

The Problem of Self-Censorship

by Rebecca Hill

You're nervous. The book in question is edgy, maybe controversial. Someone might complain so you have to decide. Does it stay or does it go? Do you put it on a restricted shelf or require parental consent? This is a crossroads that many school librarians face. When the pressure to self-censor happens, do you let fear determine what you do with the book?

When No Challenge Exists

Self-censorship, not to be confused with actual censorship, is the most complicated, but least understood form of censorship. In most cases of actual censorship, objections to a book are based on offensive language, sexual content, or unsuitability by age, and a complaint is filed to suppress the book. Often an internal review is undertaken, and a court case may ensue. Most often parents file a complaint, but religious or political advocacy groups may also institute a complaint. Since 1990, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Free-

dom has recorded 10,415 cases of actual censorship on the record, 7,230 of which occurred in the school or school library (American Library Association n.d.). In all cases, someone or a group actively attempted to control or prevent access to a particular type of content. While it is easier to calculate the number of actual censorship cases, it is more difficult to quantify the number of self-censorship cases that occur. Why? Because no actual challenge exists.

What distinguishes self-censorship from actual censorship is a librarian's

fear that something might happen. Second-guessing is the motivating force behind surreptitious acts like removing or misplacing a book or even restricting its access. Because of this, the librarian might act pre-emptively without going through the normal review process. According to Joan E. Bertin, executive director of the National Coalition against Censorship, "Self-censorship is the kind of thing that you cannot measure and for that reason may be an even more widespread problem... By definition we don't hear about self-censorship. Li-

Unfortunately, many librarians may not immediately understand or realize the long-term cost of self-censoring.

brarians know the sensitivities of their communities, who the ‘troublemakers’ are and how they operate, and I’m sure they act with that knowledge. It’s certainly true of art museums, where directors and curators openly admit that there are some things ‘we just don’t show here.’ I’ve heard enough from librarians to know that the same process is at work” (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010).

Challenges

For nineteen years, Dee Ann Venuto has been a school librarian, but only recently she experienced her first formal challenge. A group of individuals representing the 912 Project’s county chapter visited her school board and asked for the removal of three titles based on social, political, and sexual content in the books. Not only did they ask to remove the books, they also wanted to know who purchased the books and how they were purchased. These demands put Venuto smack dab in the middle of a censorship challenge for the first time in her library career. This is a perfect example, Bertin says, of the type of inquiries that can result in the “intense anxiety over the personal position that they [librarians] are put in” (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). At Venuto’s school, the controversy resulted in one of the books being removed from the library while the other two were eventually returned to the shelves. Whether or not it has hurt her career in any way is still in question, says Venuto (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). Even though many people have been supportive, she believes that with the large amount of press attention in this case, more people will pay more attention to the school library and her role as a media center coordinator. “Given the sensitivity of the

situation, people are choosing sides, and some members of the Board are none too happy with me. Some people seem hesitant to talk with me about this in both the community and in school,” Venuto said (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). “At present, I know that this challenge has negatively affected my level of job and life satisfaction” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Given the public nature of Venuto’s ordeal, other librarians could view this negative experience as a reason to self-censor in the event of a complaint or even a threat of a complaint. Librarians are put in a difficult position when censors claim “a kind of moral high ground, by framing their challenge in terms of protecting children (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). Furthermore, according to Bertin,

“When someone says they only want to protect kids, it sounds like a good idea... Librarians are understandably wary of looking like they’re not protecting kids. But it depends on what you mean by protecting kids. Some people want to protect kids by keeping them from reading certain things, while those opposing censorship think that reading is essential to protect kids from ignorance and confusion” (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010).

As a result, people arguing for intellectual freedom are always on the defensive looking for a moral ground that is often, as Bertin says, pretty hard to get back. This perception alone may be all that it takes for a librarian to self-censor a controversial book. In fact, in a recent *School Library Journal* survey, the survey found that 70% of the school librarians interviewed said that they would not purchase a book based on a possible reaction from parents (*School Library Journal* 2009).

Long-Term Cost

Unfortunately, many librarians may not immediately understand or realize the long-term cost of self-censoring. Author Chris Crutcher, no stranger to censorship challenges himself, has seen the tremendous cost of these challenges to teachers and librarians. “As much as the censors tell us their overriding religious philosophy is a loving one,” Crutcher said, “they go after the teachers and librarians like cold-blooded politicians. Personal attacks and thinly veiled bullying become the order of the day” (Chris Crutcher, email interview with author, May 14, 2010).

