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# Censorship in Our Schools: A Consideration of Classic Award-Winning Titles

BY JANET STEIGERWALD

**A**s a society, we value children who are literate, thoughtful, and caring human beings. We feel the need to “protect” them from dangerous or disturbing ideas and information. However, the things that one person or community finds dangerous and disturbing may strike others as exciting and still others as simply truthful. Differing opinions and values along with our concern for our young people is what keeps censorship alive in public schools and libraries (Vandergrift, n.d.).

There are a surprising number of well-known and well-loved books that have been challenged and in a few cases banned in elementary school classrooms and libraries. Understanding censorship in its various forms, researching books that have been challenged in the past, and using this knowledge to avoid censorship conflicts in the future are some of the ways that teachers, librarians, parents, and other concerned citizens can prepare themselves to deal with the issue of censorship.

## Types of Censorship

When a book is challenged or censored, there is an attempt made to restrict or remove that book based upon the objections of a person or a group of people. A book banning is the actual removal of the book from the classroom or school library. There are many forms of censorship. Perhaps the most sophisticated use of censorship is the “required book list” where selections and omissions for the list may be influenced by both subtle and deliberate censorship (Seney, 2002).

Subtle censorship is a censorship of selection. This occurs when only those books that meet the criteria of the teacher, parent, or community are selected for inclusion in the classroom or on a reading list. For example, if controversy surrounds a particular book choice during a school year, it may be pulled from classroom shelves and left off reading lists in following years. This is sometimes seen as a quick and harmless way for teachers and school authorities to avoid addressing yearly censorship attempts on the same book. It is, however, still censorship, and results in restricted access to knowledge, enjoyment and intellectual development (Seney, 2002). Curtailment falls into the subtle censorship category. This is when access to a book is limited or somehow restricted to only certain students (Seney, 2002). Generally, curtailment involves a book being available only to those students with parental permission. The books in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling suffered this type of censorship in Michigan and Texas in 2000. In Zeeland, Michigan, the books were restricted to fifth through eighth graders with written

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parental permission. The same restriction applied to students in all grades in Santa Fe, Texas (Doyle, 2001).

Deliberate censorship is an exclusion of a book from the classroom, library, or reading list because the teacher, parent, or community has had previous problems with issues or content presented by the book. *Annie on my Mind* (Garden, 1982), which will be discussed later in this paper, is one of the most well known cases of deliberate censorship through exclusion. Another type of deliberate censorship is censorship by alteration. This is when a book has offending pages removed or certain words "blacked out." There have been numerous instances of censorship by alteration involving the 1971 Caldecott Honor book, *In the Night Kitchen* (Sendak, 1970). This was one of the first children's books to illustrate anatomically correct frontal nudity of a young boy (Heintzelman, 2002). Librarians, school administrators, and teachers through the years have taken it upon themselves to paint diapers on the boy, Mickey, to cover up his nakedness. This use of white-out or tempera paint to alter *In the Night Kitchen*, was most often censorship of a pre-emptive nature. Mickey's nakedness was painted over in the fear that someone might object to it (Heintzelman, 2002).

A school board has the authority to issue a direct edict to remove, cut, or prohibit a challenged book when approached by a parent or community group with a complaint (Seney, 2002). An instance of this occurred in Olathe, Kansas. The district superintendent there had seen neighboring communities endure bitter controversy over the inclusion of *Annie on My Mind* (Garden, 1982) in school libraries. He made a unilateral decision to remove all copies of the book from school libraries in Olathe in the hopes of avoiding ugly controversy about the gay-themed book (ACLU, 1995).

Books are usually challenged with the best of intentions—to protect others, usually children, from

difficult ideas and information. For every challenge reported, there are up to four or five that go unreported (ALA, 2003). Censors tend to fall into three groups: parents who hear about or see material that troubles them; community members or parents who react to a book without having read it; and local, state, or national organizations, some of which have specific lists of titles which they consider objectionable (Gottlieb, 1990). According to the American Library Association, parents, more than any other group, are responsible for initiating challenges. In the years 1990-2000, the most popular reason for a book to be challenged was that it contained content that was too sexually explicit, such as Newbery Award

winner *Julie of the Wolves* (George, 1972). Other reasons for a challenge, in order of their frequency, were: offensive language; unsuited to the age group; promoting the occult or Satanism; violence; promoting homosexuality; and

promoting a religious viewpoint. Less frequent were complaints about nudity, racism, sex education, and anti-family messages (ALA, 2003).

