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# BOOK CENSORSHIP 2008

## *A View from the Trenches*

by JOAN BERTIN, Executive Director of the National Coalition Against Censorship

**While the general public may not be aware of it**, it's probably not news to teachers that book censorship is alive and well in the United States. It's a fact of life in almost every school district in the nation. While it's impossible to say precisely how many challenges occur, there are hundreds reported in the press or to advocacy organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship every year. Whatever number we can point to, however, is by definition an under-estimate, because many more fly below the radar. Add all the books not assigned in class, or purchased for libraries, because of fears that they *might* be challenged, and the numbers rise even further.

Another fact that jumps off the pages describing reported cases is that almost anything is vulnerable to challenge: *In the Night Kitchen* because of a drawing of a little boy's naked body; *The Lorax* for its advocacy of environmentalism; *Where's Waldo* because it contains a line drawing of a breast; and *Little House on the Prairie* because of statements about Native Americans.

Nonetheless, certain subjects are particularly likely to elicit a challenge. For example, sex in almost any form—from sex education, to health and biology, to sexual maturation. *It's Perfectly Normal* has been frequently attacked as “explicit” and “pornographic.” The Boston Women Health Book Collective's classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has been called “pornographic” and “filthy.” *Seventeen Magazine* was removed from a high school library over an article, written by a doctor, describing what to expect when visiting a gynecologist. Judy Blume's coming-of-age novel, *Forever*, seems to have been on the most challenged list—well, forever.

Predictably, material referring to homosexuality is commonly targeted. *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Annie on my Mind* are among the commonly challenged titles. *And Tango Makes Three*, a true story about male penguins raising a penguin chick, was recently attacked for its “homosexual undertones.”

Some parents feel that exposing their children to books about same-sex relationships violates their religious beliefs. When parents in Massachusetts raised such an argument recently, the federal appeals court dismissed the suit: “Requiring a student to read a particular book is generally not coercive of free exercise rights. Public schools are not obliged to shield individual students from ideas which potentially are religiously offensive, particularly when the school imposes no requirement that the student agree with or affirm those ideas, or even participate in discussions about them.”

Religious sensitivities also prompt challenges to books containing certain forms of profanity that is deemed blasphemous (e.g., Katherine Patterson's *A Bridge to Terabithia*) and books about magic and sorcery, such as the Harry Potter series and Philip Pullman's *The*



*Golden Compass*, which has been called anti-Christian. Profanity that is deemed vulgar is attacked on other grounds - that students should not read books containing words that they're not allowed to say in school (e.g., Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk* and Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*).

Race and ethnicity represent another sensitive category. Many books that are attacked on these grounds were written with the goal of exposing the evils of prejudice or recounting the details of life in some communities and families (e.g., *Black Boy*, *Huck Finn*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Down These Mean Streets*, *Tar Baby*). By describing certain experiences realistically, and delving into darker moments in history, for some parents such books merely re-open old wounds.

And the list could go on and on.

Censorship incidents can arise at any stage in the educational process. Until recently, such controversies were more prevalent in the lower grades and middle school, but there is now a marked increase in censorship challenges at the high school level, often in classes for college-bound students. For example, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison was removed from Advanced Placement English classes in Louisville, Kentucky. Within 30 pages of the end of the novel, the book was removed and discussions about it abruptly halted. In West Virginia, *The Prince of Tides* and *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy were removed from the Advanced Placement English curriculum. While the books were ultimately returned to the curriculum, the school board now requires teachers to notify parents about books that someone might find objectionable.

Other books that have been challenged at the high school level include *The Freedom Writers Diary* by Erin Gruwell, Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. Students in any high school in which these kinds of books are banned will likely graduate with little or no experience with contemporary fiction and unprepared for college-level study.

What is clear from these incidents is that parents often need to be educated about why a particular book has been assigned, what students are expected to learn from reading it, and how literature not only



ABOVE: Performance of a censored play by Wilton High School students. BELOW LEFT: Last year's Youth Film Contest winners.



