

Good libraries don't: The censorship of Canadian picture books

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Résumé: *Le relevé des albums illustrés qui ont été critiqués ou attaqués par des groupes de pression révèle que la censure repose sur un malentendu fondamental: la plupart des adultes présupposent, à tort, qu'ils connaissent la manière dont les enfants vont interpréter les ouvrages qu'on leur donne à lire.*

In schools, censorship occurs whenever groups or individuals, within or without the school, attempt to prevent students from reading, hearing or seeing something or someone because of the censors' belief that such exposure will be harmful to the students. In Canada, for example, the liberal left, concerned about various "isms," has challenged books like Mark Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little house on the prairies* and W.P. Kinsella's *The moccasin telegraph and other stories* on the grounds that these titles are racist in content. Meanwhile, members of the conservative right, troubled by matters such as explicit sex, the presence of witchcraft or what they consider to be offensive language, have caused books like Sarah Ellis' *The baby project*, Beatrice Culleton's *In search of April Raintree* and Alice Munro's *Lives of girls and women* to be removed from schools.

Nor is censorship limited to these kinds of challenges. The climate of censorship within Canadian public education has led to a number of authors, including Margaret Buffie, Welwyn Wilton Katz, Kevin Major and Sandra Richmond, being "dis-invited" from speaking at schools. And as I reported in "Censorship and Canadian schools," the censorship chill is also felt by the nation's publishers, both trade and textbook, who attempt to avoid the censors by pre-censoring their books.

But surely, you say, censorship does not extend to the contents of picture books, those slim 32-page volumes with the brief text and the "pretty pictures"? Alas, it does, and Canadian authored and illustrated picture books experience both the same forms of censorship and the same range of complaints that censors of the right and left address to materials for older audiences.

Often, the very popular authors for juveniles are also the most frequently censored. Robert Munsch is a favourite with Canada's picture book crowd, but his legion of early-years followers is not sufficient to protect him from the various forms of the censors' wrath. In an interview in 1988, Munsch reported

that at least one school has blackened out “I have to go pee!”—the repeated line in his book *I have to go!*—and replaced it with the more genteel, “I have to go to the bathroom.” Rick Wilks of Annick Press recalls some “parents [who] complained that Munsch’s *The paper bag princess* was anti-family because the princess refuses to marry the ratty Prince Ronald” (Goyette A9). Still other adults have questioned the princess Elizabeth’s calling Prince Ronald a bum at the conclusion of this book. In his 1988 interview, Munsch recounted that earlier oral versions of this story had Elizabeth socking Ronald on the nose; but Annick Press, suspecting that there would be objections to such a physical response, asked him for a softer version.

Some Munsch stories contain what he calls “minor taboo violations,” words such as “pee” or “bum,” which he says children will readily accept. “Kids love talking about peeing and farting, but they do not like stories where the mother says, ‘Go to hell!’ to the father. That’s a major taboo violation, and kids do not want an adult doing that. But to have an adult saying ‘bum’ or ‘pee’, that’s great. ‘Underwear’ is good too!” (Munsch 1988).

Numerous parents can, undoubtedly, relate to the conflict about clothing found in Munsch’s *Thomas’ snowsuit*. Thomas, characterizing his “nice new brown snowsuit” as “the ugliest thing I have ever seen in my life,” refuses to wear the garment voluntarily. After Thomas’ mother expends considerable physical effort, she manages to get him into the snowsuit for school. At recess, Thomas’ teacher, having inherited the problem, is forced to involve the principal in

helping to get Thomas to put on the hated garment. “When he [the principal] was done, the principal was wearing the teacher’s dress, the teacher was wearing the principal’s suit and Thomas was still in his underwear.”