*A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962), *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950), *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961), *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978), and *Little House in the Big Woods* (Wilder, 1932) are books that many of us have loved for years. They are also all books that have been challenged, and in some cases restricted or temporarily banned. All of these books were written with a target audience of 9- to 12-year-old readers (fourth through seventh graders). The most comprehensive resource I found that provides information on the reasons and occasions of book challenges through the year 2001 is the *2001 Banned Book Resource Guide* (Doyle, 2001).

### **A Wrinkle in Time**

The 1963 Newbery Medal was one of the many awards received by *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962). This story explores space and time travel. A

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father is searched for, unearthly strangers are encountered, and an evil power must be overcome. Characters must rely on individual and collective strengths to complete their journey. L'Engle's classic explores adolescent anxieties related to physical appearance, family relationships, and searching for one's identity.

*A Wrinkle in Time* was challenged in Florida in 1985 by parents who claimed the story promoted witchcraft, crystal balls, and demons. In 1990, complainants in Alabama challenged the book because they said it sends a mixed signal to children about good and evil. There was also an objection to the name of Jesus Christ being listed along with the names of other religious leaders when referring to defenders of the Earth against evil. A school board challenged the use of *A Wrinkle in Time* in North Carolina in 1996 stating that it undermines religious beliefs. No bannings or restrictions resulted from any of these complaints (Doyle, 2001).

The story told in *A Wrinkle In Time* carries the message that each of us must strive to protect all that is good and that we must prevail over evil. It is hypocritical that a challenge was made about naming Jesus Christ as a defender of the Earth against evil, but no such objection was made to others named on the same list (Ghandi, Buddha, etc.).

*A Wrinkle in Time* challenges our imagination and the scope of our vision. In her Newbery Award Acceptance speech, Madeline L'Engle stresses the importance of literature as a springboard for creativity in children who face heavy loads of scientific and analytical subjects in school every day. Because of the complexity of the story, this might not be a good choice for a read-aloud book, but its inclusion in classroom libraries (from the fifth-grade level on up) should not be questioned.

### **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950), a 1962 Lewis Carroll Shelf award winner, is one of seven books in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series. Although there have been challenges to the book, it has never been banned or restricted. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* blends fairy tale and heroic

adventure in a story in which four children come to know the imaginary land of Narnia through a portal in an old wardrobe. Narnia is a land of mythical beasts ruled by an evil witch. With the help of the animals, most notably the lion Aslan, the children struggle to protect good from evil. They prevail and rule over Narnia for years. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis introduces the reader to Aslan, a Christ-like character. Lewis expresses his personal view that there are parallels between pagan myth and Christian gospel in his writing in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia* series.

Although *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was challenged in a Maryland school district in 1990 for its depictions of graphic violence, mysticism, and gore, it remains included in the libraries of many classrooms. There are worthwhile themes of trust, friendship, sacrifice, and cooperation in the story. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, including *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are often noted as exceptional contributions to the fantasy genre, helping to increase the popularity of the genre among writers of juvenile literature (Senick, 1992).

### **James and the Giant Peach**

There have been some "successful" challenges to *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961). In Virginia in 1995, *James and the Giant Peach* was censored for containing crude language and encouraging children to disobey parents and adults. This objection resulted in the book being removed from classrooms in the Stafford County, Virginia, schools and placed in the school libraries with access restrictions. In a case such as this, only certain children, usually those with parental permission, were allowed access to the book. This is an example of curtailment, which was discussed earlier as a form of subtle censorship. In Texas in 1999, this book was banned from an elementary school because it contained the word "ass" (Doyle, 2001).

*James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961) tells the story of young James who is leading a difficult and dreary life with his aunts. With the help of magic crystals, he is able to escape in a giant peach where



he finds fantastic giant insects that become his friends. Their journey together is imaginative and fun and the ending is happy. This book has been the target of numerous challenges in elementary schools. In addition to objections over crude language, disobedience toward grown-ups and the use of the word "ass," *James and the Giant Peach* has been called "inappropriate reading material for young children" in Florida in 1991. It was challenged there because it contained a foul word and promoted drugs and whiskey. Some Wisconsin residents objected to the word "ass" and the fact that parts of the book deal with tobacco, wine, and snuff.

