

BANNED BOOKS

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Harry Potter series tops list of most challenged books

The best-selling Harry Potter series of children's books by J.K. Rowling tops the list of books most challenged in 1999, according to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom. The Potter series drew complaints from parents and others concerned about the books' focus on wizardry and magic. The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom received a total of 472 reports of challenged titles last year. A challenge is defined as a formal, written complaint filed with a library or school about a book's content or appropriateness. The majority of challenges are reported by public libraries, schools and school libraries. According to Judith F. Krug, director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, the number of challenges reflects only incidents reported. She says that for each challenge reported, as many as four or five remain unreported.

In Colorado, the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Association has defended a number of bookstores and titles that were challenged. They offer

free materials to member bookstores and to the public. They encourage the reading public to be alert to free speech challenges in the region and to respond to them through appropriate means. You can contact MPBA's executive director, Lisa Knudsen at 19 Old Town Square Suite 238, Fort Collins, CO 80524, phone (970) 484-5856, fax (970) 407-1479, toll free (800) 752-0249, lisa@mountainsplains.org or go to [www. Mountainsplains.org](http://www.Mountainsplains.org)

My own personal first encounter with rabid book censors was a woman who came at me with a copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak's Caldecott award winning picture book, edited by the legendary Ursula Nordstrom at Harper and Row, published in 1963 and immediately the center of a storm of controversy.

"Look! Look at this demonic horde! They have *horns!*" she screamed. Now, I must admit, I am sometimes a few nails short of a pound, and this confirmed it. I had read this book about a thousand times to my daughter and son and honestly had never noticed the horns. What I had noticed, of course, was the sense of empowerment the kids felt as they vicariously overcame the Wild Things who rolled their terrible eyes and roared their terrible roars and Max just stood there and said, "Be still." He also did not wet his pants.

So I was totally befuddled what to say to this woman who appeared to be close to collapse with her outrage and indignation. I must have said something really stupid, because she just looked at me like I was a cocker spaniel and turned on her heel and walked away.

I realized then the true power of children's literature in all of its endlessly varied forms, and vowed to give up anti-war demonstrations in favor

of pro-children's-reading advocacy. I have admittedly through the years subjected my poor children (who both read at age three due to their mother's overzealous reading of thousands of books to them and daring to defy the common wisdom that you should never teach your own children to read) to all manner of banned books. Why? Because my goal was to create lifelong readers.

You may or may not be old enough to remember the Good Old Days when the Catholic schools issued a Proscribed book list. This thing circulated by hand-written copies (this was before Xerox was invented!) that roared like wildfire through every junior high and high school in the world. It was the Basic Reading List If You Want To Know Anything About Anything for kids. On the list were titles like *Peyton Place* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, as well as Ken Kesey and most of Arthur Miller. Girls were known to baby-sit for free for college professors in order to get at their personal libraries and read the otherwise-unavailable titles. I tell you, that list single-handedly increased the reading habits of American preteens and teens far more than anything before or since. I was devastated when it kind of went away, whimpering into the wilderness of Civil rights and liberal politics of the sixties.

Censorship has always been a part of a literate society, at least in America. In countries where civil liberties are not constitutionally protected, book burning and banning are common and even capital offenses. But it is, I think far more heinous when a constitutional democracy like ours lets censors hold sway, especially over the children who literally (and legally) have no constitutional rights.

So, when New Mexico, in its third world wisdom, decided to enact a piece of legislation back in 1981 that would make it a criminal offense for libraries and bookstores to disseminate or display certain kinds of material, I just could NOT pass up the opportunity to go before the honorable Judge Bobby Baldock ¹ and testify against the statute in question. The courtroom was packed with literary notables and when I was called to the stand, I looked the judge in the eye and asked,

“Your honor, according to this statute, I will be criminally liable if I display or disseminate, read or promote this book,” and I whipped out a copy of *No More Diapers* and read it out loud. “According to the wording of the proposed statute, I am in violation because this book displays a naked child, said naked child’s buttocks, and is therefore lewd and lascivious by the definition of this statute. Also, it makes me a felon to keep it in “convenient reach” of a child, and I would ask this court to tell me what constitutes “convenient reach” for a two year old who can climb out of a crib like he had suction cups on his hands.”

Baldock laughed, so I kept going. “And then there is the matter of *Where Babies Come From* written by the editors of Time-Life, radical bunch there.” And I proceeded to read it to the court and ask the same questions about child nudity, display of the female anatomical apparatus known in the statute as “private parts” and was even tempted to ask where the judge thought kids were going to learn about reproduction if all the books that

¹ (sometimes referred to as Booby Baldock because of his notorious mangling of the English language in rulings)

mothers and teachers could read to them were outlawed.

