

SURVIVING A BOOK CHALLENGE

by Jane Snowberger, Lakeview Middle School Librarian

*The following exposé is simply a personal reflection upon
my experiences with various attempts at censorship,
particularly the challenge to the novel
Sold by Patricia McCormick.*

♦ A Preface to Fellow Librarians - (Preparing for Hostilities?)

During the 1990's the number of library books challenged increased by nearly 50%, and if current national trends are any indication, the odds are better than average that eventually there will be a challenge to literature in your library or to the books, videos or other materials used in the classrooms of your district. I mention this because over the last decade or so, 42 of the 100 books recognized by the Radcliffe Publishing Course as the best novels of the twentieth century have been challenged in schools. The number of challenges to books, magazines, videos, etc. are growing partly because various 'concerned' groups are popping up all over the country trying to censor literary materials in public as well as school libraries. Numerous web sites (*See the pro-censorship sites listed on this web page*) are not only encouraging parents to challenge books but are then giving them lists of books to go after and telling them how to go about it. So it's not difficult to imagine that challenging school materials is becoming more than simply the actions of individual, concerned parents; instead, it gives the appearance of becoming 'the thing to do' in parts of the country. Numerous districts around the country have reported that they have seen a bandwagon effect from individuals and groups in their communities concerning the number of challenges to various types of materials.

Obviously, how your district handles its first challenge will serve as a blueprint for all future occurrences. Perhaps one of the best ways to preserve the integrity of your district's educational materials and its academic values is to clarify, review and update, if necessary, your procedures that deal with such disputes. As an educational professional, it seems logical to me that the school librarian should take a leading role in assuring the community that your school's selection and review policies are, in fact, strong and explicit enough to offer an adequate defense against exposing their children to harmful or dangerous materials. For instance, a comprehensive written policy concerning the selection and use of instructional and library materials would eliminate ambiguity and encourage stability and continuity by directly addressing most potential problems associated with the acquisition of educational materials that some may deem as controversial. And one of the best ways to immediately begin this process, in my opinion, would be to have your school board endorse the ALA's (*American Library Association*) Library Bill of Rights.

◆ Disclaimer

All of the following thoughts and interpretations are based mainly on the evolution of my own thinking as a result of experiences with; **(1)** reading articles and speaking with various ‘experts,’ **(2)** working with my district’s censorship policies **(3)** actual challenges to books, and **(4)** my observation of how well our policies and procedures have worked in practice.

▶ Point 1 - Be Prepared

If you have never had a book or teaching materials challenged by an upset parent, then it is most likely something that you seldom, if ever, have even thought about, that is - until it happens. But I have found that the best way to meet the possible threat of a challenge is to make sure you are prepared for it. Here are a few things to consider:

- * First of all, do you know where your administration and school board would stand if a book in your library is challenged? It will do no good if something is challenged and you prepare to defend the material along with the academic principles behind your selection, only to discover that your administration is only interested in avoiding a controversy and goes about undercutting not only the fundamental ideas involved, but also your position of authority on this subject by giving in to the challenger without due process. Believe me, this has happened. So, I strongly recommend that you touch base with your administration before talking to any parent when a complaint has been registered. *(You may also want to check your collective bargaining agreements, you may have already negotiated clauses that protect academic freedom and that call for agreed-on selection processes.)*
- * If you do have a book challenged, your road will be infinitely smoother if you already have a clearly stated policy in place for both (a) the selection of materials and (b) a formal process for reviewing challenged material. If you have such policies but don’t have a copy of them handy; get them now, keep them, and become familiar with them. If you don’t have both a selection and challenge policy in place, create them ASAP.
 - * Such a district challenge policy should include...
 - A clearly defined description of each step in the challenging process. In addition, the entire faculty should be familiar with it. Once implemented, this procedure should be open and clearly understood by all parties involved. *(It is imperative that it is clear to the individual who has made the challenge. I have found that an issue is seldom resolved to anyone’s satisfaction if one party feels that the process was not an open and fair one.)*
 - It’s also vital that your school board has a written challenge form available for the challenging parent to fill out. Having every part of the challenge written down helps reduce emotions that often run high at the beginning of a challenge and separates those parents who just want to blow off steam from those who are serious about their challenge. A lengthy and detailed challenge form forces challengers to be serious by using their own time and sitting down, answering detailed questions rationally as they go through their own

thought process of why they are challenging, exactly what they are challenging, and what results they are trying to achieve. *But most importantly, a written challenge enables you to then base your defense of the book or other materials on specific details that have been written in black and white, and not on vague spoken comments or irrational emotions.*