*James and the Giant Peach* was Roald Dahl's second children's book and it is said to have established him as a literary force. It is a fantastic story, wild in its adventures and brilliant in its imagination. I was able to locate the one page that makes mention of tobacco, snuff, and wine. The giant centipede includes these things in a song in which a monkey chews tobacco, hens use snuff, and porcupines drink wine (Dahl, 1961). This song is outrageous in its humor and rather than condoning this behavior in humans, it seems to argue the point that these are behaviors fit for only animals.

The criticism of *James and the Giant Peach* because of the contents of the centipede's song illustrates the danger of considering passages from a book out of context. Censorship is serious, and before considering a challenge, the work being challenged must be read in its entirety and examined as a whole.

### **The Great Gilly Hopkins**

*The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978) has won numerous awards, including a Newbery Honor award in 1979. The book tells the story of a young girl who finds herself in the foster home of Mrs. Trotter where she lets down her defenses and learns about life and love. The challenges to this book span the years from 1983 to 1997. Schools in Kansas, Minnesota, Connecticut, Texas, and Nevada have challenged the book because it contains profanity, blasphemy, obscenities, and "gutter language." The only school it was actually banned from was the school in Connecticut, and it was restored to the school shortly

thereafter. Other reasons for challenges to *The Great Gilly Hopkins* include scenes that are violent, Christians being portrayed as dumb and stupid, and children going unpunished for telling lies and stealing (Doyle, 2001).

The most common and numerous challenges to this book are in reference to the language used by the main character, Gilly. This book, like the others I have discussed, is intended for a fourth- to seventh-grade audience. Realistically, most children in this age range have been exposed to worse language in the school hallway, on the bus, or on television. I believe that the language in *The Great Gilly Hopkins* is used purposefully and deliberately to define Gilly's character. It helps the reader sense the defiance and obstinacy in Gilly's nature. Katherine Paterson, the author, has discussed the language used by Gilly in numerous articles. She describes Gilly as a lost child who steals, bullies, and has no tolerance for those she perceives as different from herself. Paterson's claim is this: "a child like this does not say 'fiddlesticks' when frustrated. She would not be real if her mouth did not match her behavior" (Paterson, 2004). The use of language as an element of character development would make for an interesting topic of classroom discussion. Students could expand on this by looking for it in other books, with other authors, and other characters, then finding out what authors and others have said about the use of such "language" in books for children.

### **Little House in the Big Woods**

*Little House in the Big Woods* (Wilder, 1932), like *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1978), was actually removed from classrooms (banned) in one district, but restored to those rooms shortly thereafter. This occurred in a California school district in 1996 because the book was perceived as "adding fuel to the fire of racism" (Doyle, 2001). *Little House in the Big Woods* is the story of pioneer life in Wisconsin in the late 1800s. Each chapter shares a special occasion in the life of the Ingalls family with the reader. The detailed descriptions of family chores and events are the backdrop for the adventures of Laura growing up on the frontier.



There is a song that Pa Ingalls sings to his children that refers to people of color as "darkeys" (Wilder, 1932). The words to the song do not make it clear if this reference is to African-Americans, Native-Americans, or perhaps to any non-Caucasian. It is not made clear whether the word "darkey" was even meant to be derogatory in nature.

If I were to use this book in my classroom, I might want to begin with a discussion about the time period in which the story took place, race relations, and the attitudes toward people of color at that time in our history. As a whole, the *Little House* series was often objected to because of the way books depicted Native Americans as one-dimensional fearsome people. *The Birchbark House* (Erdrich, 1999), like the *Little House* series, deals with Native American-white settler relations. Both tell us of pioneer life in realistic detail. *Little House in the Big Woods* tells the story of a white pioneer family from the viewpoint of 7-year-old Laura. *The Birchbark House* is told from the viewpoint of Omakayas, a 7-year-old Ojibwa girl. She is a strong, intense, likable character. Erdrich's writing in *The Birchbark House* shows the reader interesting, well-rounded Native American characters. It affords readers a superior account of the ways of the Native Americans during the same time period as *Little House in the Big Woods*. The use of both books in your classroom presents a balanced view that should satisfy everyone.

