Knowledge is Power:

The Issue of Censorship in Middle Grades Literacy Instruction

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Amidst book challenges and controversies, teachers, librarians and other school officials need to be prepared to address censorship and selection challenges. They should not impose their own moral preaching through book choice, but instead acknowledge the responsibility to teach students to read critically and make informed decisions about literature on their own. Knowledge is power, and schools have the ability to give students that power through informed literary choices and literacy instruction.

Quality literature for older children should not preach moral values either directly or by always providing a one-sided 'model' or account. Rather, parents and caregivers ought to provide the primary source for guidance on these issues. Schools cannot be expected to instruct and provide for students in every aspect of their daily lives; such an awesome task would require much longer school days and years, to say the least. Parental leadership on moral issues is much more powerful than a work of fiction (Vesey, 2002).

In addition, dealing with moral issues through text, where characters do not always make the 'right' or popular choice, creates an avenue through which teachers and students and school communities can deal with these issues in reality (Freedman &

Johnson, 2001). It gives students a way to discuss difficult topics, such as sexual molestation, that may otherwise remain in the shadows.

Occasionally, publishers may edit or revise literature to eliminate or reduce controversy in order to appease those who object to its moral content. This practice sometimes comes at the expense of weakened characters or plot lines (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). For example, revising Roald Dahl's (1964) original description of the Oompa-Loompas may have detracted from the more sinister side of Willy Wonka that the reader was meant to see. As well, the adventurous plot of *Lucy Brown and Mr. Grimes* (Ardizzone, 1937) was diluted by editing out of fear that children would succumb to strangers and pedophiles.

For teachers of older children in upper elementary or middle grades, motivation is an oft-cited obstacle to independent reading. Students may be turned off to reading by the imposition of certain values through censorship. Many students at this age may resent adult assumptions about what they know or can handle with regards to controversial topics – racism, sex, profanity.

In fact, while profanity can frequently be heard in the hallways, bathrooms and cafeterias of many middle schools, it is also the most-cited reason for challenges and objections to

children's literature (Curry, 2001). On the other hand, expressing personal preference through self-selection of texts is a powerful reading motivator for older children (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008).

Eliminating all controversy in books is next to impossible if one is going to choose books that are relevant and current in students' lives. Children's literature has been challenged on the loosest of connections to any of the following, often in combinations of two or more: dirty old men, violence, homosexuality, sensationalism, the Pentagon, generally immorality and sordidness and even having "very detailed geography of foreign countries, especially those inhabited by dark people" (Donelson, 1981).

Choosing bland books that lack relevance to students' real lives creates a disconnection between literature and reality for children. Most adolescent readers do not find controversy in the same topics which are most commonly cited as objectionable by parents or community members (Freedman & Johnson, 2001) but instead find these topics to be the very ones to which they can relate and with which they are confronted on a daily basis. One reason for this may be the fact that controversy abounds in older children's daily lives; they must constantly make choices about sex, drugs, racism and bullying. The life choices

presented on a regular basis to modern children and teenagers are inherently fraught with controversy (Simmons, 2000). Even most parents acknowledge the presence of these topics in their children's lives. For example, many parents want their children to receive more sex education in school, not less (Broz, 2002).

In conclusion, it is clear that school officials and communities need to take a more active stance in defending high-quality children's literature in media centers. One way to handle book challenges is by helping those who object to analyze the book itself and their own reasons for objecting. The issue cannot be ignored. Rather, school officials should direct the objections first to the teacher, who is best able to explain how the book is being taught in class and its relationship to the larger curricular goals. If there is still a desire to challenge the book, objectors may be asked to complete a written interview analyzing the curricular purpose, author's purpose, critiques of the book or author and students' response to the book (Donelson, 1981). It is also helpful to give objectors workable options about future handling of the text, such as offering their child a different book choice or sending the book to a school committee for review. In this way, the school and the community form an alliance, rather than an opposition, to provide high-quality, diverse literature to all children.

Blume, J. (1974). *Blubber.* New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, Simon & Schuster.

ISBN: 0-689-84974-5

Guided Reading Level T

In Blubber, Judy Blume tells the story of several girls dealing with issues of self-esteem, bullying and peer pressure. Wendy, a 'popular' girl, and her faithful sidekick Caroline begin teasing Linda, a classmate struggling with being overweight. Jill is the main character and although her inner dialogue tells us that she is somewhat uncomfortable with the teasing, she doesn't take action to stop it until much later in the story. When she does, Wendy strikes out at Jill in a very personal way: she makes a racially derisive comment about Jill's Asian friend, Tracy. Justice prevails following the scene in the bathroom where Jill and Wendy confront each other. Jill is no longer teased and finds herself with the confidence and freedom to reach out to a new classmate in friendship.

This book easily applies itself to learning about dynamic characters and the idea of change in a story. Most obviously, Jill changes from being a follower to a leader. Other characters could be used for comparison between dynamic, such as

Jill, and flat character depictions, such as that of Tracy, who does not change much throughout the story. It could also be used to study other narrative elements, especially the concept of conflict resolution in plot, since this story has a resolution that may leave many readers feeling uncomfortable.