Finally, do not take the challenge personally! Always remember to treat the challenger with respect. Be professional, especially if tempers flair. Keep in mind that once this whole challenge is over, the parent will most likely still have their children in your school and will still vote. Based on my experience, the issue that sours the relationship between parent and school is not so much the decision concerning a challenge of a particular book as it is how they feel they were treated during the process and whether they felt that their opinions were taken seriously.

► **Point 2 - The Responsibility of the Librarian**

As the professional most knowledgeable about topics like copyright, information resources and censorship, it usually falls on your shoulders to make all your teachers aware of the district policy because it is just as likely that some supplemental material used in a classroom could be challenged as a particular book in the library. Here is what I tell our teachers:

- 1) Teachers should give recommended, rather than required, reading lists. Teachers should always be willing to provide alternate reading selections or materials when requested. Try to work with the parents as much as possible in order to try to keep a small problem from becoming a big problem (*i.e. formal challenge*). When communicating with parents the preferred method is to use email, so there will be a record of all communications.
- 2) Teachers should find and keep professional reviews that support their selected materials. The defining question in a challenge is: *Can they defend the selection of this particular material if forced to? What sources, reviews, or recommendations was the selection based on? Are there authoritative sources that support the educational value of this material?*
- 3) And finally, I make sure that every teacher knows that if there is a complaint or a challenge to any of their materials, that the first person they should come and talk to is ME or the principal, not the complaining parent.

► **Point 3 - Maintaining a Balance between Home and School**

Sometimes as librarians we spend so much time advocating academic freedom and planning activities for Banned Book Week that we forget about the all important link that exists between school and community. One cannot exist without the support of the other. Yes, I believe in freedom of choice, but I also believe in using common sense. I know too, that being a parent now is not easy, and that all parents who are concerned about what their children see or read are not automatically my enemy. We have to maintain an empathic perspective on the struggle of today's families and recognize that, in fact, it is every parent's duty to be the final arbitrator for their

child until adulthood. Parents have the right to determine what time they have to be home, where they can go with their friends, what movies they can see, what principles and values are important and yes, what books they can read. And as an integral part of the community, I believe schools and libraries must not only recognize that authority, but also support it.

All good parents should be concerned about their children's contact with undesirable places, friends, or ideas that they find inappropriate or possibly even dangerous. But each parent must take responsibility themselves to monitor their children's language, TV viewing, reading, etc. They must understand that schools, or any institution in an open and free society for that matter, should not and cannot do that for them without being guilty of the most perilous kind of suppression of everyone's freedoms.

As I've already stated, I believe that schools should work with parents and accommodate them as much as possible, but what schools must firmly resist are those individuals who want to make decisions about what books are permitted in our libraries but who have no knowledge of academic literary policies, nor any expertise or experience in dealing with young adult readers and who have no professional training pertaining to the selection of quality reading materials nor who understand the pedagogical needs of our students along the academic reading continuum. They do not know other children's abilities, their interests, their maturity or the desires of other parents. This is the proper vocation of trained professionals who work with and represent all parents and all levels of children in their community schools on a daily basis.

Every potential book challenger must understand that any attempt to ban a book does not simply involve only their personal desires of what they want or don't want their child to read. They are attempting to dictate to other children what they can have access to it. Hence, book challenges are never about a single book; they are a 'challenge' to the most basic freedoms of *other parents* concerning their right to choose what's best for their own children. It is against our society's whole concept of equality to allow one individual's rights to nullify another's.

