

Censorship of Children's Materials

"If librarianship is the connecting of people to ideas - and I believe that is the truest definition of what we do - it is crucial to remember that we must keep and make available, not just good ideas and noble ideas, but bad ideas, silly ideas, and yes, even dangerous or wicked ideas."
-- Graceanne A. Decandido

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Term Paper

LIS 615: Collection Management

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November 15, 2005

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The collection management mantra that has been emphasized most this semester is that of meeting the needs of the users. However, this becomes an interesting conundrum regarding the issue of censorship. All users have the right to hold the belief on any subject, but librarians have to make an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access. In this way, freedom and censorship exist in opposition. This is a significant problem for children's librarians in particular because youth materials are challenged most often by censors. Case in point, the majority of publications cited on ALA website's list of the 100 most frequently challenged books from 1990-2000 are children's books. In further research, it is evident that the group that censors children's books the most is parents, particularly those that are a part of Christian groups, and such instances typically lead to self-censorship on the part of both librarians and publishers. Most of the children's materials in question include profanity, sexual content, and perceived witchcraft, and it is common for these books to fall under more than one category. Despite this, there is hope for children's librarians and collection managers; resources exist that provide useful tips to help libraries when their materials are challenged by users. Common suggestions include implementing policy, developing connections with patrons as well as library trustees, supervisors, and legal counsel, and also taking preventive action to ensure that materials are less likely to come under fire. Thus, even though children's materials are frequently challenged due to their bad language, sexual content, and references to witchcraft, librarians can counteract by developing collection policies to justify inclusion of materials, building bridges with people in the community, and implementing preventive strategies.

According to the ALA website, the group that challenges children's materials most often is parents. There are some sources that provide possible explanations for this phenomenon. Judy Blume, a children's author who has frequently been challenged for the profanity in her books, has been quoted as saying, "Some parents are afraid of exposing their children to new ideas, ideas that are different from their own.... Censorship grows out of fear, and there is a tremendous amount of fear on the part of parents" (Garden 17). Parents are typically afraid that they will be unable to control what their children are exposed to, and thus are concerned that their children are vulnerable to possible corruption. "Books are usually challenged with the best intentions—to protect others, frequently children, from difficult ideas and information" ("Challenged and Banned Books" par.1). Parents who have strong Christian convictions also pose a significant threat. Typically, such parents attempt to censor books that discuss homosexuality, contain profanity, and appear to condone witchcraft.

The strong need of these parents to protect their children inevitably affects the levels of a library collection because librarians who acquiesce to the demands of such patrons are unable to provide free access of materials to the rest of the community. When librarians stifle their collections due to a fear of controversy, they are demonstrating what is known as self-censorship. One example of this was found in a 1993 report about censorship in U.S. schools. "It...reported school personnel as acknowledging that they were being careful in what they added to the collections..." (Evans 552). Although this report was given more than a decade ago, it does well to demonstrate how censorship suppresses the ability of librarians to provide books that enrich the learning experiences of children. Even today, material that might be labeled controversial is being taken out of

children's reach. "Young adult librarian Jessica Yates believes that public librarians may move controversial YA materials to adult areas because the librarians are fearful of young children 'wandering over' to the YA area" (Curry 28). Similarly, publishers have demonstrated acts of self-censorship by attempting to screen out controversial material before it actually reaches the shelves. According to the article, "Censorship in Children's Books," publisher Stephen Roxburgh states, "Publishers, editors...are all making decisions in anticipation of objections from some unknown and vaguely threatening 'other'" (West 111). In essence, publishers sacrifice controversial content in fear that materials might be rejected. One author that directly experienced this was Judy Blume, who was asked to delete a passage about masturbation from Tiger Eyes ("Panelists Review Censorship Pressures" 11). Inevitably, such stifling actions by publishers have a negative effect on writers. This is further elaborated by another controversial author, Robert Cormier. "I know an author whose book wasn't picked up in paperback because of some controversy about it. 'From now on,' he says, 'I'm writing squeaky clean books'" (West 108). Such acts of self-censorship pose a risk to the quality of children's materials because they not only force writers to be more cautious about their writing, but also deny children access to information that encourages diversity of thought and expression.