While children generally find *Thomas’ snowsuit* delightfully funny, not every adult

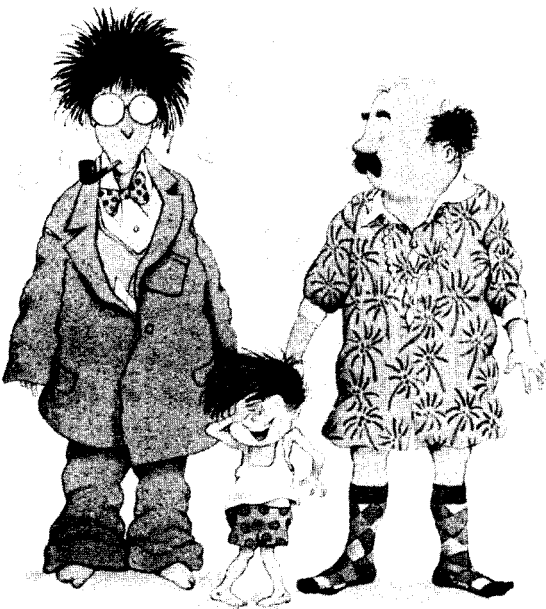


Figure 1

shares their assessment of Munsch's plot or Michael Martchenko's illustrations of the cross-dressing teacher and principal. During the 1988-89 school year, "a teacher at an elementary school in Lloydminster (on the Alberta/Saskatchewan border) told the school principal that the book (despite its humour and spirited hero) undermined the authority of all school principals. The principal agreed and removed the book from the school library without even telling the school librarian" (Rae K15). Though another district school followed suit, the area's eight remaining elementary schools kept the book.

Lloydminster was not the sole source of such a complaint. In an interview in 1990, Munsch recounted how

he got a letter from a school in New York City saying, 'We try to teach good citizenship and respect for authority, and this book is anti-authoritarian.' I can see how, in certain social situations if people were thinking a certain way, they would think that. I regard that situation as unfortunate. In general, that's a very popular book with teachers and principals.

Almost immediately after its publication, Munsch's *Giant; or waiting for the Thursday boat* was challenged in Ontario's Middlesex and Welland Counties for depicting violence towards God. McKeon, Ireland's largest giant, is angry at St. Patrick for chasing all the snakes, elves, and, with the exception of himself, all the giants out of Ireland.

St. Patrick's explanation that he was "just doing what God wanted" causes McKeon to transfer his anger and to say:

Then send out your God.
I'll kick Him in the knee.
I'll knock Him on the head.
He'll never recover!

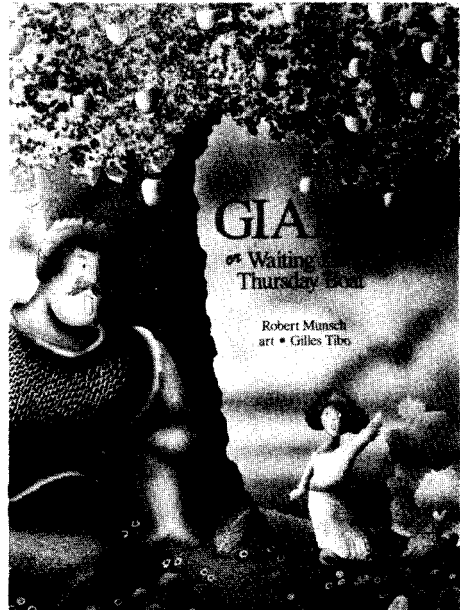


Figure 2

Told that God does not fight with giants, McKeon attempts to provoke Him by throwing Ireland's church bells into the ocean. Learning that God is arriving on the Thursday boat, the giant plans to meet Him on the beach, where "I'll pound him till he looks like applesauce." The first boat to arrive is quite tiny and contains only "a very small girl with a lot of fish." Certain that this person is not God, McKeon awaits other boats. In succession, boats arrive containing a very rich man, an important man, and a prominent military man, but McKeon discovers that none of these people

is God. When the little girl tells McKeon that St. Patrick is now driving snakes, etc., out of heaven, the giant goes there and commences to throw bells over heaven's sides. St. Patrick, wishing to complain to God about McKeon's behaviour, searches for Him in the biggest houses in heaven. Finally, giant and saint find God, the little girl, in heaven's smallest dwelling.

