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A Dirty Little Secret: Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is rampant and lethal

By Debra Lau Whelan -- *School Library Journal*, 2/1/2009



Illustration by Brian Stauffer

When Barry Lyga finished writing his second young adult novel, he knew there'd be trouble. After all, *Boy Toy* was about a 12-year-old who has sex with a beautiful teacher twice his age, and Lyga expected it to spark letters to local papers, trigger complaints to the school board, and incite some parents to yank it off library shelves.

But none of those things ever happened.

"The book just didn't get out there," says Lyga. "Kids weren't getting the book because adults weren't letting them get the book."

At first, that didn't make much sense. *Boy Toy* (2007) was getting rave reviews from professional journals, and the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* loved it. So did the kid-lit bloggers who gave *Boy Toy* the Cybil Award for best YA fiction. Yet its sales figures were lower than Lyga's first novel, *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* (2006, both Houghton).

Then the news started trickling in.

Some bookstores were placing the novel in the adult section, while others weren't carrying it at all. Soon Lyga started hearing stories about librarians who loved the book but refused to recommend or buy it, just in case someone complained. There was even an email from a high school media specialist in Maryland who was so nuts about *Boy Toy* that she read it three times—but ultimately decided not to include it in her collection.

"It's sort of a soft, quiet, very insidious censorship, where nobody is raising a stink, nobody is complaining, nobody is burning books," says Lyga about the plight of *Boy Toy*. "They're just quietly making sure it doesn't get out there."

Self-censorship. It's a dirty secret that no one in the profession wants to talk about or admit practicing. Yet everyone knows some librarians bypass good books—those with literary merit or that fill a need in their collections. The reasons range from a book's sexual content and gay themes to its language and violence—and it happens in more public and K–12 libraries than you think.

"It's probably fairly widespread, but we don't have any way of really knowing, because people who self-censor are not likely to broadcast it," says Pat Scales, president of the Association of Library Services to Children and author of *Protecting Intellectual Freedom in Your School Library* (ALA Editions, 2009). And since most people think librarians are the best champions of books, adds Scales, their jobs give them the perfect cover.

The [American Library Association's](#) (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom only documents written challenges to library books and materials (there were 420 cases in 2007), and even then, it estimates that only one out of five cases are reported. But when it comes to self-censorship, it's almost impossible to quantify because no one is monitoring it or collecting stats, and there's no open discussion on the subject. We most often hear about it through anecdotes or if someone is willing to fess up.

"In a way, self-censorship is more frightening than outright banning and removal of challenged material," says author and former librarian Susan Patron, because these incidents tend to "slip under the radar."

The extent of the problem gained nationwide attention when Patron won the 2007 Newbery Medal, the most prestigious award in children's literature, for *The Higher Power of Lucky* (S &

S/Atheneum/Richard Jackson Bks., 2006). Suddenly, elementary school librarians across the country were vowing to ban her book all because of one word: *scrotum*. Was that word really appropriate in a book aimed at 9- to 12-year-olds, asked many librarians. Indeed, the subject ignited a heated debate on blogs and electronic discussion boards and thrust the issue of self-censorship onto the front page of the *New York Times*. (For the record, there have been no official challenges to *Lucky* to date.)

Why do some librarians reject books with edgy content? In the first survey of its kind, *School Library Journal* (SLJ) recently asked 655 media specialists about their collections and found that 70 percent of librarians say they won't buy certain controversial titles simply because they're terrified of how parents will respond. Other common reasons for avoiding possible troublemakers include potential backlash from the administration (29 percent), the community (29 percent), or students (25 percent), followed by 23 percent of librarians who say they won't purchase a book due to personal objections. (Click here for [survey details](#).)

Interestingly, nearly half of those surveyed (49 percent) say they've dealt with a book challenge. And once someone's been burned by the experience, it's hard not to let it affect future book purchases, says Joan Bertin, executive director of the National Coalition Against

Censorship. Despite this, however, 80 percent say those challenges haven't affected their book-buying decisions.

Even so, Judy Blume, one of the most banned children's authors in the United States, says it's impossible to guess what will tick off censors these days. "I always tell people, 'You think you're safe? Think again, because when you're writing, anything can be seen as dangerous.'" And it's not just right-wing conservative Christians. Politically correct lefties challenge books, too. Like when a progressive mom asked that Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (Dutton, 1972) be removed from her daughter's class because it included a scene with a dead turtle. "She said, 'Don't you know that reptiles have feelings, and reptiles feel fear?'" Blume recalls.