In the end, Jill and Wendy both have friends as well as their own sense of self-esteem and dignity. Wendy never receives any real retribution for her relentless bullying of both Jill and Linda. Linda, who temporarily became a bully herself (of Jill), is once again alone at the end of the novel. Although the resolution may not be satisfying, it is unfortunately more realistic than most teachers and parents would like to imagine.

The girls sometimes use shocking and inappropriate language as they are jockeying for social position in this preteen drama. It would seem that people are uncomfortable with the idea of children or preteens, especially young girls, behaving as foul-mouthed tormentors. The controversy behind this book centers mainly on the language and the bullying overall. This novel, although its themes of bullying and social justice are relevant to all students, may present a certain level of disconnection for boys since its main characters are all female (Jones, 2006).

Rowling, J.K. (2007). *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.* New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, Scholastic.

ISBN: 0-545-01022-5

Guided Reading Level W

The Harry Potter series of books by J.K. Rowling tells the story of the title character from his initial public recognition as a wizard to his ultimate final battle with his arch nemesis, Voldemort. Along the way, Harry encounters all the trappings of a great fantasy story: magical creatures, parallel universes and extremes of 'good' and 'evil'. When we first meet Harry, he is living a neglected and sad existence with his aunt, uncle and cousin. Although these people are his family and have been entrusted with his care by his deceased parents, they treat him with disgust, mistrust and downright repulsion and live in fear of his wizardry from the moment they catch a glimpse of his abilities. When half-giant Hagrid comes to take Harry to Hogwarts School of Witches and Wizards, we learn the story of Harry's infamous scar. As a baby, Harry was attacked by the evil Lord Voldemort, but his mother's love for him protected him; as a result, he was left with his life and a lightning bolt scar on his forehead. This scar acts as a powerful conduit between Harry and Voldemort throughout the series, growing warm

and painful whenever their connection grows stronger. After battling Lord Voldemort and his minions for several years, Harry finally defeats the evil wizard using the same powerful protection that his mother gave him: love.

J.K. Rowling provides detailed descriptions of the characters, magical creatures and fantastical locations in this series. It would provide excellent opportunities for students to practice their envisioning skills, perhaps even through multimodality such as visual art or mapping. In addition, the highly dynamic characters are very well-developed, with detailed presents and pasts; families, both seen and unseen; likes, loves and dislikes; friends and enemies. Therefore, this series would work well with a unit on growing ideas about characters and character analysis.

The series generally has very few minority characters. When they do appear, as with Lee Jordan (a Black male who shares the last name of possibly the most easily recognized Black basketball player in the world) or Cho Chang (an Asian female whose name completely lacks subtlety or creativity and whose role in the story mainly revolves around her position as a love interest), they usually play a sideline role and the descriptions of them are brief and somewhat stereotypical.

The exception to this rule is the presence of Albus Dumbledore, a very major player in the series. However, in Dumbledore's case, most readers had no idea that he was meant to be homosexual as Rowling never explicitly points this out or brings it into the storyline. Her claim that he had a love affair with Grindenwold is preposterous in that even the most attentive of readers could miss it. The implication is that homosexuality is something to be kept in the shadows, not something that would play a part in one's daily life, despite the fact that other heterosexual characters have public relationships and active love lives which sometimes even turn physical.

In addition, strong female characters are few and far between. Most of the main characters are male; the females in the story, with the exception of Professor McGonagal and Hermione, are positioned according to stereotypically female roles: beauty queen, mother, love interest. In other words, they are not given much power in the book and their perspectives are more or less invisible (Jones, 2006).

It would appear that White heterosexual males hold almost all of the power in Rowling's magical world, an unfortunate message for her to be sending, whether consciously or not, to her young readers.

Dahl, R. (1961). *James and the Giant Peach*. New York: Puffin Books, Penguin.

ISBN: 0-14-130467-7

Guided Reading Level Q

James and the Giant Peach is the story of a young boy who feels like a misfit in his own home. Neglected and abused, he feels like he does not belong, even with his own family. Eventually, his cruel aunts expel him from their home. One day, he discovers a peach at the top of a tree that has grown unbelievably large. As he marvels at the size of the peach and explores its perimeter, he discovers an entrance. Inside, he meets a cast of oversized and outlandish characters: Centipede, Earthworm, Ladybug, Green-Grasshopper, Glow-worm and Miss Spider. The personified creatures decide to go on an adventure, so Centipede chews through the stem, sending the giant fruit tumbling down the steep slope of the garden. Seagulls are enlisted after a time to bear the fruit aloft by its stem. James and his insect friends have many adventures together throughout the book, including the smashing of a real rainbow painted by Cloud-men. Finally, the peach reaches Manhattan and is brought to rest on the pinnacle of the Empire State Building.

This book would lend itself to a writing lesson on personification. There are fantastic creatures in this book, such as the Cloud-men, as well as many ordinary creatures that are made extraordinary by the author's personification of them and by their exaggerated size. Teachers could use excerpts from the book as a shared reading prior to a writing lesson on personification or the writing of a genre that involves fantastic or magical creatures.

