

THE PUBLISHER CONNECTION

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Rumbles! Bangs! Crashes! The Roar of Censorship

M. Jerry Weiss

To understand the roar of the censors and the concerns of their effects, one should have a clear definition of censorship. Henry Reichman (1993) in *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*, defines censorship as “the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic, or educational materials – of images, ideas, and information – on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of standards applied by the censor,” and adds that:

Frequently, the simple occurrence of an offending word will arouse protest. In other cases, objection will be made to the underlying values and basic message conveyed – or said to be conveyed – by a given work. In the final analysis, censorship is simply a matter of someone saying, “No, you cannot read that magazine or book or see that film or videotape – because I don’t like it. . . .” By suppressing materials containing ideas or themes with which they do not agree, censors produce a sterile conformity and a lack of intellectual and emotional growth in students. Freedom in the public schools is central to the quality of what and how students learn. (pp. 2 and 4)

Although one can argue against censorship, one needs to recognize that many would-be-censors are well organized and funded. The impact often is intimidating, and a number of school administrators give in when a phone rings and someone complains about a book, movie, or video being used in a class or available in the school library, which can easily be chosen by a student to fill an assignment.

But in how many school media centers are these books available? Sometimes parents don’t want such materials available to their children. Censorship is a reality. With school budgets being greatly curtailed, some school personnel feel they might as well buy books that probably won’t cause any commotion within the community. If students really want to read risky books, they can check them out of the public library.

When I was in high school, I wrote a book report for my English class. The book I chose was Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. I was asked to meet with my teacher and a school administrator shortly after the day the paper was due. They wanted to know where I got the book. I told them I checked it out of the public library.

“Do your parents know that you were reading this book?”

“I don’t know. My parents let me read anything I want. They encouraged me to go to the library.”

“Then who gave you permission to read such a book?”

“No one. I just took it and read it. Why?”

“Don’t you know the book has vulgar language and sex?”

“Yes. I know that. After all, I read the book. But I didn’t read it because of that stuff.”

“Then why did you read it?”

“Because I like the way the author writes, and I had to do a report on a book by an American author.”

Well, to make a long story short, the report was not acceptable. I had to choose something more appropriate. In the meantime, I could expect a lower grade for the marking period.

I did not sneak the book out of the public library into my house. As I stated, my parents gave me the freedom to choose books that appealed to my interests and that would hold my attention. Hemingway was that kind of author. But he was too contemporary at the time. This was the type of book available through Book of the Month Club and was for adults. And besides, the book’s popularity would probably disappear quickly.

I know the feeling of being censored and can empathize with those who have heard or read about incidents. Many articles have appeared on various aspects of censorship. I have chosen to write about a few cases that have affected me while I have served on intellectual freedom committees of the International Reading Association and/or the National Council of Teachers of English. All of these are genuine.

Sin and Snakes and Alice Walker

Invited to speak at a state meeting about censorship, I was prepared to talk about issues, cases, and to make suggestions for preventing or handling censorship actions. It was a lively session, well attended, and the audience was very responsive.

Following the meeting, I started to pack my briefcase. A gentleman approached and introduced himself as a principal-teacher in a small rural community. He had kind words about my session, and then he went on to tell me the following story:

One day an English teacher in his school was standing by her classroom door, waiting for her students to enter. She overheard three girls discussing enthusiastically a movie they had seen over the weekend, *The Color Purple*. The teacher commented that she had seen and enjoyed the movie also. She added that it was based on a book written by Alice

Walker. She then went on to teach what had been assigned for homework.

The gentleman speaking to me told me that later that afternoon his telephone rang, and a person asked for meeting to be held with several parents, the English teacher and the principal. The principal replied courteously that he would be happy to meet with the group and was sure that he and the teacher could meet the following day after classes were out. All agreed.

Six parents arrived, and a couple was carrying paper bags with them. After greetings were exchanged, one of the parents asked the teacher if she had talked about a book, *The Color Purple*. The teacher told the parents the circumstances under which she had mentioned the book. "I heard the girls talking about seeing the movie, and I just mentioned that it was based on a book. That's all."