Initially banned by Ontario's Middlesex County Board, *Giant* was returned to libraries with the restriction that, "because of the book's religious implications, it won't be in the primary curriculum and teachers won't be permitted to read it to children" ("Children's book" 19). In describing the early response to *Giant* in 1990, Munsch said, "My letters are going 50% hating it and 50% liking it. People are saying they don't like the amount of violence in it which isn't what I thought people would say. I thought people would get upset on religious grounds. Maybe people are upset on religious grounds, but what they're saying is that it's too violent a book for little kids."

In a study of challenges to materials in Canadian public libraries, Alvin Schrader (1992) found that the nation's most frequently challenged title was a children's picture book, and a Canadian one at that: *Lizzy's lion*, written by Dennis Lee and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay. Recipient of the 1984 Canada Council's Children's Literature Prize for Illustration, the book was challenged eleven times during the study's 1985-87 time span, with violence being the recurring complaint.

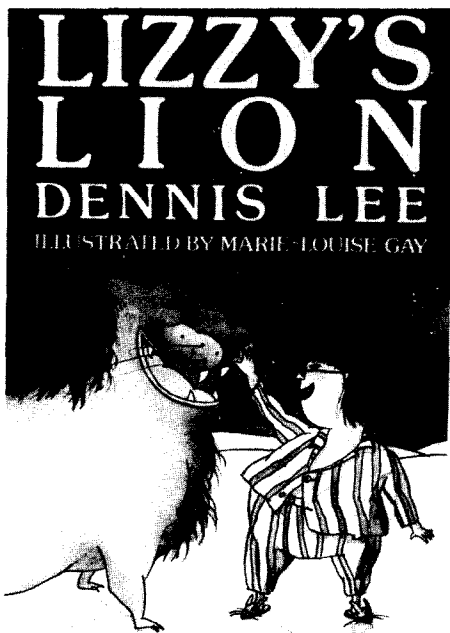


Figure 3

In fourteen four-line stanzas, Lee's *Lizzy's lion* describes what happens when a burglar breaks into a little girl's bedroom one night and attempts to steal her piggy-bank. Anticipating that the child's room might be guarded by a lion, the burglar brought candy to scatter about to distract the animal. Lizzy's lion, which "wasn't friendly" and "wasn't tame" and which can only be controlled by using "his Secret Lion Name," proceeds to give "the rotten robber an experimental chew."

In an interview, Marie-Louise Gay described the personal challenge she faced in illustrating Dennis Lee's 56 lines.

Violence doesn't bother me in children's books, but I realized that, for four double

page spreads, there was a lion eating a robber. That's a big part of the book. 'What am I going to do?' I started the whole book again and said, 'How could I put this into one or two pages?' There was no way. You can't have a page with five stanzas and then a page with no text....I couldn't draw four pages of blood and guts. And I don't think that's the point. The point is that the lion eats the robber and the child is the strong person in the book. She knows the word, the lion's secret name. So, how to do it?

What I did was to dress the robber up in very distinctive clothes and the lion would rip them off. You could tell the lion was doing something, but we didn't have to see the blood. In the last fight image, the lion is holding the robber by the leg and the robber's head is cut off by the page. Now, who knows? Maybe the head had been bitten off, but it's left to the imagination. Two pages later, you have Lizzy looking at the room, and there are shredded clothes scattered all over the place and the robber's glove is hanging out of the lion's mouth. It is clear that the lion has devoured the robber, but the violence has never been graphically detailed.

Although one of the eleven challenges did cause *Lizzy's Lion* to be temporarily removed from circulation in a public library, the book was retained in the remaining ten challenges, "but in two cases, it was relocated to a juvenile section" (Schrader).

Violence was also the concern when, in 1990, a mother complained about the book, *The old woman and the pig*, which her six-year-old son brought home from a Winnipeg school.

In the McCrackens' retelling of a traditional cumulative tale, an old woman cannot cause a pig she recently purchased at market to climb over a stile. When it appears that the porker's pig-headedness will prevent the woman from returning

home that night, she attempts to enlist help from passersby. Commencing with the old woman's unsuccessful request of a dog that it bite the pig, the story chronicles the domino-like chain of requests wherein the needed action of each subsequently introduced character will occur only if the character next "higher" in the chain takes action. Ultimately, the old woman's act of giving the cat a bowl of milk causes the necessary series of connected actions to unfold so that finally "piggy in a fright jumped over the stile."