Author Rachel Vail had a similar incident late last year—but this time the censor was a librarian. After being invited to speak at an elementary school in Woodbury, NY, Vail says she was told that her latest picture book, *Jibberwillies at Night* (Scholastic, 2008), would be barred from the library and copies would not be available for sale in conjunction with her visit. The reason? *Jibberwillies*—which received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* and others—deals with children's nighttime terrors and might make kids develop fears or worries that they otherwise didn't have, Vail says she was told.

"I didn't even realize it was actual censorship until after the fact," adds Vail, who was subsequently uninvited. "To have my book banned by a librarian is just shocking to me."

Some may argue that librarians are merely selecting what they feel are the best books for kids and that it's not censorship. But the key factor is one's intent. A trained media specialist is expected to choose a range of titles that best suits the curriculum and meets the reading needs of students—and that involves making judgment calls. "But if you reject a book just because of its subject matter or if you think that it would cause you some problems, then that's self-censorship," says Scales. "And that's going against professional ethics."

Censorship takes place anytime a book is removed from its intended audience, Scales adds. And it includes public libraries that move kids' books to the adult section, as well as media specialists who bowdlerize books or rate them like they do movies, or who put titles in a restricted area. Other excuses librarians tend to hide behind are lack of money or shelf space. Then, of course, there's always "It doesn't fit our curriculum" or "We don't have any gay students."

Coe Booth says she knows of a few libraries in which her first novel, *Tyrell* (Scholastic, 2006)—an ALA Best Book for Young Adults about a 15-year-old Bronx boy whose family is homeless—is in a glass display case or behind the checkout desk instead of on the shelf in the teen section. "It's definitely very frustrating—especially since it's being done in anticipation of a challenge, not in reaction to any real complaints," she says.

Even more infuriating, says Booth, is labeling. "It seems that any book with an African-American character on the cover is quickly being labeled street lit, regardless of the subject matter or the setting of the book."

Meanwhile, books about Caucasian characters in urban settings don't get lumped into that genre. "It's a form of racism," she says, because the street-lit category is an "easy way

for some librarians to label a book that they can quickly dismiss as being inferior”—and for that reason, choose not to buy.

But racism doesn't top the list of reasons why librarians censor. They tend to be skittish about book purchases for obvious reasons. Sexual content ranks number one, with 87 percent of those

surveyed by *SLJ* saying it's the main reason they shy away from buying a book. Objectionable language (61 percent) comes in second, followed by violence (51 percent), homosexual themes (47 percent), racism (34 percent), and religion (16 percent).

Not surprisingly, titles with gay themes get their very own category when it comes to book banning, whether self-imposed or not, because “people have a very rigid, narrow view of what kinds of sexuality are allowed to exist,” says author Jordan Sonnenblick, who's the spokesman for a group called AS IF (Authors Support Intellectual Freedom). And oftentimes, librarians lump gay characters into the mix with sex.

Take, for example, the experience John Coy, the author of *Box Out* (Scholastic, 2008), had after an appearance at a suburban Minneapolis bookstore last fall. “I later found out that middle school librarians were saying they couldn't carry the book because there was one lesbian character in it—and she wasn't the main focus of the book,” says Coy, who was stunned because, if anything, he had anticipated objections to the novel's questioning of school prayer.

The banning of picture books with prominent gay characters, such as *And Tango Makes Three* (S & S, 2005) by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson and *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* (Putnam, 2008) by Sarah S. Brannen, also makes it clear that same-sex relationships alone—not language or sexual content—are what give many people pause. Although we'll never know the level of self-censorship over these books, one 2007 study by the University of Central Arkansas shows that less than one percent of school libraries in that conservative state have books containing gay subjects or story lines—a clear sign that some heavy-duty cherry-picking is going on.

Researchers Jeff Whittingham and Wendy Rickman asked media specialists if their collections offered the most popular gay-, bisexual-, lesbian-, and transgender-themed books published between 1999 and 2005, including Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (S & S, 2001), Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club* (HarperTeen, 2003), and David Levithan's award-winning *Boy Meets Boy* (Knopf, 2003). Almost always, the answer came back no.

Interestingly, Levithan says he intentionally wrote *Boy Meets Boy* as clean as possible so that if the book were ever challenged, the only logical reason would be because it features “happy gay characters in love.” His explanation for the study's results? Librarians often let “fear, not principle, guide their choices, which is deeply unfair to the teens they serve,” Levithan says.

