

W.D. Valgardson's *Gentle Sinners*: A book more sinned against than sinning

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Résumé: *L'auteur examine les tactiques auxquelles le groupe "Moms in Touch" a recouru pour forcer une commission scolaire du Manitoba à retirer du programme d'un de ses enseignants le roman de W. D. Valgardson, Gentle sinners; il montre comment, de l'automne 1989 à l'hiver de 1991, le recours systématique à l'intimidation et à la subversion des règles des processus démocratiques a amené l'enseignant en question à capituler et à renoncer au livre qu'il défendait.*

The Setting

Fort Garry School Division #5, one of eleven school divisions within the metropolitan Winnipeg area, is located in the southern portion of Winnipeg and has some 7,000 students attending eight elementary (K-6), three junior high (7-9), two high schools (10-12) plus two French immersion schools. Fort Richmond Collegiate's student body numbers some 850 students with a staff complement of approximately 45.

In 1980, Fort Garry School Division approved a policy, identified as KLB, for dealing with 'Public complaints re curriculum instructional material.' This Board document recognized "the right of an individual parent to request reconsideration of the use of any book or learning material and such requests shall be processed according to the approved regulations." The Board took the position, however, that "censorship of books and other learning materials shall be challenged in order to maintain the school's responsibilities to provide information and enlightenment." One of the policy's three "criteria for access to learning material" stated that "no parent or group of parents, outside the Corporate Board, has the right to determine the learning materials for students other than their own children."

Chuck Hamelynck, the English teacher who had elected to teach W.D. Valgardson's *Gentle sinners*, was but two years away from retirement when the controversy first arose. A teacher for some 30 years, Hamelynck had, for the previous five years, taught *Gentle sinners* to a single class of English 200 students. The "200" designation means that most students would be in Grade 11 and pursuing a course pattern which could lead to university education. While Manitoba's provincial education department produces a list of "approved

textbooks,” teachers are permitted to utilize learning resources which, like *Gentle sinners*, are not on that listing. Hamelynck was the sole teacher in Manitoba teaching this particular book.



Gentle sinners, first published in 1980 and winner of the Books in Canada First Novel Award, was written by William “Bill” Valgardson, an English professor at the University of Victoria. Speaking of the novel’s contents, the Canadian Library Association said, “It’s about a 17-year old boy who, in desperation, runs away from the home of his strict fundamentalist parents to his uncle’s farm in northern Manitoba. On one level, it is a coming-of-age novel, and on another it is an indictment of supposedly respectable and religious folk who are guilty of all manner of sinning” (“Being...” 17).

The Gathering Storm

The community’s first knowledge about any parental objections to Valgardson’s *Gentle sinners* occurred when four mothers of students attending Fort Richmond Collegiate distributed a two-page letter, dated October 6, 1989, to “... a list of parents we feel would share our concern” (1). Sent “on behalf of Moms in Touch [i.e. mothers] group of students attending Fort Richmond Collegiate,” the letter was to alert recipients to *Gentle sinners*’ contents. “Depending on your son/daughter’s teacher it may be required reading for them this year. On the other hand, if your child is in Grade 10 it is necessary to begin action and make an attempt to have it removed from the curriculum for the next year” (1).

“Moms in Touch,” now called “Mothers Who Care,” is an international Christian organization whose members are to provide moral support to local schools via prayer. Although the “Moms in Touch” letter stated that “our intentions are not to win a battle against the teachers but instead, [sic] have a positive influence on the material being taught at our High School” (1-2), readers were informed that “it is our goal to have several [people] send in a formal complaint to the School Division” (1). The letter also “encourage[d] each of you to examine the book for yourself” (1).

Accompanying the letter was a page of ten “excerpts taken from the book.” These passages, ranging in length from two to eleven lines, were drawn from nine of *Gentle sinners*’ 213 pages. The letter’s authors quoted Dr. G.C. Richison, a parent, who, “after reading the book ... had this comment to make:

Gentle sinners is about a teen in identity crisis rebelling against his narrow and rigid Christian

parents. Valgardson has chosen to play on the sexual tensions of teens by graphic pornography. Chapters two and eighteen contain the most explicit sexual scenes. These chapters clearly deal with more than the sexual struggles of teens but seduce the reader into sexual values which are anti-Christian. (1)

At the November 2, 1989 meeting of the Board of Trustees of Fort Garry School Division, Dr. Peter Blahey, Deputy Superintendent, informed Board members that a complaint had been received regarding a material but that "the complaint is not wholly consistent with the Board Policy" (Minutes 7). Item #9 on the school division's "Citizen's request for reconsideration of a work" form calls for a response to the question, "What would you prefer the school do about this work?" To the two choices, "Do not assign or recommend it to my child" and "Request it be re-evaluated," the complainant had added a third, "Remove from the curriculum entirely." Blahey pointed out that the complainant's request violated the policy because a complainant "is not permitted to attempt to restrict the use of that material for other children" (Minutes 7).

By the end of November, the Board had received five further written requests with four requesting that *Gentle sinners* be re-evaluated and the fifth asking that the book not be assigned or recommended to the complainant's child. On December 1, 1981, Blahey wrote Terry Angus, Principal of Fort Richmond Collegiate, telling him that: "In keeping with the requirements of the Board Policy and Regulations KLB Public Complaints re Curriculum Instructional Materials, I have informed the Board at the November 30th meeting that these complaints have been received" (1).

