Reflections on a personal case of censorship

Margaret Buffie

Résumé: *Margaret Buffie nous fait part des expériences malheureuses que son roman Who is Frances Rain? lui ont valu à Ottawa et à Winnipeg lors de ses visites dans les réseaux scolaires. Elle décortique tous les arguments de mauvaise foi que les autorités lui ont opposés: selon elle, ceux qui censurent les livres refusent d'admettre qu'ils se livrent à la censure.*

For writers, librarians and educators, the banning or censoring of a recommended book, even *once*, should ring alarm bells. Loud ones. True, the censoring of literature specifically aimed at young readers is most difficult to deal with. For teachers and librarians, the selection of age-appropriate books can be an ordeal. However, in Canada, many people forget that we have a number of highly-regarded committees who carefully choose and recommend books specifically aimed at certain ages, not only for reading levels but, just as importantly, for their literary qualities as well.

The Canadian Library Association has lists of recommended books, as does the Canadian Children's Book Centre (Our Choice Catalogue), the National Library of Canada, and many individual libraries across Canada. There are magazines such as *Canadian children's literature*, *Canadian materials*, *Quill and quire*'s "Books for Young People," *Emergency librarian*, and many others that offer insightful analyses of books for young readers. Available from the United States are the esteemed American Library Association "Best Books List," The New York Library "Best Books List," and journals such as *School library*, *Hornbook* and others. I have heard from some librarians that it is impossible to read every book one orders for a school or library. Still, they can't complain that there is nothing on which to base their selections.

Teachers, librarians and school principals presumably use these lists as guidelines for the selection of books from all over the world, as well as for choosing the finest examples of Canadian literature. One bright note: it has been my experience—talking to a great many teachers and librarians—that a large number *do* buy books on these recommended lists and *do* vigorously defend

them against challenges by individual parents or groups who may wish to have one removed from their library or classroom shelves. And a surprising number of these teachers and librarians have read the books they order. Hooray for these involved and committed people!

Sadly, however, there are still those who feel compelled—for various reasons—to remove age-appropriate and highly-recommended books for young people from school library shelves.

Despite the unanimous recommendation from all of the above groups, and despite winning a major Canadian award and being shortlisted for two others, one of my novels, *Who is Frances Rain?*, was banned from an Ottawa school during my tour to the Montreal and Ottawa areas for Children's Book Week in the fall of 1990.

Ironically, a few months after my experience in Ottawa, just when I thought the nightmare was over, a long article appeared in the journal *Canadian materials* which described the Ottawa incident and talked sympathetically about the dilemma of selecting age-appropriate materials. A number of people were interviewed for this article. The principal of the Ottawa school, Jim Brown, was once again given space to list the "smokescreen" excuses he'd used to justify cancelling my visit. The only person who was *not* interviewed for this article was "the censored one"—the person most affected by the censoring of her novel—me! I had no opportunity at this crucial time to defend my novel, to defend *myself* against the personal slurs, or to respond to the reasons offered for cancelling the visit.

Shortly before I was to fly east for Book Week, I was told that the Principal of Queenswood Public School in Orleans, Ottawa, had cancelled my pre-arranged and confirmed visit. His librarian and a grade six teacher were concerned about certain words in *Who is Frances Rain?* When Principal Brown saw these words, he immediately cancelled my visit. He then removed the book from the classroom and locked it in his office. He told reporters later that he would allow students to see it only with parental supervision, stating that this should not be viewed as censorship in any way.

I was flabbergasted. Warned that I might be besieged by the press upon my arrival in Montreal, I laughed this off. Surely the media had better stories to write about than one isolated incident of censorship.

However, after my first presentation in Montreal, I was called to the phone—the first of many calls. A reporter from a large Toronto newspaper asked for my reaction to the banning of my book. Then she asked if I was aware that Principal Brown was maintaining that the language in the book was only *one* reason for the cancellation of my visit. The main reason was that I was simply too difficult and demanding to work with.