But even Crutcher acknowledges that, though he understands why they do it, “it seems to me it erodes a little bit of their souls” (Chris Crutcher, email interview with author, May 14, 2010). “So what happens,” Dee Ann Venuto asks, “if we cleanse our collections and have nothing that interests or pertains to today’s young adults? How will we encourage the use of libraries?” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Variations of Self-Censorship

Self-censorship can come in many seemingly innocuous forms like book labeling, parental control requirements, and restricted rooms and shelves. Even though they are not the actual banning of a book, Bertin believes that “these are all forms of subtly entrenching the ideas that lead to censorship” (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). One of the first cases to deal with the restricted shelving issue was a 2002 case involving the Harry Potter series. Parents of a Cedarville Elementary School in Arkansas filed a lawsuit seeking to overturn a school board decision to place the Harry Potter books on a restricted borrowing list that required written parental protection ([10](http://www.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/firstamendment/courtcases/courtcases.cfm).

In this case, the parents argued that placing the book in restricted shelving requiring parental consent basically stigmatized the books and their readers. The court ruled in favor of the parents, saying that a requirement for parental permission was tantamount to the implication that the child was “evil” just for wanting to read Harry Potter (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). Although Dee Ann Venuto has never had to seek parental consent for books, she says that this concept was addressed during a review committee meeting. “I believe students would hesitate to request certain materials if they had to seek parent permission and/or the library staff for access,” Venuto said (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). “In fact, unless certain sensitive topics are addressed for student research assignments, it is my experience that students will not ask for help when seeking information on certain topics such as sexuality or abuse” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Labels stating that a book is for “mature readers” or stating a specific reading level like those in Lexile or Accelerated Reading programs may appear to be innocent, but this type of labeling opens the doors to censorship if schools and their librarians use these programs as their sole selection tools. In most cases, the problem arises and evolves into a censorship complaint when students are assigned a reading level and then read above or beyond their maturity level. Some of the more volatile censorship cases have come from books when the reading and maturity level do not match up, says Pat Scales, school librarian and columnist for *School Library Journal*.

“In an elementary school in Arizona, we had a huge issue there when *Perks of Being a Wallflower* was found in an elementary school when it really wasn’t appropriate for an elementary school reading level. We need to have open access, but you must engage with the students about books to ascertain their maturity level. Unfortunately educa-

tors that grade-level books are often not even reading the books. That road has led us down that dark path of censorship. You cannot use these computerized reading programs as selection tools” (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Decreasing the Risks of Silent Censorship

While no one can predict when and if a censorship challenge or complaint will arise, the risk of a challenge can be mini-



mized and, at the same time, the likelihood of self-censorship can be decreased by being adequately prepared. As most librarians can attest, the most valuable tactic is a thorough selection policy and process. For Dee Ann Venuto, having these policies in place and an avid knowledge of them was invaluable. “Our school has a board policy concerning the media center, which includes statements on how and why materials are selected and another concerning complaints regarding instructional materials,” Venuto said (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). “These documents, a Reconsideration Request Form that I had on file, and a large binder of resources

I gathered were the basis for managing the challenge” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010).

In addition, a thorough selection process that relies on professional review sources and a strong reader’s advisory approach to book selection is critical and will increase the comfort level about books available in the library. To keep parents in the loop, Pat Scales created the Communicating through Literature program where parents read and discussed the books that their teens were reading. A crucial aspect of this program was simply

asking kids first what books they wanted their parents to read and then Scales asked the parents to read these books. She found that when parents read and discussed these books, they were less likely to object to the books’ content. Through blogging and social networking, communicating through literature with parents becomes even more convenient and can provide ongoing feedback.