Whenever I can, I try to suggest to parents who are concerned with what they consider 'controversial' materials that, instead of deciding to do 'battle' with their school, they could actually help improve the entire school system by submitting a list of books that more clearly reflects their views of the themes of whatever maturity and growth issues that they may be concerned with, and send the list to me or to a teacher and ask that these books be considered for purchase. Rather than focusing on depriving other students of materials they feel unsuitable for their children, parents who have different views can help all students by helping their school library include additional resources so we can offer a wider range of views on these topics for every child.

◆ A brief overview of how Lakeview deals with a book challenge

Before delving into all the details, here is a brief summary of our challenge / review process...

1. First, meet with the complainant, respectfully listen to their objections and attempt to resolve the issue. Try to offer alternative selections. Some parents are satisfied simply knowing that their school is willing to listen to them and meet them part way. At this stage, a compromise is usually a win for both sides.
** While the complaint is being explored, keep the challenged material available on the shelf.*
2. If that fails, the next step is to have the complainant fill out a written complaint detailing the questionable material, the bad effect it is thought to have on students, and what replacement materials are suggested. The return of this written form begins the official review process.
3. If the written challenge form is returned, provide the complainant with a copy of published district policy for reviewing controversial materials and explain the procedure to be followed. *(see the Challenge Policy on this web page)*
4. Establish a committee to review the material. Provide ample time for all participants of the committee to read and study the questioned material. *(usually 4 to 6 weeks)*
5. The committee meets. It's purpose is to make a written recommendation to the superintendent on what it thinks the district should do concerning the material challenged. *(This committee serves in an advisory role. The decision is solely the superintendent's.)*
6. After the review is completed, the committee provides the superintendent with a written report containing their recommendations.
7. The superintendent, in turn, informs the complainant of the district's decision in writing.
8. The complainant has 30 days to decide whether to appeal the decision to the Board of Education.

◆ My Story

The following is an account of my experience with the only 'official challenge' of a book in our district's libraries that I have been responsible for overseeing...

1. This particular challenge started with a parent first calling my principal and then the superintendent wanting the novel ***Sold*** by Patricia McCormick removed from the Middle School library. After examining the book which her child checked out, the parent was, *"Shocked and outraged that this material would be permitted in the Middle School library."*

Upon the receipt of this news, my first step was to review the book in question: Have I read it? Recently? If not, I needed to read it again. What was this book about? Why did I add it to the

library in the first place? What sources did I use as a recommendation? When was the book added to the library? Have other students checked out this book and read it? Did it win any awards? What else has the author written? Do I have other books by this author? What kind of reviews did this book get? What was the recommended reading level of this book? Does this book belong to a literary genre popular with students? Could this book not be appropriate for certain students? If so, have I taken any steps to prevent inappropriate readers from checking this book out? Are there other steps I can take to direct this book to more appropriate readers? What are the most objectionable parts of this book? Was this book checked out by the student as a free selection or was it part of a class assignment or project? If so, are there alternative books that I could recommend to the parent? (*Yes, it was a lot of extra work.*)

2. After I prepared a thorough review of this book and knew all the answers to the questions I asked myself, I met with my principal. We discussed every single question mentioned above. I provided her with printouts of reviews and awards won by this book. But most importantly, I provided a written copy of my opinion of the value of the story and how I thought the school system should respond. She, in turn, took this information to the superintendent who then gave the green light to start our challenge/review procedure with me as the point person.
3. Fortunately, our superintendent is always roaming around the district (*personally, I think he tries to hide from certain individuals*), but about a day or so later he stopped in my library, and we chatted about the book challenge. As a result of that short discussion I knew that I had the complete support of the administration throughout this entire review process. I cannot tell you how huge it is to know that my administration had my back and that they too supported what I thought were the key principles in this challenge.
4. Next, I called the parent who made the challenge. I started off with some light conversation about the weather and her child's schedule in school. I eventually inquired whether she read the entire book she is challenging. (*Throughout the conversation I asked several other subtle questions that would confirm in my own mind that she did indeed read it.*) I listened to her objections (*while taking notes*) without interrupting. Then I explained why I placed **Sold** on the library shelves and what I thought the value of the story was. I have to say that she also listened politely and without interruption. Then I offered some alternative book selections for her child and even put forth some suggestions that I hoped might resolve the issue by making some concessions without actually taking the book off the shelf. But she felt that this book was totally inappropriate and needed to be removed for all students and was not willing to compromise. I then politely explained that the district has a process to review materials when someone considers something inappropriate. I explained the whole process and told her that it officially begins when she fills out and returns the three page "Review for Preview of Materials or Course Content form" (*see 'Reconsideration Form' on this web page*) that I would now send her.
5. I waited until the Review form was returned a week or so later before moving to the next step. In the past when we have objections to various materials, usually the amount of work and time involved in filling out the Review form tended to discourage most people from taking their