I babbled something sophisticated and worldly along the lines of, "Get outta here! No way!", but the reporter insisted that she had talked to him personally. Principal Brown's attack on my professional behaviour was bewildering. After

all, I had never spoken or written to this man—and still haven't to this day. Preparations for Book Week are always handled through regional co-ordinators.

What on earth, I wondered as I organized my overheads and books for the next presentation, could he mean when he called me difficult and demanding? It took a few months, but I finally found out—in the *Canadian materials* article by Janet Collins. According to Brown, "the author insisted on limiting the audience to sixty students. Nobody else who has come to our school has made that sort of demand."

Let me explain. The Children's Book Centre asks authors what we consider the "ideal" class size, as a flexible guideline for schools. During that particular 1990 Book Week, I talked to groups ranging from 20 to 130 students and teachers. During my various trips across Canada in the past five years, I have given presentations to auditoriums filled with 200 or more students as well as talking to as few as 15 youngsters from a single classroom. Although, like many authors, I prefer smaller groups, I have never turned down students or teachers eager to sit in on a presentation. I would not have dreamed of turning down any student or classroom teacher at Queenswood School. If I had been approached (which I was not) with a request for more than the *preferred* number of 60 students, there would not have been a problem. Principal Brown, however, said in the *CM* article that "many teachers believed their students would be left out and that led to arguments among the staff." Mmm. Doesn't sound as if everyone was in agreement with my being banned, does it? I felt that this "problem" with class size was an excuse used in order to slip-slide around the real issue—the issue of a school principal banning a highly-recommended book and then having to explain his actions.

On hearing this first excuse, I had a sinking feeling that I was in for a pretty bumpy ride. Most censors get away with their behaviour—usually because they practice "silent" censorship, but the media—print, radio and television—wanted to know all the details. Rather than possibly taking an unpopular stand in the public eye, the censor points the finger at the author. It's all her fault!

The *CM* article states, "Once the [Queenswood] teacher ruled out the possibility of grade six students attending the reading, [because of 'inappropriate' language], the question turned to the book's suitability for grades four and five." Principal Brown is quoted as saying, "We had to rule it out as being too complex for them."

I had been told from the beginning that I would be talking to grade six students at Queenswood School. In an interview with *The Globe and mail* on November 7, the Principal stated that certain passages were "not suitable for Grade 6 students." Then he told the Ottawa *Citizen* on the same day that the grade level was four and five. In the local community newspaper, *The star* (Orleans), November 14, he definitely goes with the "too difficult" excuse, citing the grade levels as four and five, with no mention of grade six classes at all. A small enough point but vital: I had been asked to talk to grade six students.

"Logistics" was another "murky" reason offered for my visit cancellation. In the *Globe and mail* article, Brown is quoted as saying, "I cancelled Buffie's appearance at the school, which was scheduled for mid-November, because of logistical reasons. We couldn't fit her into our schedule." Odd, considering that I had been invited to the school and my acceptance had been confirmed. The school librarian had even arranged to take me to an authors' lunch!

In preparing for this article, wading through Principal Brown's excuses, and once again suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous excuses, I perceive that a great deal of this mess in Ottawa came about through Queenswood School's lack of preparation. Not one of these people had read the book in its entirety before responding with knee-jerk reactions to it. If they had read it, they might have decided against censoring it. And if they were enlightened educators the problem of language could have been addressed in class—a point I will discuss in a moment.

When a school librarian, eager for an author visit—*any* author visit—takes on a writer whose work she is unfamiliar with, there is always plenty of time to familiarize herself with the author's work. Most authors automatically assume, quite rightly I think, that the classroom teacher and the students will be acquainted with at least one of their books when they arrive on the scene. Book Week is exhausting, but it is a job we take on with great energy and pleasure. When I arrive at a school or library, *I am prepared.* It is always disappointing when a writer discovers that a school such as Queenswood is unprepared.

