



THE NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED DIARY OF A CLOSET CENSOR

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Abstract

Censorship, in any form, is alive and well in school systems throughout the educational arena. It can and does occur in grades K-12 and higher education. This article describes multiple types of censorship, with a close look into the act of self-censorship and the prevalent censorship of young adult literature. In a realistic manner, the article explores who the censors are while promoting the importance of ending censorship.

Introduction

Monday

August 14, 2007

Dear Diary,

New school year; new way to turn kids on to reading: young adult literature. The themes in YAL will definitely draw the kids' attention. Finally, my students will be able to identify with what they are reading. The characters experience much the same things that today's teens do. I can't wait to begin this school year. As excited as I am, I'll have to be careful about the books I choose to let my students read. Sometimes YAL books are a little too realistic.

Wednesday

August 16, 2007

Dear Diary,

I was right!! The kids are excited about not having to drag a reading anthology along. They can't wait to get started on a "real book;" neither can I! I've decided to start the year with Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs*; they'll love it.

Sunday

August 20, 2007

Dear Diary,

4:10 p.m.

As I re-read the first three chapters of Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs*, I realized that the topic of teen suicide may be a little too heavy for ninth-graders. I know that kids their age commit suicide, but there is no point in them reading about it. Back later with more news on which book I end up choosing.

6:07p.m.

I think I have finally found the perfect book to use. It's a little less challenging for this age group than what I prefer, but I don't think that it will cause any waves among their parents. It's called *Where the Red Fern Grows* written by Wilson Rawls.

11:30p.m.

I can't sleep. I don't think Rawls's book is such a good choice. Can 14 and 15 year olds handle the subject of death in any form? What will their parents say about them reading a touching story that reveals how violent death is? What will those groups who want to ban guns say about Billy's desire to own one? What about the environmental groups? I can just hear them saying "You promote depletion of the forest!" Billy does cut down the Big Tree after all. What do I do now? I've already promised the kids a "real book."

Monday

August 21, 2007

Dear Diary,

6:48a.m.

Finally, after a sleepless night and a long talk with my husband, I think I have come up with the only solution. Before I tell you the answer to my dilemma, let me tell you what my husband, who, by the way, knows nothing about my predicament, had the nerve to accuse me of. He, brace yourself, implied that I was practicing censorship. I told him really fast that censorship was a ship that never sailed in my harbor. I decided not to dignify his accusation with a response. After much soul-searching, I decided on a harmless tale about James, a boy's adventure with a peach that comes alive. Perhaps it's a little childish, but at least it's safe. *I hope they won't think that I'm promoting belief in fantasies.*

Self-Censorship: A Definition

The above scenario, although fictional, is all too real. Teachers impose self-censorship daily. They worry that what they want their students to read will be censored by someone, somewhere, sometime, so they often beat them to the punch. Looking at the term objectively, Tan (2000) asserts that self-censorship is refraining from saying or doing anything out of a belief that typically has its origins in the individual's moral or cultural values; it is not something, Tan continues, that is imposed externally by force. Everyone, Stuhlman (2006) asserts, edits their thoughts. All of us are careful not to say or do things that may hurt, anger, or offend others. The whole concept of self-censorship, in fact, implies that individuals exercising it do so willingly or voluntarily (Tan, 2000). But, is it really by choice?

According to Davis (1986), self-censorship is open, dangerous, and sometimes heroic. As teachers, we occasionally practice censorship in order to avoid possible problems that may arise from outside sources. Davis refers to this practice as "selecting literature through someone else's eyes and with someone else's values" (p. 67). Instead of choosing to act against censorship, we often choose the easy way out when selecting novels. We end up censoring ourselves before the censors who have "come out" can. In essence, we put the literature on trial and find it guilty, never allowing the students to judge if it is appropriate for them. Noted author Judy Blume (2000) puts it this way:

"... it's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written; the books that will never be read and all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers."

Robert Cormier (1992), prolific young adult novelist, admits to having practiced the act of self-censorship. For example, in *The Chocolate War* (1974), Cormier initially included a chapter where the main character, Archie, masturbated in his room. When Cormier's 15-year-old daughter asked to read his manuscript, however, he censored her reading by omitting that

chapter. Later, when the initial manuscript was accepted for publication, he was asked to consider removing the chapter. In other words, his work was being censored. Cormier says, “I knew instantly what I had done: I had been willing to inflict that chapter on other people’s fifteen-year-old daughters but unwilling to inflict it on my own daughter” (Cormier, 1992, p. 71). He removed the chapter and “learned the lesson of self-censorship” (p. 71). Of interest, this same book, even with the self-censored removal of the chapter, heads the list of the most censored books (Weiss, 2005).

Censorship and Young Adult Literature

Doyle (1995) declares that “reading stimulates a thinking mind [and that] censorship destroys the ability to discover differences and the commonalities in our fellow humans” (p. 113). During the different ages of my life, I have found solace in books. To think that I could have been denied that right is unfathomable. As a teacher, I have encouraged students to read for enjoyment, for answers, for identity. I have discovered myself, many times, in novels I have read and encourage my students to execute this same search for self. It allows us, as readers, to recognize that we are not alone in the universe and that what we are feeling or going through is not unique. Therefore, what rights do I, other educators, or vocal censors have to deny that privilege to today’s teens? The answer, of course, is none; yet, we continue to do so which, ultimately, annihilates two of the readers’ basic bill of rights:

- the right to read anything, and
- the right to not defend our tastes (Pennac, 1999).

