

We are all censors

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Résumé: *L'auteur se livre à l'examen critique des comportements à la base de la censure, parmi lesquels il distingue ce qu'il appelle l'agnosis ou le refus de savoir. Il conteste la répartition des livres en fonction de l'âge des enfants et refuse de concevoir le livre comme une source d'enseignement en soi. Selon Nodelman, la vraie source de la transmission du savoir se trouve chez les éducateurs, dans les exemples qu'ils donnent et les valeurs qu'ils défendent. Dans cette optique, l'enfant devrait pouvoir lire tous les livres qu'il veut, à condition que cette liberté soit encadrée par un adulte résolument impliqué dans le processus d'apprentissage.*

Like myself—like, I imagine, most readers of this journal—the people I talk to about the censorship of children's books are against it. Like me, they chortle in amused horror when union officials in B.C. try to ban a picture book about trees because it will turn children against loggers—or when a school board in Western Canada actually does ban a Robert Munsch story about a teacher and principal failing to get a determined child into a snowsuit, on the grounds that it will undermine young readers' respect for those in authority, i.e., teachers, and principals, and school boards.¹

We laugh at these clearly misguided acts of suppression because we have a strong faith, not just in the importance of the democratic principle of freedom of thought and expression, but also in the basic good sense of most children. We believe that they are too smart (or maybe just too rigid) to be subverted as easily as most censors and would-be censors imagine they will be.

And yet: in my conversations with others about these matters, there's always a point when even those most scornful of censorship become censorious—themselves versions of the very thing they so vociferously attack. When it comes to children's books, I've concluded, we are all censors.

We anti-censors are most likely to become censorious about books that diverge from our own theoretically anti-censorious values—books that attack individual choice, or reinforce gender stereotypes. The more angry someone is about attempts to ban anti-logging books, the more likely that person is to demand the suppression of other books for being anti-environment.

That's not surprising, perhaps; but it *is* dangerous. To suggest that we have the right to close down discussion of any topic or ban any book is merely to

establish that censorship is, in some circumstances, appropriate; and if it's appropriate in some, then who's to distinguish between those and others?

As is probably clear by now, my own position on these matters is brutally simple—simplistic, some will say. There is *nothing* that anybody should not be allowed to say or to write—nothing, no matter how offensive, how narrow-minded, how boneheaded, or how dangerous I might personally find it. Not anything sexist or racist. Not neo-Nazi misrepresentations of history. Not pornography. Nothing.

But this is not to say that bigots and fools and perverts have the right to let their bigotry and stupidity and perversion go unquestioned. Just the opposite: they *must* be questioned. If we succeed in preventing them from saying it, then we lose our opportunity to question it—and history teaches that evil or folly repressed merely deepens and becomes more dangerous, like gangrene under a bandage. It becomes forbidden and tempting. It grows, and it grows worse. No, I say—better to let it be said, so that we in turn have the freedom to point out how ridiculous or how dangerous it is, in the faith that, if we argue against it logically and well, people in general will be reasonable enough to reach our own wise conclusions about it. To believe they won't be would be unconscionably arrogant.

So: nothing censored, nothing suppressed—and that includes, perhaps above all, the censorious utterances of would-be censors. For if we're truly against censorship, then we have no choice but to allow censors freedom of speech also. If we're truly tolerant, we must tolerate their intolerance—at least to the extent of not condemning the expression of it, so that we can then *condemn* its erroneousness.

All of which, you might well be saying, is fine and true and good: of course we have to let people say whatever they want. But the right of people to say it doesn't mean that other people must hear it—and especially not if the other people happen to be children. So sure, let writers express their racism or anti-environmentalism—as long as I preserve my right not to listen to them, and above all, my right to keep their sick perversions out of the hands of the children in my charge.

In *Storm in the mountains*, his disturbing book about the attempt in West Virginia to ban the language arts text series he had edited, James Moffett suggests that censorship emerges from what he calls *agnosis*—"not-wanting-to-know." Now agnosis is an acceptable personal choice—particularly when it's made by adults who do in fact already know and just aren't interested. I assume that's the basis upon which most of us choose what we read—seek out more science fiction like the science fiction we've already enjoyed, perhaps, and reject pornography. When it comes to children, however, the situation is not so simple.

