Book Challenges Bring Attention—and More Readers—to Many Great Books

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A number of books for young readers have run afoul of would-be censors, and as a result, works such as In the Night Kitchen by Maurice Sendak have virtually disappeared. But many others, including Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are, have become best sellers, often because of the censors' attempts to eliminate them. Whereas the references to menstruation in Judy Blume's Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret are now considered acceptable, the theme of masturbation ensures that Deenie, another book by Blume, remains a target of challenges. Gay and lesbian, occult, and anti-religious themes have made Heather Has Two Mommies, the Harry Potter books, and The Golden Compass, respectively, focal points of opposition by conservative groups. Yet as these and other examples show, banning a book can also help spur its sales.

Max imagined himself into the land of the wild things, and the censors said no. Mickey fell out of his clothes in full-frontal view, and the censors said no. When [author] Judy Blume gave Margaret her period, gave Tony Miglione wet dreams, and answered Deenie's questions about masturbation, the censors said "too much information," and they said no. When [author] William Steig turned donkey Sylvester into a rock and sent his parents to the pig policemen for help, the censors called these, respectively, an "out-of-body experience" and "offensive to law enforcement officers," and they said no. And when [author] J.K. Rowling sent Harry Potter to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the censors called it "evil," and they said no.

Some Subjects Will Always Be Controversial in Children's Literature

Max is almost fifty years old, and the censors have finally put him to bed and left him to dream his way to Where the Wild Things Are [by Maurice Sendak]. Now approaching forty, Mickey hasn't been so lucky. Many children have never seen [Sendak's] In the Night Kitchen because adults are just too troubled by nudity. There are a few grownup children who remember reading the book but say they never noticed that Mickey was naked. It's likely that the boy they knew wore pajamas, or perhaps a diaper, designed by teachers and librarians using opaque magic markers. Never mind that the text reads that Mickey "fell through the dark, out of his clothes / past the moon & his mama & papa sleeping tight."

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Those who were uncomfortable with Maurice Sendak's In the Night Kitchen are now causing a fuss over Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants series. "There's just not a place in children's books for underwear," remark those who challenge the books. Some assert that boxer shorts would be more appropriate than the jockey shorts the Captain proudly wears. Children are amused by underwear, which is one of the reasons that Pilkey's series is so popular. And it's all different styles of underwear that attracts young readers to The Philharmonic Gets Dressed by Karla Kuskin. Though this book has eluded censors in recent years, it did raise eyebrows.
when it was first published in 1982. Censors saw no reason for underwear to "ruin" a book about musical instruments.

Most censors have now recovered from the idea that fictional characters can have periods and Judy Blume's Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret is as popular with young girls today as it was when it was published in 1970. But there are still those who consider the topics of wet dreams and masturbation taboo. For this reason, [Blume's novels] Then Again, Maybe I Won't and Deenie continue to be challenged, especially in schools where computerized reading programs are used. These programs determine the readability level of books with no regard to maturity level. Parents then complain when their "gifted" second and third graders come home with books that are targeted for older readers. The Alice series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor; It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health by Robie H. Harris and Michael Emberley; Where Willy Went ... by Nicholas Allan; and many other books about sexuality appear on the American Library Association's most challenged books list.

Censors Often Target the Latest Social Issues

Novels and picture books featuring gays and lesbians are now the biggest targets of censors. Annie on My Mind by Nancy Garden had its day in court in Kansas in the 1990s; more recently, Daddy's Roommate by Michael Willhoite and Heather Has Two Mommies by Lesléa Newman have been the topic of heated discussions on talk radio shows across the nation. And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell is the latest book to cause debate on this subject.

Fantasy is another matter, though Steig's Sylvester and the Magic Pebble no longer causes a stir. Not since the 1970s has anyone cared that the policemen in the book are portrayed as pigs. And only a few adults understand (or remember!) the concept of an "out-of-body experience"; to young readers, Sylvester's magic pebble is simply a magic pebble.

The Harry Potter books remain troublesome to some adults, especially the Christian right. They object to any book that challenges their "Christian views" and believe that children who are exposed to witches and wizards may be tempted to engage in "evil" activities themselves. The Golden Compass and other titles in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy have had similar problems. Critics have called the books anti-religious and demanded that they be removed from public and school libraries. When the Catholic League called upon the public to boycott the film version of The Golden Compass, challenges to Pullman's entire series escalated.

Social issues are red flags for censors.

Sometimes Censors Blame Books for Society's Ills

Violence in children's books is another topic that gives censors pause. Killing Mr. Griffin by Lois Duncan, a favorite novel of middle school readers, had been on library shelves for years when the Columbine tragedy occurred. Struggling to make sense out of that massacre, the censors began blaming books, and novels such as Shattering Glass by Gail Giles and Give a Boy a Gun by Todd Strasser quickly fell under the watchful eyes of parents and nervous school administrators. Now, Neil Gaiman's The Graveyard Book, winner of the 2009 Newbery Medal, is already being labeled by some as too violent and ghoulish for young readers.
Profanity, racial epithets, and any type of name-calling in children's books almost always bring protest. *On My Honor* by Marion Dane Bauer, *Blubber* by Judy Blume, *Anastasia Krupnik* by Lois Lowry, *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, and *The Land* by Mildred D. Taylor have fallen prey to censors for one or all of these reasons.

It is human nature to want to read what others say you shouldn't, and banning a book often helps keep it in print for years.

Social issues are red flags for censors. They don't like books that deal with bullying, child abuse, drug and alcohol use, death, gangs, rape, war, or any topic that causes young readers to contemplate the world's ills. Ironically, censors who wish to control what children read question the controlled society in *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Jonas is a hero, but censors don't care. They see only the issue of euthanasia, and they say *no*.

Almost any book can fall under the guillotine of censors. The good news is that challenges bring attention to some great books. It is human nature to want to read what others say you shouldn't, and banning a book often helps keep it in print for years. The (tongue-in-cheek) moral of this story for writers: call upon young readers' imaginations by creating stories filled with magic, witches and wizardry, nudity, profanity, sex, violence, and social issues. And don't forget the underwear. The censors may say *no*. Young readers will say *yes*.

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**Further Readings**

**Books**

- Pamela Dell *You Can't Read This!: Why Books Get Banned*. Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, 2010.


**Periodicals**


• Suzanne Bilyeu "Mark Twain's Bad Boy," *The New York Times Upfront* 142 (March 1, 2010).

• "Book Bans at Odds with Modernisation Efforts," *South China Morning Post*, February 8, 2008.


• Brent Bozell "Librarians against Censorship?" *Townhall*, May 9, 2008.

• Kelsey Bradbury "Authors of Teen Novels Defend Their Right to Tackle Tough Subjects," *Buffalo News*, September 27, 2006.


• Deborah S. Connelly "To Read or Not to Read: Understanding Book Censorship." *Community and Junior College Libraries* 15, no. 2 (2009): 83-90.


• Erin Downey Howerton "Just Open the Door: Banned Books (and a Librarian!) in the Classroom," *Young Adult Library Services*, spring 2007.


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