Scales believes that programs like these work because we are engaging the kids and their parents. “People don’t think to engage the kids. They are afraid to engage the kids,” said Scales (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010). But, Scales believes, it is important

“Librarians often have to be brave. They have to be willing to be misunderstood, be criticized, and sometimes even face employment consequences.” —Joan E. Bertin

to remember that a child and an adult could read the same book, and yet have different perceptions of the content, “You bring your own life experience to a book,” said Scales (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010). This, Scales believes, is one reason why censorship challenges arise. “In a challenge, we are imposing on children our adult view of things,” (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Another way of engaging kids who read is to solicit their personal stories about reading not only banned books, but controversial books. These firsthand accounts can be valuable in defending the selection of a book or even in the event of a challenge. Collecting and using these accounts may also confirm the value of the book to parents, school boards, and others who might raise an objection to a particular book. Further, sharing these stories on an ongoing basis with the school administration can also demonstrate just how valuable these reading experiences are to students. Pat Scales was the chair of her school district’s Materials Review Committee when a challenge to a book in a school in her district arose. “I went to the class that had been studying the challenged book, and asked them to share their own stories about the book and what it meant to them” (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010). “I took those stories to the committee and we retained that book. Sometimes, you just have to let the kids tell their stories” (Pat Scales, telephone interview with author, May 20, 2010).

Just as Venuto did, librarians who want to be prepared in the event of a challenge do well to identify those national organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship who can lend valuable support not only in the event of a challenge, but to develop policies and

procedures that will help avoid a challenge. Most national organizations like the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom or the National School Board Association have sample policies and procedures online that can assist in preparation for and against a censorship challenge. Further, they can assist school librarians in developing a defense against a challenge and help them keep in touch with others who have been through similar situations. Because they are in the position to offer this type of guidance, Dee Ann Venuto strongly encourages librarians to seek their assistance. For her, “the American Library Association and National Coalition Against Censorship were invaluable, both professional and personally” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). “The people working for these organizations are truly dedicated and supportive advocates” (Dee Ann Venuto, email interview with author, May 20, 2010). Most importantly, knowing that professional support and resources are available increases the comfort level while also ensuring adequate preparation.

Challenge of the Challenge

Everyone knows just how difficult a book challenge can be to a school, the school librarian, teachers, and even the school district as a whole. The amount of time taken in a challenge can be astronomical. Personal and professional relationships are affected. Librarians who go through a censorship challenge experience a plethora of emotions ranging from fear to shame to anger to apprehension. So it is not hard to see why many librarians would rather just “lose” the book rather than enter into a fight. Ultimately, though, no librarian needs to be told there is a greater mission of

the library. “Librarians often have to be brave,” said Joan Bertin. “They have to be willing to be misunderstood, be criticized, and sometimes even face employment consequences” (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). According to Bertin, they have to avoid that little devil sitting on their shoulder who warns when something could cause possible trouble (Joan E. Bertin, telephone interview with author, May 21, 2010). But by being prepared, utilizing their policies and procedures, engaging their readers and parents on an ongoing basis, and then reaching out for help when they need it, they will be able to put those kinds of thoughts and fears aside and continue living, as Chris Crutcher says, “where ideas and readers meet” (Chris Crutcher, email interview with author, May 14, 2010).

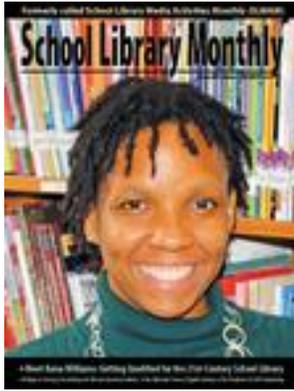
References:

- American Library Association. *Challenges by Initiator, Institution*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengesbytype/index.cfm> (accessed May 25, 2010).
- American Library Association. *Notable First Amendment Court Cases*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/firstamendment/court-cases/courtcases.cfm> (accessed May 25, 2010).
- School Library Journal*. “SLJ Self-Censorship Survey.” <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6633729.html> (accessed May 25, 2010).
- Scales, Pat. “Does Censorship Matter?” http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/RHL_magazine/pdf3/RHI08.pdf (accessed May 25, 2010). ◀

Rebecca Hill is a freelance writer who writes on education, library, and literacy issues. She has a Masters in Information and Library Sciences from Indiana University Purdue University. Email: bh8811@gmail.com



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION



Author: Hill, Rebecca

Title: The Problem of Self-Censorship

Source: Sch Libr Mon 27 no2 N 2010 p. 9-12

Publisher: Libraries Unlimited/An Imprint of ABC-CLIO
130 Cremona Drive, Suite C, Santa Barbara, CA 93117-5505

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.