objection any further. But in this instance the form was returned and the challenge became 'official'.

6. **KEY ITEM:** As soon as the challenge became official, my first action was a call to ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom. While thoughts of taking on this challenge process had my adrenaline flowing, to the ALA it was just another day on the job. The people there were extremely helpful! Without going into pages of details, let me just say that as a librarian facing a book challenge, you will never find a better source of support, tips, ideas or useful materials than at the Office of Intellectual Freedom. They offered to write a letter of support (*see ALA Support Letter on web page*) and encouraged me to stay in touch and keep them updated throughout the process. Kudos to the ALA!
7. Our review policy calls for a committee to review and evaluate the challenged materials and provide a written recommendation to the superintendent who is responsible for making the final decision. It became my responsibility to put together this committee. The superintendent is always a de officio member but my principal also wanted to be a part of this committee. (*I think she may have wanted to be there just to support me. She's that kind of person.*)

For the other members I looked to provide some diversity. But I also wanted people who were widely read, and who were qualified somewhat in evaluating literature and in understanding today's educational paradigms as well as today's students. Consequently, I asked the following people to serve on our review committee:

1. Our high school English chairperson,
2. The Teen Librarian at the Warren Public Library, (*I wanted an expert outside the district.*)
3. A Lakeview parent (*who also happened to be the media specialist at another district*)

Including myself, that made 6 members who would comprise our Reconsideration Committee. There was some discussion about whether to include a student on the committee, but in the end it was decided to go forward without student participation. (*An interesting side note is that once it became known that we had set up a reconsideration committee a number of other teachers asked if they could also participate. In the end, we added one additional teacher, which actually worked out well because one of our original members dropped out.*)

* Our first meeting would take place in one month. I called the parent to update her on where the review process stood, who the committee members were, and what the next steps would be and when the committee would meet.

* And finally, I made sure each member of the committee had a copy of the book, and I had to continually bugged a few of them to make sure they actually read it.

8. Now, it was my turn to go to work. Being chair of this committee and considering the fact that the challenged book was in my library, I felt a special responsibility to make sure that the job we did reflected well on us as professionals and on the quality of the library program. Furthermore, I also wanted the committee to be fair and set a good precedent for all future review hearings. *(Of course, having my superintendent and principal sitting on this committee also gave me a little incentive.)*

Truthfully, one of the main things that I hate about meetings is when participants walk in the room unprepared. I have found that starting from scratch with a blank agenda and then trying to accomplish anything productive is both frustrating and a waste of everyone's time. I was determined to use the weeks before our committee meeting to provide each member with plenty of material to consider on the subject so they would be fully aware of all the issues I thought were important and so they could be prepared to make a well informed and thoughtful decision. Consequently, I considered the main questions involved in this challenge and offered the following thoughts and explanations to our committee before our meeting. . .

• Consideration #1: Why was 'Sold' by Patricia McCormick selected for the Middle School Collection in the first place?

Acquiring educational materials and new works of literature is an important aspect of any librarian's job, especially in a school environment. This is something that both the High School librarian and myself take very seriously and spend a great deal of time researching. So when a book in our collection is being challenged it logically follows that the committee should understand the process by which this book, and others like it, have been selected.

