Libraries Should Restrict Access to Offensive Books

Censorship, 2002

In the following viewpoint, Helen Chaffee Biehle contends that libraries have abandoned their role of acting *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent) in protecting young children from inappropriate material. Libraries now permit children to view and check out obscene material that they would not be permitted to see or buy outside of libraries. Biehle, who is a teacher in Ohio, argues that libraries should once again act as censors and keep inappropriate material out of the hands of children.

As you read, consider the following questions:

Go to the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center and read a magazine article on antipornography laws, then find some news articles that provide real examples of censorship debates today. Then look at your notes and develop them into a short essay (2-3 paragraphs) describing your stance on censoring materials for children. If you feel like you have different reactions to different cases, explain.

1. What are a library's three arguments for why it cannot censor material for children, as cited by Biehle?

2. According to the author, how does the American Library Association characterize librarians who accept and make moral judgments about offensive materials?

3. What does Article 5 of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights advocate, as cited by Biehle?

"We could drop your kids off at the library while you and I finish our shopping," I said to my young friend. She looked shocked. "I never let my kids go to the library alone!"

I did a double-take. I was, after all, a library lover. As a teacher for 25 years, I had gone to the library more often than I'd gone to the grocer. But I had not looked into the youth division since my grown children had used it.

My friend sputtered on. "The librarians say they have special rights, so they can't protect children any more and can't notify parents. And parents don't have any rights. If we complain they call us 'censors.' I dare you to go into the youth section over at County Library and see what's there. Some of the stuff will curl your hair."

**A Purveyor of Obscenity**

The next morning, I opened the local paper and understood instantly what my friend was getting at. There in bold print was the story of Mrs. Cindy Friedman, her 12-year-old son and the county library. She had refused her son permission to buy 2 Live Crew's rap tape, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, as had the local record store on the legal grounds that he was underage. I remembered that this was the very tape that had been judged by a federal judge to be obscene and whose seller had been arrested, and whose performers had been
arrested for an obscene performance in Florida. True to its title, the tape is nasty, indeed, glorifying rape, with men's voices shouting "I'm gonna break you" and "I wanna see you bleed!" over the plaintive voice of a young girl crying "No! No!" All of the lyrics on the tape are unremitting gutter profanity, and all are about violent and casual sex which gleefully celebrates sadistic cruelty toward women. Imagine Mrs. Friedman's astonishment when she discovered that her son, on an innocent trip to the library, had not only found the offending tape in the library's collection, but had been allowed to check it out with his library card with no questions asked.

According to the Cleveland Sun Messenger account, Mrs. Friedman, with the perfectly normal reactions of a responsible parent, fell into the library's ideological trap. "If he has to be 18 to buy the tape, he should have to be 18 to take it out of the library," she said. (Zap!) "The Library Bill of Rights forbids discrimination on the basis of age," said the library head.

"The library should have a system of warning parents what kids are taking out," said Mrs. Friedman. (Zap!) "That would be CENSORSHIP. Besides, librarians cannot act in loco parentis." (Excuse me. Who said so? They had formerly been doing this, just as teachers had, for many, many years.)

What was going on here? Was there to be no apology to Mrs. Friedman for what columnist John Leo calls the cultural equivalent of poison gas? I reached for the telephone. "I'd like to speak to the director of the Cuyahoga [Ohio] County Library system." (This is a system with 28 libraries and 440,000 patrons.) When the director answered, I questioned her current policy on children, and asked for some adult supervision in the purchasing department. She was completely calm and utterly un-apologetic. Much later, I learned that her calm came from following the detailed instructions given by the library's Intellectual Freedom Manual for handling irate taxpayers like me.

The Library's Defense

The Library Director's first defense was diversity. "Neither you nor I might approve of As Nasty As They Wanna Be, she said, but we serve a very diverse population." I assumed that this was a code word for minority groups. But, not long afterward, my trust in her excuse about diversity began to evaporate as I read news accounts about the African-American parents demonstration against Rap recordings and their effect on their kids. And later, the whole country began seeing news reports about Rap performers who had been arrested and charged with rape or murder.

