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# Challenging Witchcraft in School Libraries: Where We've Been and Where We're Going

by Michelle Rosen

Several months ago 13-year-olds Debra Jean Kawaguchi and Sarah Casey stepped into the path of an oncoming train in Knox, Indiana. No one knows what was going through their minds as they walked onto the tracks and watched a Norfolk-Southern locomotive race towards them. But seconds later it was all over, and a community would soon blame witchcraft for their suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Events such as this strike a chord of fear in every parent's heart, but the effects don't stop there. Once a community decides that the occult is, or potentially could be, harmful to their children, efforts to limit access to materials on the subject are sure to follow. These efforts, in turn, are usually focused on the places where the materials are readily available – and among those places is the local school library.

Censorship in the name of protecting children is as old as society itself. As far back as 387 B. C. the philosopher Plato wanted to edit the works of the Greek poet Homer to make it more palatable to a young audience.<sup>2</sup> And in the 19th century, a physician named Thomas Bowdler published a “cleaned-up” version of Shakespeare so that it could be read in a family setting, leading to the phrase “bowdlerized.”<sup>3</sup> Before the Civil War, calls for censorship came from Southerners who were upset that school textbooks, which were published in the North, described slavery as “evil,” and the North as more important.<sup>4</sup> But it wasn't until after World War II that calls to censor books in schools really took off, partly because of the exponential growth of school libraries throughout the country and the growth of diversity in the American population. In 1960 the first Standards for School Library Programs was published by the American Association for School Librarians and federal funding later became available to schools for books via the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>5</sup> These efforts, combined with the tumultuous political climate that defined the 1960s, led to efforts by parents and community citizens to control what was offered on the library shelves.<sup>6</sup>

Over the last three decades, several landmark cases have helped define the issue of school censorship. The following descriptions of these cases will serve as good background for a discussion of the occult in children's literature.

**\*Rosenberg v. Board of Education of City of New York:** In 1949 The Supreme Court ruled that *Oliver Twist* and the *Merchant of Venice* could not be taken off school library shelves despite the fact that some thought they promoted hatred of Jews. The Kings County, NY court said the school system “acted in good faith without malice or prejudice and in the best interests of the school system entrusted to their care and control, and, therefore, that no substantial reason exists which compels the suppression of the two books under consideration.”<sup>7</sup>

**\*Presidents Council, District 25 v. Community School Board No. 25:** In 1971 *Down These Mean Streets*, a book about Puerto Ricans growing up in the 1940s and 1950s in Spanish Harlem, was removed from the shelves of three junior high school libraries in Queens County, NY. Some school district residents objected to the book's use of profanity and descriptions of sexual experiences, as well as its violence and incidents of drug abuse. The final court decision upheld the right of the school board to decide such issues without interference of the courts.<sup>8</sup>

**\*Todd v. Rochester Community Schools:** In 1972 the Michigan Court of Appeals ruled that *Slaughterhouse Five* could not be banned from schools. The judge ruled that “Vonnegut's literary dwellings on war, religion, death, Christ, God, government, politics, and any other subject should be as welcome in the public schools of this state as those of Machiavelli, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Melville, Lenin, Joseph

McCarthy, or Walt Disney.”<sup>9</sup>

**\*Island Tree Public Schools Board of Education v. Pico:** In 1975 ten books were removed from the shelves of the junior- and senior-high school libraries in the Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 in Long Island, NY. Parents objected to the books due to their foul language, sexual content, and supposedly anti-Christian themes. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where nine years later the court issued a decision in favor of returning the books to the shelves.<sup>10</sup>

**\*Bicknell v. Vergennes Union High School Board:** In 1980 Librarian Elizabeth Phillips and several students filed a complaint after a Vermont School Board removed two books from the library, froze new library acquisitions, and began screening all major acquisitions. A U.S. District Court judge sided with the school board, saying these actions did not violate the constitutional rights of librarians or students. The court, which was later backed by a U.S. Court of Appeals ruling, said the school board had final authority.<sup>11</sup>

**\*Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education:** In 1981 a group of Tennessee parents sued the school board over required reading that included *The Wizard of Oz*, *Goldilocks*, *Cinderella* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Parents said they wanted their children to have the right to “opt out” of the assignments because the books taught values other than those of the Bible. The school board, however, felt that opting out would hurt the students in their abilities to learn other parts of the curriculum. After several court decisions, a federal appeals court ruled in favor of the board of education in 1987.<sup>12</sup>

