

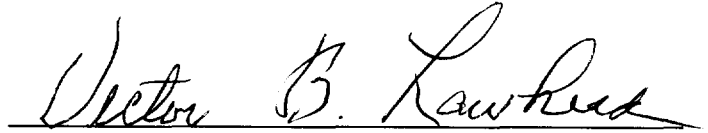
“Censorship: A Study of Selected Objections Addressed to Indiana School Systems”

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Victor B. Lawhead". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

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Abstract

The cases and discussions presented are limited to the attempts of parents to remove books from libraries or reading lists of Indiana school systems. The study focuses on five cases representative of incidents reported in the United States. Different motives such as racial depictions, religious views, and violence, provided the basis for selection. The reading level associated with the books encompasses the complete range of elementary, junior high, and high school selections. Along with the description of the objectionable material, personal criticisms of the challenges and resolutions are presented. Discussion of a proposal for policies dealing with censorship in school systems will follow the analysis of the selected incidents.

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The Problem in its Setting - A Personal Perspective

The educational system has been and will continue to be a target of criticism and a source of controversy. School systems are held responsible for the intellectual and social development of children. As such, there will always exist contrasting opinions of the manner in which this development is structured. Many factors contribute to this, although none are as significant as the perceived purpose of education. It is disturbing that many view education as a system intended to foster ideological conformity. Education should be quite the opposite - a way to challenge students intellectually. Students need to learn to use their own judgement and creativity.

No action is currently more threatening to our current educational system than censorship. Objections raised by parents and interest groups affect not only students, but teachers as well. Intimidation serves as a significant motivation in selecting the resources to use. Deciding what materials are 'safe' can take priority over what is most beneficial for the student. As a result, the student is deprived of resources meant to enhance problem-solving skills, imagination, and personal interaction.

Censorship attempts on books comprise the majority of challenges to schools. The literary value of books is overlooked in favor of filtering out objectionable language or contrasting religious views. Objectors fail to recognize that social, political, and moral issues raised by books serve a critical purpose. Students should

be encouraged to explore new ideas and possibilities. Criticism and evaluation of books considered by some to be controversial can help young adults to develop their personal views and ideals. This is necessary for them to succeed in such a complex and diverse society.

A substantial threat to these necessary opportunities is the opposition to library resources. Once again, this can be attributed to a distorted definition of purpose. Consistent with the Library Bill of Rights in appendix A, the central function of libraries should be to provide a balanced collection of materials encompassing all viewpoints and issues regardless of any bias, ambiguities, or controversial subject matter. As they now exist, libraries serve as a provider of optional reading materials. However, objectors seek to infringe upon the rights of all others and would convert this invaluable resource into a mechanism of change representative of the views held by advocates of censorship.

David Berninghausen in "Social Responsibility vs. the Library Bill of Rights" states that the purpose of libraries is *not*, "1. To eradicate racial injustice and inequities and to promote human brotherhood. . . . 9. To resolve hundreds of other social, scientific, or political issues, regardless of how vital they may be for the future of humanity" (52). Rather than solving problems, libraries provide the means by which issues can be explored, expanded, disputed, or resolved.

Vital though they are, it is essential that librarians, in their professional activities, shall view such issues as subordinate to the principle of intellectual freedom, for, unless men have access to all varieties of

expression as to the facts, theories, and the alternative solutions to these problems, they will be unable to apply their powers of reason toward their resolution. . . . (52)

The true motivation of censors is difficult to identify, yet necessary to understand. It has become apparent that censors in our society are quick to object to ideas and issues which they find threatening to their own views. The requests of removals/bans serve in some capacity to either inculcate rather than educate, or protect against delinquency. Controversial works must in some way represent a significant threat to the intellectual and moral development of students. However, as William C. Kvaraceus states, "Removing books from the reading shelf to save delinquents is a vain and futile gesture, although it may satisfy the missionary zeal of the censor" (15).