A parent asked the teacher if she knew how sinful the book was, if she knew what the book was about.

The teacher admitted that she had read the book and did not feel that the book was vulgar or sinful.

A parent then asked if the board of education had approved the book for use in the school.

The principal indicated that the book had never been submitted for approval.

The teacher interrupted to indicate that she had never recommended the book as part of the school curriculum, and she had never mentioned to the class that this was a book they should read. Her comment came after she overheard some girls talking about how much they had enjoyed seeing the movie.

A parent then stated that the teacher might not be "pure" enough to work with students in this school. The fact that she had made such a comment to these girls might be an indication that there was an evil force within her.

The parents now wanted the approval of the principal to test the purity of the teacher. Those who had brought the bags with them revealed that each bag contained a snake. They wanted the teacher to spend the night in her classroom with the snakes; if she were to survive the next morning, then they would know she was pure enough to be with students.

Of course, the principal denied the request, and indicated that he would have a conference with the teacher and straighten out their concerns. The parents were angry with that response, and they indicated he might hear further from them and others.

The parents left with their bags.

The principal and the teacher spoke, and both agreed never to mention anything that was not in the curriculum guide or in the textbooks.

The teacher was petrified by the experience. Yes, she was still at that school. Her husband had a job in the area, and she could not afford to relocate.

In conclusion, the principal said she was one of the best teachers on his staff. The students really loved her. But to

this day, she will never express her opinion on anything that is not in her textbooks.

"By the way, Dr. Weiss, what would you recommend in a case like this?"

Of Tenure and Timidity

A former student of mine had taken a young adult literature class in which Robin Brancato had come and talked about her books. The former student was a remedial reading teacher in a small community in New Jersey. This teacher was dynamic and creative. She had developed a small library for her classroom. When her students came in, she encouraged them to look at the books, and if anyone wanted to check out a book, she would let that person do so.

One day the principal and superintendent sent her a note to please meet with them after school. She went, unafraid and unassuming. When she arrived in the office, she was greeted warmly by both and offered some coffee. As they sat there talking informally, one of the administrators asked her to describe her room and her activities. She told them about

different things she was doing. Then one administrator asked her if she had a classroom library. She said she did. She had bought a number of young adult books over a period of time and she thought that some of her reluctant readers might give them a try.

She was asked about a book, *Blinded by the Light*. Did she know the book?

She replied she did and went on to tell how she had met the author and heard her describe her experiences in preparation for writing such a book. She assured them that it was a very good book.

The administrators looked at each other. Then one spoke that the book had never been approved by the board of education to be included as part of any school program. The books was not in the school library. Was she aware of that rule?

She admitted that she had not thought about the rule. She thought that if a book had received good reviews and been recommended by her college classes, that it would be permissible to include as part of a class library. No one was forced to read anything. After all, in a reading class she thought the objective was to encourage the students to read.

Yes, the objective was to get the students to read, but the reading had to be in those books approved by the board of education. There had been a phone call from a irate parent who found this paperback in her child's room. Never had she read such blasphemy.

"Now since you don't have tenure yet, and if you want to stay here, we would suggest you shut down your library until you have checked to see if the books have been approved. Let this be then one and only warning we can give to you. Thank you for coming to our little meeting."

This former student called me to describe in vivid detail what had happened to her. She was deeply hurt and somewhat terrified by the ordeal she had just endured. She thought it was her duty to tell me that I was endangering the jobs of hundreds of teachers by conducting such a course. It would

be a good idea to put out lots of warnings ahead of time of what might happen if people listen to teachers like me and then recommend such books to students. We have not spoken since. It was the end of a very good friendship.

Of a Forbidden Film

I was invited to a Midwestern community to spend a day with a group of English teachers, talking about some of the methods and materials that might be worthy of their thoughts and actions. I happened to believe that in some cases a good movie based on a fine literary work might be useful to enhance the reading and learning experience. At that time Zeffirelli's widely acclaimed film, *Romeo and Juliet*, had been released and was playing in many local communities. I referred to the film and went on to discuss other things.

