

## Letters from Canadian writers



*From Bob Munsch*

There are various types of censorship

1. *Government censorship* where writers or publishers are imprisoned or killed for their actions. This can happen in a country where there are laws that let the government do this, or else in countries

where there is de-facto government repression in spite of laws. This situation is very rare in Canada and is reserved for people who publish "hate" literature and for authors whose material is seized by customs.

It is important to realize that some types of literature are under government censorship in Canada and that this has the support of the general population. Child pornography is the best example. Nonetheless, it is possible to write mostly what we want in Canada. Canada does not rate high in PEN's list of countries that are repressive and we are lucky it doesn't.

2. *Government censorship based on funding.* In many countries, government funding or kickbacks or influence can virtually strangle public media. In Canada, the government funding of arts tries to be fair and to stay at "arm's length" and it generally succeeds. I have not been very much involved with government funding since my books started selling well, since I think that authors who need the help should get it and not me. (It is important to realize that all the funding and support for Canadian literature is a form of government funding pressure that we mostly agree with.)

3. *Local schools and libraries.* This is where a lot of the conflicting values of a poly-ethnic, multi-religious society are expressed when the laws prevent censorship at higher levels; and there are two reasons for this:

(a) Parents see schools, and to a lesser extent, local libraries as *In loco*

*parentis* and expect them to mirror their own values.

(b) Local schools and libraries are very vulnerable to politics at the most local level and generally want to avoid trouble.

My experience with "censorship" has been at this level. It is important to point out that this is a low level of censorship. Nobody is arresting me or refusing government loans to my publisher or shooting me on my front doorstep, and anybody who wants to buy my books can do so. The pressures felt on my books are part of the ongoing civic scrimmage of how low-level public institutions try to serve their populations in a multi-belief society. This, in itself, is not a bad thing. It is part of living in a democratic society.

I think that it does make sense for local teachers and librarians to try to reflect local values in so far as their professional ethics let them, and the same goes for authors when they operate in a local setting. For example, I once dropped in on a public school near Kitchener that has a totally Mennonite population. The Principal asked me not to tell the *Paper bag princess* because it didn't mesh very well with traditional Mennonite sex roles. I didn't tell it because I considered that I was, in a sense, a guest of the local community, using their kids to try out my stories on. Of course, there is a difference between censoring myself in a specific situation and deciding to write a book for the general population.

Some issues of censorship are so sanctioned by local ethics that the censorship is automatic. My local school does not have *Playboy* on the shelves and that is that: No *Playboy*! The school librarians know what the parents want and they agree with the parents.

Censorship gets complicated when the community is fragmented on an issue. I think the rule here should be as follows: Material that a significant percentage of the population *wants* should be available, even if the majority doesn't want it.

It has been my experience that a *vocal minority*, maybe three parents out of a school, can get a book taken off the shelves. I once had a very upset librarian call me because three of my books were in trouble in her school district; *Thomas' snowsuit* for being anti-authoritarian, *I have to go* for using the word "pee," and *A promise is a promise* for advocating satanism. The librarian was frantic! "There's an organized movement," she said. I had visions of picket lines around schools. It turned out that she meant that two families in two different schools had made the same complaint about all three books.

But let's deal with numbers that are not trivial. Suppose 10% of a population really wants a book off the shelves and 90% sort of like it, or even really like it. What then? I think the 10% should lose. In real life they often win; .001% can win, as long as they stage a sit-in on the floor of the principal's office.

It is unfortunately true that a librarian is much more likely to avoid trouble by quietly restricting access to a book. Only rarely does a restricted book become the subject of an "organized movement of liberation." It is up to a librarian's professional ethics not to restrict books that a significant part of the population

wants, and to defend books against small pressure groups that want to restrict book access for the general population.

In situations where some of my very popular books were restricted or banned from school libraries, it was the response of the majority of parents that led to them being reinstated. Librarians should remember that public opinion can function to keep books in circulation as well as take them out.

**Bob Munsch** is a storyteller who makes up stories in front of audiences. He has published 24 books for children.

### From Kathy Stinson



These notes are excerpted from my part in a panel discussion on “Censorship begins at home” for Freedom to Read Week 1992.

My first personal involvement in the censorship issue came with the publication of *The bare naked book* in 1986.

When I began to discover that some schools were carrying all my books except this one, alarm bells went off for me—Why, this is censorship! I thought.

Gradually though, as I heard librarians talk about their reasons for including it, or not, in their collections, I began to see not having *The bare naked book* in a school library more as a matter of book selection than one of censorship; it *would* be censorship if a school decided to have

the book in the library but removed it because a parent came in and complained.

But I do have a niggling concern about arriving at this conclusion. Does my acceptance of schools not having *The bare naked book* in their collections give principals or teacher-librarians permission, whenever it’s convenient, to hide behind the “book selection” argument, when in fact, for some of them, not choosing to have this (or any other) book might have more to do with fear of controversy than with any professional concerns? If this is what is happening, is it not a form of censorship after all—censorship by anticipation?

It’s not that I can’t sympathize with the educator’s dread of confrontation, or of having to spend time and energy on a book challenge that they’d rather spend on doing their job, but I think some school personnel must examine the reasons behind their choices, and be prepared to stand behind them. Those who do this