#### THE NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

The National Coalition Against Censorship regularly assists teachers, parents, students, school officials, and others in developing and implementing policies, especially in response to book challenges. NCAC and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE) have jointly established the *Kids Right to Read Project* to track book censorship incidents nationwide, and intervene whenever possible. In addition to ABFFE, we regularly collaborate with sister organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, PEN American Center, Association of American Publishers, ACLU, and others. NCAC's web site functions as a clearinghouse of information on censorship, and it provides a collection of resources for educators and the general public, such as *Learning, Speaking, and Thinking Freely: The First Amendment in Schools* ([www.ncac.org/education/schools](http://www.ncac.org/education/schools)), and *Book Censorship in Schools: A Toolkit* ([www.ncac.org/literature/bookcensorshiptoolkit.cfm](http://www.ncac.org/literature/bookcensorshiptoolkit.cfm)).



sharpens language and analytical skills but also allows young people to explore the world vicariously and better understand the world around them. When children are exposed to books on disturbing or sensitive topics in school, the experience can open lines of communication with parents, teachers and peers.

While parents are entitled to voice their views and concerns, in the end the task of selecting readings for the curriculum properly belongs to professional educators. Parents may be equipped to make choices for their own children but, no matter how well-intentioned, they have no right to impose their views on others or demand that the educational program reflect their personal preferences.

As one federal appeals court recently observed, public schools have the obligation to “administer school curricula responsive to the overall educational needs of the community and its children.” Thus, no parent has the right “to tell a public school what his or her child will and will not be taught.” Any other rule, as the courts have noted, would put schools in the untenable position of having “to cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the school’s choice of subject matter.”

The First Amendment thus offers protection for educators who stand up for intellectual freedom and an expansive education. Few, if any, courts have ever ruled against a school for *retaining* material in the library or curriculum, as long as the decision was based on sound pedagogical reasons. For example, in a case challenging

*Huck Finn* over its racial language, the federal appeals court upheld “the assignment of a literary work determined to have intrinsic educational value by the duly authorized school authorities.” As that court recognized, removal of material because someone objects to its content or message would likely be challenged successfully by those who wish to read it and argue that removal constitutes censorship.

In our experience, the best way to avoid potentially contentious debates is to establish and consistently follow a clear policy governing how challenges can be made and how they will be processed. To address constitutional concerns, challenged works should be considered as a whole. Decisions about retention should be based solely on educational considerations, not on personal preferences, beliefs or sensitivities, and materials should never be removed until the review process has been completed. Well-crafted policies of this sort can encourage dialogue through which parents gain insight into the educational methods and goals used in the school, while respecting the professional judgments of educators.

To a large extent, book controversies reflect the reality of contemporary life: people with widely divergent experiences, values, and cultural norms rub shoulders at work, in school, on the street, in the store, and at social gatherings—and they educate their children together. Regardless of their differences, most parents have a common goal: to have their children acquire the information and skills they need to become productive, self-sufficient adults. If parents see how the books their children read in school serve that end, perhaps they will appreciate the value of literature, rather than fear it. ■

### About the Writer



JOAN BERTIN, Executive Director of the National Coalition Against Censorship, is a graduate of NYU Law School, where she was a fellow in the Arthur Garfield Hays Civil Liberties Program. She practiced law for many years, first as a legal services lawyer representing indigent clients and then litigating civil rights and civil liberties cases at the ACLU. She has taught at Columbia University, where she remains on the faculty, and at Sarah Lawrence College, where she held the Joanne Woodward Chair in Public Policy. She frequently speaks and writes on legal and policy issues, and is the author of more than 30 chapters and articles in professional books and journals.



ABOVE: Wilton High School Drama Teacher Bonnie Dickinson with Playwright Christopher Durang. BELOW: Chip Gibson speaking at the annual benefit. BELOW LEFT: Authors Judy Blume and Chris Crutcher at the annual benefit.