The library head's second line of defense was philosophic. "Not to buy the tape would be making a moral judgment," she said. "We can't do that." (Not make a moral judgment? Can we not judge that cruelty is wrong? Can we not agree that cruelty packaged as entertainment and given to children is morally indefensible?) I couldn't resist recommending a book to the library head: British philosopher Mary Midgley's Can't We Make Moral Judgements (sic). (That was in 1991. Who would have guessed that five years later a commercial retailer, WalMart, would put libraries to shame by making moral judgments? It would refuse to sell recordings with obscene lyrics and album covers. The record companies would respond by offering cleaned-up performance versions. Bottom line: Parents could trust Wal-Mart.)

The library head's third defense was the Library Bill of Rights, "You need to read this," she said. "It states clearly that we can't keep materials from children on the basis of age. You can find a copy of it in the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Manual." I hung up the receiver and drove like a demon to the nearest library. I was determined to find out what had caused this doleful change in a formerly beloved
institution. Sure enough, buried in the chapters of that ALA paperback manual is the entire history of who changed our libraries, how and when.

A Rejected Responsibility

The library with which most Americans over the age of thirty grew up was the creation of people like William Fletcher and Arthur Bostwick, who, writing at the turn of the century, encouraged librarians to accept responsibility for the library's moral influence in the community. And this is the heart of the change: today the ALA resoundingly rejects this responsibility as naive and old-fashioned. Its official statements ridicule and ostracize librarians who do not comply with this rejection and library schools teach the new doctrine. The acceptance of moral responsibility for children in the library is now called "unprofessional"; making a responsible moral judgment about materials purchased for the library is called "elitist," and the librarian who is brave enough to do either is labeled a "censor."

Libraries, before the 1960's, had great local autonomy. Librarians were free to make moral judgments and were thus free to acquire the best available materials for their library collections. There were separate collections for children and adults, and, until the 1960's, the American library shared common values with its public....

The moral tone of today's public library is a casualty of the culture wars which began in the 1960's. During the social turmoil of that period, Judith Krug, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and the Library School of the University of Chicago, was in 1967, appointed director of the ALA's new Office of Intellectual Freedom, a position which she still holds today. A true child of the Sixties, Ms. Krug appears to have rejected the library's trusted role as the repository of civilization, seeing it instead as an engine of social change. She has worked tirelessly to make it so, forging, for example, strong links with the American Civil Liberties Union, on whose board she served for three years while carrying on her job as head of the OIF. She has been very successful in promulgating the ACLU's views within the country's libraries, and the ACLU has honored her with awards.

The policies of the ACLU are based on a philosophical nihilism which sees the freedom of the autonomous self as the highest good, and all censorship as evil. This has not changed since its founding by Roger Baldwin at the turn of the century. According to George Grant's 1989 study, the ACLU believes that children should have the same rights as adults, that pornography should be protected by the Constitution, and that the tiniest limitation of any expression will lead automatically to totalitarian repression. The current president, Nadine Strossen, is the author of *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights*.

Judith Krug is also director of the Freedom to Read Foundation, which she herself describes as an activist group. Like the ACLU, its attorneys stand ready to sue in library censorship cases....

Age and Libraries

It is apparently from these groups that the ALA has absorbed the philosophy that children do not need protection from socially destructive materials. Consistent with this view, in 1967, Ms. Krug's right-hand man, Ervin Gaines, suggested in a national ALA meeting that the word "age" be added to the Library Bill of Rights, so that any child of any age could access adult material in libraries. By 1972, the ALA council had approved
Article 5, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background or views."

This one word has led to hundreds of conflicts between communities (especially parents) and their libraries. But instead of deleting the word "age" from Article 5, the ALA has developed strategies for doing battle with the public.

The first strategy was to "interpret" Article 5 or libraries and to pressure them into obeying the will of ALA headquarters. During the anti-draft riots of the 1960's, Congress had lowered the voting age to 18. College students had pressed for more personal and sexual rights, denying that colleges any longer had the right to act in loco parentis (in place of the parent). The ALA then moved to deny that librarians, who had been acting in loco parentis for children in the library for not quite 100 years, any longer had that right. In the case of the colleges, students were rejecting established authority. But in the library's case, we are confronted with the strange spectacle of established authority rejecting its own responsibility to children and their parents.