While this may be true, self-censorship is a subject with many gray areas and no simple answers. For one, the fear of retaliation that many librarians speak of is very real. There have been enough cases of librarians losing their jobs or facing the threat of losing employment while defending the freedom to read that ALA has created the LeRoy C. Merritt

Humanitarian Fund to help pay for fees and expenses associated with these First Amendment clashes, says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, deputy director of ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom. Although information about these grants is confidential, dozens have been awarded since the fund was created in 1970.

During this time of severe budget cuts and job losses, media specialists are choosing their battles carefully. "Each librarian has had to reflect on his or her own situation to determine if they can afford to speak up for their beliefs," says Vicki Palmquist, cofounder of the Children's Literature Network, an organization that connects authors, educators, publishers, and others in the world of kid lit. "They may be sole income earners, parents, [or someone] dependent on medical insurance."

To further complicate matters, librarians, like Joel Shoemaker at South East Junior High School in Iowa City, IA, say selecting age-appropriate books based on subject, reading ability, and emotional and social development isn't that clear-cut. Consider Ellen Wittlinger's *Sandpiper* (S & S, 2005). The protagonist is a 16-year-old girl who has learned that performing oral sex is a sure way to get a boyfriend—but she also learns that this behavior leads to problems. *Booklist* lists the title for students in grades 8 to 12. *Publishers Weekly* says it's for kids ages 12 and up. And *SLJ* puts it for students in grades nine and up. "What's a librarian of a seventh- and eighth-grade junior high to do?" asks Shoemaker.

While Shoemaker says he tries his best to evaluate books, it's a process that's incredibly stressful because of the potential for book challenges. "I literally think about it every day," he says. "I've had friends who've lost their jobs, had their marriages destroyed, developed mental and physical illnesses due to the stress of having their collection-development decisions challenged formally, informally, or even merely questioned."

As someone who made ALA's list of the 10 most frequently challenged authors of 2007, Lauren

Myracle knows what it's like to be the target of organized attacks by censors. Her *ttyl* (Abrams, 2004), which contains vulgar language and descriptions of sex, teen drinking, and an improper student-teacher relationship, is intended for high schoolers. But a middle school librarian in Round Rock, TX, thought it was appropriate for her older students, a decision that angered a group of parents who sent Myracle hate mail, called her a pornographer and a pedophile, and prayed that she be rescued from Satan.

"Some of these parents can be so relentless in their attacks, and the attacks are personal," says Myracle, whose book was ultimately pulled by the school superintendent who circumvented the formal review process.

Like many controversial authors, Myracle has had school visits cancelled once administrators found out the kinds of books she writes. More often, librarians invite her to speak at their schools, but ask her not to mention a certain book or subject, like homosexuality in her novel *Kissing Kate* (Dutton, 2003). "They think that's a very reasonable thing to say without any hint of apology," Myracle says. "But then I think, why are they inviting me and telling me 'We want you here, but we don't like this part of you and please keep it hidden?'"

The pressure to avoid this kind of confrontation can sometimes creep into the minds of the writers themselves. "It has that kind of invisible corrosive effect," says Bertin of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Hartinger, whose semiautobiographical YA novel *Geography Club* was banned in his hometown of Tacoma, WA, says, "When you become repeatedly challenged and censored, as I have been, the next time around you're asking, do I need this headache?"

Carolyn Mackler, whose Michael L. Printz honor book *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (2003) was one of the most challenged books of 2006, admits that the fear of censors can sometimes have a paralyzing effect. It led her to second-guess including a female masturbation scene in her YA novel *Guyaholic* (2007, both Candlewick). "I remember thinking, do I put it in? Do I not? If I put it in, will I get challenged again?" she says. "I have to tell myself, don't listen. Don't worry."

Then there's added pressure from publishers. Myracle says her editor asked if the word "suck" on the first page of her middle-grade novel *The Fashion Disaster That Changed My Life* (Dutton, 2005) was absolutely necessary because, ultimately, the book, about a 12-year-old girl who arrives at school with her mom's panties clinging to her pants, would reach a smaller audience if left in. Similar considerations led another publisher to suggest that Myracle change the title of her book about a snarky group of popular schoolgirls from *The Bitches* to *Rhymes with Witches* (Abrams, 2005). Ironically, now there are complaints from people who think the book is about witchcraft.