Blahey explained to Angus that he would be establishing a review committee consisting of three parents of students from the division's other high school, two members of the English department from that same high school, and a University of Manitoba professor. The review panel was to report by January 8, 1990. Through Angus, the school was asked to provide "a statement indicating the criteria for the selection of this work in the English program, including a statement as to its purpose as it relates to the objectives of the curriculum" (1) as well as "a statement from you outlining the school's policy regarding the choices that students have for alternative materials if they do not want to use this material" (1). Blahey also commented that "if there is consistency among the panelists [sic] in their recommendations, I would take their recommendations to the Board. If the panel is divided, I will call for a meeting of the panel to try to resolve their differences before a recommendation is taken to the School Board" (2).

The Review Process—Round One

In mid-December 1989, the six review panel members each received copies of (a) *Gentle sinners* (b) the School Board's Policy and Regulations related to

public complaints regarding curriculum instructional materials (c) the complaint form of each of the five parents with their identities removed and (d) the school's statements regarding the criteria used to select *Gentle sinners* plus its policy for providing students with learning materials choices.

With regard to (d), Angus explained in a December 18, 1989, letter to Blahey, "Our practice at Fort Richmond Collegiate when students or parents have reservations about the appropriateness of contents of materials to be studied is to offer alternate titles to be studied in the same context" (1). In the case of *Gentle sinners*, "when a parent contacted me, an alternative Canadian novel with a similar theme (*Grain*) was distributed to the whole class. Students were told they could choose either title and questions, etc., were designed to be applicable to either novel" (1). To avoid embarrassment to individual students, teacher Hamelynck distributed both novels to everyone. "In this case, four students chose the alternative title and both novels were studied in the same classroom. The final test applied to either novel" (1).

Hamelynck provided a ten-page rationale for teaching *Gentle sinners*. Subtitled "Why Valgardson's *Gentle sinners* has been taught successfully at Fort Richmond Collegiate for the past five years," the document described the book as "a highly teachable novel with themes that eminently 'fit' within the continuum of themes explored in *Lost horizon*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Grapes of wrath* and *Of human bondage*" (1). Hamelynck also said the novel "has many advantages for Gr. 11 students in Manitoba in that it is written by a Manitoba author, is set in Manitoba's Interlake region, and features a high school student who has completed Grade 11 and who has many of the problems that his present peers can and do encounter" (1). Hamelynck added that "another aspect that recommends it for inclusion in the curriculum is the inherent morality of the novel's story wherein the author shows his ability to deal sensitively with many of the moral questions many of today's youngsters are faced with" (1). The remainder of Hamelynck's rationale expanded upon these points.

In closing, Hamelynck acknowledged that "*Gentle sinners* is a realistic novel. It contains some graphic descriptions of sexuality, hypocrisy [sic], dishonesty and plain 'evil'. So does real society and life itself. But within the context of the entire novel, these descriptions are merely one essential item to make the reader more aware of the main issues of the story" (9). Hamelynck concluded:

To lose sight of all this for the sake of the realism it shares with many other good novels is to do injustice to the story, to the author, and to all the teachers who can make the reading and study of *Gentle sinners* a memorable and worthwhile experience for Gr. 11 students who are fifteen and sixteen years old and whose moral teachings at home should be strong enough to cope with the reality of the end of the 20th century. (9-10)

The "Citizen's request for reconsideration of a work" form used by Fort

Garry School Division requires complainants, in addition to providing some biographical information and an indication of whether they represent themselves, an organization or other group, to respond to a series of questions.

Responding to "(1) To what in the work do you object? Please be specific; cite pages," Complainant A simply listed nine pages; Complainant B said "Pornography" and provided some page groupings; Complainant C replied "pornographic," "sadistic," and "violent thoughts" and offered page references for each concern; Complainant D was concerned about "sexual description, violence, negative thought patterns" plus pages; Complainant E's objections, with supporting pages, were "Fosters ideas of runaways," "Suggestion made to pay for sex," "Lied about age to get employment." In all cases, cited pages were those identified in the "Moms in Touch" excerpts page.

Asked in "(2) In your opinion, what of value is there in this work?" Complainant A said, "I honestly don't know." Complainant B, one of two who had read the entire book, acknowledged, "Flashes of good literature; touches teen problems." Complainant C found on pages 121-22 "One positive attitude of working hard to complete work." Complainant D noted that "subjects and situations expressed in vivid descriptive easy reading style" while Complainant E found "very little—exposes teen problems."

As to "(3) What do you feel might be the result of reading this work?" Complainant A stated, "Kids that may be prone to pornography could justify it by saying it's taught in school." Complainant B felt that "school authorities validate pornography as acceptable value." "No respect for women, elderly, sick views of sexual lifestyle," replied Complainant C while Complainant D thought the results might be "preoccupation with thought patterns with potential destructive behaviour." Finally, Complainant E claimed that "students see this as an acceptable lifestyle when taught by schools."

None of the complainants, in responding to "(4) For what age group would you find this work acceptable?" found *Gentle sinners* to be acceptable to any age group contained within the public school system, though two complainants, C and D, did say it would be acceptable to adults while B stated, "None to those who hold Biblical presuppositions."