Article 5 of the Library Bill of Rights does not actually mention in loco parentis, but the Intellectual Freedom Manual lays down the new rules. Many libraries, used to a tradition of local control, continued separate card files for children and continued to act as authority figures responsible to the community. In response, the Office of Intellectual Freedom drafted an "Interpretation of Free Access to Minors" and sent it to librarians all across the country. (It was this statement that cut off the partnership between parents and librarians and caused what parents see as a betrayal of their trust.)

The Statement labels as "unprofessional," any librarians who continue to notify or act for the parents. Librarians who do not follow the ALA line are accused of being "in violation of Article 5 of the Library Bill of Rights." I asked Ms. Krug if librarians were legally bound to follow the Statement of Interpretation. "No," she said. "It's a philosophical statement. But 55,000 librarians adhere to it."

Libraries Should Censor

It is a fact that most of the material about which parents complain would never have been found in the library before the 1970's. And, had the Internet been in existence, the ALA would have found the idea of access to pornography in the library to be simply out of the question. The enormous change in attitudes toward the selection of materials for the library is vividly illustrated in the ALA's own literature. For example, Arthur Bostwick, President of ALA in 1908, said in his inauguration speech:

Books that distinctly commend what is wrong, that teach how to sin and how pleasant sin is ... are increasingly popular, tempting ... the publishers to produce, the bookseller to exploit.... Thank heaven they do not tempt the librarian.

In his 1929 book, The American Public Library, he says "Nobody can buy every title that is published, and we should discriminate by picking out what is best."

In 1956 the Division of Public Libraries of the ALA Coordinating Committee published guidelines for materials selection which were taught by library schools. At first glance, the following guideline looks like a statement by today's ALA:
The collection must contain various opinions which apply to ... controversial questions ... including unpopular and unorthodox positions.... Selection must resist efforts of groups to deny access to materials in the name of political, moral or religious beliefs.

But then, we remember the context. Library collections were still separate for children and adults. The Supreme Court had not yet let down the bars against indecent material. Libraries still had great freedom from the heavy hand of the ALA. In that context, the statement fits comfortably with the Committee's other important guidelines for materials selection:

The library continually seeks the best.... Materials acquired should meet high standards of quality in content, expression and format.... Factual accuracy ... significance of subject, sincerity and responsibility of opinion must be considered.

(Madonna or 2 Live Crew in the library? Not under these guidelines!) Now fast-forward to 1996 and Mr. Conable, speaking for the ALA in the Intellectual Freedom Manual. He says librarians should not "narrowly limit collection scope on the basis of purely subjective factors such as 'quality' or 'popularity,' which require outside endorsement in the form of reviews or recommended lists ... or which are written in a way to justify the exclusion of controversial material...." "If material remains unordered, un-catalogued or un-circulated, ... censorship has occurred" (Emphasis added.) Here, the use of any kind of responsible judgment is equated with censorship, thus making it impossible for a librarian to build excellence into a collection....

Tax-supported libraries allow children access today to material so destructive that before the Internet, Ted Bundy could only get it from adult bookstores off-limits to children. In libraries, ironically, nothing is off-limits to children. Yet libraries are currently immune to obscenity and "harm to minors" laws. The seriousness of this situation is brought home by the fact that were a librarian to provide some of the material in question to a child on the street outside the library, that adult could be subject to arrest....

Mild Limits on Freedom

Everyone accepts, for the good of the community, mild limits on freedom in other areas: we must have a license to drive; we stop at red lights; we do not even fish without a license. Reasonable limits to intellectual freedom for the good of the community should frighten no one, for these limits were once observed in this country with a correspondingly better quality of life, including the safety of children.

Our quarrel with ALA is over their belief in philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's absolute freedom of the individual. This kind of freedom rejects responsibility and is blind to consequences. On the other hand, those who reject the ALA philosophy believe in the "freedom to do as one ought." This classic definition of freedom involves responsibility and weighs consequences to the community, especially its children. Only this kind of freedom is appropriate in a truly civilized society.

Further Readings

Books


- June Edwards. Opposing Censorship in Public Schools: Religion, Morality, and Literature. Mahwah, NJ:


Periodicals
- Dudley Barlow. "Teaching Core Democratic Values?" Education Digest, January 2000.