Principal Brown admitted to more than one reporter that he had not read the book before banning it. I believe he felt he didn't have to. Certain words—words which were strung together for the media, making it look as if *Who is Frances Rain?* was one long profanity—had been helpfully highlighted for him by his librarian. Why would he need to read the whole book?

If someone hasn't read a book, can he make a thoughtful decision about its appropriateness for a classroom? Is he in any position to discuss it with anyone? Should he be allowed a platform, such as *Canadian materials*, to discuss what he *doesn't know*? Why was he allowed to prattle on about a demanding and difficult author he had never met, logistical problems and grade level problems, without once having to discuss the actual book? Why wasn't he asked why he banned a book that had been so highly recommended for ages ten and up?

And why wasn't I asked to participate in the debate in the *CM* article? It was titled *Buffie reading cancelled.* Where was Buffie's side of the issue? When I asked for an explanation, it was admitted that only *one* phone call had been made to try to locate me. This article came out over two months after the event. Why didn't someone try to call me in Montreal, or after I returned home in November? Is this a fair look at an issue, when the one most damaged by it is left out of the debate? Being offered a chance to respond in a letter to the *CM* editor two months after the article came out was simply not good enough. The damage had been done.

Sadly, we find that there are other principals and educators out there who ban or restrict books without having read them. In March 1991, a Winnipeg principal encouraged the restriction of *Who is Frances Rain?*. A long-awaited visit was discouraged after the librarian read that *Canadian materials* article and took her concerns to the principal. I wonder if she would have been as worried if I'd had a chance to present my views in that article!

Unfortunately, principals such as this Winnipeg educator are so worried about protecting their position that they find it easier to censor, ban, or restrict a book than to face possible political fallout from a few irate parents (often it is only one parent) or nervous school board members. It saddens me when I see how they can give up or put away, often temporarily, their convictions about intellectual freedom to keep their little boats from bouncing around on an unexpected wave or two. I suppose I can see how this happens, but I will not condone it.

It appears to me—and I have heard this from teachers themselves—there are a growing number of principals and teachers who are taking this easy way out—sometimes anticipating a problem *before* it happens, sometimes moving quickly to stop a conflict in their school by banning an author as soon as one parent complains. Those principals and teachers fail the writer and their own students. These are the educators who we assume have handled censorship problems for years and have a sound selection policy. These are the educators who we assume will crack down on unreasonable censorship.

But they don't. It is *those* educators who anger me the most. It is *those* educators who use their authority in an atmosphere fraught—they claim—with political problems, parental pressures, and questioning school boards to remove a highly-recommended book from the shelves; who decide that a book will not be read to the students; who back down to keep peace; who use words such as "sensitivity" in place of censorship. It seems easier to ban a book and to phone an organizer of an event or the author herself and tell her that she is no longer welcome; that her book has been removed from the shelves; that it will not be read aloud to or read by the students before an author visit, as intended. It seems easier to do all of these things than to expend energy and time fighting school boards, trustees, parents and the growing number of organized censor hounds. Do these principals really think that an author will shrug her shoulders and say, "Oh, well. On to the next school"?

I think they do. As in the case of the Winnipeg principal, they speak so reasonably, you see...so apologetically about all of the "political" pressures they are under. And they ask the writer to understand. Then, if the author speaks out, they use other issues to cloud the real one. If a principal clouds the issues with innuendoes and rumours before sliding back into the shadows, then with luck—he hopes—the author will not respond too loudly and peace will once again reign.

Censorship is often based on fear. I think many of those who press for

censorship, whether a parent or a principal or a teacher, do so because of fear. These people believe that the very moral fabric of our society is in grave danger.

The world is a worrisome place. There appears to be more and more violence—especially against women and children. There is growing drug and alcohol abuse and an apparent social acceptance of sexual promiscuity, teen-age pregnancies and all of those things that frighten educators and parents. Some feel that disrespect for authority is also being encouraged. (The banning of Robert Munsch's *Thomas's snowsuit* is just one example of this particular fear overcoming common sense.) How can adults guide their children when so much is out of their control? As a parent I have felt these pressures. For some people, however, I think the fear grows and grows until they feel compelled to find something, anything that they can blame—but it has to be something that they can control. One of the things that frightened adults feel they can control, or desperately try to control, is literature that is aimed at young people.