This sort of stuff doesn't just happen with fiction writers. Tracy Barrett tore up her contract with one publisher when, she says, they asked her to tone down her criticism of Andrew Jackson and his treatment of Native Americans in *The Trail of Tears: An American Tragedy* (2000). She ended up going with another publisher, Perfection Learning.

Naturally, no one wants to go through all that. Mackler says she became a writer to tell honest stories, drawing from her own experiences and those of today's teens. Because *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (which has been banned for offensive language and sexual content) so accurately explores body image, self-mutilation, date rape, and eating disorders, Mackler often receives letters from readers thanking her for making them feel they're not alone. "Books have the power to help teenagers be more empowered about their choices," she says. "I don't throw in sex or swear words just to hook a reader. I put it in if it's in the context of a story, and I try to have my characters make smart choices."

Indeed, all of the authors interviewed for this article say they're completely driven by a moral compass. "We have a special responsibility writing for kids, and we take it seriously," says Hartinger, whose books are often challenged and sometimes banned. That's why Lyga takes issue when people say the almost erotic sex scenes in *Boy Toy* went overboard. "The only way you can experience the guilt and shame that [the main character] feels later is by experiencing the thrill and the joy and the arousal he felt as a child," Lyga explains about the sexual abuse that takes place between a teacher and her underage student.

As for crude language, Levithan insists that it's absolutely necessary, not just for a character's voice but to make a point. "'He lied to me' and 'He fucking lied to me' are two very different

sentences—the latter has an amount of rage and disbelief that the former can't convey," Levithan says, adding that it's much easier to attack a book than to deal with the reality that teens go through every day.

"These parents don't want to believe that their little darlings know this vocabulary so they edit reality," says Sonnenblick. "As if by controlling what's in print and books, you control what's existing in the world."

The truth is, no one ever really knows which books might end up changing a kid's life, helping him find comfort, or gaining a better understanding of a subject. After reading *Boy Toy*, one high school student emailed Lyga to say that she finally understood what her boyfriend went through as a sexually abused child. Another told Mackler that thanks to her novel *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, she's working through depression, bulimia, and low self-esteem—and is actually starting to feel proud about her shapely figure.

It's mostly parents and adults who have hang-ups about controversial books, since kids for the most part are able to handle hot-button issues. "If you read these letters and see how books affect teenagers, then it's really hard to think about pulling [the titles]," adds Mackler, who has had three out of her four novels officially challenged.

Scales, a First Amendment advocate and former school librarian, offers these words of advice: don't put restrictions on kids, because they'll regulate themselves if given the freedom to read. "Children will put down what they can't handle or what they aren't ready for," she explains.

Still, what can librarians do to protect themselves? Make sure your school has a written selection policy and reconsideration policy that addresses written challenges to books. "If you don't, you're totally vulnerable," says Scales.

In the 1982 *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* case, which went to the Supreme Court, the district was following a selection policy and the court held that the First Amendment limits the power of local school boards to remove library books from junior high and high schools simply because they "dislike the ideas contained in those books." The same held true for the high-profile 1995 case involving Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* (Farrar, 1982), in which U.S. District Court Justice Thomas Van Bebber ruled that the novel, about a lesbian teenage relationship, must be returned to high school libraries because it was educationally suitable. And in April 2003, a federal judge ordered the Cedarville School District in Arkansas to return "Harry Potter" books to school libraries after parents sued the district over its decision to require written permission to read them.

In other words, if a book is age appropriate and there are students who would benefit from reading it, then removing a title based on the disapproval of its content raises a constitutional issue, says ALA's Caldwell-Stone. "Students do have a measure of First Amendment rights, and it says that governments can't censor materials unless they're obscene, [contain] child pornography, or are harmful to minors."

Librarians need to remember that it's not their job to impose their own ideologies on the kids they serve or to parent or protect them, Scales says. And even though schools are required to act *in loco parentis*—Latin for "in place of parent"—the doctrine only applies to

school librarians when it comes to the safety and health of their students, not when it comes to censorship, she adds.

"You won't ever make a difference if you don't step out of the box," she says. "And we can make a difference to children. Who knows? That very book that you thought was inappropriate may be the one that turns a child in the direction that he needs to be going or that gives a child quiet hope about a situation."

Author Information

Debra Lau Whelan is SLJ's senior editor for news and features.