Following the presentation, three teachers came up to me and thanked me for my presentation. They said that they had made

arrangements for their classes to see the Zeffirelli film, but when the chair of the department had heard about some "partially nude scene," she had cancelled the trip and had become very irate that her teachers did not have more common sense than to take high school seniors to see such a work of trash. The teachers thought I ought to know this.

Before I left the school, I thanked the chair for inviting me and asked her if by chance she had seen this movie. She tightened up and replied, "Not yet!" This meant she would never go.

As I left the school, I asked my driver if we could take a spin around the city. I would like to see the site of the major penal institution for which this town is well known.

Of Misconceptions and Reasoned Responses

A popular children's and young adult author was a speaker at a state librarian's convention. She was exciting as she described how she researched and wrote her books. The applause was thunderous.

Following her presentation, a number of librarians came up to speak with her and get their books autographed. A few wanted to know if she did school visitations. She assured them that she did and gave one of her cards.

One of the librarians went back to her elementary school and spoke enthusiastically about this author. Everybody agreed that she ought to be invited to speak to the students during the day and to the parents that evening. The librarian contacted her and the date and fees were acceptable. About ten days before her scheduled appearance, the author called me and said that her scheduled visitation had been canceled because some teachers and parents had read some of her books and thought they were inappropriate for their children. She knew that her young adult books dealt with a number of issues confronting adolescents

in the modern world, but she was bothered by the fact that they found objectionable items in her children's books.

I asked for the name of the school district that had called her and the name of a person I might speak with. She gave me the necessary information. I made a telephone call.

I spoke with the principal. He was cordial and we discussed the matter quite frankly. He pointed out that in one of the author's most popular works were the following words that one child called another: "tight-assed mosquito." He thought that this was definitely not in good taste.

I asked him if there were other objections. He replied that he did not know of any.

I went on to explain that the author had been invited to many schools and conferences and was greatly respected. Her books had appeared on several recommended reading lists, including the one in which he found the bothersome language. I also pointed out that the author had made an agreement to come to the school and should be paid in full and sent a letter of apology. I reminded him that the author had probably turned down another invitation for that date in

order to accommodate his school district. I told him that if he didn't work out some acceptable arrangements with the author that I would notify several major newspapers that would make him and his school the laughing stock of the state. I also planned to notify several groups, such as NCTE, ALA, IRA, and the National Coalition Against Censorship to urge they take some action against the school's stand. He had thirty minutes to reach a resolution.

Sure enough, he called within the time frame and said that the school had decided to honor the invitation. However, they would not permit the sales of her book on school grounds.

He and I called the author to tell her about the decision, and she thanked me for my anti-censorship efforts, I told her to call her publisher and tell of the school visit, not about the attempt of censorship, but to try to have a nearby book store publicize her appearance and to arrange sales of her

books. All this was accomplished.

When she returned home, she called again to thank me and said that the audience was great. Many parents wanted to know why the school didn't have copies of her book for sale. Since that incident, I have urged all author friends making school visits to which they

are able to drive to carry a carton of books in the trunk of their cars, just in case there are people interested in purchasing copies.

One author has vividly described how her book was burned on the steps of the Board of Education Building in a large Midwestern city because the book had the word "homosexuals" in it. It is a riveting Holocaust novel in which the author points out that homosexuals were sent to the concentration camps. It was an important part of her plot.

A school of nursing connected with a major hospital had

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worked out an arrangement with a local college to offer the necessary courses to allow those who wanted to meet the requirements for a Bachelor of Nursing degree to do so. One of the requirements was a course in world literature. The English instructor assigned to this class was a very popular teacher. She prepared a list of requirements and the reading assignments for the course. When the head of nursing saw some of the authors and books being recommended, she immediately called the president of the college to have a different teacher assigned who would have a more decent list of readings for "her girls." The president declined to make any changes. The course was offered for one semester, and then the program was canceled.