### **Being Prepared for Challenges**

The fact that well-known and well-loved books and authors are not immune from challenges should prompt teachers to adopt a proactive stance toward censorship issues. It is a difficult job to protect the sensibilities of some students and parents without restricting the freedoms of others (Day, 2001). However, there are some things that a teacher should do to help keep challenges to classroom materials at a minimum.

***Be prepared for challenges that do occur. School districts should create a form that can be used by objectors or potential censors to identify their specific concerns in writing.***

Communication is crucial. Create a communication link between the classroom and the parents early in the year. Provide parents with a list of the novels that you plan to use in the classroom and define the learning goals for each novel. Encourage parents to read the novels and to discuss them with their child. Invite parents to peruse your classroom library and welcome their impressions and suggestions. Emphasize that additional reading is important and that those choices are left up to the student and parent (Seney, 2002).

Keep a file of written rationales for each book used in the classroom. Be sure that your rationale for using each book answers the following questions: Why is the book appropriate? How does the book meet educational objectives? What have critics said about the book? Does the book contain elements of style, tone, or themes that are possible grounds for censorship? How can these problems be addressed? Are there other appropriate books a student might read in place of this book? Keep in mind that the more choices students have in reading or not reading specific titles, the less potential there is for challenge and censorship (Seney, 2002).

Be prepared for challenges that do occur. School districts should create a form that can be used by objectors or potential censors to identify their specific concerns in writing. National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Library Association (ALA) have created forms that you may use, or modify, for this purpose (NCTE, 1998). This form should help parents and others to state clearly *what* they find offensive about a book used in the classroom, *why* they find it offensive, and what they might recommend as a suitable alternative for their child that will still meet the targeted learning goals.

When a challenge to classroom materials does occur, a careful and informed response must be made. Complainants must know that they will be



given serious consideration and that interest in the school curriculum is always welcome. Parents must understand that before a conference can be scheduled to discuss objections, they must read the *entire book* that they have concerns about. Passages or parts of a book should not be pulled out of context. A book's values and faults need to be weighed against each other and opinions based on the materials as a whole (Reichman, 1993). It is important that teachers, school officials and administrators maintain neutrality about the pros and cons of the challenged material by keeping the material in the curriculum until a review is completed (Seney, 2002).

Once an objection has been voiced, the teacher should use a prepared form for accepting and recording challenges to classroom materials. NCTE's "Request for Reconsideration of a Work" (NCTE, 1998), or a form modeled after this one, serves many purposes. When serious challengers see that there is an established procedure in place so that their objections will not go unresolved, they are more likely to be satisfied. Although the purpose of the form is not to discourage challenges or objections, you will find that the less serious challengers may not wish to follow through with the formalities of a written form and a pre-established grievance procedure (NCTE, 1998).

Advantages of the written form are that it identifies the complainant and formalizes the complaint. A written form can establish the objector's familiarity with the work in question, and require the complainant to think through his or her objections to make an intelligent statement about them. The teacher may want to provide the objecting parent with a copy of a written rationale supporting the classroom use of the material. The serious challenger may be able to use the rationale along with the complaint form to suggest solutions to the situation or recommend other books that might accomplish the same teaching objectives (NCTE, 1998).

Ginny Moore Kruse, former head of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Intellectual Freedom Award recipient, suggests that it is not enough to simply

hand a form to a would-be censor. The teacher at this point needs to engage the complainant in conversation, allowing him or her to vent, and attempt to diffuse the situation (Pavonetti, 2002). Kruse emphasizes that one of the most empowering strategies for teachers is careful communication and understanding that not every concern about a book will result in a challenge or a book being banned (Pavonetti, 2002).

### Conclusion

Any collection of books, whether it is in a classroom, a library, or on the shelves at home, may contain titles that certain individuals find objectionable. One of the most important reasons that we want children to become avid readers is so that they will develop judgment—the ability to discern the good from the bad, the superior from the shoddy (Vandergrift, n.d.). Instead of censoring, we should be helping our children to sort through, select, and look critically at the literature they are so privileged to have access to.

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