Those who censor highly-recommended quality literature see words—books—as something with the potential to endanger, to frighten and to corrupt the young. I am absolutely certain of one thing: censors of this type believe that what they are doing is right. They have a sense of absolute purpose. They think they are protecting their children's future emotional and spiritual well-being.

Writers of children's literature and many educators do not believe that banning books is the way to go about protecting our young. To deny a student access to a recommended book because of so-called profane language—by counting the number of swear words in it and putting a limit on the acceptable number—one, two, six?—puts a severe limitation on that student's right to read a wide variety of literature by some of the finest writers in the field today. As Dr. David Jenkinson once said to me, "These people seem to presume that innocence and ignorance are synonymous terms."

In a healthy educational atmosphere, we should be able to discuss *why* a writer might use such language. Ask the students. I have. They *know* why it is used. It reflects the world they live in. Writing a certain word does not condone the use of that word. Writers *must* use the language that exists in the world they are writing about. To deny access to a book on these grounds presumes that the rest of the book, the other thousands and thousands of words and sentences and images and conversations and thoughts and feelings are worth absolutely nothing. And as a writer, I refuse to accept that.

So where does this leave the writer who has been censored? If censors and book-banners are allowed to remove my books from the schools and libraries, if they are allowed to define what *all* children read—not just their own children—according to their own narrow vision of what is "moral" or "proper" literature, where will this leave me? What happens to a writer, I wonder, who gives in and accepts the fact that she must now be told what she can and cannot write? Surely the freedom of true creativity will be lost—for she will have to debate within herself what she thinks the censors will want rather than spending

time on the literary value of her work.

And where does this leave the possibilities of delving into areas that are controversial or unexplored? I cannot write about a family conflict without using the language that is real to that particular family. It is not possible to write a book that is censor-proof. Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* was banned in the early 1980's. The *Merriam-Webster dictionary* and *My friend Flicka* have both been the victims of censorship attacks in recent years.

It is not easy to sort out the problems of censorship. Fighting censorship calls for courage and commitment. As a writer, I know I would much rather be writing a novel than writing this article. I hate the personal attacks I have had to endure from people I have never met—from people who have not even taken the time to read my books in their entirety.

I see the true educator's job as transmitting knowledge, ideas, the love of reading and writing—not limiting or restricting those things. Many teachers offer their students a wide range of books to read. And they also offer them the opportunity to openly discuss what they have just read. It can't always be easy. But these are the educators who are truly contributing to the development of confident, tolerant, literate, and astute young adults.

I really do believe that this is probably just the beginning of censorship in our schools. The more that educators use trade books in their whole language curriculum, for example, the more flack they are going to face. More people will be demanding that the schools go back to the bloodless and safe educational texts that can be rigorously scanned for controversial material. But rather than all of us running around, screaming the sky is falling, or avoiding books that might be a problem, teachers and librarians—and principals—will have to arm themselves with carefully-prepared selection policies and guidelines for handling challenges which begin with the all-important question: "Have you read the entire book which concerns you?"

Censorship problems won't stop me from writing. I love writing. I love creating another world. I love outlining plots and describing characters, and developing conflict, and choosing the right name for each character. I love watching those characters get up off their two-dimensional planes and move and walk and talk and react with each other. I love my computer. And my pencils and the smell of paper and ink and cardboard boxes filled with each new draft of a manuscript.

For now, I won't throw away my thesaurus, or my dictionaries, or my *Elements of style*, or my *Elements of grammar*, or my *Fundamentals of clear writing*. With all of the support around me, I will continue to write the book that searches me out and demands to be written. And *I* will decide what words to use—and how and when to use them.

Margaret Buffie *is the author of three novels for young adults. Her latest book* My mother's ghost *was nominated for the 1992 Governor General's Award.*