One reason that children enjoy reading fantasy is that it is much easier to consider difficult life issues such as child abuse when the events are safely removed to a world of fantasy (Cruz & Pollock, 2004), like the giant peach that James discovers. However, the worlds of fantasy and reality come very close to colliding near the end of *James and the Giant Peach.* The illustrations and events in the final chapters may alarm some readers with their eerie reminiscence of the events of September 11th. Older children for whom this book is suited were alive on that day in 2001 and most were old enough to have vivid memories of the news coverage and events. Although the book's implication that the residents of Manhattan believe that the giant peach filled with friendly creatures is a bomb is meant to be humorous, the similarities hit too close to home for those who have even vague memories of that day. Most vividly, Chapter

35 describes the moments just before the peach lands: “…people…looked up and saw it coming, and they stopped running and stood there staring in a sort of stupor...A few women screamed. Others knelt down on the sidewalks and began praying aloud. Strong men turned to one another and said things like, ‘I guess this is it, Joe,’ and ‘Good-by, everybody, good-by.’ And for the next thirty seconds the whole City held its breath, waiting for the end to come.” This passage recalls the tearful final good-byes from cell phones with which Americans became so familiar on that day and the accompanying illustration of helicopters circling the Empire State Building will remind some readers of the video coverage of the smoke-filled sky on September 11th. Even the tongue-in-cheek description of a president eating sugary cereal in his pajamas could bring to mind the image of a real president, reading to schoolchildren, so uncertain of his next move that he continued to read even after being informed of the World Trade Center attack.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia.* New York: HarperCollins.

ISBN: 0-690-0135-0

Guided Reading Level T

One of five siblings, Jesse Oliver Aarons Jr. is going into the fifth grade when the story opens. He is largely ignored by his hard-working father, browbeaten by his easily enraged mother, despised by three of his four sisters and too old to be flattered by his 7-year-old sister's adoration. His goal at the start of the school year is to be the fastest runner in his class, and this is how he meets Leslie Burke. Jesse and Leslie become close friends and invent a magical world that they christen Terabithia and fill with all sorts of fantastic events and characters. Located in the forest across a creek, Terabithia is their escape from the difficult challenges of real life – neglect, anger, violence, loneliness, bullying. Suddenly, though, the escape from reality comes to an abrupt end when Leslie dies trying to cross the creek into Terabithia.

Metaphors and similes abound; Paterson's writing is thick with figurative language. For this reason, teachers might choose to use portions of the book for writing lessons on how to

create more vivid mental images for a reader. For example, the author effectively incorporates no less than three vivid similes in the opening: “he would be hot as popping grease”, “the bottoms of his feet were by now as tough as his worn-out sneakers” and “Momma would be mad as flies in a fruit jar”.

The deep emotions felt by readers, especially when Leslie dies, make this an excellent choice for a read-aloud. Reading the book aloud, together as a class, will allow teachers to guide students in discussing their feelings. In addition, the teacher can guide students toward inferring and interpreting the reasons behind Jess and Leslie’s need to have their own imaginary world where they rule as king and queen.

As with *James and the Giant Peach*, the difficult issues present in this novel are more easily dealt with by readers because they are part of a fantasy (Cruz & Pollock, 2004). This story is seen entirely through the eyes of child characters – Leslie, Jess and occasionally May Belle. The parents and teacher, Miss Edmunds, are left to be largely interpreted by the reader. Although adults may have questions about Leslie’s relationship with her father or wonder at the appropriateness of the one-on-one field trip taken by Jess and Miss Edmunds, whether students notice this will depend on their level of maturity and world knowledge or personal experience.

Rockwell, T. (1975). *How to Eat Fried Worms*. New York: Dell.

ISBN: 0-440-80148-6

Guided Reading Level R

How to Eat Fried Worms begins with a dare between boys: Eat 15 worms in 15 days to earn $50. After Tom gets into trouble and is reprimanded by having to miss dinner, the initial dare is a playful response to Billy's boasting about what he would do to avoid banishment during dinner. As the story progresses, Billy creatively consumes more and more worms; some of his methods include covering them in ketchup and other condiments and eating them as a sandwich. As Billy approaches the 15th worm, the bet grows serious and so does the scheming and cheating to keep him from his goal. At this point, the story becomes slightly darker; Joe and Alan, the opposing side of the bet, bully and attack Billy to try to keep him from winning, which he eventually does anyway.

This book would work well in a reading partnership or book club. Since the story focuses on opposing sides of a bet, there are plenty of opportunities for growing new thinking in partnership discussions by taking on different perspectives. A discussion around whether Joe and Alan are justified in their attempts to cheat, for example, could spark a lively debate in a

book club or partnership meeting.

This book has been criticized for its crude content. Female students may be turned off by its obvious angling toward an audience of boys, but as in *Blubber*, certain themes are universal – bullying and peer pressure, for example. Using the book in a mixed-gender book club would create an opening for students to discuss connections and disconnections (Jones, 2006) about whether the type of bullying that occurs is gender-specific as well as the crude and often repulsive events.

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