Within the story's cause-and-effect chain of events, a butcher is called upon to threaten the well-being of an ox; however, in turn, the butcher also requires some extrinsic motivation. The mother said that she refused to let her son read the book "when she saw an illustration showing the butcher with a rope around



An old tale retold
by Robert and Marlene McCracken

Figure 4

his neck and his tongue hanging out. 'I know it's a fable. I wouldn't have minded it except for that illustration'" (St. Germain 5).

Although this mother's right to restrict the content of her son's reading would have been acceptable to the school system, it appeared that, in describing the book as "inappropriate for use in her son's school" and saying that "they have to screen the books better," she wanted to extend the scope of her prohibition. As further argument for the book's removal, the mother noted that "a student in another class [had] attempted suicide by hanging." The school's principal, however, replied that "she hadn't heard about a suicide attempt among the school's students." While *The old woman and the pig* was to have been reviewed by the school division's education committee, the principal, in early 1993, could not recall having received the committee's decision. But she stated that the school, itself, had voluntarily removed the book from general circulation and

placed it on the "teachers' shelf"—from which, one assumes, it can still be borrowed by teachers and read to classes without the illustrations having to be shared.

Sue Ann Alderson's *Ida and the wool smugglers*, illustrated by Ann Blades, found its way onto the list of books cited in America's "Banned Books Week '92" ("Kids' Corner" 25).

Using a setting of "long ago, when tall trees grew where cities now stand [and] farmers settled the islands that lie off the west coast of Canada," Alderson tells the story of a middle child, Ida, who is too small to help her father or big brother

John with their farm chores, and who is also too little to assist her mother in caring for her infant sister. One day, however, Ida's mother asks her to deliver a basket of bread to their nearest neighbours, the Springmans, who have just had a baby. John immediately insists that "Ida's too little to go the Springmans' by herself," adding, "It's too dangerous for Ida to go." The danger which John anticipates comes from smugglers who row from the mainland to the islands to steal sheep, shear them, and then smuggle the wool back to the mainland to sell. As no one else can be spared for the delivery task, Ida must perform it. Her mother warns Ida to stay out of the woods and to follow the meadow path. Further, if Ida hears any whistling in the woods, the smugglers' method of signalling, she is to run home or the Springmans', whichever is closer. On her errand, Ida not only encounters her favourite ewe, Tandy, with her twin lambs,

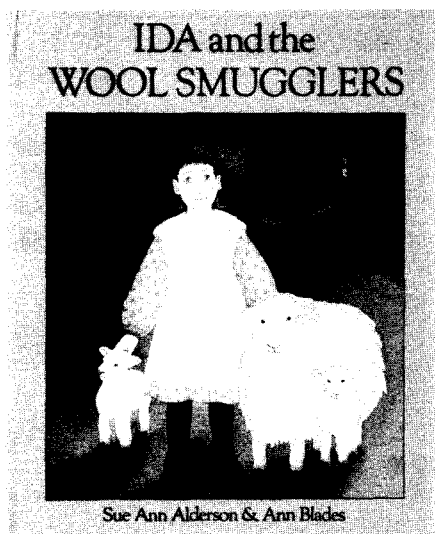


Figure 5

but she also hears the whistling. Fearing that following her mother's instructions would lead to Tandy's lambs becoming smugglers' meals, Ida elects to drive the sheep trio to safety at the Springmans'. At book's end, a successful Ida can start to think of herself as "big enough now."

Certainly Ida did disobey her mother's explicit instructions, and it is not unheard of for someone to complain when a juvenile character in fiction does not do what an adult in authority requests. That *Ida and the wool smugglers* might encourage children to rebel against adult authority was not the complaint in this instance, though. Instead, the *Newsletter on intellectual freedom* reported the parental objection to be that "the mother in the picture book was neglectful because she sent her daughter to the neighbors when she knew the smugglers were in the vicinity" (178). A Howard County, Maryland, review committee, in recommending that *Ida and the wool smugglers* stay on library shelves, said it was an "historical representation of nineteenth century rural Canada and it was normal for the child to take a long walk under the circumstances."