When it comes to children, many of us practice agnosis-at-one-remove. We reject books on the basis that they might teach children something we ourselves do already know, but that we do not want them to know at all.

We usually don't want them to know it on the basis that it will harm or pervert them—that knowledge of evil will make them evil. That ignores one salient fact: our *own* knowledge of evil has not made *us* evil. Just the opposite, most of the time: when we come upon a sexist stereotype, it's not male chauvinist pigs that most of us turn into—it's angry feminists. Our usual response to the discovery of evil matter in a book we're reading is an outbreak of outraged rectitude.

But that's because we already know how to identify the stereotypes as stereotypes; it might be argued (indeed it is) that weaker or less mature minds than our own won't have that skill. They will accept the stereotypes unconsciously, and that's why we need to protect them from reading books that contain them.

But we live in a world filled, not just with books we don't approve of, but also with TV advertising, drug pushers, phone solicitors, politicians, evangelists, and the children of parents with values different from our own. Keeping children from access to ideas and values we don't like is next to impossible. It would be more logical to protect them, not by trying to suppress the potentially dangerous materials, but by helping them to learn the important skill of being less trusting. My own daughter took over the responsibility of identifying the sexism in the picture books she read as soon as the world made her conscious of her gender and her parents made her conscious of the oppression she faced because of it; since then, she has watched even the Miss USA pageant without any apparent desire to transform herself into a fluff-brained egomaniac.

And let's suppose we hadn't taught Alice to notice gender stereotypes: for all the ardent convictions of adults about what books children shouldn't read, I've never met anybody, not one single person, who admits to having personally learned to be evil or violent from the evil or violence they encountered in the books they read as children. Again, just the opposite: a student in my children's literature course this year showed me a book she still treasures because she'd loved it as a child. But nowadays she told me, she keeps it on the top shelf of a dark closet, behind the linens, for nowadays she finds it obnoxiously racist, and she doesn't want her own children to see it and be contaminated by it. That book is indeed racist: it is called *10 little negroes*, and it tells of Choc'late Sam and his wife Ebony, who are "as proud as any coons" of their ever-increasing family of "nigger boys." But as my student's urgent need to suppress this book suggests, it had not made *her* racist. As a child, she had not herself been the victim of the crime she imagined the book would commit on others.

I have to wonder if these crimes ever are committed—if books by themselves do actually play a significant part in the formation of our less appetizing values. Yes, books can certainly confirm what we already suspect about our world, or perhaps make us question it—maybe even offer us new choices to consider. But surely we make those choices on the basis of what we know and are already. If books or TV shows do persuade children of what their parents or other caregivers would prefer they didn't learn, it can only be for one of two reasons: either

children are inherently and unchangeably evil despite their care-givers' attempts to turn them to good (a conclusion I refuse to accept); or else care-givers' parents didn't provide their children with a context in which they would be likely to reject the evil.

I suspect, then, that books are always less significant in our education than the values our care-givers provide us with—either the ones they claim to believe in and work at inculcating, or the ones they actually live by, and teach us by merely allowing us to observe them. I also suspect it's the latter that actually does teach so many children the love of violence and lack of concern for others that so many of us blame TV and comic books for. Mainstream TV shows and books must be popular to be profitable, and can only remain popular by mirroring mainstream societal values—that is, by confirming the reality the majority of people imagine themselves to inhabit. If we ourselves claim not to share that version of reality but don't work conscientiously to make the children in our care conscious of our objections to the often objectionable values inherent in it, then we can hardly be surprised when the children then accept those values from TV and books.

For the sake of my argument, I'm going to pretend that what I've just argued is, in this one remarkable case, wrong—that the words we read *do* work on us, and that no matter what your position on these matters was before you began reading this essay, I have by now convinced you that I am dead right about everything. My insidious prose has done its clever work, and triumphed over all your previously dearly-held convictions. You have been persuaded: censorship is absolutely and always wrong.