When I stepped down from the stand, John Nichols (*Milagro Beanfield War* John) said, “You’re a hard act to follow,” and scowled at me as he took the oath. The New Mexico statute was defeated, but it was close.

There will indubitably be more challenges, especially with the repressive conservative climate that is headed down the pipeline from the Supreme Court of the United States. Guard your libraries, folks. Bookstores narrowly escaped having to turn over their sales records to the FBI/Homeland security spooks but the Tattered Cover took it to court and won. Their monetary cost was enormous and they are now on the ropes financially.

Kids in the classroom constantly are subjected to predigested material in textbooks that were selected, written and approved by committees. No child in living memory has ever asked, “Mom, will you read me that textbook again?” If anything, it is the textbooks that ought to be outlawed and replaced by real books, in my humble opinion. But since I’m not a very convincing censor, I’ll never be chosen to carry that banner. I am reminded sometimes of the school principal in a small rural district who objected personally to the librarian’s selection of what he called “infuriating and dangerous” literature. So he would sneak into the library and glue the offending pages together.

There are ever-vigilant censors who want to tell me what my kids can and cannot read, both in school and at home; they are on the move, battling to win an intellectual game of Qiddich. When they challenge a book in the library, the noble and fearless librarians have learned how to handle the situation: they say “Here is a [very long] form to fill out. Please quote exact page numbers

and title, author, publisher and ISBN of the material which you find objectionable and we'll get back to you.”

Usually, that does it. Most of the erstwhile censors say, “I would never READ that sort of thing!” but they feel perfectly capable of preventing me and my kids from doing so.

I think one of the best things to happen lately is the outcry against Harry Potter. I had put *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* on a list of *101 Best Books for Reluctant Readers* that I created (seven first class stamps and an SASE and it's all yours), and got some wonderfully livid e-mail from people who thought I ought to be escorted from the planet immediately. After some reasoned dialogue with these people, I found they had never even opened the book, but were responding to a rallying call from their church leader who said the book caused children to join covens of witches, engage in animal sacrifice and indulge in blood rituals in the dark forests of suburbia.

Harry, of course, is the ultimate child hero, in the same elite club as Roald Dahl's many mighty mites. Unloved, alone, cast upon his own resources, with the mentorship and advice of a huge variety of old geezers, some of whom are wolves in sheep clothing. Harry (like James Henry Trotter and Matilda and Charlie Bucket) learns to recognize evil and do mortal combat with it. This is dangerous stuff! We've got lots of grownups out there who have not got clue one how to battle evil, or even recognize it! They ought to be reading kids' books, I suspect, learning how to fight the good fight and win.

Through the ages, there have been censors and inquisitors galore. Fortunately for us, we have a little document called the Constitution which

guarantees freedom of intellectual pursuit. Sort of. Unless if you're a kid. Kids have no constitutional rights whatsoever until they turn into adults. So who will protect their rights? Teachers, librarians and hopefully, parents who are willing to do battle with censors.

Here is a list, from the ALA/ALSC website of the 100 Most Challenged Children's Books. I didn't choose the titles. I did however add annotations based on my reading experience.

1. *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* Series by Alvin Schwartz. Folktales and campfire legends, urban legends and well-told tales like The Hitchhiker, The Hook in the Door, and the Girl with a Ribbon Around her Neck (when she is forced to take it off, her head falls off.) 2nd grade reading level. A hit with ages 8-12 and high school impaired readers because of the great illustrations (by Stephen Gammell) and the big print.
2. *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite Daddy's gay, you see, and his roommate is not a woman. Uh oh. Will and Grace, look out.
3. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (wasn't this on the Oprah Bookclub list?)
4. *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier.
5. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. We've all read about Nigger Jim and Huck's criminal exploits. We're all warped by the experience and run out and join the KKK after reading it, right?
6. *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

7. *Harry Potter* (Series) by J.K. Rowling (see above)
8. *Forever* by Judy Blume. Girl has sex in back seat of car and finds out that boy does not love her forever. Newsflash. Some guys are like that.
9. *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. Boy and girl are best friend. Boy seeks a way out of poverty, girl is killed while swinging across river to their secret clubhouse (Terabithia, named after a place in Narnia series by the notorious rabble rouser, CS Lewis) where they do god-knows-what.
10. *Alice* (Series) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor
11. *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman. Heather's mommies are gay.
12. *My Brother Sam is Dead* by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier
13. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Roundly hated by many kids as a prep novel with little to be said for it. At the time it first came out, however, it was reviled.
14. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. A dys-utopian novel of the first order, which calls into question the role of authority, by whose authority law is constituted and how does one escape evil's pervasive influence.
15. *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris. A guide to your body for kids. Eek. It shows all the body parts including hair. For ages 10-15, illustrated by Marc Brown, creator of the notorious *Arthur* series now on PBS.
16. *Goosebumps* (Series) by R.L. Stine This series is trash. RL Stine, in a private interview with me, told me that he wrote very few of the books and contracted most of them out, and did it because he knew the kids would buy them and said, " Kids are such suckers." Exploitation of children is not on my

list of literary prerequisites.