Sometimes the censoring of a picture book occurs *before* the book is published, and the general public is then not aware of the censorship that has taken place. Laszlo Gal's illustrations of Margaret Crawford Maloney's retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's *The little mermaid* resulted in Gal's receiving his second Canada Council Children's Literature Prize for illustration, but the paintings children meet in the book are not as they were originally submitted to the publisher and have, instead, been altered in response to the publisher's censorial instructions. For example, the original cover had featured a mermaid au naturel. Explains Gal, "It was much more daring before, and I had to cover the breasts with hair. I felt stupid to put a little shell there like a Walt Disney movie." American publishers showed interest in *The little mermaid*, but they did not publish it. "A year later, I found out that they couldn't take it because of the 'nudity,' because they cannot sell these books in the Bible Belt."

While touring Manitoba during Children's Book Week in 1990, illustrator/author Werner Zimmermann related another incident of pre-publication censorship, one which affected his illustrations

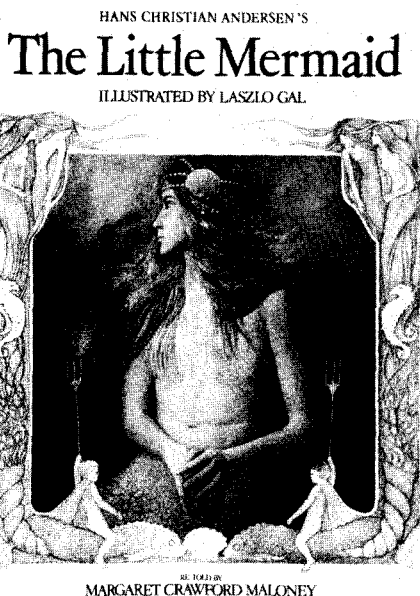
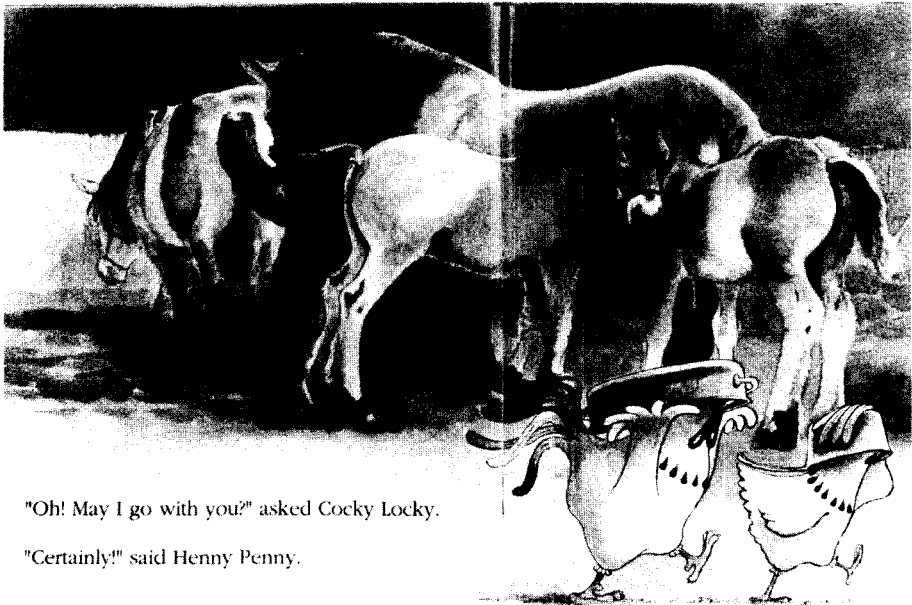


Figure 6

for the picture book, *Henny Penny, aka Chicken Licken*. Zimmermann's Canadian publisher, pleased with his illustrations, had offered the book to an American publisher who expressed a willingness to take some tens of thousands of copies of the book on the condition that the illustration for the double page spread occupying pages 6 and 7 be changed. It seems that Gal's experiences with bare human breasts being unacceptable in certain areas of the United States also extended to the "breasts" of any mammal. In Zimmermann's original painting, which he shared with the Winnipeg audience, two fowl characters, Henny Penny and Cockey Locky, are seen in the background walking across a field. In the foreground, and acting as a frame to the pair, are the legs and underside of a cow from which dangled an anatomically correct udder. "Either the udder with its teats goes, or the book goes," said the American publisher in effect. Faced with the loss of significant royalties, Zimmermann finally capitulated and replaced the cow with four horses, their rear ends prominently facing readers, perhaps as an illustrator's editorial comment on editors.