As chair of the English Department of an inner city college, I arranged for two nationally known authors to speak about their concerns on education matters. Both had books on *The New York Times* best seller list and were well versed on current problems involving young people. Over a thousand people attended this one-day event. After the first speaker had finished his presentation, a group of about ten teachers walked out in a huff. I had not idea what caused this. I could not leave the stage when this happened, since I had to introduce the second speaker.

Within three days a letter appeared on the college president's desk, protesting this conference as a fraud. "Dr. Weiss and the English Department were running a political campaign under the guise of an English conference."

The president called me in and asked if this were true. I assured him that this definitely was not true, and that these two outstanding speakers had received a standing ovation upon the completion of the conference. Yes, they had ruffled some feathers. But it was important for teachers of English to open their minds to the facts that some things might have to change in order to meet the many needs of a diverse student body. He agreed. However, since the conference had been audio-taped, he requested that the tapes be sent to his office. He had received a request form the State Commissioner of Education that report on the matter be sent to him. The president forwarded the copies of the tapes.

I never heard another word about this matter, but the tapes were never returned.

While attending a recent conference, a teacher told me that a superintendent had examined a newly-adopted social studies text. He noticed there was a picture of Michelangelo's David. Fearing consequences when this book was carried home, he had the teaching staff "paint shorts" on the famous nude statue.

My latest concern is the dangerous act of self-censorship taking place in classes and school libraries all over this country. As I have been invited to speak about the topic of censorship, I have been receiving newspaper articles and letters describing how books such as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* and other outstanding children's books are dangerous to the minds of the young. They are not mature enough to know right from wrong. A book such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* is unfit for children because it talks about a group of people who are not "the true religious believers." I could go on and on.

But why am I scared?

When people in one community are caught in the controversy over a book, schools around the community hear or read about it and librarians and teachers in these other communities decide not to order the books for their schools because the **might** have to go through a similar defense in their community. There are so many books being published anyway, why bother over a few titles? Just avoid them.

Let me assure you this last matter is not a small matter. I know good teachers and librarians that have told me that the issue is not whether or not "fuck" is used in a story. Words such as "damn" or "hell" or children disagreeing with adults are stuff enough to ban a book from reaching their shelves. We can't have unfit language and role models for students.

Of Schools' Stances and Censorship

The role of education is to make sure that children are given the books that foster proper manners, morals and values.

Whose?

In Judy Blume's new book, *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers*, she writes:

In this age of censorship, I mourn the loss of books that will never be written, I mourn voices that will be silenced-writers' voices, teachers' voices, students' voices – and all because of fear. How many have resorted to self-censorship?...
(p. 10)

Harry Mazer, one of the contributors to Judy Blume's book, adds:

Good books are created when authors can write freely, take risks, go where their imaginations lead them. Once the author begins to temper his language and writes not to his own standard, but to the standard of the feared censor, the quality of his work suffers.

Books belong to all who read. Readers need and want well-written, interesting books. And since what interests me may not interest you, we need more books. More authors. More varied points of view. Books are our windows on the world. The permit us to safely experience other lives and ways of thinking and feeling. Books give us a glimmer of the complexity and wonder of life. All this the censor would deny us.
(p. 97)

This means that schools should have a good policy on the selection of materials for all classes and the school media center. There should also be a policy guaranteeing teachers the freedom to use methods that stimulate learning and thinking and creative expression. There should be a policy for handling complaints that is fair to all. The school should have a good communications network with religious, civic, political groups, including parent and student organizations. Of course, there should be effective procedures for working with the media so that they can present accurate information concerning issues that might impede intellectual freedom.

In conclusion, I recommend these four books as valuable resources for protecting the freedom of teachers, the freedom of students to have access to materials, and the freedom of all to learn, to grow, and to express themselves:

Blume, Judy. *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Karolides, Nicholas J., Margaret Bald, and Dawn B. Sova. *100 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature*. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999.

Reichman, Henry. *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*. Chicago and Arlington: American Association of School Administrators and American Library Association, 1993.

Simmons, John S., ed. *Censorship: A Threat to Reading, Learning, Thinking*. Newark: International Reading Association, 1994.