17. *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck. Brutal scenes of reality in the Depression in rural Vermont. Animals being killed to be eaten. Excuse me? Eating pork makes you stupid? Age 14-up love this book because it is autobiographical and is a story of endurance and perseverance in the face of grinding poverty, orphanhood and too-early maturity.

18. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. I never thought of this as a children's book and probably Alice Walker didn't either.

19. *Sex* by Madonna This is the renowned companion volume to Michael Jackson's *Guide to Parenting*.

20. *Earth's Children* (Series) by Jean M. Auel. Not a children's series. Jean Auel told me she had been "advised" by an editor to add sex scenes at given intervals to make the book more salable for adults. If she had not done so, it could have been a very fine children's series.

21. *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson. A foster child figures if she's just bad enough, they'll send her back to her real mother. Be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it. She finally lands in a foster home where she is loved and cherished and guess what! She's shipped back to her druggie-prostitute mother and presumably lives unhappily ever after. Not that the Dept of Human Services ever screws up.

22. *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. Witches. Incantations. Flying unicorns. Satyrs. Time travel. Tesseract. Scientists gone mad. Kids forced to rescue their father from the Other Side Of time and defy fire and death to do it. Madeleine of course is a notorious Christian writer whose adult books have

sold in the millions and whose Episcopal outlook is dangerously cockeyed as far as the censors are concerned. Companion volumes in this series are equally disturbing: *Wind in the Door* has Charles being consumed by mitochondrial leukemia and his siblings have to rescue him at the nanotechnology level. *Swiftly Tilting Planet* follows kids trying to keep the earth from spinning off its axis and into oblivion. The series goes on and on, as do many other of Madeleine's books which follow the Murry family and its cousins and grands in a dynastic set of fictionalized parables.

23. *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous. Alice tells kids about drugs, sex, needles, and sordid life on the street. This was written long before AIDS was a factor for kids, but is brutal in its depiction of the dark side of prostitution, drugs and poverty for kids who will never see the inside of a Volvo unless they steal it.

24. *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers Vietnam Vets go bad. Don't watch *Jacob's Ladder*, the movie, either.

25. *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak. Yikes. Mickey is naked and has a PeePee (as one censor told me in horrified tones). What can I say?

26. *The Stupids* (Series) by Harry Allard. Harry Allard was the alter-ego of the now departed and much beloved James Marshall. The Stupids (Mother, Father, Buster and Petunia and their dog, Kitty and cat, Xylophone) love each other very much and cherish their time together. They celebrate the kids getting all F's on their report cards (F is for Fantastic, right?) by having a Ball to which they invite notorious troublemakers like George Washingmachine. This series is totally mild compared to Beavis and Butthead. My kids and I

used to write our own Stupids books and send them to Jim Marshall. In our versions, the Stupids Go to Hawaii, Stupids Go to Santa Fe, Stupids Go to the State Fair, Stupids Go to the beach, Stupids Go to the Balloon Fiesta, The Stupids Go to Mt. Rushmore and The Stupids Go to Disneyland. Disney threatened to sue me.

27. *The Witches* by Roald Dahl. Unlike the Angelica Huston movie, the book is filled with evil and loathing, horror and abused children. It's not pretty folks. Roald Dahl, of course, wrote for his own kids. His wife, Patricia Neal, had her devastating stroke when their youngest child was four, and he wrote *James and the Giant Peach* to prepare the kids for their mother's certain demise. Due in large part to Roald's relentless insistence on moving her paralyzed limbs and reading to her, she recovered. However, the censors never will.

28. *The New Joy of Gay Sex* by Charles Silverstein

29. *Anastasia Krupnik* (Series) by Lois Lowry. She's Jewish, she's a smart mouth and she's an investigator. She also has a pesky brother she threatens to put in the trash masher if he doesn't quit stealing her stuff. Bad combination.

30. *The Goats* by Brock Cole. A girl and a boy are left alone—and naked—on an island in a malevolent initiation by thugs and bullies. They learn (and teach us) about care, compassion and the hollowness of revenge.

31. *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane

32. *Blubber* by Judy Blume. She's fat, she's in Fourth Grade and she's pissed. This was before Bill Cosby's Fat Albert Character came to the one-eyed monster.