Sexual content in children's literature is the most common reason for censorship challenges, and has been a controversial issue since at least the 19th Century. "The first obscenity laws in Britain and America in the mid-19th Century, and when it became time for the courts to interpret them, the definition of obscenity turned explicitly on the presumed need to protect minors from sexual ideas" (Heins par. 10). The need of parents

and other community members to protect children from sexuality continues to this day. A recent study conducted in both the United States and Canada investigated the most common reasons that materials might be either relocated or challenged. Regarding the issue of sexuality in children's materials, the study found that descriptions of sexual activity deemed by the complainant to be immoral or illegal were the impetus for forty-one complaints (Curry 33). Some children's books that typically come under such fire include It's Perfectly Normal, by Robie Harris, Where's Waldo, by Martin Handford, various poetry publications by Shel Silverstein, and Life is Funny, by E.R. Frank. It's Perfectly Normal, a candid account of everything from intercourse and conception to birth control and AIDS, has come under severe controversy since it was published in the mid-1990s. The tangle over the book started in June 1997 when a parent filed a complaint, calling the book too sexually explicit and claiming it lacked a moral emphasis (R.O. 12). The "lack of moral emphasis" aspect derives from complaints that the author did not specifically state in his book that sexual intercourse should be reserved for marriage. A group that advocates this criticism is an organization of patrons from Montgomery, Texas, who have put together a website that lists books they would like moved away from the children's section into a restricted adult section of their local library. They specifically display contents and pictures from It's Perfectly Normal on the site, with naughty bits censored out. Under a page that shows a drawing of two adults about to engage in intercourse, the site comments, "The word 'marriage' does not appear anywhere in the book" (Library Patrons "Book Contents: It's Perfectly Normal" par. 1). In addition, the site criticizes the book on its inclusion of nudity. Also regarding nudity, the book Where's Waldo has been under fire due to a tiny drawing of a woman on a beach wearing

a bikini bottom without a top. This is a bit absurd because the object of the book is to find Waldo in a large sea of people, and all the drawings are very small. Despite this, Where's Waldo was challenged at the Public Libraries of Saginaw, Michigan in 1989 and removed from Springs Public School Library in East Hampton, New York in 1993 (Yonosko par. 66). "Inappropriate" illustrations have also been found both A Light in the Attic, and Where the Sidewalk Ends, which are poetry books by Shel Silverstein. They were "removed from Minot, North Dakota Public School Libraries when the superintendent found 'suggestive' illustrations" (Yonosko par.42). These examples demonstrate that even seemingly innocent material is prone to controversy, especially if it deals with sex. Librarians should thus be careful in dealing with fanatic patrons who want to censor quality material for irrational reasons. To be fair, however, not all censors are lunatics. There was an instance in which a mother in Merced, California, complained about the novel Life is Funny. "She objected to what she characterized as an X-Rated passage describing two teens' first experience with sexual intercourse...the Merced City School District pulled the novel...from the shelves of two middle-school libraries" ("Censorship Watch" par. 1-2). Since the book directly contains an explicit sexual scene that middle-school students had access to, it is not surprising that a parent would object, particularly if the information contained in the scene was neither educational nor informative.

Some of the most common complaints of materials that contain "sexually explicit" material have to do with the issue of homosexuality. "Three of the 10 books on the '10 Most Challenged Books of 2004' were cited for homosexual themes—which is the highest number in a decade" ("Challenged and Banned Books," par. 12). Parents, especially those from conservative backgrounds, typically do not want their kids to be

exposed to information about same-sex relationships because it counteracts their family values. It is not uncommon for such protests from parents to escalate and impact the community as a whole. Recently, there was an attempt in the Oklahoma state legislature to confine homosexually-themed books to an adults-only section. “House Resolution 1039 was sponsored by State Rep. Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) after a couple living in her district learned that a book checked out by their child concerns homosexual marriage” (Oder par.2). The book in question was King & King, by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland, which involved a crowned prince marrying another prince after turning down all the princesses in the kingdom. This book has been controversial because it portrays a positive view of homosexuality in a format that is easily understood by children. Catherine Threadgill, a librarian in Charleston County, SC, elaborates further. “The book does present same-sex marriage as a viable, acceptable way of life within an immediately recognizable narrative form, the fairy tale” (Threadgill par.1). Other children’s books that inform about homosexuality and same-sex marriage in a constructive manner include Heather Has Two Mommies, by Leslea Newman, and Daddy’s Roommate, by Michael Willhoite. Just like King & King, these books have received storms of criticism because they place the controversial topic of homosexuality in an arrangement that is easy for kids to comprehend. For instance, Heather Has Two Mommies is an easy-reader book, enabling children as young as five to learn about same-sex parents by reading about a girl with two lesbian mothers. Newman, the author, says that she was at one point called the most dangerous writer in America (Link 58). Daddy’s Roommate, which has had at least 84 challenges since its publication, according to the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom, also presents a non-traditional family setting. The protagonist’s parents are divorced and

