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Is Censorship a Dirty Word?

By Nikki Tate-Stratton

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On the shelves of the children's section of your local library or bookstore you'll find books with characters who are child molesters, compulsive gamblers, and drug addicts. Teenagers in young adult novels have too much to drink, get pregnant, and commit crimes. Some series fiction has so little literary merit it seems a complete waste of your child's reading time. So, at what point should parents step in and intervene in the reading choices of their children? Should we simply turn our kids loose and let them find their own way through the slew of available books, some of which we may find objectionable for any number of reasons? At what point does a well-meant reading suggestion become a subtle act of censorship?

If you have any kind of life yourself, you probably won't be able to read every book your child brings home, especially if you happen to live with an avid reader. Last summer my 12 year-old daughter read more than a hundred novels - she is a much faster reader than I am and even if I had wanted to keep up, I couldn't have. If you have more than one child, good luck!

Somewhere, someone has banned even the very finest literary titles. Books are subversive vehicles - they expose children to new ideas, alternate worldviews, and different perspectives and this is exactly what makes them so threatening. But by reading a wide variety of books with our children and then using those books as launching points for discussions, we have an opportunity to show our kids how to approach books with a critical eye.

Characters struggling with moral dilemmas can be used to start discussions about the moral values of your own family. Exposure to the mores of other cultures could be an excellent way to examine our own cultural assumptions and biases. For example, reading Deborah Ellis' novel, Breadwinner, (which looks at 6th grader, Parvana's experiences as a girl living under Taliban rule in Afghanistan) is a great way to launch discussions on gender relations, fundamentalism, or non-democratic forms of government.

If you are a believer in free speech and the free exchange of ideas in a democratic society, then don't be too quick to strip your child's shelves of Garfield comics, or forbid her to read anything by Francesca

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Lia Block. Instead, be aware of what your child is reading, offer gentle guidance, make suggestions for possible reading material, and remain open to discussions that may be triggered as a result of your child reading something from a perspective other than the one found at home.

There are some terrific novels out there for teens covering subjects from drinking and drug use (*What They Don't Know*, Anita Horrocks) to teen gambling (*Double or Nothing*, Dennis Foon), or learning to find your own way in the face of outside pressures (*Changing Jareth*, Elizabeth Wennick). If you suspect it's time to have a chat about a subject like sexual orientation or religious beliefs different to your own, why not introduce the topic through a book you can share and discuss with your child? The author's perspective does not have to match your own for the book to be useful.

Quibbling with content is not the only reason parents balk at certain books. Pulp fiction for youngsters is a cause for concern for many. But should you panic when your daughter picks up yet another title about Mary–Kate and Ashley? Not necessarily. Sometimes a child simply needs to unwind, relax, and not have to think too hard. Reading a bit of un–demanding series fiction is no worse than watching some television. For the child who has developed an addiction to books like this, simply banning the offensive titles won't necessarily stop your child from reading them (and, an all out ban often serves to make the forbidden fruit all the more appealing). School and public libraries as well as best friends are all sources of the contraband reading material even if you refuse to purchase another Sweet Valley High novel.

Instead of an outright ban, try a compromise: "For every two books from Objectionable Series A, why don't you try one of these." Then, make sure you have a few appropriate alternatives around. Offer to help build your child's personal collection by buying one book each week (and indicate which, if any, titles are not on the purchasing list. Suggest your child borrow the less desirable titles from the library.) Draw on the knowledge of teachers, librarians, and children's booksellers when looking for suggestions. There are also several reading guides that list dozens of titles by age, subject, and reading level (*100 Books for Girls to Grow On*, Shireen Dodson, *Great Books for Boys: More than 600 Books for Boys 2 to 14*, Kathleen Odean, or *Canadian Children's Books: A Critical Guide to Authors and Illustrators*, Raymond E. Jones and Jon C. Stott are a few such handbooks).

One constructive way to encourage kids to try books outside their reading comfort zones is to reinstate family reading time. Sometimes, when children reach the end of their interest in picture books we stop reading to them, but even teenagers enjoy a good novel shared in installments. With older children, take turns reading to each other and also alternate who chooses the selections. This is a great way to introduce your kids to some authors they may not be willing to try on their own.

Recognize that children do not grow up in a strictly linear, well–organized way. When your 12 year–old digs out his collection of Berenstain Bear books, this is a perfectly normal way of returning to a secure, pleasant and familiar place. There's no need to censor here, either, by making a disparaging remark about 'reading something a little more appropriate' or, even worse, donating the collection to the local daycare when your son is at school.