And yet, I suspect, you're still a censor. As I said earlier, when it comes to children's books we are all censors—but the question over which we become most often and most thoroughly censorious has nothing to do with the values, or the violence, or the gender-stereotyping I've been discussing so far. It has to do with age.

Whether we are parents, teachers, librarians, or children's literature specialists, most of us want to determine just one thing about any specific children's book we happen to look at: what *age* is it for? And while we claim to be interested in finding the *right* age, we almost always couch our inquiry in terms of defining the *wrong* one. "Is this book too simple for a four-year-old?" we ask. Or, "Too advanced for an eight-year-old?"

Just about any adult discussion of children's books will confirm the prevalence of this sort of approach to them. I found the following comments in a quick browse through a recent issue of *CM: A Reviewing Journal of Canadian Material for Young People*—a journal intended to guide professionals in their purchases for school and public libraries:

Recommended for younger children up to approximately age eight [but not, clearly, anyone older]. Should appeal to girls in the upper elementary grades [and not, clearly, to those in grade two or

twelve—and it seems that any boy confused enough to like it needs gender therapy]. The complexity of the vocabulary, the emotional content, and the psychological elements make it unsuitable for readers below intermediate level.

Packed with words, up to 200 words per page, much too many for a young picture book fan or audience to cope with.

Young readers may have a difficult time with the sudden changes in time The narrative will also be a challenge for young readers, as many expressions are unfamiliar.

Even positive recommendations are couched in the form of censorious comments about which ages of children ought not to read a book:

There is a lot of text, it's a sometimes dark and scary tale, and the illustrations are intricate as tapestries, but if read aloud or recommended to a confident reader, it will surely be enjoyed.

These reviewers take it for granted that a major part of their task is to determine what audiences should *not* be encouraged to have access to these books.

In other words: they are censors.

And yet, I'm sure, they'd be offended by my calling them that. I'd bet that most if not all of them are advocates of free speech, ardent foes of censorship. And I bet that they themselves would identify the practice I've labelled as censorship as something quite different. They'd probably call it "book selection"—and see it as a necessary consequence of our humane concern, as responsible adults, for the welfare of the children in our care.

But just as "erotic literature" is another name for the pornography we approve of, book selection is another name for the censorship we approve of. And it's equally suspicious.

For one thing, these characterizations of the skills of children of specific ages are dangerously akin to the kind of thoughtless stereotyping that underlies sexism and racism. Individual real children rarely match these generalizations about the skills or interests of "children" of specific ages: what one four-year-old finds difficult another may dismiss as too simple, depending on character, basic intelligence, and previous experience of both books and life. In making these generalized prohibitions, then, we deprive a lot of children of stimulating and pleasurable experiences they are quite capable of handling.

But let's assume for a moment that a significant number of children aren't in fact capable—that a certain book does indeed contain a number of words that many children might not in fact be familiar with. Surely we'd be further ahead if we saw that not as a reason for proscribing the book, but as an occasion for teaching children, not just that particular word, but the pleasure of learning new words in general. The selection of books on the basis of what ages of children aren't ready for them yet is peculiarly anti-educational—a way of preventing children from learning the very things we assume they don't yet know.

But I know I'm not likely to convince you of that as easily as I pretended to have convinced you earlier. The assumptions about the nature of childhood that

underlie this obsession with the differing abilities of children of different ages are so strongly ingrained in our cultural attitudes toward children that they have the status of unquestionable truth; and so does the accompanying conviction that we adults have an obligation to protect children from what we perceive as being inappropriate for them. If we are all in some way censors of children's books, it is because our assumptions about childhood, and therefore about children's literature, are inherently censorious.