Gallo (1994) believes that “many teachers still teach the ‘tried and true’ because they are uncomfortable with uncertainty and they fear the unknown” (p. 117). He credits some of the censorship of young adult literature books to the amount of time they have been in existence. Novels written specifically for adolescents, such as Chris Crutcher’s *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989) and Bette Greene’s *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (1991), according to Gallo (1994), have not yet proven themselves. Even though they were published more than a decade ago, they are not part of the classics and do not appear on most English language arts canonical literature lists. Gallo also believes that young adult novels are often signaled out because of their content; a cause more likely to result in censorship than even the language. The subject matter in young adult literature, like the two books mentioned above, deals with real issues and real characters who encounter real problems. For example, the main character in *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989) is dealing with his brother’s suicide and girlfriend’s incestuous molestation. In Greene’s 1991 novel, the characters face homophobia and prejudice in realistic manners; Stephan Jones is killed because he is gay. Today’s teens, like those mentioned in the Crutcher’s and Greene’s novels, are faced with real dilemmas: divorce, drug addictions, death, pregnancy, and, yes, even homophobia and suicide. While these topics may be unsettling for most adults, they are authentic issues. Adolescents encounter them daily. Rob, a character from Sue Ellen Bridgers’ *Permanent Connections* (1999), questions how his mother could still love him. He wonders “had she recognized scents on him--stale beer spilled on his clothes, semen on his sheets, grass in the hazy distance he kept from her?” (p. 98). After reading the previous passage, a high school sophomore and I talked about whether or not Bridgers’ novel could make it into his high-school English curriculum. Our conclusion, sadly, was what I expected to be. We both felt that her

book would not be permitted. I asked him to explain why he thought *Permanent Connections* would be censored. He mentioned three things: curse words, sex, and drugs. With an insight that most censors lack, he observed that these three things, however, are not what the novel is about. But, as Gallo (1994) points out, many would-be censors object to certain novels without having read (or understood) the entire book. They select passages, much like the one above, and begin their crusade.

Censorship: Other Types

In most instances, the ALA, American Library Association, (2006) reminds us, censors are sincerely concerned individuals who believe that censorship can improve society, protect children, and restore what they see as lost moral values. Small (1994) elaborates further by discussing three censorship types:

- the “I Know What’s Best for You” type
- the “I Wouldn’t Do That If I Were You” type, and
- the “Don’t You Dare Teach That Filth to My Children” type.

The first one mentioned is frequently veiled. This type, according to Small, is often disguised by well-meaning librarians who insist that students “check out a better book than that” (p. 190). The second type Small refers to is a “pull toward self-censorship” (p. 194). This form of censorship is often encased in the form of veteran teachers who feel that they know what parents will and won’t object to. Parents are the censors referred to in the last type; many times they object to what is being read without understanding or having read the material they are objecting to. Several years ago, for example, I was faced with an irate, but well-meaning, parent who did not want her child to read Greek or Roman myths. She felt that mythology (and I) distorted Christianity, and that it would confuse her 13-year-old daughter. Though her concerns were real, they were misplaced. Fortunately, this matter was easily dealt with once the parent understood the difference between fiction and nonfiction. I continued teaching the mythology unit without further complaints. I was lucky.

According to Bushman and Bushman (1993) one of the most important goals for any public school, at any level, is to foster reading so that students develop into lifelong readers. Encouraging lifelong reading is a goal that is not always attainable. Often students resist what teachers want them to read, and the lifelong reading habit that teachers hope to instill is all but forgotten. Using young adult literature in the classroom is one way to combat this. Hipple (1997) believes that the best reason to use young adult literature in the classroom is because students will read it. He continues to say that teenagers are reading is more important than what they are reading. My own past experience using this type of literature with middle and secondary students supports Hipple’s stance. They will read it when they will not read the anthology or the classics.

Conclusion

Most educators will profess to hating censorship, to wanting it abolished. I am one of the most. I do not like the idea of someone telling me what I can and can not read. Even so, I admit to sometimes being a self-censor. Just like the woman in the diary entries, I worry about “they”

and what “they’ll” say. Hipple (1989) would argue that I am being tyrannized by at least three of the six Ts: tradition, teachers, and they. The tradition tyranny forces me to question whether the books I have selected for inclusion have been taught before; if they have not, should they be eliminated? Other teachers’ opinions have, on occasion, also tyrannized me. Though they are typically well-meaning, their views have caused me to omit perfectly good literature choices from the curriculum. Lastly, the infamous they (though often unknown) and my fear of them have resulted in self-censorship practices by my steering clear of certain titles because “they” may object. As a result, censorship is alive and well in our schools. It can, and does, occur anywhere and in any form. Sometimes it is disguised (i.e. self-censorship); other times it is very publicized and appears in the form of book-banning. Who then are the censors? They are novelists, like Robert Cormier, who carry out self-censorship; they are educators, like me, who initiate self-censorship based on their beliefs about school system policy and possible parental objections; and, they are parents who employ it out of concern for their children. Whoever the censors are, and in whatever form, they are dangerous. If censorship, regardless of what form it comes in, goes unchecked, to echo Blume’s (2000) opinion, it is the young readers who will suffer.

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