"Oh! May I go with you?" asked Cockey Locky.

"Certainly!" said Henny Penny.

Figure 7

Calling Diane Léger Haskell's *Maxine's tree* "emotional and an insult to loggers" (Dafoe C4), members of the Sechelt, B.C., area's IWA-Canada [International Woodworkers of America] local demanded that the trustees of School District 46 remove the book from school libraries. The complaint about this picture book arose when a six-year-old girl told her fourth generation logger father that what he did for a living was wrong (Collins 134). Asked to provide

the source for this judgement, the little girl referred her father to a book, *Maxine's tree*, which had been read in school.

In Léger Haskell's sentimental tale, Maxine, five, goes camping on weekends with her father in Carmanah Valley on Vancouver Island's west coast. There, Maxine's father, with other volunteers, builds trails through the woods so that people can visit the ancient rain forest. While others work, Maxine plays in her tree, a giant sitka spruce. When Maxine sees the clear-cut sections in the next valley, she fears for her tree. Making a sign with her name on it, Maxine sticks it on the tree in the belief that "Nobody will want to hurt someone's favourite tree."

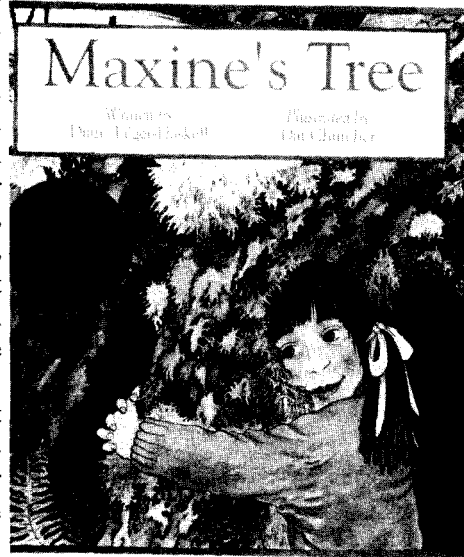


Figure 8

Though the story is presented as fiction, Léger explains that the book's Maxine is actually her own daughter and that "*Maxine's tree* is basically a true story" (Paul 8). The real Maxine and her cousin Eddy, having spent a weekend in 1988 in the Carmanah with Maxine's parents, began to cry as, leaving the forest, they saw kilometre after kilometre of clear-cut.

They thought Carmanah was going to be the same thing I wrote the story to soothe them—soothe their fears *Maxine's tree* is not anti-logging, but I do have a viewpoint on a particular type of logging in a particular area I was very careful not to put the word 'logger' in or to have any negative connotations. I was expecting a bit of a stir from some local pro-clear cut groups, but nothing happened. So I was surprised that it happened two years later. (Paul 8-9)

The complainant father said he "didn't want the book used in the classroom. In fact, I think library books should, as a rule stay out of the classroom" (Collins 134). As noted earlier, the union sought to widen the prohibition, but the trustees decided to retain *Maxine's tree* in the school district's libraries.

Voice or cultural appropriation was the reason for the removal of the 1985 recipient of the Canadian Library Association's Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Medal for illustration, Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*. The book relates the story of a young Chinese boy, Chin Chiang, who, for years, had dreamed of dancing the dragon's dance with his grandfather in the New Year's parade. Now, on the day he is to do so, "instead of being excited, Chin Chiang was so scared he wanted to melt into his shoes. He knew he could

CHIN CHIANG AND THE DRAGON'S DANCE



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
IAN WALLACE

Figure 9

never dance well enough to make Grandfather proud of him.” With the help of a new friend, Chin Chiang overcomes his concerns about clumsiness and dances so well that his grandfather describes him as “the very best dragon’s tail I have ever seen.”