Even the existence of a body of texts designated as literature for children represents a form of censorship. Prior to the last few hundred years or so, such a literature did not exist, and for a good reason: children weren't considered different enough from adults to need a special literature of their own. The need for such a literature emerged only when children did begin to seem to have significantly different needs—needs almost always defined in terms of their relative vulnerability and the consequent obligation of adults to protect them from complete and dangerous knowledge of the world. Not surprisingly, the first children's books, which appeared in Europe at the end of the sixteenth century, were expurgated editions of classics: censored books.

As children's literature began, so it has continued. C.S. Lewis once said he was attracted to writing children's books because "this form permits, or compels, one to leave out things I wanted to leave out" (236). By definition, children's literature is a literature that leaves things out—i.e., censors them.

The assumptions about the nature of childhood that underlie that censoriousness continue to have great power. Most of us still think of children as being innocent—that is, either ignorant of the restraints of adult maturity and therefore savagely primitive and weakly prone to evil, or else, unsullied by the laxity of adult corruption and therefore delightfully pure and in need of being sheltered. Both attitudes suggest the need to isolate children, either from the corrupting immodesty of adult sexuality or from the corrupting limitations of adult rationality.

In other words, childhood as we understand it *demand*s censorious behaviour from adults: children can continue to be children only so long as adults censor their perceptions of the adult world. And we seem to have a deep need to ensure that childhood does continue, as long as possible. The response of many adults to my positive recommendations of children's books containing matter they consider unsuitable is, "Well, sure, they might be able to understand it—but why do they have to read about awful stuff like that when they're so young? They'll find out about it soon enough."

In the centuries since we first conceived of the idea that children are different from adults in terms of inherent limitations in their ability to understand, we've developed a highly sophisticated system of just exactly when and how. We believe that there are "stages" in the development of childhood thinking, and of children's moral and social skills. Not only are children different from adults in the way they think about things, but young children are different from older ones:

the species “human” consists of a series of chronologically distinguished sub-species inherently alien to each other.

That’s why we worry so much about those age categories: until children make these abrupt and apparently magical transformations from one sub-species to the next, one stage to the next, they simply aren’t able to absorb more than the limited amount that their current stage allows, any more than caterpillars can fly. Exposing them to more would short-circuit their minds, we think—blow significant cognitive fuses. Maybe their heads would explode.

Our censoring acts of book-selection are actually meant to prevent such explosions. Many of the people I talk to about these matters are convinced that providing children with books not suitable—i.e., not simple enough—for their current stage will somehow extinguish any desire they might have to ever think another thought or read another book.

Nor does it help when I get these adults to admit that they themselves have sometimes read books with unfamiliar words in them, and that it did not do any serious damage to them—that they themselves endured “onomatopoeia” or “ecdysiast” and survived, unexploded. And survived moreover, to read again. Before I can persuade them to trust their own real experience over their theoretical convictions about the significance of ages and stages, I have to call those stages into question.

As it happens, that’s an easy thing to do. The idea that childhood consists of a series of stages related to specific ages is a version of the cognitive theories of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget—and as most often expressed, an incorrect version. Piaget himself never suggested either that the relationships between developmental stages and the chronological ages of children are as rigid as many of his followers believe, or that information should be kept from children at certain stages because they cannot deal with unfamiliar ideas or experiences. Just the opposite, in fact: Piaget makes it clear that children *need* new ideas and experiences to assimilate in order to move to a new stage—and that they’ll make the move only once they have the information, and not simply because they’ve reached some magic chronological turning point.

On the other hand, Piaget did assert it was impossible for children to learn concepts that he defined as being above their current stage of development—an idea that more recent research in cognitive development has called seriously into question. Slightly different versions of the experiments on which Piaget based his theories have shown that children can accomplish theoretically impossible kinds of thinking at surprisingly early stages.

Contemporary research also challenges the assumption that development is a series of periodic changes from one distinct state to another. Recent studies suggest that learning occurs gradually in a continuous series of small steps, as long as there are new experiences for children (and adults) to learn from. While the distinct stages Piaget outlined do seem to exist, studies suggest they may be culturally imposed, the result of matters such as typical school entrance ages and

our adult expectations of the sorts of experiences children can process; as Barry J. Zimmerman says, “what appears to be maturationally ‘normal’ in cognition and performance reflects, upon closer examination, a culturally imposed system of ‘prods and brakes’” (14).

