1987, the vast majority had appropriate access policies—a written selection policy, a written objections policy, a form for handling objections, and a donations policy. The vast majority also endorsed the Canadian Library Association's *Statement on Intellectual Freedom (CLA Statement)*, which states that: "All persons in Canada have the fundamental right, as embodied in the nation's Bill of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to have access to all expressions of knowledge, creativity and intellectual activity, and to express their thoughts publicly."

However, at the same time that most respondents endorsed the CLA Statement, three in ten also restricted borrowing or in-house use of materials according to age, with restrictions varying from ages twelve to eighteen years old. Some institutions reported that they restrict access to specific titles or authors such as Judy Blume titles, *Wifey*, *Forever*, *Boys and sex*, and *Girls and*

sex. A sizeable minority of respondents also restricted children's access to certain categories of materials, variously described as "questionable" adult material, books with "doubtful morality," adult fiction, adult type of material, sexually explicit material, adult comics, erotic comics, sexual enjoyment guides, books on sexuality, sex education books, books on childbirth, "pornographic" materials, "some controversial reference material (sex)," violent material, certain art and science books, or, in one case, "anything that is not housed in the children's room."

Summary

Do children and young adults enjoy unfettered access to Canadian public library collections? This study shows that the answer is, for the most part, yes. While public library staff who participated in the study reveal considerable sensitivity in their reactions to challenges and in their relations with those members of the community who believe that they have a right to personal advocacy in the public library selection process, at the same time, they also reveal a strong commitment to the principle of freedom of access to information and literature for children and young adults. What public librarians across the country need now is enhanced relationships with teachers, school librarians, and literature specialists across the country, in the common goal of helping young people to learn what it is to be human.

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