As noted earlier, only two complainants, B and C, had read the entire work. The remaining three responded to "(5) Did you read the entire work? What pages of [sic] section?" by saying that, in essence, they had read only those pages referred to in the "Moms in Touch" letter.

In response to "(6) Are you aware of the judgment of this work by critics?" none of the five complainants had sought to discover other interpretations of *Gentle sinners*. Complainant B responded "Irrelevant!" and D commented, "It doesn't really matter what their judgement is."

When asked, "(7) Are you aware of the teacher's purpose in using this work?" the complainants' responses appeared to evidence that only complainants B and E may have spoken to Hamelynck. B simply replied "Yes" and did not elaborate

while E added, "Feels it teaches them sexuality." Though the remaining three seemingly had no personal knowledge of the teacher's purposes, two did proffer what they believed to be Hamelynck's intentions. Complainant A said, "I believe it is to bring into the open the world around and discussion," and C thought the teacher's purpose was "to discover teen sexuality."

To the question, "(8) What do you believe is the theme or purpose of this work?" Complainant A said, "I believe it undermines morals & is anti-Christian, the purpose being more undermining than meets the eye. Negative!" Complainant B claimed, "Among other purposes, to encourage the breaking of conventions & pursuit of other ideas. It is instrumental in presupposition." Complainant C responded, "Run away from home, throw away values to find yourself." Complainant D thought the work's theme or purpose was "a release of negative thoughts and attitudes by the author" while E responded, "To encourage: Runaway from past values; negative viewpoints in life."

In responding to "(9) What would you prefer the school to do about this work? Do not assign or recommend it to my child. Request it be re-evaluated," four complainants requested that the book be re-evaluated while one asked that it not be assigned or recommended "to my child."

The final question allowed complainants to suggest other titles for study. "(10) In its place, what work of equal value would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of a society or set of values?" Complainant A replied, "I am sure there are some on your 'board' who could recommend a better quality book who are more familiar with literature than myself" Complainant B answered "—; there are 100's of books as is no doubt obvious to you." C offered, "Books to encourage, biographies, positive role models" "Who is in the wind [sic] W.O. Mitchell, Prairie literary unit settlers of the marsh S. Grove [sic], Wild geese M. Osten [sic]" were suggested by D who added, "The above works were given by another Gr. XI teacher whose opinion I trust. She commented that it was impossible to present material that did not contain some 'bad' language, etc., but did not feel uncomfortable teaching the above books because of controversial moral & ethical standards." E suggested, "Books teaching character building/heros [sic] Biographies. Numerous bks. available—used with discretion."

Two complainants added comments to the bottom of their form. C said, "This [*Gentle sinners*] would be an 'R' rated movie so why do 16 year olds have to read it." "Making phone calls & talking like book describes would be against the law. —Obscene phonecall [sic]." "Poor role model 'he admired his uncle's drinking, lack of church going & swearing.' pg. 156" "This gives teens the idea that sex before marriage is OK. Then you ask 'why so many teen pregnancies' pg. 190" Finally, E noted that "Mr. Angus Principal F.R.C. has said that it [*Gentle sinners*] was not the best material and he would not teach it himself and "One Grade XI student made the remark, 'I can't believe that this is what is being taught in Grade 11.'" As well, a complainant appended photocopies of two *Winnipeg free press*

articles: “Sex, drugs risk for half of runaways” and “Inmate dreams of slitting throats, court told.” The latter also had the handwritten note, “Refer to Page 140 [of *Gentle sinners*]—’He wished he had brought a razor so that he could flit from one to the other cutting their throats.’”

By January 7, 1990, the six review panel members had replied and had unanimously recommended that *Gentle sinners* be retained as a teaching material. This information was presented to the Board at its January 25, 1990, meeting. Because “the judgement of the panel was unanimous and students should be given the option of selecting an alternate novel” (Minutes 2), Trustee Murray felt that no motion of the Board was required other than “That the report of the panel be received as information” (2). In the discussion concerning this motion, one trustee sought clarification about the appeal process available to the complainants. Deputy Superintendent Blahey “responded stating that the policy provides that appeals may be made through the Superintendent’s Department to the Board” (2). The Chair also noted “that, should the Board pass a motion at this point, it could be viewed as prejudging any appeal that might be launched by the complainants.”

In a January 29, 1990, letter to the panel members outlining the outcome of their work, Blahey reported that “The Board, at its meeting on January 25th, accepted the following recommendation from me on your behalf: ‘That the Board support Fort Richmond Collegiate’s use of Valgardson’s *Gentle sinners* in the English 200 program as outlined in the school’s Statement of Purpose, provided students are given the option of selecting an alternative novel to meet the curriculum objectives.’” Blahey also communicated with the five complainants. In addition to providing them with “anonymous” copies of the review panelists’ statements, Blahey told the complainants of their right to appeal the decision to the School Board.