According to the cognitive psychologist Charles Brainerd, in fact, “Empirical and conceptual objections to [Piaget’s] theory have become so numerous that it can no longer be regarded as a positive force in mainstream cognitive-developmental research” (vii). Brainerd adds, however, that “its influence remains profound in cognate fields such as education and sociology”—and so, of course, in the discussion of children’s books. There’s no reason—except, perhaps, our own rigid investment in a clearly outmoded theory—why we should not follow the lead of cognitive psychologists, and stop using untenable conceptions of childhood stages as a basis for saying no to children’s books.

Particularly when the “stages” we imagine do manage so successfully to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Children deprived of information by adults who assume they can’t absorb it will be just as egocentric and illogical as stage theory suggests they will be. Denied knowledge, children do remain ignorant.

But of course, ignorance is just another, less positive word for “innocence”—and that leads us back to the other assumptions about childhood I outlined earlier, to our rejecting books that we believe will corrupt or even bring an end to childhood innocence. In order to make my point about the danger of our censorious assumptions about book selection, I need to argue that children either are not or should not be innocent.

That childhood *isn’t* particularly a time of innocence is easy to argue—depressingly so. If we refer, not to our ideals and our myths about childhood, but to our actual knowledge of the lives of real children, we must quickly realize that surprisingly few children are ever innocent at all. Those whose livelihood depends on adults buying their sexual services are certainly not innocent—nor are those who are subject to sexual and physical abuse by their relatives. Those who starve on the streets of third-world countries and too often even in the back lanes of first-world ones are not innocent—have no time to be innocent if they have any hope of surviving. Those who do live under roofs but in a poverty that cannot afford to insulate them from the whole range of their parents and older siblings’ experiences are not innocent either; nor are the apparently insulated children of wealthier alcoholics or manic-depressives or absent corporate executives.

Nor are the (I hope) numerous children lucky enough to be free from this catalogue of woes particularly innocent either—not if they watch TV, or have contact with other children who do; not if they ever interact with any other fallible human beings at all, including those human beings who are working so hard to keep them innocent.

But, you might well argue, these are exactly the kinds of ugly, brutal, hope-destroying experiences that children should *not* be experiencing. Such experiences

twist and damage people; surely shielding children from them is a way to keep them healthy and sane. Surely agnosis-at-one remove is good for children.

So: *should* children be innocent? Yes, obviously, and ideally—innocent of the actual experience of hunger, of emotional chaos, of exploitation by sex-crazed and violence-prone adults. I have no intention of arguing that hunger and exploitation and violence are good for children; they are not good for human beings.

On the other hand, however, I do argue that *knowledge* of them is good for human beings—including children. If you know about something, you can think about it even if you've never actually experienced it. And thinking about evil is, surely our best defence against it.

Unless, of course, we believe that evil is inherently more attractive than good. I don't. I believe that evil and violence and such are inherently distasteful and dismissable, that it doesn't take much thought to reveal the limits of even pleasurable forms of self-indulgences—as long as one has developed the means of doing the thinking.

I also believe that children given knowledge of such things and provided with strategies for thinking about them will arrive, not necessarily at the same conclusions about them as myself, but certainly at conclusions which are subtle and thoughtful and take as many facts as possible into account. The theories of moral development, like Lawrence Kohlberg's, which suggest that children cannot actually do such thinking, not only depend on Piagetian assumptions which are no longer tenable, but have come under serious and deserved attack for being both male-chauvinist and Eurocentric: they privilege attitudes just like those of their European male creators as the highest point of moral evolution. It's time we gave these theories a rest, and tried to help children of all ages to be as subtle in their moral thinking as we like to believe we are ourselves.