However, despite increased awareness and opposition, challenges to books have been increasing at a significant rate. Attacks on the Freedom to Learn reported that in the 1994-95 school year, researchers confirmed 338 challenges in 49 states. 50% of the attempted censorship cases succeeded. It was also stated that for every censorship incident that went reported, four or five went unreported (People 1995: 5). From 1982 through 1995, the most frequently challenged books have included many classics. These include Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck, The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger, and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain (237). Unfortunately, censorship is now viewed by interest groups as an appropriate response to any controversial subject matter, regardless of purpose or content.

Five Representative Cases

Attacks on the Freedom to Learn, a publication by People for the American Way, is a non-comprehensive collection of censorship attempts against school systems in the United States. The basis of objections range from sexuality, language, and violence, to religious views and racial depictions. It is this annual survey that provides the basis for further discussion of individual cases. Although limited to Indiana, the cases evaluated represent a fair cross-section of challenges to public education encompassing the complete range of elementary, junior high, and high school literature.

Bloomfield: The Assistant

In Bloomfield, IN, objections were raised as to the appropriateness of Bernard Malamud's novel, The Assistant, for use in a tenth-grade English class (People 1994: 89). Although the book was used for a relatively mature reading audience, parents specifically stated that the novel promoted and taught "Jew stuff" - material unsuitable for the students. Ironically, the parents allowed their child to complete the book. However, the objectors requested strict action from the principal and the school board demanding that the teacher in question be fired and The Assistant be removed from the curriculum(89).

From a limited and arguably elementary evaluation of Malamud's book, it supposedly could be debated that it did in fact teach "Jew stuff." However, this observation seems trivial when one considers the fact that a Jewish writer would

write about characters of his own faith.

The Assistant, in entirety, is a relatively innocuous novel centering primarily about Morris Bober, an aging storekeeper struggling to maintain his grocery in a poor district of New York City. Several themes developed over the course of the novel although none seemed significant in any way as controversial in nature. Morris served as a character to personify victimization. He was the Jewish "sufferer." Although at times he had hope for the future, his struggle for freedom and success led to a life of disappointment and despair; one fostered the other. However bleak his existence seemed, Morris served a vital role - that of helping others at his expense.

Helen, the young daughter of Morris, sought to escape the Bober fate of struggle and entrapment. Her hopes centered on fulfilling her potential with an education.

Another key character in the novel was Frank Alpine. His past, filled with failure, bad decisions, and self-destruction, led him to rob Morris. However, desiring a new life, he sought to expiate his crime by serving as an assistant to Morris.

Introduced in the plot as an anti-Semite, his attitudes were apparent. During the robbery:

"Where've you got the rest hid?"

Morris sick to his stomach, couldn't speak.

"Tell the goddam truth." He aimed the gun at the grocer's mouth.

"Times are bad," Morris muttered.

"You're a Jew liar." (Malamud 25)

Frank was also exposed to the viewpoints of others in the neighborhood. "Otto Vogel, once when he was weighing a ham, warned him in a low voice, 'Don't work for a Yid, kiddo. They will steal your ass while you are sitting on it'" (60). Although Frank wanted to turn his life around, and felt obligated to Morris, he looked down on the Grocer's existence:

What kind of man did you have to be born to shut yourself up in an over-grown coffin and never once during the day, so help you, outside of going for your Yiddish newspaper, poke your beak out of the door for a snootful of air? The answer wasn't hard to say - you had to be a Jew. They were born prisoners. That was what Morris was. . . . (86)

However, Frank despite wishing more for himself, found himself strangely attracted to the life that Morris had. By the end of the novel, Frank not only assumed complete control over the store, he became a Jew. Ironically, he "imprisoned" himself in the ideal he had held since his first encounters with Morris.

Any controversy surrounding Malamud's The Assistant must surely be associated with either the previous passages, and/or with the fact that Frank converted to Judaism. The relatively bland story offered limited sources for objection.

Columbus: Souder

Souder, classified as juvenile literature, was the target of parents in Columbus, Indiana. William Armstrong's book was deemed inappropriate on the basis that it contained racial slurs. In addition to being in the main circulation, Souder was used by teachers in the classroom (People 1993: 71).