The Appeal Process—Round Two

On March 20, 1990, Fort Garry School Division received an appeal of its January decision, and, on the evening of March 22, James MacKenzie appeared before the Board to present a brief on behalf of a delegation. Board Minutes record that MacKenzie raised nine major points in his presentation: (1) It is not clear that the proper procedures were followed in the citizen’s request. (2) The language and the situations portrayed in various parts of the book would not be acceptable in other contexts. (3) The text contains questionable role models. (4) The students reading this text are likely to draw conclusions from it that are quite different from those that adults would draw. (5) The text demeans women and portrays them as sex objects. (6) Virtually all of the relationships portrayed in the book are depressing and negative. (7) The Christian religion is presented in a stereotyped, negative light in the book. (8) The book is not used by most other English teachers in the school. (9) The book introduces young people to

questionable attitudes and behaviour (2-4). MacKenzie “stated that they [the delegation] would like to know whether the Board, by simple majority, will make a decision or would a petition signed by a majority of the parents require a withdrawal of the book” (Minutes 4). MacKenzie “stated that he accepts the impartiality of the review panel but thought that it would be helpful if individuals from outside the Division would review the book” (6). The Board told MacKenzie that the delegation would be informed as to when the issue would be discussed at an open Board Meeting.

A Board discussion followed in which two motions were made. The first simply referred the matter “to the next Regular Meeting of the Board on April 12, 1990” (9). The second motion, unsuccessful, called for *Gentle sinners* to “be referred to a committee for review which committee will be comprised of two teachers and three parents all from outside of the Fort Garry School Division” (9). In the discussion about this second motion, Superintendent Henry Izatt pointed out, “If the Board deviates from its policy by convening an additional review panel, the Board will have to decide how many panels will be utilized before it makes its decision regarding the appeal” (9).

Approximately a week before the scheduled April Board meeting, the “setting” suddenly changed. On April 3, 1990, *The south lance*, a flyer-type community newspaper distributed to all homes in the area, ran a half-page article, “Parents claim sexual content in novel is not appropriate for high school students.” Though the piece simply reported on the happenings of the March Board meeting without editorializing, the article did broaden, to some extent, community awareness. However, this “quiet,” very localized concern became a city and province-wide issue when, on April 6, both of Winnipeg’s two daily newspapers had front-page headlines related to *Gentle sinners*. “Trustees urged to ban book” reported the *Winnipeg free press* while *The Winnipeg sun* said “Book ban demanded: Teen sex in acclaimed novel disturbs Fort Garry parents.” The latter paper’s tabloid-sized third page was given over to two articles dealing with the book: “Parents want book out: But division firm on *Gentle sinners*” and “Author fires back at critics,” an interview with Valgardson. On April 8, the *Sun* again made censorship its front page headline, “Schools ban books on monthly basis,” and devoted page four to an overview of Manitoba school censorship while the *Winnipeg free press* ran an editorial cartoon showing a pilgrim-type figure wearing horse blinders and carrying a sandwich board bearing the caption, “Good Christian moral values only \$3.00.” The next day, April 9, the paper ran a brief, overview article, “School division weighing book ban says such requests rare.”

The April 12 Board meeting “drew 40 spectators and nine reporters and cameramen, which forced the meeting to be moved from the Board’s offices to an elementary school library” (Nikedes 2). Ray Wyant, Board Chair, formally addressed the meeting, saying, in part:

At the outset, I want to say that the publicity surrounding this case has been regrettable. Though there are some who might wish to paint this delegation with the brush of fanaticism, such is not the case and I appreciated, as I think the whole Board did, the passionate yet calm manner in which this presentation was conducted. I listened intently to the presentation, I read all of the material presented and the book, and after doing so, I cannot vote to reconsider the work for use in Fort Richmond Collegiate. (1)

By a 7-2 vote, the Board voted to “reject the request of the delegation to remove the book *Gentle sinners* from the Fort Richmond Collegiate Grade 11 English program upholding the decision of the Committee to review a request for reconsideration of the work” (Minutes 8). A second motion calling for “a letter to be sent to parents of students who will be asked to read the book *Gentle sinners* informing them that it contains scenes and language which some have found offensive and, in keeping with Board Policy KLB, alternative reading materials may be chosen” (Minutes 12) was defeated by a 5-4 vote.

On Sunday, April 15, 1990, both city newspapers reported the Board meeting’s outcome. The *Winnipeg free press* quoted MacKenzie as saying that “he will not continue seeking a ban on Valgardson’s novel” and that “he won’t be looking for more books to ban” (Nikedes 2). The *Winnipeg sun* related that “Board chairman Ray Wyant said Thursday’s vote will be the last word on the book in the division. ‘There’s no further process that the Board has or plans to do’” (St. Germain 5).

The Appeal Process—Round Three

On May 4, 1990, Ron Anderson, a parent of a child in Fort Garry School Division and someone who had attended the April 12 Board meeting, sent a letter to the editor of the *Winnipeg free press* and *The south Winnipeg lance* in which he “compliment[ed] the group of parents working to have this book removed from the schools. I fully support these courageous people and applaud the professional presentation of their most valid point of view” (1). As to the Board’s actions, Anderson commented “...one may well conclude that these elected representatives voted as they did for reasons other than common sense, courage and moral wisdom” (3). In his concluding paragraph, Anderson expressed the hope “that the parent group opposed to *Gentle sinners* will keep up their good work, and proceed undaunted by their initial setback” (5).