Taken collectively, it is the vast array of subjects and approaches that makes the world of books (like

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the wider world those books represent) so exciting. Teaching your child that it is quite acceptable to read a book and dislike it, or read a book and completely disagree with the author helps create a critical reader capable of forming carefully considered opinions. Opening doors to new reading material is one of the best ways to expose our children to the vast complexity of the world around us. Closing doors with the heavy hand of censorship doesn't provide the same opportunities for growth, discussion, and the development of critical thinking skills. And is that not what reading is all about?

Censorship Mini-Quiz

1. Which of the following authors made it to the 1999 Most Challenged Authors list (compiled by the Office for Intellectual Freedom in the USA)?

- a. Judy Blume
- b. Robert Cormier
- c. Stephen King
- d. Lois Lowry
- e. Christopher Pike
- f. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
- g. J.K. Rowling

2. What was the first recorded incident of censorship in Western history?

3. Which of the following titles have been banned?

- a. Madame Bovary (Gustave Flaubert)
- b. On the Origin of the Species (Charles Darwin)
- c. Les Misérables (Victor Hugo)
- d. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Mark Twain)
- e. Ulysses (James Joyce)
- f. A Farewell to Arms (Ernest Hemmingway)
- g. Alice in Wonderland (Lewis Carroll)
- h. The Merchant of Venice (William Shakespeare)
- i. Grapes of Wrath (John Steinbeck)
- j. As I Lay Dying (William Faulkner)
- k. Little Red Riding Hood

4. What two books did Plato feel were inappropriate for immature readers?

5. What was the first printed book to be banned in England?

Answers. 1. All of them. 2. The condemnation of Socrates for blasphemy and corruption. His death sentence was handed down in 399 B.C. by the Athenian Assembly. 3. All of them. 4. The Iliad and The Odyssey 5. The New Testament.

For more information on censorship and book banning, visit

<http://www.bookspot.com/features/bannedbooks.htm>

Or

<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/>

Nikki Tate is a writer and storyteller from British Columbia. She is the author of the Tarragon Island juvenile novels, the Estorian Chronicles (a YA fantasy trilogy), Jo's Triumph (historical fiction for young

readers), and the StableMates series of horse novels. Tate also works as a freelance writer, writing on

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subjects from tattoos to compost. Her articles, reviews, and opinion pieces have appeared in publications in Canada, Japan and the USA.

Are You Making Yourself Dull And Boring?

By Neil Notes

I'm very afraid that most of us are slowly becoming dull and boring. Mind you, we aren't naturally boring, we're just becoming that way intentionally, through great effort.

I can hear you thinking right now, "You're kidding! Right?"

No, I'm deadly serious. I have irrefutable proof this is happening, and I'm willing to take just a few moments of your valuable time to prove this to you.

My theory works like this: We live in an age when society has developed ever stricter "rules" for what is acceptable. This not only applies to our actions, but also to what we say and even what we admit to thinking.

Our self-censorship is particularly advancing in the areas of sexuality, politics, and social commentary. Thanks to a myriad of special interest groups who preach constantly on TV, most of us have become afraid to really express our ideas and feelings on a number of fronts previously thought essential to human discourse.

Say what you think about politics and you may be ostracized by your friends and even persecuted by your government. Let your real feelings about sexuality out and you may find your photo on a police web site and your neighbors demanding you move.

Or at least that's what we THINK will happen if we express ourselves. The truth lies somewhere else. I'm willing to bet you can say just about anything you please and most of the people in the room will find your words creative, entertaining, thought provoking, and incredibly fresh.

You see, the world is not nearly as staid and button-down as we think. If you have a wild thought, you can bet many others are thinking the same thing.

This may not be what your mother taught you, but RESIST watching your tongue. We have entirely too much self-censorship these days. Let your thoughts, creativity, and especially your expression fly, even if it flies in the face of what you believe to be mainstream thought and power.

Not only will YOU be a much more interesting person, but your ideas will bring joy, humor, emotion, and deeper inspiration to those around you. You'll be a more exciting person, AND our culture will benefit from your willingness to "tell it like it is."

Neil Notes (his real name) is an artist, entrepreneur, and creator of the outrageous new

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. See his vast collection of Greeting Cards that express the way YOU think.

Put on your sense of humor and enjoy! Some adult content. Reach Neil at



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