The year before the Pico decision was issued (1982), the American Library Association, along with other organizations, began an annual campaign to call public attention to the issue of banned books. Every September Banned Books Week “celebrates the freedom to choose or the freedom to express one’s opinion even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular and stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints to all who wish to read them.”<sup>13</sup> Since 1990, ALA’s Office of Intellectual Freedom has kept statistics on banned books and provides an annual list of the ten most challenged books each year. Statistics are broken down by type and initiator as well.

While Banned Books Week has certainly called attention to the issue, it has not stopped challenges from arising. Between 1990 and 2000 more than 6,000 challenges were reported to ALA. What’s even more interesting is that officials estimate that for every challenge reported, another four to five go unreported. Of these 6,000, more than 800 dealt with the occult or witchcraft, making it the fourth most common challenge.<sup>14</sup> And the book at the very top of the list -- the most challenged book during the 1990s -- was the “Scary Stories” series by Alvin Schwartz.<sup>15</sup> Some library scholars, including Henry Reichman, author of “Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools,” believe that witchcraft is the most hotly contested censorship issue today. And it will remain so, he says, because complaints about secular humanism, as well as “New Age” or eastern religious practices, have been lumped into the occult category.

Although objections to “secular humanism” and “New Age” religion may still be heard, the frequency of the complaints about witchcraft suggests that this rubric offers would-be censors a more powerful mobilizing rationale for attacking the broad array of concerns that have been subsumed under the humanist and New Age labels. After all, the charge that secular humanists and “New Agers” are perverting children’s minds is consistent with the long-standing tradition of “witch hunting” that is one of the more unattractive features of our political culture.<sup>16</sup>

In North Carolina, several school librarians who were interviewed reported no serious challenges to works on the occult in their libraries. Some had, however, admitted to having conversations with teachers and principals about witchcraft-related books. Others said they were slow to purchase certain books that sparked controversy in other school districts.

“When the Harry Potter books first came out, I didn’t buy them because I’m in a very ultra-conservative community and the books were being challenged elsewhere,” said Vanessa Olson, media specialist at Lindley Park Elementary School in Asheboro. “My principal and superintendent read the first book before we bought it so they could be prepared if a challenge arose.”

Another librarian said her experiences in the public and private sectors differed. “I’ve not really had much experience at my current school,

a private K4-12th grade institution,” said Diane Averett, a librarian at Kerr-Vance Academy in Henderson. “Back when I worked in a public elementary school I had to be careful not to have any witch stories for several students.”

Media specialist Judy Compton of Green Year-Round Elementary in Raleigh tries to avoid the issue of censorship by putting more of the onus on parents. “If a child or parents bring up a concern about a book verbally to me, I talk to them about how we have certain materials that appeal to the whole school population and that they should convey their concerns about particular types of books to their child,” Compton said. “I tell the children that they should not check out books that their parents don’t approve of.”

None of the librarians interviewed said that they purposefully stay away from witchcraft books when purchasing items for their collections. But a couple did remark that financial restraints and other restrictions might indeed affect their ability to purchase such materials.

“Certainly there will be less money as Bush makes it clear that he will not fund ‘bleeding heart’ education priorities, which is where he places libraries,” said Karen Perry, media coordinator for Davidson County Schools. “But of much more concern are the federal restrictions that are placed on schools in order to receive federal funds. More restrictions on how funds can be spent will cut the heart out of every urban system in the nation. In North Carolina we are talking about Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Guilford, Wake, Winston-Salem/Forsyth, and Cumberland for sure.”