Anderson’s name next appears in the “Minutes of the meeting regarding *Gentle sinners* held on Tuesday, July 3, 1990, at 3:30 p.m. at the Fort Garry School Board Office.” At this two-hour meeting, Anderson and five other parents met with Superintendent Izatt and Deputy Superintendent Blahey. The minutes record that Anderson “recognized that the group has had its say before the Board and that the Board has made its decision. However, the group feels it must continue its efforts to have *Gentle sinners* removed from the curriculum” (1).

Anderson put forward six reasons why the matter should be revisited. First, he indicated that a “petition containing over 450 signatures was collected. According to Anderson, the petition was collected through a networking system and not through a door to door campaign” (Minutes 1). This petition asked for “(a) the removal of the book, *Gentle sinners*, by September, 1990, and (b) a request that a review process regarding the selection of materials be instituted” (2). Further, “the group [had] met with the Minister of Education who expressed a concern about the book and recommended that the principal of the school be approached again” (1). According to Anderson, the principal “was not prepared to meet with the group, indicating that it is now in the hands of the Board” (1). Anderson also charged that the initial review process was “mishandled” because “he feels one of the members of the Review Committee was a close associate of the author” (1). Fourthly, Anderson pointed out that *Gentle sinners* “is not on the approved list of the Department of Education” (1). He also called for the book’s removal because “he feels that the material like the content of *Gentle sinners* has a link with the behaviour of children in the community” (2). Finally, “he made a reference to the recent Manitoba Teachers’ Society report on teacher abuse by students. He questioned how teachers could agree to teach *Gentle sinners* and then ‘cry for help’ when teachers are abused by students. He cites this as contradictory behaviour” (2). In conclusion, Anderson appealed to the Superintendent and the staff to consider removal of the book prior to the coming term. He cited this as an “honourable and positive step to take” (2).

Another of the group, Dr. Chudley, a paediatrician and Associate Professor of Paediatrics at the University of Manitoba, also spoke to his concerns about *Gentle sinners*. While the minutes record that Chudley had only examined the page of excerpts and had not read the entire book, on the basis of this limited reading, he concluded “that the literary value of the book is not high” (3). As well, he said “that it is his judgement that the excerpts arouse sexual desire” (3).

Asked what is stopping Principal “Angus from pulling the material from use at this stage,” (3) Superintendent Izatt unknowingly but prophetically responded, “It is at this stage a matter of the teacher’s choice” (3). Later, the group again asked “Izatt to ask Terry Angus to get Mr. Hamelynck to stop using *Gentle sinners*” (4). Told that “the Board has ruled on this issue indicating that it is okay for the school to continue using this material for Grade XI students” (4), Anderson said that “he feels that the Board did not say that the book could not be removed” (4) and asked, “Why does not someone in authority—the teacher, principal or others, remove the book” (4). Izatt again “responded that, at this stage, only the teacher can remove the book” (4). Izatt also said that if “he receives the petition, he will present it to the Board as information. If the group wishes to have a discussion with the Board, the petition should be presented by a delegation at its next meeting on September 12” (6).

On September 7, 1990, MacKenzie wrote the school division’s Secretary-Treasurer informing him that the group, now calling itself “Parents for Quality

Education,” wanted to present “a petition and brief concerning the novel *Gentle sinners* and related matters to the Board...” (1). Enclosed with the letter were (1) a petition containing 446 signatures, (2) “a copy of the brief of the presentations by Mr. James MacKenzie, Dr. A.E. Chudley and Mr. John R. Penner, (3) “a letter and supporting documents distributed to select parents of students entering Grade 11 at F.R.C.,” (4) “a letter from the Director of Women Exploited, Ingrid Krueger, expressing concerns about the novel,” and (5) “a letter from Dr. R. Wand, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist expressing concerns about the novel.”

In the group’s brief, MacKenzie explained that “our purpose in making this presentation is not to challenge that vote [of April 12, 1990, to retain *Gentle sinners*] *per se* but to share new information and clear up any misconceptions ... such that a more informed decision can be made with respect to removing the book *Gentle sinners* and indeed books of like kind.” In the group’s closing remarks, they asked “that you reconsider your vote and remove the book *Gentle sinners* and replace it with more suitable material” (2).

In his presentation to the Board, Dr. Chudley focused on the suicide incidents within *Gentle sinners*. He pointed out that “suicide accounts for the second most important cause of death next to accidental deaths between the ages of 15 and 19 years.... Social scientists and mental health researchers have confirmed a statistically significant relationship between media coverage and suicide and temporally associated increases in suicide rates among teens” (2). Later Chudley observed:

The fact that Eric and Larry [two of the book’s characters] are 17 years old, an age close to Grade 11 readers with similar struggles and questions about life’s meaning, may enhance the student’s likelihood of relating to the characters and events in the novel and thus increase the chance of mimickry [sic]. This issue should be of grave concern to both parents and educators. Although we cannot and do not implicate all tragic events in children’s lives to novels or stories (in or out of the classroom), parents and educators must be diligent and cautious before recommending controversial educational materials in our public schools. Though no harm is intended, unintended consequences may result. (3)

One Board member, “Mrs. Foster pointed out that other literature such as *Romeo and Juliette* [sic] or *Hamlet* contain suicide. This literature is on the Department’s approved list. Dr. Chudley responded stating that the books cited were written by Shakespeare centuries ago and students do not have the same appreciation for their impact as they would if it were a more current work” (Minutes 8).

