

# An Author Looks at Censorship

In Fall 1987 (Volume 45, Issue 3), author Lee Bennett Hopkins contributed “An Author Looks at Censorship,” an issue which resonates strongly with libraries in North Carolina and beyond today. Hopkins was an award-winning children’s author who was also an incredibly prolific anthologist of poetry for children—he compiled more than 120—and who created the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award (Pennsylvania Center for the Book) and the Lee Bennett Hopkins/International Reading Association Promising Poetry Award for outstanding writing for children. In this essay, Hopkins describes how the “concern, doubt, and anxiety” in these critical times leads teachers and librarians to self-censor, thus depriving readers of the richness of literature to explore the full range of our experiences. Hopkins ends by urging us “open more library doors” and to “do it now!”

*Shut not your doors to me proud libraries,  
For that which was lacking on all your  
well-fill'd shelves, yet needed most  
I bring,  
Forth from the emerging war, a book  
I have made,  
The words of my book nothing,  
the drift of it every thing,  
A book separate, not link'd with  
the rest nor felt by the intellect,  
But you ye untold latencies will  
thrill to every page.*

Walt Whitman  
*Leaves of Grass* / 1865

It is incredible that this sentiment was expressed over 122 years ago, yet some libraries still are shutting their door on Walt Whitman. They are also closing out a multitude of writers being censored by non-writers.

In the world of children’s literature, countless titles are being scrutinized, then banned, in every genre—fiction, non-fiction, even poetry!

I find it hard to believe what I find in journals and newspapers. Imagine, for example, that a Superintendent of Schools in Panama City, Florida, announces “a three-tier book classification system,” banning such acclaimed novels as Robert Cormier’s *I Am The Cheese* about a teenager who becomes involved in a spy-like web, and Susan Beth Pfeffer’s novel, *About David*, dealing with teenage suicide—one of the major problems children in our country face today.

Other headlines recently have blared: “Alabama Textbooks Banning Threatens School Librarians;” “CNEA Files Brief in Tennessee Textbook Case;” “Censor’s New Aim: Limiting Study of Ideas in Schools.”

Where are we going? What are we headed for? Indeed, censorship is a rampant disease that makes it difficult to reach readers.

James J. Jacobs states: “...most of us realize if every book which makes someone unhappy were torched, we could operate the city library from the trunk of a Japanese import.”<sup>1</sup>

Each and every book is under scrutiny. Shel Silverstein’s popular volumes of light verse, *Where the*

<sup>1</sup> James J. Jacobs. “Making Kids Safe for Books.” *The People*, (October, 1985).

*Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic* are constantly under attack due to lack of “moralism.” Yet, if one carefully observes his body of work, one will find human messages contained within his verses, more so than any current writer of verse today. The renowned poet, Myra Cohn Livingston, stated: “Mr. Silverstein’s genius lies in finding a way to present moralism, beguiling his child readers with a technique that establishes him an errant, mischievous and inventive child as well as an understanding, trusted, and wise adult.”<sup>2</sup>

Censors hit the minds and hearts of everyone involved in teaching—those who instill the love of reading—causing concern, doubt, and anxieties.

In a recent speech on censorship held at the International Reading Association Annual Convention in May 1987, Myra Cohn Livingston reported: “... several years ago I received word from an editor of a major textbook publisher that a limerick of mine scheduled for use in a textbook had to be dropped.” The five-line verse, titled “Fourth of July” deals with lighting fireworks with a *match*.<sup>3</sup>

The editor told Mrs. Livingston: “We can’t have anything about children playing with matches.”

“But how do you light fireworks?” Mrs. Livingston posed, stopping due to her realization that she had become familiar with the restrictions about “junk food, about witches, about proper English, Black dialect, brandnames, violence, Negative and Positive images.”

Judy Blume, one of the most beloved, yet most banned authors in the country, talked about her view of censorship:

Several years ago, while writing *Tiger Eyes*, my editor asked me to delete a few lines because, as he said, that passage would surely make the book a target for censors. I deleted the passage and I’ve regretted the decision ever since. I think my editor does too. I have vowed not to be intimidated again. But what about all the other writers? What about writers who are just starting out? If I were

that young writer today, I might not write for and about children at all I might find it impossible to write honestly about them in this climate of fear. Because I don’t know how to get into the mind and body of a character without allowing his or her sexuality to come through. Sexuality is an important part of life. It’s healthy, not sick.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Peck, another well-acclaimed author of young adult books, has been criticized for being “too realistic.” On the basis of “community standards” his young adult novel *Are You in the House Alone?* has been removed from the shelves of classrooms and libraries in many towns.

Mr. Peck relates that he wrote the book “because the typical victim of the crime of rape is a teenage girl in our country. That’s a very hard truth. Yet, I wanted my readers to know some things about this crime, that our laws are stacked against the victim and in favor of the criminal. I wanted them to know what it’s like to be a victim...I had to deal only in the truth. I couldn’t put a happy ending on this story because we don’t have any happy endings to this problem in our society.”<sup>5</sup>

Censors hit the hearts and minds of educators, too. Misha Arenstein, a veteran teacher in Westchester County, New York, a true advocate of children’s books, relates:

Almost twenty years have elapsed since I entered the teaching profession—one I still adore. The echo of a myriad of changes fills my head.