So let me give you a brief overview of how we select books for both the High School and Middle School libraries. But first, let me make this very important point: As school librarians we always keep the overall educational mission at the center of our selections in a way that public libraries do not need to. All materials and books that have been placed on the shelves of either the Middle School or High School libraries have been selected according to the policies that have been established by our School Board, and when local policies were unclear, we turned to the respected standards set by the American Library Association. In addition, both of us work very closely with teachers when selecting particular literary genres that might apply or be used in their areas. As a matter of fact, a good portion of our collections have come about as a result of teacher requests.

But on a more practical level, choosing works of literature is not a random process but the result of a lot of meticulous scrutiny so as to ensure that our limited book budgets purchase quality literature. We continually scour reviews from a wide variety of authoritative literary sources. We look for books that have received accolades from professional literary journals, critics and other educators. We observe what topics and trends students themselves are interested in and then look for 'quality' books that deal with similar themes. We also consider the major milestones students typically experience throughout their development, such as puberty, dating, etc. And of course, we always pay attention to works that have received literary acclaim.

So...after reading reviews of **Sold** in professional journals and literary digests; after witnessing the number of awards it received (*over 40*); after listening to what other educators and librarians said and wrote about the story and the quality of writing; after having read other works by the author; and after becoming aware of an actual ‘child trafficking’ problem right here in Ohio through local newspapers, I felt that **Sold** would be a positive addition to our realistic fiction collection. Of course, we knew from the start that **Sold** was a crossover genre selection which would be suitable only for our teen readers (*i.e. 7th graders*), and we have always treated it as such.

• **Consideration #2: What is the reading level of ‘Sold’?**

The novel **Sold** has a Lexile reading level of **820L**. The Lexile measurement represents a student’s level on a developmental scale of reading ability. It measures the complexity of the text by breaking down the entire piece and studying its characteristics, such as sentence length and word frequency, which represents the syntactic and semantic challenges that the text presents to a reader. The outcome is the text complexity, expressed as a Lexile measure, along with information on the word count, mean sentence length and mean log frequency.

However, it is important to note that there is no exact correspondence between a specific Lexile measurement and a specific grade level. The above chart provides only a very general reference as to the actual reading level of **Sold** as it relates to grade level abilities. But based on the information shown here, **Sold** is well within the reading abilities of 7th grade students.

Typical Reader Measures, by Grade

Grade	Reader Measures, Mid-Year 25th percentile to 75th percentile (IQR)
1	Up to 300L
2	140L to 500L
3	330L to 700L
4	445L to 810L
5	565L to 910L
6	665L to 1000L
7	735L to 1065L
8	805L to 1100L
9	855L to 1165L
10	905L to 1195L
11 and 12	940L to 1210L

Reading Range of **Sold** (820L)

• **Consideration #3: What about the recommended reading audience for ‘Sold’?**

As already shown, the impartially calculated Lexile reading measurement of **Sold** is clearly within the abilities of 7th grade readers. But, understandably, the complainant felt supported in her challenge based on reviewers who have recommended the book only for older students.

Sold, like most reviewed books, received a wide range of different recommendations from various reviewers in respect to the proposed audience. (*Hence, the increasing use of the more objective Lexile score.*) The suggestions by reviewers have ranged from; ‘ages 12 - up’, ‘grade 7 - up’, ‘grades 9 - 12’, ‘middle school - high school,’ clear up to ‘18 years old - adult’. Naturally, the parent believes the older age recommendations prove her point.

But what is important to note, particularly in light of this challenge, is that recommendations by reviewers are not based on any objective, factual, or evidence-based data. Reviewer recommendations are simply the subjective opinion of that person about who would most likely want to read the book and who would most likely enjoy it. **It is about**

perceived reader interest! It is one person's 'gut' suggestion and not an authoritative benchmark.

