

editorial

As I listened in horror to the horrifying stories of book burning told by the participants in one of those panels about censorship that have recently become obligatory at children's literature conferences, I suddenly realized how much I was enjoying my outrage. For most of us who care about literature, censorship is directly contrary to the principles by which we live. It is easy to hate. Confronted by it, we act more like committed true believers confronting woefully wrongheaded heretics than like the humane, reasonable people we like to think we are. But as I sat feeling just as superior as everyone else in the room did to those book burning dolts we were hearing about, I began to wonder if we were not, perhaps, in some not quite obvious way, guilty ourselves. In support of that possibility, I offer some recent scenes out of my life as a teacher of children's literature, some of which are, and some of which just might be, cases of censorship.

Case One: A typical episode worthy of typical true outrage. A news broadcaster asks me to comment on the decision of a local school board to remove a number of books from their libraries—books the board members have not actually read themselves (it seems they are too busy shooting ducks and making land deals to have time for something as frivolous as reading) but which a concerned parent or two has declared unacceptable (the parents have not read the books either). One book is about a child who takes drugs and dies, which will obviously encourage weak-minded youths to take drugs and die themselves. Even worse, the other is about Jews doing typical Jewish things, and apparently that will encourage those same weak-minded youths to go around wearing silly beanies and lusting after spicy pickles. I tell the interviewer that anyone who believes that young people are that easily swayed has never tried to talk a young person into eating rutabaga.

My verdict: The school board members are guilty of censorship first degree: guilty of foolishly believing that children who know only acceptable things will always act acceptably; guilty of arrogantly believing that the goodness of youngsters is, unlike their own, too weak to survive knowledge of evil; guilty of godlessly believing, in their effort to make all children conform to their own narrow values, that the only others one is supposed to do good unto are the others who are just like oneself. But I am guilty of first-degree censorship too; I sure would like those doltish school board members to stop making their ignorant pronouncements about my subject and stick to their land deals and their duck killing.

Cases Two, Three, and Four: In Case Two, my students reject an old children's poem for its obviously excessive moralizing about the subject of duty to one's parents; but two minutes later, they all agree that children could relate to a poem that rather excessively encourages being imaginative and having a positive self-image. In Case Three, a student writes me a paper in which she tells me that children could not relate to a poem which mentions Scotland Yard, because, unless they happen to live in Scotland, they will not know what Scotland Yard is; she herself has never been to Scotland, but enjoys the poem a lot. In Case Four, my students tell me children could relate to a story about a boy who gets some wool carded, and that it would teach them useful information, like how to card wool. But another story, an African folktale about a starving man who gets food from a talking skull, is not something children can relate to, because children have never seen a talking skull, are not themselves starving, and worst of all, would be disturbed by the fact that the man dies because he doesn't follow the good advice the skull gives him, without even one little second chance.

My verdict in all three cases: My students are guilty of censorship second degree, which is first degree censorship masquerading as pedagogical cliché about childhood: guilty of assuming children can relate only to what they know already; guilty of agreeing with the first degree censors that children are all weak, all fragile, all easily turned away from the good—the difference being that goodness for second degree censors is not spiritual health but mental balance and social normalcy; guilty, furthermore, as people brought up only on what their teachers thought they could relate to, of profound ignorance about the world they live in (for they live in a city in which few people card wool, and in which many people are starving; and as I discovered to my horror, almost none of them know where Scotland Yard is); guilty, above all, of mindlessly accepting the mindless assumptions about human growth and childhood development and relating that are the opiate of the pedagogical masses nowadays, without actually thinking about them.

And I suppose I am guilty too—guilty as my students tell me, of believing that my opinions are better than their opinions just because I've thought about them; of assuming that I know better than the pedagogical establishment I criticize; and of censoring my students' right to think stupid thoughts and live by unconsidered ideas. Yes, I am guilty of all of these, and proud of it.

Case Six: My students love John Neufeld's *Freddy's Book* (which contains a very bad word, but nevertheless teaches children about things they can relate to). But when I ask the class if they intend to use the book later in their professional lives as teachers and librarians, they tell me they certainly wouldn't buy it for their libraries or classrooms, or recommend it to children. It's good, and good for children; but some nosy, stupid parent who believes in censorship, of all nasty things, would find out about it and make trouble, and then they'd probably lose their jobs just because they knew what was really good for children; no, they'd probably end up letting the children in their schools and libraries read only that old-fashioned moralistic stuff that dumb parents approve of. Well, I make inquiries; and I discover that I cannot find evidence of there being one single copy of *Freddy's Book* on the shelves of any school or public library in the entire province of Manitoba.

My verdict: My students (and many teachers and librarians) are guilty of censorship third degree—censorship by people who are afraid of first-degree censors, and therefore do it themselves to avoid the problem; guilty of depriving children of books they think children ought to have because they think other, less wise people will want to deprive children of those books. Censorship third degree is still censorship, for it has the same effect: it deprives children of books.

Of censorship third degree, I believe I am myself innocent—innocent but untested. As I once told the parent of a student who phoned me up to complain about the novel I was forcing on her twenty-year-old child, I don't teach children. If that twenty-year-old person was indeed a child, then obviously he shouldn't have been enrolled in a university English course. But what if I were teaching children? Would I find it so easy to act on my convictions? Would I insist my students have access to all the vast variety of literature I believe all children ought to have access to? I have to admit that I simply do not know. But I do know that censorship third degree is censorship at its most insidious, censorship committed by people who passionately hate censorship. I'll try to remember that the next time I go to a conference and enjoy being outraged by the book burning stories.

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