The story of Souder, the coon dog, focused primarily on the life of a young black boy in a family of sharecroppers. As the plot began to develop, the father was taken away and imprisoned for stealing food. As the father was taken away, a deputy shot Souder during his attempt to follow his master. The dog disappeared and was thought by the family to have died. Souder, known by all for his reputation as the best coon dog and for his powerful voice, returned later in the story disfigured and partially crippled. The boy's father also later returned in a somewhat similar condition. At this point, Armstrong made an allusion to Argus, the faithful dog of Odysseus. From a distance, only Souder recognized his master, and soon afterwards he died.

A song that the boy's mother sang served as the theme for the book:

You gotta walk that lonesome valley,

You gotta walk it by yourself,

Ain't nobody gonna walk it for you (Armstrong 37)

The young boy had been dependent upon others his entire life. In an instant, he had been confronted by his own insecurity and loneliness. While his father had been imprisoned, the boy searched for him by visiting the many work camps.

However, during one of his journeys, he was taken in by a school teacher. The boy had always dreamed of being able to read, and the opportunity of education offered freedom and confidence that was not otherwise attainable. As the boy read, he came across a passage that stated, "Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead" (114). He came to understand the meaning, and was able to cope with the death of Sounder and his father's condition. His memories still lived on.

Sounder contained one passage - in fact only one word which provided the basis for the parent's complaint: "'There are two things I can smell a mile,' the first man said in a loud voice. 'One's a ham cookin' and the other's a thieven' nigger'" (21).

Elkhart: The Chocolate War

In Elkhart, IN, five separate complaints were submitted in objection to The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier. Removal was requested on the basis that objectionable language and violence was inappropriate for ninth-grade honors English classes (People 1994: 90).

Although the book did in fact contain several acts of violence in addition to passages containing adult language, the issues presented by Cormier were very relevant to the age group in which it was intended. Themes such as peer pressure, confrontation, acceptance, and individualism, provide students an opportunity to examine and evaluate significant issues.

The Chocolate War focuses on the life of Jerry Renault, a high school student who struggled to be accepted following the death of his mother. He was disgusted

by his father's apathy yet had done little to change his somewhat similar situation. An encounter with a homeless person was instrumental in Jerry's change of attitude:

"You know who's sub-human, man? You. You are. Going to school every day. And back home on the bus. And doing your homework." The guy's voice was contemptuous. "Square boy. Middle-aged at fourteen, fifteen. Already caught in a routine. Wow. . . . Go get your bus, boy. You're missing a lot of things in the world, better not miss that bus." (Cormier 20)

Jerry was later confronted by a mob within the school. As an "assignment" by the Vigils, Jerry refused to take part in the school fund raiser - a chocolate sale which was a primary source of funds for the private institution. As a result, he was initially resented by the teachers.

A poster with the phrase, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" prompted Jerry to act out in defiance even after he had completed his task. He chose to accept the consequences of refusing to participate. Not only was he treated as an outcast by his teachers, he began to experience acts of resentment and hostility towards him by peers. Jerry became a target for criticism, vandalism, rejection, and eventually violence. However, feeling committed to his course of action, Jerry's feeling of independence and non-conformity progressed into despair and shame.

In the conclusion, Jerry was ultimately forced to abandon his position. Confiding in a friend, he stated that "They tell you to do your thing but they don't

mean it. They don't want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing, too" (187).

Carmel: Journey of the Sparrows

In Carmel, IN, Journey of the Sparrows by Fran Leeper Buss, became a target of censorship on the basis of profanity and depictions of illegal immigration. The book was used in the sixth-grade social studies curriculum and was also in the middle school library main circulation. The request of the objector was removal (People 1995: 93).

Journey of the Sparrows, although directed toward a young age group, was effective in portraying the struggles of a group of illegal immigrants. The story focused on the life of a young girl, Maria, and her efforts to support and protect her sister and brother. Although Maria recalled the atrocities she and members of her family had sought to escape in El Salvador, specific details or graphic depictions of murder and persecution were not present in the story.