MacCallum (C15) recounts how a number of Toronto school libraries quietly removed *Chin Chiang and the dragon’s dance* in 1991 because it supposedly “seriously misrepresented Chinese culture.” According to a former social studies consultant, “the crucial problem with *Chin Chiang* originated with its author coming from outside the Chinese community, and doing no research with people in the culture, so the voice was not Chinese.” Had the persons levying these charges taken a moment to call fellow Torontonians Wallace, he could have described to them his two months’ research time at Toronto’s reference library and the period he spent at Vancouver’s Chinese Cultural Center (Jenkinson 1985: 49).

Wallace’s editor, Patsy Aldana of Toronto’s Groundwood Books, acknowledges that “I’m much more aware of the possibility of post-publication censorship problems these days I now have to feel a book is defensible, that it can sustain attack from whoever, before I’ll go ahead” (Hurst D5). As for *Chin Chiang and the dragon’s dance*, Aldana describes it as “an honorable book by an honest writer,” while adding, “Would I publish [it] today? Absolutely not. But then the author wouldn’t submit it today.”

Perhaps Aldana has misjudged what Wallace would do. In a recent interview,

he says:

I see the whole thing as a kind of reverse discrimination where we're going to be pigeonholing writers and illustrators into these little slots where someone like Paul Yee can't do anything but a Chinese book and native writers can't do anything but speak from a native position. I think it's absurd! I don't know where the trend is going to go or where it's going to end, but I think the minute you start restricting the creative imagination, you have placed limitations on it that shouldn't be there.

Nonetheless, the damage to *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* has been done. As Rae points out, "It may be difficult to remove the 'controversial' taint from a delightful book" (K15). Even the alphabet has been subjected to censorship—or at least the words and illustrations used to represent one of the letters in Roger Paré's *The Annick ABC* may have been censored. In June, 1992, Canadian Press carried the story that a Red Deer, Alberta, mother had "complained the reference 'N' is for nudist eating noodles in Naples' is inappropriate reading for kindergarten students" ("In Alberta" A8). The mother was upset that she "had to explain nudism to her five-year-old daughter." Though the illustrations had



A nudist eats noodles in Naples.

Figure 10

resulted in Paré's winning the 1985 Canada Council's Prize for Illustration, after the mother "complained to the school librarian, the 99-cent book ... was pulled from the shelf and thrown out."

Some eight months later, however, the principal of George Wilbert Smith

Elementary School claimed that “the story was much ado about nothing” (Goyette A9). According to the principal, a kindergarten teacher, on overhearing one mother express concern about a school library book, *The Annick ABC*, to another parent:

suggested that the mother talk it over with the librarian. They had a good chat and the mother’s questions were resolved. Checking the book again, after the conversation, the librarian ‘made an individual judgement’ and threw out the book. He later told the principal he removed it only because of its poor physical condition, and ‘felt terrible’ about the accusation of book banning.

Evidently, the charges of censorship arose because “the parent who had been talking to the worried mother in the hallway concluded that this was an act of censorship. She contacted the media and the story was widely reported.” The principal reported that “everybody feels burned We feel the press made an issue where there was no need to make an issue.” As for the well-worn *Annick ABC*, the principal said, “It probably won’t be replaced because it has created such ‘bad feelings.’”

Was *The Annick ABC* really censored, or was it, as the librarian and principal claim, just discarded because of its deteriorating physical condition? Because the book has yet to be replaced, the question remains unanswered, but another comment made by the principal raises a further question about the level of understanding within George Wilbert Smith Elementary School regarding the concept of censorship. Goyette reports the principal as saying: “Schools indulge in censorship whenever they make budget decisions about library materials, or select certain books to support the curriculum.” If this statement accurately represents what the principal said, it would indicate that the principal does not understand the fundamental difference between censorship and selection. Selection is a positive process in which selectors look for reasons why a material