In discussing the issue of witchcraft and the occult in children’s literature, two works stand out as causing the largest outcry among parents and communities. The first is a Canadian reading series called “Impressions.” This elementary school series comprises poetry, novels, biographies, short stories, folklore, fantasy, and other genres of literature. Featured authors include Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Seuss, Rudyard Kipling, and Maurice Sendak. The series was used in more than 1,500 schools in 34 states, but soon came under attack in 45 jurisdictions including some in California, Alaska, Illinois, Maryland, and South Dakota. In 1992, two fundamentalist Christians from California sued to have the series removed from schools. Their suit, which was backed by the American Family Association, at first charged that the series was morbid, disrespectful toward parents, and littered with references to witches and ghosts. Later, however, the complaint was changed to reflect allegations of witchcraft and neopaganism. Other cases were filed elsewhere in the U.S., but none won its day in court. Judges eventually ruled that the materials should not be excluded from classrooms.<sup>17</sup>

The other set of books that has produced a firestorm of controversy is, of course, the aforementioned Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. Potter topped ALA’s list of challenged books for four straight years, until being knocked to second place in 2003.<sup>18</sup> And it has drawn the ire of conservative Christian groups around the country for allegedly seducing children into the world of the occult. Of special interest to these groups is their belief that the books are connected to Wiccan groups. (WICCA is a goddess-based religion, which focuses on “Mother Earth” and the power of women. Members are called witches and some hold beliefs of reincarnation, etc.) Leading the charge against the Harry Potter books has been television evangelist Pat Robertson, who recently invited a self-proclaimed expert on the occult to discuss the issue on his show, “700 Club.” Caryl Matrisciana, author of the video *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*, told Robertson that Rowling based the books on Celtic, Druidic, Satanic, and Pagan religions and purposefully wove those themes into her book. Matrisciana said:

The harm is first of all that witchcraft is being normalized to our children. For the first time in the history of the world, witchcraft is being given to children in a children’s format, and children are seeing other children practicing it and say it’s all right.”<sup>19</sup>

Robertson followed with his own comments.

Now, ladies and gentleman, we have been talking about God lifting his anointing and his mantle from the United States of America. And if you read in Deuteronomy or Leviticus, actually, the eighteenth chapter, there’s certain things that he says that is going to cause the Lord, or the land, to vomit you out. At the head of the list is witchcraft....Now we’re welcoming this and teaching our children. And what we’re doing is asking for the wrath of God to come on this country....And if there’s ever a time when we need God’s blessing it’s now. We don’t need to be bringing in heathen, pagan practices to the United States of America.<sup>20</sup>

Another conservative leader put it rather bluntly. “Is Harry Potter a Harmless Fantasy or a Wicca Training Program?” asked Traditional

Values Coalition leader the Rev. Louis P. Sheldon. TV preacher D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries also highlighted that connection when he interviewed another self-proclaimed occult expert, Richard Abanes, who asserted that the membership in the Wiccan groups of England was exploding due to the popularity of Harry Potter books.<sup>21</sup>

Plenty of organizations are lining up right behind these leaders in efforts to keep witchcraft off the shelves. Some of these include Focus on the Family of Colorado Springs, CO; the Liberty Counsel of Orlando, FL; the American Family Association of Tupelo, MS; Citizens for Excellence in Education, a division of the National Association of Christian Educators of Costa Mesa, CA; the Family Research Council of Washington, D.C.; and the Christian Educators Association, of Pasadena, CA. Interestingly enough one of the main groups in the U.S. that protests books, Parents Against Bad Books in Schools, or PABBIS, does not speak out against Harry Potter. Although the Virginia-based group does receive complaints via telephone and email about Rowling's work, they do not include excerpts from it on their Web site, as they do with others they deem a bad influence on children.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, some people would dismiss outright any comments made by conservative televangelists or leaders of the aforementioned groups. But one must recognize that a large portion of mainstream America agrees to some extent with those cited above, even though they may not go quite as far in their comments. To put this issue in perspective, a medical school librarian wrote a column on the issue in the May 2000 *Horn Book* magazine trying to explain the religious concerns in children's literature.

In her work, Vanderbilt Medical School librarian Kimbra Wilder Gish, talks about the dilemma she faces as a conservative Christian and librarian. "This is a passionate issue," she writes. "Few things stir the heart like one's true faith or one's love for sharing books with children." Gish explains that it is easy to dismiss the witchcraft and sorcery in Harry Potter, if you don't believe that witches and demons are real. But conservative Christians do believe they are real, she says, so they perceive a clear and present danger to young minds. She highlights biblical passages in detail in an effort to show the basis for conservative beliefs. One such passage is described below:

Most criticism for the occult in fiction have their basis in Deuteronomy 18:9-12. 'When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an overseer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer'.... Numerous other scriptures also forbid the practice of witchcraft or consultation with mediums or diviners (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6,27; Isaiah 8:19, 19:3; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8), and several specifically mention wizards (in addition to many of the above, 2 Kings 21:6, 23:24; 2 Chronicles 33:6)<sup>23</sup>

Gish goes on to talk about the negative portrayal of Muggles, the nonmagical people in Harry Potter stories, while wizards are portrayed in a most positive light. Also troublesome, she notes, are the instances of demonic possession in the books.