I remember early on as an elementary teacher, formally requesting my Board of Education’s approval for the use of Judy Blume’s pioneer novel, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. The President and the Board laughed at my timidity, thinking I was too intimidated by so-called controversial books!

In later years, I recall a parent complaining about my use of M.E. Kerr’s, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*. Was I advocating the use of heroin? The

<sup>2</sup> Myra Cohn Livingston. “The Light in His Attic.” *New York Times Book Review*, (March 9, 1986): 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> “Fourth of July” in *Celebrations* (New York: Holiday House, 1985.)

<sup>4</sup> Judy Blume. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*, (September, 1986): 144, 176.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Peck in *From Writers to Students: The Pleasures and Pain of Writing*, edited by M. Jerry Weiss. (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1979): 65.

criticism vanished as I asked the parent whether she had read the book. The parent judged the entire content of Kerr's work by the title alone.

Today, a seasoned and literate reader of children's literature, past and present, I fear most the reactionary atmosphere surrounding all of us. I indulge in self-censorship—a practice widely prevalent in many schools.

Coming across a mild expletive, an off-color word, or a situation involving realistic sexual interest. I often set a book aside.

Will my administrators welcome the chance to defend my academic freedom, I silently ponder? Will parents influenced by years of negative comments about teachers and teaching understand my fervent attempt to get children to read? Censorship and its silent effect on us all must present the answers.<sup>6</sup>

“A more subtle and frightening kind of censorship...is that which is practiced voluntarily by librarians and teachers.”

Unheard of decades ago, college professors of children's literature devote chapters in textbooks to censorship. Their concerns are voiced too.

The distinguished educator, Charlotte S. Huck, includes a discussion of censorship in her volume, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, reiterating what Misha Arenstein feels in these troubled days. “A more subtle and frightening kind of censorship,” Dr. Huck states, “is that which is practiced voluntarily by librarians and teachers. If a book has come under negative scrutiny in a nearby town, it is carefully placed under the librarian's desk until the controversy dies down.”<sup>7</sup>

Arthea J.S. Reed, an associate professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Asheville echoes this phenomenon in her text, *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult and the School*. She begins the chapter, “Censorship and the Young Adult Book”

with: “Censorship sends terror up and down the teacher's and the librarian's and the administrator's spine. No educator has failed to reexamine the materials used in the classroom or library when well-publicized cases of censorship, book-banning, and book-burning have occurred. No creative teacher feels safe from the censor's wrath when he or she reads about teachers who were fired for using particular books in their classrooms.”<sup>8</sup>

In Zena Sutherland's, *Children and Books*, Alice B. Naylor, Professor at Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, devotes twelve pages to the issue of censorship, including excellent listings of “Anti-Intellectual Freedom Organizations” and “Pro-Intellectual Freedom Organizations.”<sup>9</sup>

All of the above texts are worth reading, each providing sound guidelines to educators as to what to do when the censors do come.

Distinguished editors of children's books, such as Jean Karl, feel the effects also. In her article, “Calm down, Squirrels,” Ms. Karl relates: “These days, I look at *damns* and *hells* and *gods* and *pisses* and all the other four letter words that spell realism to many. And in many cases they are realism. They are exactly the way the characters that use them would talk, and so they must talk that way, no matter what the censor might believe. To create books that lie about speech or about any aspect of life is to create distrust in readers, to say that we cannot depend upon books. It is to doom the book as a part of common life...

“It is time to stop shutting those doors and open new ones...”

Every aspect of language, and of incident, in books being edited is considered with an eye to what must be there and what might simply be fodder for the censor.”<sup>10</sup>

So many writers have felt the impact of the censor's arbitrary bite in America: Maurice Sendak, Ezra Jack Keats, Norma Klein, Carl Sandburg, Langston

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with author. April, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte S. Huck. *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. Third, Updated Edition: (New York: Holt, 1979):42.

<sup>8</sup> Arthea J.S. Reed, *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult and the School*. (New York: Holt, 1986):422.

<sup>9</sup> Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot. *Children and Books*. Seventh Edition. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1986.)

<sup>10</sup> Jean Karl. “Calm Down, Squirrels.” *The Advocate* (Winter, 1982):77.

Hughes, E.B. White. The list could fill a volume! But one thing is certain. In fifty years or less, those people banning books will be long gone. But the books such as Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, Keats' *The Snowy Day*, Klein's *Mom, the Wolf Man, and Me*, the poetry of Sandburg and Hughes, and the classic tales spun by White will live on and on and continue to be loved long after the censors' knives are dutifully blunted.

It is time to stop shutting those doors and open new ones—open young minds to the feasts that only books can bring—to life and language that can be found nowhere else except on printed pages.

"We need those books that reflect every aspect of our cultural diversity," Jean Karl states. "And if we can no longer picture teen-age sexual explorations,

the trauma of abortion, their terrors of drug addiction after its initial pleasures, the things that are really wrong with our society, and lives that are not lived in a perfect suburb, then we are lying to our children and forcing them into cultural blindness that could eventually shatter the fabric of the nation. For democracy is based on trust and understanding, on acceptance, and when these are missing, the diversities that will continue to exist will fragment rather than enrich the commonwealth."<sup>11</sup>

We do need these books. We need to light more bulbs in more attics, not turn them off. We need to start opening more library doors. And we need to do it now!

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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