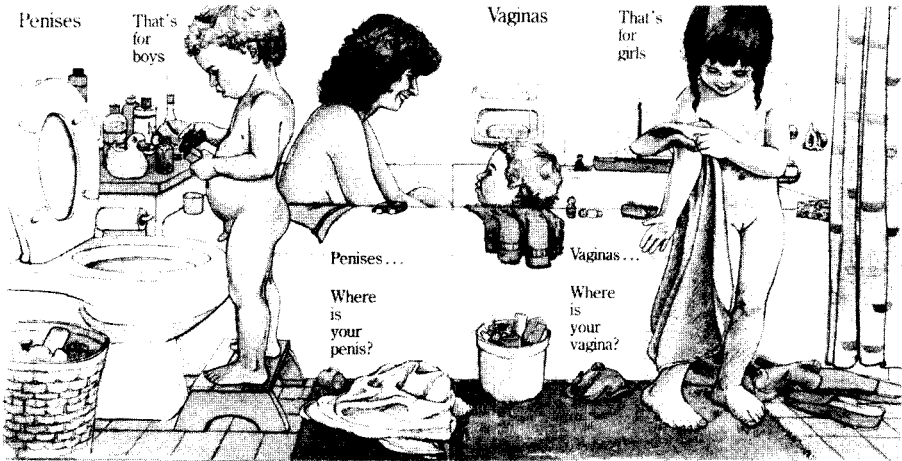


Figure 11

should be added to a library's collection or included in the curriculum, but censors, armed with a mental hit-list of "no-no's," look for reasons to exclude items. The selection process undoubtedly offers in-house censors many unseen opportunities to practise silent censorship.

For example, if a library has purchased all of Kathy Stinson's picture books, such as *Big or little?* or *Red is best*, but not *The bare naked book*, which labels body parts from head to toe, is that censorship?

Stinson, herself, asks that question:

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? (Stinson, "Letters" 136)

At the time Robert Munsch's *Giant* was under attack, he was awaiting the publication of a story which had been part of his oral repertoire since the days of *The dark* and *Mud puddle*. As the *Giant* brouhaha swirled around him in 1990, Munsch looked ahead, possibly with some trepidation, to the public's response to that next book. "It's called *Good families don't*. That's the notorious fart. God knows what the reaction to that is going to be!"

Given the "fuss" generated by a word like "pee," Munsch's concern seemed justified. The plot of *Good families don't* focuses on a little girl, Carmen, who,

one night, goes up to her bedroom and finds that "there, lying on her bed was a great big purple, green and yellow fart." When she informs her mother and father, their response is, "Don't be ridiculous ...! Good families like ours do not have farts." In the same fashion that the young children in *The dark* and *Mud puddle* use their



Figure 12

internal resources to overcome the books' villains, Carmen rescues her parents and the police from the fart's noxious effects. The silence which has surrounded Munsch's *Good families don't* likely represents another example of the widespread but quiet censorship which can and does occur during the selection process.

Kathy Stinson has also experienced another form of censorship which, again, is of a type largely invisible to the general public. Annick's Rick Wilks reports that "an Ottawa school cancelled [Stinson's] visit because her *Bare naked book* contained a single picture of a child's very tiny, but definitely bare naked penis" (Goyette A9). Actually, Wilks is not completely correct, for the book's closing illustration of "bare naked bodies" also shows most of a toddler's penis. Nevertheless, given the concern over the "penises" page, it is interesting to note how the right half of that double-page spread bathroom scene carried the parallel text: "Vaginas That's for girls Vaginas ... Where is your vagina?" and showed a frontal view of the little boy's bare naked sister drying herself off after a bath, but it was seemingly ignored. Additionally, Stinson-the-author was censored for illustrations created by Heather Collins.

As the various examples have shown, censorship in its many forms and for its many reasons is part of students' lives from the very first moment they walk into their kindergarten classrooms and encounter the collections of picture books found there. While schools must respect the censorial rights of individual parents, schools must equally strive to ensure that such parents do not succeed in extending their prohibitions to everyone's children. As Carmen's mother might have said, "Good libraries like ours do not have censorship. What would the neighbors say?"

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- Figure 10.** *The Annick ABC*. Roger Paré. Annick Press, 1985.
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