his gay father lives with a “roommate”. “‘Mommy says Frank and Daddy are gay’ -- this new concept is explained to the child as ‘just one more kind of love’” (Donahue and Roback par. 1). In essence, this book and others like it demonstrate that loving families can exist in all kinds of different situations, and can offer comfort to children who live in such circumstances. As a result, such materials should not be seen as threats by either parents or librarians.

The second most common reason that certain children’s materials are challenged is that they contain language that is considered offensive. The results found by the aforementioned study of the relocation of materials, documented by Ann Curry, demonstrate that complaints usually focused on classic swear words. This is most likely caused by parental attempts to protect children from language deemed inappropriate. In addition, the study showed some instances in which Christians complained about the misuse of the word “God”. “In these cases, the word ‘god’ was used as an expression and the author usually expressed the term without first letter capitalization, a practice that was noted as being particularly profane” (Curry 33). In other words, it was not the word itself that incensed people, but rather its contexts. One of the books most often challenged for such reasons is Robert Cormier’s The Chocolate War. The plot centers on high school freshmen who refuse to take part in a school chocolate sale, and the book’s main objective is to demonstrate the pitfalls of conformity. In so doing, it provides crude dialog that high school boys typically use, which includes both classic profane vernacular and improper contexts of the word “God.” The Library Patrons of Texas group went as far as documenting the amount of times that inappropriate language was used in the book. “Language: For Christ’s sake, ba**ard (24), Jesus (numerous), Christ (numerous), GD

(10), hell (numerous), son of a b**ch (4), s**t/bulls**t (5), etc” (Library Patrons “Book Contents: The Chocolate War” par. 1). The book has also come under siege for its inclusion of rebellion and its negative portrayal of authoritative figures. Curry’s study, for instance, found complaints that Cormier portrayed most of the adult figures unsympathetically (36). This observation is significant because it demonstrates that it is common for controversial books such as this to fall under more than one “inappropriate” category. Another example of such overlap is demonstrated in the debate surrounding the Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey. Not only do parents find the language offensive, but they are concerned that their children will be encouraged to misbehave. “The adults in the stories are usually mean or stupid, or both, and there is a lot of discussion about things such as wedgies and nostril nuggets and upchucking” (Chang par. 3). James and the Giant Peach, by Roald Dahl, is another example of a book that is criticized for more than just its profanity. It was “...challenged at the Morton Elementary School library in Brooksville, Fla. (1992) because the book contains the word ‘ass’ and ‘promotes’ the use of drugs (tobacco, snuff) and whiskey...removed from classrooms in Stafford County, Va. Schools (1995) and placed in restricted access in the library because the story contains crude language and encourages children to disobey their parents and other adults” (Yonosko par.37). This demonstrates that parents are not wary of bad language because of the words themselves, but of what their implications might be. Therefore, children’s books that contain profanity, or perceptions thereof, will also be challenged for other reasons, such as rebellion by protagonists. This requires librarians to keep a close eye on the real reasons behind acts of censorship regarding profanity in order to better understand their motivations. In so doing, librarians can perhaps tactfully

show patrons that they might be magnifying words and making them seem worse than they actually are.

The third most common complaint regarding controversial children's materials is witchcraft. Mainly, Christian parents protest such materials because they associate them with Satanism and the occult. They want to protect their children from such material because they perceive it as being dangerous. The Harry Potter series, by J.K. Rowling has received the most criticism in this regard in recent years. According to a 2002 School Library Journal article, it topped the ALA's list of most challenged books for the third year in a row (Ishizuka 29). The controversy behind Harry Potter is explored in depth in the article entitled "Hunting Down Harry Potter," by Kimbra Wilder Gish. Gish does not condone censorship of Harry Potter but rather explains the actions behind it from a Christian's point of view. She explicates that parents are afraid that children will see witches in a positive way. "This is the primary reason that parents might challenge a book with any hint of occult or Satanic practices—they are concerned that their children may learn to see them as acceptable..." (Gish 264). In essence, fundamentalist Christians do not want their children to be in accordance with such material because it is in opposition to God's teachings. This belief is held particularly by those in the religious right wing who believe that witches are real. The Harry Potter series adds to this dilemma because the main characters are somewhat realistic; they are just like normal children, except they have magical powers. This added level of reality thus makes the material much more threatening to Christian parents. "When you believe that witches and occult practices are real, and contrary to God's laws, those books are quite different from what authors probably intended" (Gish 264). Historical fiction that contains witchcraft also contributes