Addendum #3, a one-page letter dated August 24, 1990, was not signed but simply bore the complimentary close, “Concerned parents’ group for quality education.” Accompanying the letter was a page headed, “Objectionable excerpts from *Gentle sinners* by W.D. Valgardson.” These excerpts closely paralleled those previously distributed by “Moms in Touch” but with four short excerpts added and one deleted. The letter explained that “we have enclosed, for

your perusal, excerpts from the book *Gentle sinners*, which we found to be offensive. The excerpts, [sic] are out of the *text*, but are not out of *context*, as they convey the same meaning as written in the story itself.” The letter also told its readers that the group would be presenting its position and the petition” to the Board and that its goal was “to remove it [*Gentle sinners*] from the curriculum and have it replaced with more appropriate English Literature.” The letter encouraged parents, “If you find this book to be offensive, now is the time to contact the School at 269-2130, to check in which class your child has been enrolled [sic] and make necessary changes.”

Addendum #4 was a one-page letter dated July 13 from Ingrid Krueger to Doreen Penner. Krueger, who identified herself as the Founding Director of Women Exploited, said:

I was shocked and insulted when I read portions of the book *Gentle sinners* by W.D. Valgardson. This book is clearly an unacceptable piece of 'soft pornography' which merely promotes and even celebrates the dehumanization of women A book such as this can simply be added to the underlying causes of the rape and violence that plague women in our communities today. The author has merely shown that women in our society are still most vulnerable to physical violation, not only at the hands of men, but through their pens as well.

Finally, addendum #5, a single-page letter dated September 7, from Dr. Ward, an Assistant Professor in the University of Manitoba's Department of Psychiatry, was addressed to Dr. Chudley, and began, “I am writing in response to your request for my opinion regarding the advisability of including the book *Gentle sinners* by W.D. Valgardson in the high school curriculum. I reviewed the book with regard to the mental health themes which exist within the storyline of this novel, many of which deal with contemporary issues of adolescent alienation.” Wand goes on to set forth his understanding of the novel which he sees “approach[ing] many issues in human interaction in a nihilistic manner...” and concluded:

I have a concern that the depiction of these themes in the manner in which they are presented in the novel may magnify certain vulnerable students' feelings of apathy, despair and depression existing in their own lives to enhance dynamics of learned helplessness existing in adolescents who may become involved in various forms of self-destructive behaviours. Since students come to class unselected as to emotional stability, often without the knowledge of their educators of their personal vulnerabilities, there exists the possibility of increasing problems in some students with literature containing such nihilistic themes. I would not endorse the study of this particular book in the high school population without personal knowledge of the students and the specific issues each is dealing with in their own life.

At the conclusion of the delegation's presentations, the Board, by motion, agreed “That this matter be referred to the next Committee Meeting of the Whole” (Minutes 9).

That next meeting occurred on September 27 at which time Trustee G.

Cummings proposed four motions which were all lost for want of seconders. The first was “that, on behalf of the delegation, the Board remove the book *Gentle sinners* from the classroom” (Minutes 20). The next called for the Board “to implement a code of conduct similar to that found in other social organizations” (20) while the third stated “That, on behalf of the delegation, the Board review the process by which material which may depict harmful aberrations of human behaviour may be identified when approving material for classroom use” (20). Finally, Cummings moved “that the Board direct the Education and Public Relations Committee to study and recommend strategies for parent-teacher curriculum committees along the lines of the Special Needs Advisory Committee” (21).

The motion which the Board finally did pass at that meeting was:

That the submission from the delegation be received as information and that the Board write to the delegation thanking them for the clarifications which they made during their presentation and outline to them the procedural changes which have taken place at Fort Richmond Collegiate with respect to options that are available to students in the English Literature classes. (Minutes 19)

The Appeal Process—Round Four

While the Board’s motion of September 27 indicated that the Board apparently considered the matter closed, MacKenzie, in his capacity as Chair of Parents for Quality Education, wrote to the Board on December 10, 1990. In his two-page letter, MacKenzie briefly reviewed the group’s efforts, saying “but, alas, to no avail; [sic] as the Board applauds our efforts but denies our rights.” Saying that “this issue is gaining considerable momentum and interest/concern at all levels...” (1), MacKenzie outlined some recent or anticipated Parents for Quality Education actions: “legal opinion has been sought;” “the Women’s action groups contacted will be pursuing this matter;” “we will shortly be meeting with Senior’s groups;” “consideration is being given to a community blitz describing the failure of the School Board;” “the news media is most interested in our story of frustration at the hands of our elected School Board” (1). MacKenzie then added, “We do not submit this letter as an appeal or threat, but simply for your deliberation, and to go on record regarding why we must take the upcoming actions we have been forced into taking” (1). The letter closed, “As always, we are open to discuss this matter with the Board, but do make you aware that momentum is building in circles even outside the community, and these much larger and more influential resources will be brought to bear on this issue” (2).