As a librarian, however, she realizes that these books can bring a totally different kind of "magic" to children's lives -- the magic of reading a great story. And they can also bring the opportunity for discussion, she says, between parents and children and even the community. "If a child has a strong interest in these books, parents can use them as a learning experience -- adding to the joy of reading for pleasure, an understanding of how to be a thoughtful reader, recognizing what good things one might take from these books as well as the things best left behind."<sup>24</sup>

Gish's comments make it easier for others to understand just how complex the issue of witchcraft in children's literature can be. Her article is insightful and her words seek not to enrage but rather to explain the conservative Christian viewpoint. One might say she even adds a bit of credibility to this cause simply because she does not invoke name-calling and the like. She also acknowledges that the Harry Potter series has been good for children's literature, and agrees with many librarians that the works inspire children to read.

"Hear hear!" say those librarians, who remark that Harry Potter has put books in the hands of children who otherwise would not be reading anything at all. Many believe that the books actually promote morality -- a charge conservative Christians would find shocking. "This is the kind of magic we need more of in the world," said Judith Krug of ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom. "These books explore the classic theme of good vs. evil, not Satanism."<sup>25</sup> *New York Times* writer Richard Bernstein also argues that youngsters can identify with the fact that

Harry faces and overcomes many obstacles in his life.<sup>26</sup>

Media specialist Vicki Bollinger of Westchase Elementary in St. Petersburg, Florida, said she also believes the Harry Potter books bring families together -- something the Christian Conservatives also strive to do. "I've had first-graders come in and check it out," she said. "One thing it's done is promote family reading together. These little kids are all excited because their bigger brothers and sisters have read it."<sup>27</sup> Finally, Rowling herself called the assertions that she wrote the books to lure young readers to the dark side "absurd." In fact in one interview she was quoted as saying, "I have met thousands of children now, and not even one time has a child come up to me and said, 'Ms. Rowling, I'm so glad I've read these books because now I want to be a witch.'"<sup>28</sup>

Despite Rowling's defense, however, the challenges to Harry Potter go on. By the end of 2001 complaints about Harry Potter had been voiced in 27 states. Also telling is that fact that even though the books didn't hit U.S. shelves until 1998, they still took ALA's seventh spot in the 100-most censored books of 1990-2000.<sup>29</sup> You don't need to look far to find the many lawsuits -- or at least challenges -- that have been made against Harry Potter in the past few years. Some have been extremely hostile, even forcing the resignations of public officials, as in a case in Zeeland, MI. A school board president resigned after repeatedly sparring with a middle school teacher who protested a board decision to ban the Potter books. The decision was eventually overturned, but the president later tried to have the teacher removed from a position in which she mentored students. When the board refused his request, he resigned.<sup>30</sup>

The most pivotal ruling concerning Harry Potter books occurred in 2003, when a U.S. District Court ordered the Cedarville (Arkansas) School District to return four Harry Potter books to the shelves for general circulation. In a 3-2 decision, the school board voted to require students to receive parental permission before checking out the books. But the parents of a fourth-grade student filed suit saying that the ruling would stigmatize their daughter if she continued to read the books. First Amendment groups and author Judy Blume, who has herself been the object of censorship challenges, filed briefs in support of the plaintiffs.<sup>31</sup>

It would be an oversight not to mention the role the Internet plays in our discussion of the occult in school libraries. Although this resource hasn't been around as long, it certainly has the potential to produce as many calls, if not more, for the censoring of materials. *School Library Journal* reported in 1998 that Wisconsin high school student Burklin Nielsen was told to log off a computer in her school library after she was caught researching sites about Wicca. After subsequent attempts, she was told that she could only look at Christian-based sites.<sup>32</sup> The superintendent denied these charges, but a school board member later confirmed that a recently-adopted Internet policy had been formulated with the Nielsen case in mind. That official added that the Web sites were considered inappropriate because they were "into stuff beyond magic and witchery," and not what most would consider to be religion.<sup>33</sup> Also interesting is the fact that many Internet filtering programs for schools do block materials that fall under the heading "Cults/Occult."<sup>34</sup> This presents quite a dilemma for any student who might claim Wicca, or some other alternative religion, as his spiritual base. Remember, that up until fairly recently, some Christians classified Mormonism as a cult.