to this phenomenon. A good example of this is The Witch of Blackbird Pond, by Elizabeth George Speare. The protagonist, Kit Taylor, moves from the Caribbean to the Puritan colonies in the late 1600s to live with her aunt and uncle. While there, she befriends a Quaker woman known as “The Witch of Blackbird Pond”. Both characters eventually get tried in the Salem Witch Trials. Although this book won a Newbery Award, it has received a lot of challenges due to both its realism and its apparent “condoning” of witchcraft. For instance, a group of parents in Connecticut started a petition to have this book and others like it removed from the shelves. ““Children read this material and get all sorts of bad ideas in their heads. It gives them the idea that witchcraft is okay, and it certainly is not okay,” said Brigitte Flanagan, who started collecting signatures for a petition earlier this month” (“Censorship” par.1). Books involving witchcraft tread into even more dangerous territory when they are non-fictional materials that are meant to inform. An example of this is Nancy Garden’s book entitled Witches, part of her “Weird and Horrible Library Books” series, which covers everything from ancient folklore to witchcraft practiced in modern religions. She explains in her article, “A Writer's Perspective on Censorship” the instances she has experienced with this book. “A few kids and their parents in Oceanside (California) challenged it because they were afraid it gave people information that could lead them to form witch covens; some Texas folks successfully removed it from a junior high library because of what they called ‘satanic themes’” (Garden 17). Again, in dealing with children’s materials involving themes of witchcraft, it is important for librarians to keep in mind what might be behind the logic of censorship in such materials. Usually, Christian parents who perceive witchcraft as being real will interpret literature in a different way than the

author intended it. It is best for librarians remember this in order to reach beyond barriers of communication and help patrons come to a better understanding of such materials.

In essence, then, in the current climate of censorship in children's materials, there are ways for librarians to cope. Most importantly, it is essential for libraries to develop collection development policies that can justify collections that might be challenged. A necessary benchmark of such policies is a statement regarding intellectual freedom. Such a statement "declares that the library will strive to provide a diverse collection representing a broad selection of points of view on topics of current and historical interest for all users, and will not exclude materials just because they may be controversial or offensive to some people" (Krug and Penway par.10). This sort of statement is helpful because it allows librarians to act on the side of free access instead of excluding materials for fear of controversy. It also provides a point of reference in writing to show patrons that controversial materials can be acceptable in a library's collection. One example of this is stated in Eugene Public Library's Collection Development Policy "All librarians have the professional responsibility to be inclusive, not exclusive, in developing materials collections" (Kolbe par.13). There are also websites available that provide templates for policy development of this nature. One in particular, first designed by Silvia Frye Accardi in 1989, and later revised by David L. Polodna, provides standards for small libraries. Specifically regarding collection management, an excerpt of the template states, "The lack of a review or an unfavorable review shall not be the sole reason for rejecting a title which is in demand. Consideration is, therefore, given to requests from library patrons and books discussed on public media. Materials are judged on the basis of the work as a whole, not on a part taken out of context" (par. 43). Such a clause can help justify

materials because it states that their merit is taken as a whole, rather than for certain phrases. This can help justify materials such as Cormier's The Chocolate War, because it encourages people to look beyond isolated expressions of profanity and appreciate the message that the book conveys. An effective policy can also guard against self-censorship because it offers librarians a sense of security, which is of particular importance in a school media setting because it is frequently targeted by censors. "A solid selection policy in your school district can ensure that school libraries do not fall victim to such self-censorship or influence from outside sources, often special interest groups who have decided what they think is good for all students" (Hutchinson 55). Just as policies can help insure librarians, they can also reassure patrons. ALA also offers the following suggestion: "Make sure you and your staff are familiar with the library's collection policy and can explain it in a clear, easily understandable way" ("Coping with Challenges" par.1). Librarians should thus make policies that are discernable to users to help guarantee that the library's points of view are understood.