Actually, more to the point, the majority of reviewers have often classified Patricia McCormick's books as '*crossover*' books. (*i.e. books considered suitable for both teens and adults*) JK Rowling's Harry Potter books are some of the better known 'crossover' titles. But other notable modern 'crossover' authors who write 'coming of age' stories include Philip Pullman, Eoin Colfer and Mark Haddon; *all of whom have books in the Middle School library. So quite honestly, any of those books could be the subject of a similar challenge.*

• **Consideration #4: Why are there 'crossover' books in the MS Library?**

(i.e. books that may be recommended for higher grade levels?)

In the Middle School Library our collection of books numbers a little more than 14,000. Approximately 85% of those books would fall within the category of age appropriateness as recommended by the American Library Association and numerous educational publishing enterprises for grades 4 through 7. However, as we all know, there are students at the Middle School who fall outside of the norms of standard deviations for reading; hence their reading abilities fall at either end of the reading bell curve. It is, therefore, my responsibility as the school librarian to address the needs of not only the average population of students but also of those on either end of the spectrum with 'appropriate' reading materials. Our collection at the lower levels makes up probably less than 5% of our collection. Typically, those students are more visually oriented and gravitate to magazines and materials that are generously illustrated. The reading level may slip to third grade level, but not much further because, at this age, there is a certain social stigma attached if you're seen reading a 'baby book'. In most cases these books are routed to students who have special reading needs. For example, this is exactly the type of book I read out-loud to our special needs classes during their library time.



The other end of the spectrum represents a completely different situation. These are the students who are frequent and/or advanced readers and are particularly interested in the 'crossover' genre, which provides a much bigger and broader canvas for topics like friendship, courage, self-sacrifice, and loyalty than possible in children's literature. These students feel like they stand on the cusp between childhood and maturity, inhabiting both worlds and are intensely inquisitive about all matter of people and situations. Their increasing curiosity and developing sense of empathy extends to topics such as; relationships, eating disorders, divorce, parental abuse, cultural identity, drugs, homelessness, dating, and yes, even sexuality. Another thing I've noticed about this group of readers is that they are very interested in stories that deal with older, more mature students. For these readers, who themselves are often beginning to experience the same personal, physical and social changes, literature provides a safe medium by which they can explore an unknown and sometimes

dangerous world. While the reading levels of these avid readers may vary widely (*it is not surprising to see levels that are one to three years beyond their actual grade levels*) it is, in fact, the hunger for adventure, knowledge and empathy that drives this particular group.

But perhaps, an even better indicator of the reading ‘maturity’ of many 7th graders can be understood when seen in relation to the annual YSU English Festival. The reputation of the English Festival has become so well known that it draws authors from every corner of the literary world. The event also draws about 3,000 students every year. Because of the large student interest, the Festival is actually divided into two separate events - one for high school students and one for junior high students (*grades 7-9*). Each participant is required to read 7 books selected by a committee of junior high, high school teachers and college professors.

Below is that year’s list of books that the junior high and high school participants have to read. See if you notice anything that illustrates my point about crossover books and the budding maturity level of 7th grade readers, both in their reading levels and in their ability to embrace complex reading material.

Book List for 7th - 9th Grades

- Mississippi Trial, 1955
- Athletic Shorts
- Fire from the Rock
- The Battle of Jericho
- Bronx Masquerade
- King of the Mild Frontier
- Getting Away with Murder:
The True Story of the Emmett Till Case

Book List for 10th - 12th Grades

- Deadline
- Copper Sun
- Dark Sons
- The Battle of Jericho
- Bronx Masquerade
- King of the Mild Frontier
- Getting Away with Murder:
The True Story of the Emmett Till Case

Yes, you are correct, four of the seven books from the high school and junior high lists are exactly the same. The fact that a wide range of educational professionals recognize that even 7th graders can read, understand, and therefore, discuss intricate and mature themes is fairly self evident.

• Consideration #5: What about the subject matter of the book? Is it appropriate?

The complainant claims in her challenge that *Sold* is, “*inappropriate for the Middle School.*” But determining what makes a book appropriate is not always an easy question to answer...

