



Editor's Page - September 1989

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Article Category:

Editorial

Byline:

News and comment from the Editor.

This issue explores the subject of censorship. With the literary world still reeling from the Ayatollah Affair - no, *not* the Rushdie Affair since he's the innocent party, remember? - it could hardly be more topical. Or, perhaps, more foolhardy. For the subject is no less contentious or complex when children's books rather than adult's are under scrutiny. On the contrary, it takes on a particular poignancy. Children are the least powerful human group on Earth. They have little defence against the edicts of the grown-ups, however selfish, arbitrary or just plain daft these are. 'After all,' we always say, 'it's only for your own good.'

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And often it will be. Or so I was convinced when I whisked **Little Black Sambo** from my classroom's reading trolley twenty years ago. Pity, of course, about the graffiti, the insults and the cold-shouldering my black kids routinely encountered off the premises ... at least my trolley was blameless. The fact that the book had a black *hero*, as the benighted old sweat of a colleague in the classroom next door observed, was beside the point. 'It's so *patronising*,' I retorted crushingly.

At the time I wouldn't even have recognised what I was doing. 'Censorship?' I'd have snorted. 'Nonsense! This is ?er... positive de-selection.' Or some such face-saver. After all, censorship was for people who wore jackboots, wasn't it? My motives were *entirely* different. Serve me right when, years later, one of my own books was positively de-selected in circumstances which were - in my view - highly dubious.

Hence the first thing we need to recognise is that, like the poor, censors are always with us. Robert Leeson's article (page 4) makes it clear why this is - writing is POWER. And censorship is part of the power struggle. So we'd better watch out when we ourselves have the say-so. Or say-no, perhaps. When it's us doing the censoring, the least we can do is to acknowledge what we're about. Who knows, from there we may go on to admit that the protection we claim to be providing is largely of *ourselves*. This may be the case even when we're exercising our adult right of veto over children's exposure to 'obscene' and 'offensive' language - see Toby Forward's thought-provoking article on this (page 25). And see Nicholas Tucker's account (page 28) of the ages-and-stages factors for a reminder that reading responses are bound to be personal. This individual flavour also informs the testimony of our team at the sharp end: a writer, publisher, bookseller, librarian, teacher and pair of parents reporting with much scratching of heads on their own experiences of censorship. Our authorgraph will come as some relief to them, I'm sure. Why, James Watson himself - doughty and eloquent critic of official curbs on freedom of speech or information or action in a number of novels - readily concedes that 'the very perception of impartiality is so soaked in ideological notions that there is no way to be impartial. So why pretend to be? If I'm accused of bias in my books - tough! *I am* biased - biased for certain value systems.'

Censor and be damned, then. Is that our advice? Hardly. The value system to which James subscribes, in company with

all our contributors, demands no justification for freedom of speech and writing. It's the *denial* of that freedom which needs to be justified. For censorship, however benignly intended, is a form of bullying. It's to be distinguished from selection in at least two respects:

(1) It condemns, not recommends, particular options. The strategy is not to express preferences about what's on offer but to nobble it lest the 'wrong' choice be made.

(2) Censorship assumes authority. Pupils do not censor their teachers' reading, nor library-users that of librarians. The traffic is all one way.

As would-be censors, then, we'd better make sure we've got a clear conscience on both these counts before we act.

Which leaves much, admittedly, unaddressed.

- What of the vexed question of 'self'-censorship which is raised several times in this issue?
- How do we cope with the classics of a former age which, while undeniably offensive for some, remain perversely pleasurable to others?
- What is the place, and the effect, of the Guidelines for Selection used by so many schools and libraries - not to mention that shadowy figure, the 'educational adviser', who vets an increasing number of texts prior to acceptance by publishers?
- What can we do to preserve the right of books to be as weird, wacky and outrageous as the television and video products which are their direct competitors but to which much less plonkingly worthy standards apply?
- How can we shake off the dead hand of inoffensive-ism, the nervous pandering to the tastes of assorted pressure groups which may bring about texts acceptable to an aggregate of moral minorities but remain unread by the majority of kids?

To all of these, and others, we'll return in future issues. On the subject of censorship the Last Word will never be said - at any rate in a free society. For it's against the background of just such a society that every book should be viewed. The alternative is too awful to contemplate. Or it would be if Nat Hentoff, in his splendid piece of polemical fiction, **The Day They Came to Arrest the Book** (Penguin Plus), hadn't made such a vision available. In this, George Mason High School is thrown into a turmoil when the charges of racism, sexism and immorality are made against ... **Huckleberry Finn**. Unlike Huck, shuddering at his imminent return to respectability and Aunt Sally, let's hope we're never able to say 'I been there before.'

Chris

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