At the Board’s next meeting on December 13, 1990, a motion calling for the Board to “write to James MacKenzie inviting him to appear before the Board for an informal discussion on this matter” (Minutes 15) was passed. That discussion occurred at the January 30, 1991, regular meeting of the Board. However, prior to the January meeting, Parents for Quality Education took the step of becoming

incorporated. The documents of incorporation included their goals statement:

The improvement of public education by means including, but without limiting, the generality of the foregoing:

- (a) The promotion of traditional Western society religious, social, community and family values in general, and in particular in the public education system, especially in relation to curriculum content and instructional orientation in the classroom.
- (b) The encouragement of teaching excellence in relation to the values aforesaid.
- (c) Encouraging parents, community, and the general public to become involved in substantive educational issues.
- (d) The promotion of positive relationships with teaching staff, School Boards and the Manitoba Department of Education in the public educational system. (3)

At the January 30 meeting, MacKenzie "said that they [Parents for Quality Education] will persevere and not dissipate simply because their request has been denied ... He said that they have no plans to request that any other books be removed from use at the schools" (Minutes 3). Mrs. Chudley, a former teacher in the division, also appeared as part of the delegation. She said that the group is not intending to censor this book or any other, rather the Board should be reasonable in making the decision in connection with *Gentle sinners*. She said that there is a proper area in which censorship is applied, such as in cases where dangerous or libelous material is removed from use in the schools. She said that that type of censorship would be proper for the Board to apply in the case of *Gentle sinners*. As a teacher, she had decided what was appropriate for use in her classroom. Rather than calling it censorship she would prefer to characterize it as discerning wisdom. All teachers exercise a certain amount of censorship in making decisions as to what material is used in their classrooms, as not all material is acceptable for classroom use (Minutes 4).

MacKenzie criticized Board Policy KLB, saying that it "requires an overhaul" (Minutes 3), and suggested that "he would like to see the book reviewed once again, in accordance with the Minister's new Guidelines" (Minutes 6).

The guidelines document to which MacKenzie referred was *Selection of learning resources: Policies and procedures for Manitoba schools*, produced by Manitoba Education and Training. Ironically, the impetus for producing such a document was the observation by its corporate authors, the School Library Media Program Curriculum Committee, that much of the censorship in the province's schools resulted from the absence of board-approved policies and procedures for responding to challenges to classroom and school library materials. The provincial department of education document, in part, provided "Guidelines for selection policy development" which were meant to be used as models by school jurisdictions which lacked policies and which, theretofore, had been using *ad hoc* procedures in reaction to complaints about learning materials. "By providing these guidelines, it is hoped that school divisions/districts and schools which do not currently have policies for the selection of

learning resources will find the basic principles of such a policy within this document" (4).

"Mr. MacKenzie stated that their group is looking at any avenue available to them in order to have the book removed from the school" (Minutes 7). Following some discussion, the Board passed the motion: "That the book *Gentle sinners* be reconsidered in accordance with the Minister's Guidelines entitled 'Selection of Learning Resources: Policies and Procedures for Manitoba Schools', dated January 16, 1991" (11).

The Board never had to implement its motion for, on February 8, teacher Hamelynck sent Superintendent Izatt a four-page letter in which, after summarizing the major happenings over the "past sixteen trying months" (4), Hamelynck announced, "I have decided that I will not teach *Gentle sinners* to my current English 200 class, but will continue to encourage my students in my care to read widely, discriminately, and judiciously" (3). Unaware of Hamelynck's letter, *The lance's* February 12 issue reported on the January 30 meeting under the headline "Valgardson novel debate continues."

On February 14, the Board received Hamelynck's letter "as information" and voted to rescind the reconsideration of *Gentle sinners* (Minutes 14). Almost two weeks later, on its February 26 front page, *The lance* announced, "*Gentle sinners* pulled from curriculum," while the March 3 issue of *The Winnipeg sun* indicated, "Dispute gets book bounced." In the *Sun* coverage, Chair Wyant was quoted as saying, "The Board never said, 'You can't use it. He [Hamelynck] made the decision he felt was in the best interests of the students and I applaud him for that.' But that doesn't mean the book won't be available to students—it's still on the shelf in the school's library" (Pollett 6). It was not until March 10 that the *Free press weekly*, a Sunday supplement to the *Winnipeg free press*, noted, "Teachers troubled after book pulled from curriculum."

Commentary

How could so many "rights" end up making a "wrong?" Unlike most Manitoba school jurisdictions, Fort Garry School Division had, almost a decade before, established a policy and set of procedures for responding to complaints about curriculum materials. Upon receiving a complaint, the teacher immediately made an alternate learning material available to everyone in the class and utilized a set of assignments and a final exam which were equally applicable to either book. In most instances, the teacher's simple action of providing a substitute learning material would have sufficed and the complaint would have been dropped.

The Review Panel, constituted in accordance with Board procedures, provided a report which was unequivocal in terms of the panel's support of *Gentle sinners* as a Grade 11 learning material. The Board's initial decision on January 25, coupled with its April 12, 1990, rejection of the group's appeal, meant that,

with the proviso that students had the option of selecting an alternate novel, the Board supported the continued use of *Gentle sinners*. Such repeated decisions were consistent with Board policy on two points. Firstly, the Board had said publicly, via its policy statement KLB, that its stance must be anti-censorship: "censorship of books and other learning materials shall be challenged in order to maintain the school's responsibility to provide information and enlightenment." Further, because "no parent or group of parents, outside the Corporate Board, has the right to determine the learning materials for students other than their own children," the provision of an alternate novel had addressed this concern.