In totality, the language was mild and seemed entirely appropriate for the readers in which it was intended. Any excerpt from the text was no more controversial or graphic than the encounter Maria had with her boss:

"Get up and come with me," he said. I panicked and looked at Alicia. Her face was white and she started to get up. "Now!" he ordered. I pushed my chair back, my heart pounding, and followed him into a little hall behind the main room, out of sight of the other women. The man laughed and grabbed me by my shoulders and as I twisted to get

away from him, he snarled, "You're illegal. I can do anything." He laughed again and I smelled the Guardias and saw the blood. . . .

(Buss 52-53)

Despite any parent's view of illegal immigration, this was a very real situation, and one appropriate for study. In addition, students had the benefit of their teachers' guidance when the book was used in coordination with the standard curriculum.

Columbus: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

In Columbus, Indiana, a formal complaint was filed with respect to one of Mark Twain's most famous works, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. At the time of the complaint, the book was in use in junior high language arts classes. A parent filed the complaint on the basis that it contained "terms which belittle people of color" (People 1993: 71).

The use of racial epithets, depictions, and dialects has been a common basis of objection for censors. It has also been apparent that even pre-20th century "classics" such as The Adventures of Tom Sawyer cannot escape the controversy that breeds censorship.

In 1876, Mark Twain stated:

Although my book is intended mainly for the entertainment of boys and girls, I hope it will not be shunned by men and women on that account, for part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought

and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in.

(Twain 2)

Twain sought to establish a stark difference between boyhood and adulthood. The book celebrated all the freedom, adventure, imagination, and mischief inherent in boyhood. In Mark Twain's masterpiece, Tom was established as the "bad boy" of the town. From instigating fights, faking his own death, and attending his funeral to convincing friends that his work was a privilege worthy of their sacrifices, Tom was capable of sustaining his Aunt Polly in a state of frustration.

However, Twain portrayed Tom in many admirable and heroic scenes. He first gained local recognition for his testimony against the villain, Injun Joe, in a murder case that had falsely accused Muff Potter. Tom also unselfishly accepted the blame for Becky Thatcher when a page was torn in the schoolmaster's anatomy book.

The primary themes of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer focused on the escapades and mischief, in addition to the development of admirable virtues in Tom. Consistent with the objection however, there were four passages that could have motivated the controversy surrounding this book.

Perhaps the most trivial was the dialogue between Tom and the young black boy, Jim: "Can't, Marse Tom. Ole missis, she tole me I got to go an' git dis water an' not stop foolin' round' wid anybody" (Twain 11). In addition, the following passage was in reference to the villain, Injun Joe. The Welshman said to Huckleberry Finn: "When you talked about notching ears and slitting noses I judged that that was your

own embellishment, because white men don't take that sort of revenge. But an Injun! That's a different matter altogether" (181).

In entirety, there were only two passages that contained explicit derogatory terms:

"Why, he told Jeff Thatcher, and Jeff told Johnny Baker, and Johnny told Jim Hollis, and Jim told Ben Rogers, and Ben told a nigger, and the nigger told me. There now!"

"Well, what of it? They'll all lie. Leastways all but the nigger. I don't know *him*. But I never see a nigger that *wouldn't* lie. Shucks!"
(43)

The final passage consisted of Injun Joe's motivation for revenge against the widow Douglas: "He had me *horsewhipped!* - horsewhipped in front of the jail, like a nigger!" (176).

By examining the preceding passages, indeed it can be found that certain terms are offensive and inappropriate in a modern social setting. However, regardless of whether or not one would agree with the Library Bill of Rights, it is important to consider the period in which the book was written. Mark Twain was born in 1835 and wrote The Adventures of Tom Sawyer 41 years later. Any currently objectionable language in the book was representative of the era in which it was written. Students in Columbus, all of whom should be aware of societal conditions leading up to, and following the Civil War, should hardly be shocked by the language used by Twain.

This objection does however bring to light an additional attitude toward, and motivation for censorship. Consistent with this objection, censors would seemingly ban all “out-dated” material that does not promote or agree with currently acceptable depictions or views.