An example of this Internet blocking occurred when this writer tried to contact various NC school librarians for comment. The first email sent contained the word "witchcraft" in the subject line. Soon after the messages sailed into cyberspace, more than half were returned with notations indicating they had been blocked due to "suspicious language." When they were re-sent taking the word "witchcraft" out of the subject line, the messages went through without a hitch!

So what of the future? Will calls for the removal of school library materials on the occult and witchcraft continue to rise, or will our society become more accepting of these resources? It's an interesting question to ponder, especially since the U.S. re-elected a conservative president whose "family values" and "protecting America" campaign won him that second term in office. Consider columnist Maureen Dowd's recent article entitled, "Slapping the Other Cheek."

You'd think the one good thing about merging church and state would be that politics would be suffused with glistening Christian sentiments like "love thy neighbor," "turn the other cheek," "good will toward men," "blessed be the peacemakers" and "judge not lest you be judged." Yet somehow I'm not getting a peace, charity, tolerance and forgiveness vibe from the conservatives and evangelicals

who claim to have their prodigal son back in office. I'm getting more the feel of a vengeful mob - revved up by rectitude - running around with torches and hatchets after heathens and pagans and infidels. <sup>35</sup>

Legal scholars, including the aforementioned Reichman, believe the future for censorship is murky and unclear. "On the issue of school library and curricular censorship, there is no single definitive judicial opinion, and many critical issues remain unresolved." <sup>36</sup> And groups, including The Columbia Scholastic Press Association, also warn against the increasing calls for censorship. The following excerpt from CSPA's report, "The Future of Scholastic Journalism: Secondary Education's Critical Future.," lists as one of the trends in education:

Strong attacks on the efficacy and validity of public education, along with the increased threats and incidents of censorship and prior review. Let's be up front - there is a very organized effort going on which is determined to abolish public education, or at least to impoverish the system, much to the detriment of many of our most needy students. Since our students are on the "front line" of this battle, we must be ever vigilant to protect their efforts and rights. <sup>37</sup>

In 2004 another national group formed to fight the occult. Called the National Concerned Citizens for Youth, this group plans a campaign against "the presence of 'satanic' and occult-related books in school libraries and bookstores." throughout the country. <sup>38</sup>

North Carolina school librarians also believe the challenges will continue. "I predict the challenges will increase and that we'll eventually see this issue hit the Supreme Court," said Vanessa Olson, media specialist at Asheboro's Lindley Park Elementary. "Movies and TV shows about witchcraft are on the increase, and I think that having it in the Hollywood limelight will make it a target for those who object."

Fortunately there are resources available for librarians who need guidance on how to handle these challenges. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom offers advice on implementing challenge policies at <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/challengesupport/dealing/Default1208.htm>. Included in these resources are tips and ideas about how to deal with challenges as well as how to conduct a challenge hearing if need be. The association also offers an online workbook with sample "requests for reconsideration," as they are called. Another sample policy is available via the New York Public Library Association at [http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page\\_id=452](http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page_id=452).

Of course the degree to which these resources are used will depend on the future of challenges to materials on witchcraft and the occult in our schools. Based on the above statements by conservative leaders as well as those issued by legal scholars, free-press advocates, and school librarians, it is safe to assume that many in our nation will continue to challenge these materials for years to come. Suffice it to say, as long as society continues to view these resources as the train barreling toward youngsters who step in its way, the status quo will continue. And those who view that train differently - as a vehicle able to transport youngsters to higher planes of knowledge - will have to continue their fight against the banishment of these materials from school libraries.

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<sup>3</sup> Gold, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Rogers, "Banned! : Book Censorship in the Schools." (New York: Messner, 1988), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Inez Ramsey, "School Libraries — History." Internet School Library Media Center <<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/libhistory.htm>> November 14, 2004.

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