At the very least, giving children knowledge of the world will allow us to discuss it with them—communicate our own attitudes about it to them; whereas if we choose to keep them ignorant of that which we despise on the theory that we are protecting them from it, we will deprive ourselves of the opportunity for such discussions. Meanwhile, it's highly unlikely that children won't be discussing these interesting matters with each other; and call me an elitist, but I have more faith in the validity and serviceability of my own values than in the ones cooked up by a bunch of four-year-olds, or fourteen-year-olds, who have been kept ignorant of mature thought in order to protect their innocence. Anyone who is, like myself, old enough to remember what the playground once taught us about matters such as sex and what women *really* want, in the absence of any public or parental discussion of such topics, will understand why I've reached this conclusion: ignorance is not particularly blissful, and rarely harmless.

I'm convinced, in fact, that more evil is done by people ignorant of what thoughtful moral beings might consider to be evil than by those with knowledge of that: that it is ignorance and not knowledge that destroys paradise.

True innocence is not ignorant. To remain innocent, that is, to try not to do evil, requires knowledge of what evil is. Knowledge then protects innocence: it is only those armed with knowledge of evil, and with the habit of considering the ethical and practical implications of the behaviour of themselves and others, who have the means to be good. And, I am convinced, that especially includes children.

So I arrive at the essence of my own book selection philosophy: don't worry about what children might not understand but should, or about what they might understand but shouldn't. Hope they'll understand. Encourage them to learn. Let them read whatever interests them, at whatever level of difficulty they themselves decide they can handle, in order to find whatever they feel they need to know. Allow them access to knowledge of the world as it is, to books that describe it as it is and as completely as they themselves wish to know it—and encourage them to wish to know it as completely, as deeply, as subtly as possible. And if we think they won't understand something, then let's help them learn how to understand it: teach them the habits of mind and the strategies of reading that will provide them with rich, meaningful, and productive reading experiences.

I have not always possessed this good sense. I learned it from my children. When they were young, Josh, Asa, and Alice selected the books they wanted to look at or have read to them from a shelf containing all the children's picture books we had in the house. It was an eclectic selection: it contained not only what I thought to be good books but also ones I'd bought for use in my children's literature classes as bad examples—examples of bad literature, and sometimes, even, of what I saw myself as bad or silly or superficial values. Much to my chagrin, the children often selected, and enjoyed, my bad examples—and I can't deny I felt that primal parental urge to limit their choices, despite my loud public opposition to censorship.

But then, I realized, the children never seemed to be terribly interested in or influenced by the bad values—and they also often selected my good examples as well as my bad ones. Access to the temptations of evil did not seem to turn them away from appreciation of what their parents were otherwise teaching them was good. So I swallowed my chagrin, stiffened my resolve to live up to my principles, and let them choose what they wanted.

Nothing much changed after they learned to read and gained even greater control of their selection of books. No longer restricted to children's books or even to the other books we happened to have in the house, they read whatever they wanted, albeit occasionally only after I had yet one more struggle with my conscience about letting them do so.

And the result? Free access to knowledge has not made any of my children monsters—not, at any rate, what I would consider monstrous. Now in their teens, they seem to their proud father to be thoughtful, sensitive, humane, responsible, and happy: moral beings despite—or, I believe, because of—their vast early access to knowledge of evil, lust, pain, anatomy, vulgarity and violence.

Given this access, of course, my children never were the “childlike” creatures we adults claim to admire. Early on, their knowledge gave them a sense of their own power: their right to be heard and taken seriously, and their freedom to evaluate the behaviour of others, including adults, with a considering and sometimes critical eye. I can’t deny that these qualities have occasionally distressed and even enraged some of their teachers, a surprising number of whom have told me that children should respect all their elders always, no matter what bullying or stupidity or small-mindedness those elders choose to indulge in. Indeed, it’s these unsettling conversations with surprisingly insensitive and self-protective individuals professionally concerned with the care of youth that have most confirmed my faith that my children’s knowledge of evil and ability to think analytically about it have been a protection to them.