In this way, librarians can also build bridges of communication with their users, which makes the climate of censorship less hostile. The ALA advocates that librarians should "take time to listen to and empathize with a parent's concern. Explain in a non-defensive way the need to protect the rights of all parents to determine their own children's reading" ("Coping with Challenges" par.1) By explicating the importance of free access, a patron is more likely to understand the dilemmas that librarians face when their materials are challenged. They should not only build bridges with patrons, but also with authoritative figures, such as legal counsel and library supervisors. This will allow librarians extra legal and emotional support when dealing with challenges in the

collection. Since librarians are not usually aware of all the legal implications involved with censorship, a lack of legal counsel can be problematic, especially if a patron decides to file a lawsuit against the library. “In Groton, Connecticut, in a case involving *Evergreen Review*, the librarian and the board of trustees were threatened with prosecution under a state obscenity statute if they refused to remove the magazine from the library. The board, after several months of resisting efforts to remove the magazine, capitulated in the face of this threat to prosecute them as individuals” (Intellectual Freedom Manual 45). If this library had developed a relationship with reliable legal counsel, it is likely that they would have been able to better defend themselves. In addition, it is important for a librarian to keep connected with library supervisors in order to receive extra support when materials are challenged. An article that helps librarians utilize library trustees in their fight against censorship states, “The most important key in dealing with censorship is providing lucid, thorough, and continuing information for the library trustee” (Kreamer 36). An open and honest relationship with the library director is also important in the fight against censorship. The ALA suggests, “Keep your director informed of any concerns expressed, whether you feel they have been resolved or not” (“Coping with Challenges” par.1). The more censorship challenges a director is aware of, the better he or she will be able to remedy the situation. Support from both trustees and directors can thus make a positive difference, especially on a psychological level. In an article entitled, “The Value of Support during a Library Media Challenge”, designed to help School Media Specialists deal with challenges, it states “Research shows that stressed individuals with good, solid support systems regain their health more quickly than those with fragmented or weak support systems” (Hopkins 32). It is thus vital for children’s

librarians to reach out and receive support from as many sources as possible. In this way, they can still maintain integrity and stability in their stance regarding intellectual freedom.

Finally, it is important for children's librarians to take preventive strategies to reduce the likelihood of challenges to their collection. One element of this is the direct involvement of patrons, particularly parents, in the process of library collections. This allows an open line between librarians and their users. The ALA states that one should "encourage parents to participate in choosing library materials for their young people... [Librarians should] host storytelling, book discussion groups, and other activities that involve adults and youth" ("Coping with Challenges" par. 1). Parents who are actively involved in the acquisition process can pinpoint materials that might come into question before they are added to the collection. Another efficient method of identifying materials that might be questionable to the collection is to consult reviews. It is customary for children's librarians to only include material that has at least two positive reviews. This precaution doesn't immunize a library from challenges to titles, but it does help garner support and credibility should a case arise (Jones 120). However, children's librarians and school media specialists usually do not have enough time to peruse reviews in sufficient depth. An article published in School Library Journal, entitled, "Too Many Journals, Too Little Time" offers solutions to this problem. "Skim. Reviews generally place criticism or praise at the beginning or the end... You don't need the whole review to find such information" (Bromann 46). Through consultation of both patrons and reviews, librarians thus have the power to prevent occurrences of censorship before they begin.

It is evident that the issue of censorship is a significant problem, especially regarding children's materials. Parents, Christian groups, and other patrons are part of a

climate that produces a fear of controversy on the part of librarians, authors, and publishers. Librarians are forced to justify a myriad of materials that contain sexuality, profanity, and witchcraft. Books that contain sexuality and homosexuality are usually brought into question due to parents' perceptions of their children's inabilities to handle such unfamiliar and controversial issues. Children's librarians should take into account that some parents may overreact and attempt to censor books that may actually be harmless. Profanity in materials also typically comes under fire because of parents' fears of its implications. A librarian should stress that materials that contain profanity do not necessarily act as models for children, nor are they guaranteed to make them misbehave. A lot of conservative Christians are threatened by materials that contain witchcraft; librarians should remember that such people perceive it as a very viable threat, and should be understanding of this instead of labeling censors as lunatics. There are also measures librarians can take to combat against instances of censorship. These strategies include the implementation of effective collection management policies, building bridges with patrons, trustees, legal counsel, and library directors, and taking preventive action to avoid censorship whenever possible. In this manner, children's librarians can meet the needs of their community by overcoming the issue of unrestricted access versus user satisfaction.

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