Resolutions

The five books reviewed: The Chocolate War, Journey of the Sparrows, Sounder, The Assistant, and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer were chosen on the basis of motivation for objection. Furthermore, the necessity to restrict the study to the library materials of Indiana school systems limited the possible variances in resolutions. By coincidence, all five objections failed to result in a successful removal.

However, a problem exists with the methods in which the school systems reacted. Of greatest concern is the fact that problems arise because school systems lack a formal policy or review process. Complaints are handled inefficiently and inconsistently.

In Elkhart, The Chocolate War was retained as a result of a superintendent’s decision to uphold a review committee’s recommendation (People 1994: 90). In Columbus, a district-level committee’s vote was responsible for retaining Tom Sawyer and Sounder (People 1993: 71). With respect to The Assistant, the principal, and later the school board, supported the teacher and decided that the book was to

remain in use (People 1994: 89). In conclusion, following the formal complaint in Carmel, a review committee voted to retain Journey of the Sparrows (People 1995: 93).

Conclusions

The fact that in the 1994-1995 school year 50% of the attempted censorship cases succeeded can be partially attributed to the failure of school systems to prepare in advance for objections. A formal policy or defined objection process provides the only substantial protection against unwarranted censorship attempts. A consequence of this study is the recommendation that school systems adopt policies and procedures similar to those included in appendix A,B, and C.

Appendix B is the reconsideration policy published in Attacks on the Freedom to Learn. The policy is an unbiased process appropriate for all libraries and the educational materials they provide. Adoption of such a policy would increase the efficiency of reconsideration and also discourage the filing of frivolous complaints. Many interest groups in addition to some parents have begun to place so much concern on “protecting” young minds from harsh language or differing religious views, that content or purpose is often ignored. If objectors are required to read the entire book and complete an object-to-content form similar to the one proposed by Catholic Library World in appendix C, school systems would encounter fewer significant threats to the decisions made by their libraries and teachers.

Censorship is not an insignificant or trivial matter. The process of reconsideration should not be handled as such.

Controversy is inherent in education. Literature provides these contrasting views and new ideas that foster the critical thinking skills and creativity of students. It is necessary to reflect on the purpose of reading materials in libraries and in classrooms - whether they exist for indoctrination or education. Censorship is a personal and highly sensitive issue that can be very destructive to the intellectual freedom of students and teachers. Controversial issues will always exist. However, the freedom and opportunity to explore, evaluate, and learn from these issues, is a true purpose of education.

Appendix A: Library Bill of Rights

The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of views on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan and doctrinal disapproval.
3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas.
5. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.
6. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use. (Weathers 438)

Appendix B: Reconsideration Policy

1. Districts should develop and observe a clear written policy for addressing challenges to library and classroom materials. Make certain that all school administrators, school board members, teachers and librarians are aware of and observe the policy.
2. The policy should state that the school system will not remove challenged materials pending review. Materials should be treated as “innocent until proven guilty.”
3. The policy should describe explicitly the various steps in the review procedure, the people responsible at each stage, key decision points and any appeal process.
4. The policy should encourage resolution of complaints at the lowest organizational level - first with the teacher or librarian, then with the principal, and so forth through the district hierarchy. The school board should be the last resort.
5. The policy should require that formal, written complaints be filed to trigger the review process. Complainants should be encouraged to read the complete work and to address their concerns in the overall context of the school’s educational goals.
6. The policy should require that review committees have broad representation, including parents, teachers, school administrators and students, and that they focus their evaluation on the educational merit and quality of the challenged material. (People 1995: 34)

Appendix C: Objection-to-Content Form

Author: _____

Title: _____

Publisher: _____

Request Made By: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: (Home) _____ (Work) _____

1. Objection: (Please be specific: cite pages or locations.) _____

2. Did you read, view, or listen to the entire work? _____

3. How do you think it will affect the library users? _____

4. For what age group do you think it should be reserved? _____

5. Is the material useful in any way? Please explain your response. _____

6. Do you know if the material has been reviewed by any authorities and/or critics? If so, by whom? _____

7. What do you think should be done with the material? _____

8. What material do you recommend in its place?

Date: _____ Signature: _____

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