This is not to say that I would never reject any book or TV show or play in any circumstance. My pleas for allowing children more freedom in their choices comes with one very important proviso: that it take place within the context of active adult interest and involvement in children’s lives in general and their reading in particular—and an active adult effort to teach them whatever skills of critical response and analysis we possess ourselves. Without such a context, children might well be influenced by evil or shallow or silly books and TV shows. *Indeed, they are; and consequently, we adults have the right—indeed the obligation—to inform children of what we consider to be evil or immoral or vulgar or just plain silly, even while we allow them access to it.*

Thus, my own children had to hear their parents bitch about the stupidity of some of the books they loved even while we allowed them to enjoy the stupidity. When they were young I often refused to read them books I didn’t myself enjoy—for instance, books that had somehow palled for me after the first hundred or so readings, or anything about Care Bears; they could look at these books by themselves all they wanted, but not without hearing my opinions first. And they had to hear both their parents wax sarcastic about the silliness of some of the TV shows we made a point of watching with them—and learn either to defend their taste or share the sarcasm. They soon learned both, I’m happy to say: while their tastes and opinions are now often different from their parents, they share our pleasure and interest in the discussion of these matters.

In other words: we worked hard at teaching them that their pleasure in certain experiences took place in a medium of other possible opinions about it. Not only did they have to acknowledge the possibility of those other opinions, they also had to learn ways of thinking about and defending or even changing their own tastes and interests. Their innocence was armoured, not just by having knowledge, but by learning responsible ways of thinking about it.

Some will say that this level of adult involvement is not possible for everybody—that not everybody is a specialist in children’s literature, that many care-givers have other responsibilities and just don’t have the time to read the books the children in their charge read, or watch the TV those children watch—

let alone also discussing those experiences with their children. But one doesn't need a specialist's knowledge to convey one's own response to a book with children—just the willingness to respond honestly, and to be honest to children about that response. And as for those without the time for such conversations: I'm not all that willing to absolve care-givers of the responsibility of at least feeling guilty about their lack of involvement. Children *do* need care, and responsible care takes time and effort—even the effort of reading and talking about a few books about talking squirrels and fairy princesses, if it means that the children we are responsible for don't end up absorbing values we claim to find abhorrent and, eventually, end up becoming the kind of people we claim to despise. And I think that that's just what it does mean.

Furthermore, I'm convinced that few care-givers remain uninvolved in children's intellectual and imaginative life through callousness or lack of interest. Once divested of a faith in the value or inevitability of childhood ignorance, the adults I've discussed these matters with happily accept the responsibility of providing children with wider knowledge of the world and guiding them towards means of developing a wise understanding of it.

They do so because allowing themselves the experience teaches them one very important thing: most children, given the freedom and responsibility of making their own choices, choose wisely. In his description in *Charlotte's web* of the rope swing in Zuckerman's barn, E.B. White says that parents always worry that children will accidentally let go of the swing and injure themselves. But, says White, "children almost always hang onto things tighter than their parents think they will" (69). And I think they do, both to ropes and to their care-giver's values—but only if we don't give them a false sense of safety by trying to do their hanging on for them.

NOTES

- 1 An early reader of this essay has suggested that the examples of censorious attitudes I've provided here are so absurd that unsuspecting readers in later times or other places might imagine I made them up as a joke. I didn't, and they're no joke. According to information provided by the Book and Periodical Council for Freedom to Read Week 1992, schools in Lloydminster, on the border between Alberta and Saskatchewan, removed copies of Robert Munsch's *Thomas's snowsuit* from their school libraries during 1988-89, for fear that the book would undermine the authority of school principals in general; as of early 1992, the book seemed to still be unavailable in two Lloydminster schools. In February, 1992, meanwhile, many Canadian newspapers reported that members of the IWA-Canada local on the Sunshine Coast just north of Vancouver had demanded that Diane Leger-Haskell's picture book *Maxine's tree* (Orca 1990) be removed from school libraries, calling the book "emotional and an insult to loggers." It seems that one of the union members had called for action after his six-year-old daughter read the book in school and then came home and told her father, "What you do for a living is bad, Daddy" (*Globe and mail* February, 1992).

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