- Is a book appropriate if the vocabulary is too easy? Or if the vocabulary is very challenging?
- Is a book appropriate for a student who has a passion to learn about a particular controversial topic?
- Is a book about teen gangs appropriate if it doesn’t realistically reflect the way they talk?
- Is a book always appropriate if it contains no swear words? Is it automatically inappropriate if there are?
- Is a book still appropriate if 2 out of 200 pages are considered inappropriate in some way?
- Is a realistic fiction title about dealing with rape appropriate to a 13 year old girl who has been a victim?
- Is a book appropriate if a student enjoys a genre of stories that are recommended for a different age group?

Appropriateness, as you can see, can be tricky. No one book is appropriate for all levels of readers all the time. What is appropriate varies but is always based on the relation between each individual child and each individual book. Take for example, a child who picks up a book and has no trouble reading the vocabulary or following the story: Is that book still appropriate if she

fails to catch all the emotional and literary nuances, if she misses the subtleties in the relationships between the characters or if she can't appreciate the beauty of the writing? Hardly ever is the appropriateness of a piece of literature a simple black or white determination. Even though librarians constantly try to make a good match between child and book, we have always recognized that students grow into literature at their own pace far beyond our control; which is why the role of involved parents are so important in guiding the unique abilities of *their own children* as they develop.

This discussion of appropriateness leads me to this thought: *Is the 'appropriate' issue here really one of deciding whether this book is inappropriate for all readers or is it whether this one particular student just made an inappropriate selection for herself?*

- **Consideration #6: What is the best way to Judge a Book?**

Nothing can distort the evaluation of a piece of literature more than when we look only at short isolated passages that are usually picked with a particular bias in mind. But a book is more than a mere collection of randomly selected passages. It would be like judging the whole Bible based only on a few of its violent passages. Words can only be understood as they relate to the context of the whole story. It is never legitimate, nor accurate to use small specially selected passages as a way to pass judgement on an entire piece of literature. Academic integrity demands that the validity of a challenge (*or its defense*) of a piece of literature must be based on the worth of the story in its entirety and on its relevance to its readers, in other words, on its **overall** appropriateness. So it seems logical to assume that in order to address the decision before us, we have to address its overall appropriateness. Therefore, I think we can try to address this concern by concentrating on answering this one single question:

Overall, does this piece of literature have value?

Of course, trying to establish the aesthetic and social value of a piece of art or a work of literature is a discussion that is as old as the first cave drawing. But within the world of art itself, (*I knew those art survey classes would come in handy someday.*) we find a number of universally accepted criteria that have evolved over the millennium and provide some straightforward guidelines for judging its quality and which also apply nicely to whether a particular story has any redeeming value for students. So we considered these art themes as they relate to the book we're scrutinizing...

- **Artistry** - Does the quality of the writing appeal to your sense of beauty? Of course, this is a tough question to tackle because the nature of beauty is one of the most fascinating riddles of philosophy. George Bancroft once said, "*Beauty itself is but the sensible image of the infinite.*" - to acknowledge 'artistry' in a work is to begin to unravel the very nature of craftsmanship and creativity that went into it.
- **Intellectual Value** - Does this literary work stimulate our thoughts? Does it raise issues we are forced to confront and think about? Does it make us realize any fundamental truths about life, human nature, or ourselves?

- **Spiritual Value** - Does the story move us emotionally? Does it elevate our spirits by bringing out moral values which makes us want to be better persons? Does it convey to us any universal message such as; love or triumph or hope? Do the characters through their courage or by the ways that they find the strength to transcend their suffering provide the reader with examples that lend affirmation to the unwavering strength of the human spirit?
- **Permanence** - Of course only time can determine the permanence of a work of art. But, on the other hand, history has clearly shown that great literature is both 'timely' and 'timeless'. There is a universality about how great stories touch our sense of humanity. So we can ask ourselves, is this book about events that seem 'timely' to us and is there a 'timeless' universal theme involved in these events that could possibly make this a modern classic?
- **Style** - This is the peculiar way in which a writer sees life, forms his ideas and then goes about expressing them. Another important observation about style is whether a book is an authentic reproduction of the character's voice (*point of view, is this character believable?*).