Why then did Parents for Quality Education "win?" While no definitive answer can be provided, a number of factors certainly played a part. First, while the Board had an approved set of policies and procedures for responding to complaints about curriculum materials, Board minutes suggest that many Board members were unfamiliar with the specifics of that document. Chair Wyant was quoted as saying that "this is the first request he has seen in his 3 1/2 years on the Board" (Nikides 6 April 1990 4). Without constant prompting from the superintendent's department, some Board members appeared ready to abandon the policy and substitute *ad hoc* procedures.

Perhaps because the Board's initial actions seemed to suggest support for *Gentle sinners*, a strong anti-censorship lobby never materialized within the community. A few pro-*Gentle sinners* parents sent letters to the Board as did the Writers' Union of Canada. Along with a sprinkling of citizens, the Manitoba Library Association wrote in support of the book to the "Letters to the Editor" pages of the local papers. Apart from the *Winnipeg free press's* April 8, 1990, editorial page cartoon and *The Winnipeg sun's* April 16, 1990 editorial, "School officials defend principle," the public press simply confined itself to reporting the continuing event. As is evident from the letters of President C. Thain of the Fort Garry Teachers' Association, local teachers certainly kept a watching brief on the happenings. However, it was not until after the Board's January 30, 1991, decision to re-evaluate *Gentle sinners* that the division's teachers indicated the depth of their concern. In a letter to new Board Chair Foster, Thain wrote:

I wish the Board of Trustees to be aware that the Manitoba Teachers' Society is concerned about attacks on learning material by small pressure groups. It is also concerned about the apparent failure of Trustees to defend the rights of their schools and their teachers to academic freedom. It has reached a point where the Society is ready to go to court to defend the right of teachers to academic freedom including the right to teach without harassment by small pressure groups who demand the right to make decisions for everyone else.

When, and I am deeply concerned that it is when and not if, such action is begun by the Teachers' Society, Trustees in Fort Garry and elsewhere are going to have to decide on which side of the courtroom they intend to stand and with what degree of commitment they intend to stand there. (1-2)

Another factor which led to the final outcome was that, from the outset, Parents for Quality Education appeared to dictate the agenda. When the "Moms in Touch" letter labelled *Gentle sinners* as "graphic pornography," the fundamental Common Law tenet of "innocent until proven guilty" was seemingly abandoned and the Division was put into the defensive posture of proving that the book was not whatever this group alleged it to be. Throughout the Board Minutes, there are numerous instances of the group's making accusations about the behaviour of the teacher, the details of some procedure, or the alleged effects of *Gentle sinners* upon adolescents. Instead of the group's having to prove the truth of its continuing string of allegations, the Division expended the time and energy of proving each charge false.

Gentle sinners (and indirectly teacher Chuck Hamelynck) was denied fundamental justice by being placed in a position of double jeopardy. The book had been "tried" and found "innocent," a decision upheld on appeal, yet that very same appeal Board was prepared to "retry" the book [and the teacher] under a new set of "laws." Actually, had the Board taken the time to compare its own policy with that suggested within *Selection of learning resources*, it would have discovered, as the Fort Garry Teachers' Association pointed out, that "the Minister's guidelines not only mirrored those under which the novel was first evaluated, they also reiterated the basic provision that no one has the right to dictate material for anyone other than their own children" (Thain to Foster 1).

If *Gentle sinners* had been re-evaluated under the Minister's new guidelines in March, 1991, I suspect that the original review panel's decision would have been reaffirmed. And then what would have happened? That was really the question Superintendent Izatt had raised a full year before when he cautioned: "If the Board deviates from its policy by convening an additional review panel, the Board will have to decide how many panels will be utilized before it makes its decision regarding the appeal" (Minutes 22 March 1990 9). Izatt was really saying that, at some point, Board members had to accept responsibility for making a "final" decision and for saying to Parents for Quality Education, "Your appeals are exhausted. The *Gentle sinners* matter is closed."

Because no one in Fort Garry School Division appeared prepared to make a strong, unequivocal statement of closure, in its absence, Parents for Quality Education was ready to continue its actions. Though the Board's April 12, 1990, vote rejected the group's appeal, the fact that two of the nine trustees voted against the motion may have suggested to the complainants that there was some degree of support for the group's position within the Board. Later "sympathetic" behaviours by this pair of trustees might have also served to reinforce the group's continued actions. Regardless, as Mackenzie pointed out on January 30, 1991, Parents for Quality Education "will persevere and not dissipate because their request ha[d] been denied" (Minutes 3). At that same meeting, Mackenzie stated "that their group [was] looking at any avenue available to them in order to have the book removed from the school" (Minutes 7). Certainly the group's behav-

iours evidenced the truth of MacKenzie's statement for, when the review policy's procedures did not lead to the group's ends, they asked the division's superintendents to subvert the democratic process by using the authority of their office to order *Gentle sinners*' removal. When that approach also did not work, Parents for Quality Education's "non-threatening" letter of December 10, 1991, apparently intimidated enough trustees sufficiently that the Board gave them another hearing and then grasped at the delaying tactic of yet another panel.

And the learning for the censors? Maintain constant but shifting pressures on the elected and appointed decision makers until, worn down and exhausted, they will withdraw their support from the school level personnel. The classroom teacher, abandoned and isolated, will then accede to the censors' demands. Frightening, isn't it!

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