9. The Committee Meeting

The last order of business was to actually hold our reconsideration committee meeting (*see the 'Sold Meeting Agenda' on this web page*). The meeting in total lasted about an hour and a half. During the call to order I stressed that we wanted our discussion to be open and professional and to seriously consider this parent's concern about the material we were considering. I was very pleased with the level of discussion that followed for the next hour. We discussed the book, the appropriateness of the theme of sexual slavery, reading levels, literary assessments, etc. I could see that the material I provided them before hand, enabled everyone to immediately jump into the deep end of our review and we had, what I thought, was a knowledgeable, productive, but most importantly, a professional discussion about the book in question.

After everyone had an ample opportunity to speak, each participant was given the evaluation sheet I created specifically for the purpose, (*see 'Sold Evaluation Form' on this web page*) and everyone sat quietly filling it out for the next 20 to 30 minutes. Once completed, each person turned the evaluation sheet into the superintendent folded and unsigned.

10. The next day the superintendent came to my library to thank me for taking charge of this project and informed me that the vote was unanimous to keep the book in the library. He then asked me as chairperson to please write an official notice of the committee's decision for the records and send it to him. (*see 'Committee Decision Letter' on this web page*)

He then sent a written communication informing the parent of the results of the committee. The parent had to decide whether to accept the superintendent's decision or to make a written appeal to the School Board within 30 days. No written appeal was received, so the challenge ended there.

◆ Conclusion - My Final Thoughts

As school librarians, I believe that it is our responsibility to give full measure to our students' right to read by providing books that enrich the quality and diversity of thought and expression. In spending years in a library surrounded by students I have learned that young people need to read nonfiction for information in order to understand their world and literature for imagination in order to understand themselves. They need to read books not only for pure enjoyment, but they need to read books that challenge their vocabulary, their view of different customs and cultures, and their comprehension of the world. After all, whose job is it, if it's not ours as caretakers of the wisdom of mankind, to help to guide students through the "Brave New World" of their personal growth?

I further believe that the collective goal of all school libraries should be to lead students to the works of a wide range of authors, different genres, and contrasting points of view. Outside of totalitarian regimes, libraries do not limit their collections only to a restricted number of safe, pre-approved, non-controversial topics and writings. Literature, by its very nature, pushes readers out of the nest, far away from their zone of comfort and forces them to take flight in a new world of exotic and unpredictable ideas. For growth through reading can only be achieved by reading stories with ever increasing levels of vocabulary and with ever more challenging themes. We all know that students will read more when high interest books are readily available to them. Yet, common sense also tells us that there are times when children are not ready for certain genres of literature, and when a child does make a questionable book selection we try to guide that student to a better selection, but in all cases, we always acquiesce the final authority to the parent.

When reflecting upon my experience with this aforementioned book challenge process, I am encouraged by the thought that censorship rarely ever succeeds in a democracy. Many individuals and groups have tried to censor unfamiliar, uncomfortable or unconventional thoughts. But ideas cannot be suppressed so easily. In the long run, I think history has clearly shown that the only truly lasting weapon against a bad idea are better ideas. I am convinced that attempts at censorship in schools are always counter productive to us as a society, because if you encounter new or difficult ideas that challenge or confuse you, it seems to me, there's no better place to tackle those ideas than in a classroom where you have the ability to discuss in depth all sides of each concept, research it, debate it, ask questions, gather facts, listen to other points of view, and express (*and develop*) your own thoughts. In other words, this is the very ideal of what I believe education should be, and it is exactly the kind of environment that motivates students to learn and to become informed citizens in a modern democracy.

These are the kind of conditions that we, as school librarians, should be committed to creating. Building a better, stronger world one library at a time, one book at a time and one student at a time in order to help all students prepare for the kind of vigorous information environment in which they will spend their entire lives.

Congratulations for making it to the end of this document. I hope you found my censorship adventure and its related ramblings, if not helpful, at least entertaining. Feel free to contact me if you have further questions or comments.

Sincerely,

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