33. *Killing Mr. Griffin* by Lois Duncan. A bunch of loser high school English class flunking kids decide to scare Mr. Griffin into changing their grade so they can graduate/stay on the varsity squad/succeed in getting a car out their parents. Surprise, surprise surprise (as Gomer Pyle would say), they take him up to the mountains and he dies of a heart attack. So they decide to take the dead body back to town and DUH get caught. Lois is an old friend and has been on a remarkable journey and battle against evil which murdered her own daughter after the publication of her book *Don't Look Behind You*. She is one of the most banned authors (next to Judy Blume) in the history of the universe and has spent the past fourteen years trying to bring the murderers of her own child to justice.

34. *Halloween ABC* by Eve Merriam

35. *We All Fall Down* by Robert Cormier

36. *Final Exit* by Derek Humphry. It's about an assisted suicide, as I recall.

37. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood This is a children's book? I don't think so.

38. *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George. Julie has to run away from her abusive husband (she's thirteen) and heads out across the tundra. Learns to survive by watching the wolves...and peeing with them. This was before Clarissa Pinkola Estes' book taught women about La Llorona and La Loba.

39. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Since when is this a children's book? Toni Morrison would have a FIT if she were classified as a children's' author.

40. *What's Happening to my Body? Book for Girls: A Growing-Up Guide for Parents & Daughters* by Lynda Madaras. Outrageous candid information that

includes information on birth control, tampons and masturbation for fourteen and ups. Very small print.

41. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Remember when Scout learns that her rescuer has been lynched? Nice scene, eh? Reminds me of the black kid who was dragged to death behind the pickup truck in Texas by a bunch of Lone Star Yahoos.

42. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison See above note on *Bluest Eye*.

43. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Written when she was sixteen and part of a street gang, it tells the truth about ranking in, about life in the hood.

44. *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. Kids cruel to teacher. Yikes!

45. *Bumps in the Night* by Harry Allard. Huh?

46. *Deenie* by Judy Blume. Deenie has a back brace for her scoliosis and it has made her into a bitter young woman.

47. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes

48. *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Garden

49. *The Boy Who Lost His Face* by Louis Sachar

50. *Cross Your Fingers, Spit in Your Hat* by Alvin Schwartz. See #1.

51. *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein. Now, I for one never liked Shel personally, may he rest in peace, because he was one of those Key West guys that wore black leather in the 90 degree heat, shaved his head, smoked a lot of dope and hated kids. Oh, and he was gay. Does that matter? The poems are irreverent, anti-everything, and of course, wildly successful. Jack Prelutsky is ten times a better poet, with a real ear for kids, and real love of the innocence and playful love of language that kids have.

52. *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Dysutopia 101. See *The Giver*.
53. *Sleeping Beauty* Trilogy by A.N. Roquelaure (Anne Rice) Duh. This is not a kid's book.
54. *Asking About Sex and Growing Up* by Joanna Cole. This is for five-eight year olds and (yikes) tells kids things they might want to know about their bodies. By the notoriously subversive author of the *Magic School Bus* series and about 100 other picture books filled with photos. This one gathered ire because it IS photo filled.
55. *Cujo* by Stephen King. Not really a children's book. Bad dog, bad dog.
56. *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl. See #27.
57. *The Anarchist Cookbook* by William Powell. Powell recently said he was sorry he ever published this and wished he didn't have to see it sold, but regardless, is the most shoplifted book of all time. Most bookstores won't carry it because the minute they put it out, it grows legs.
58. *Boys and Sex* by Wardell Pomeroy. It tells boys about how their body works. The only way they can keep boys from reading this is to put a pink cover on it.
59. *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest. This is a children's book?
60. *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. Ditto?
61. *What's Happening to my Body? Book for Boys: A Growing-Up Guide for Parents & Sons* by Lynda Madaras. This is the sequel to her other successful books, one for boys, one for girls, only this one is about the turmoil of puberty. Where is her book for us psychopathic menopausal?
62. *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. Margaret is in

torment. She is underdeveloped and impatient. She is a whiner, and she is constantly ragging on God, his ownself, to fix it all NOW. Very explicit discussion of (gasp) periods.

63. *Crazy Lady* by Jane Conly

64. *Athletic Shorts* by Chris Crutcher

65. *Fade* by Robert Cormier

66. *Guess What?* By Mem Fox. Oh, it has a witch as the main character and she is nice. If anything, the wiccan community ought to be up in arms about this one.

67. *The House of Spirits* by Isabel Allende Not a children's book?

68. *The Face on the Milk Carton* by Caroline Cooney.

69. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

70. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Murder, cannibalism, gang warfare, nudity, and it isn't even Stephen King! Required reading in many schools, made into a movie with curious changes, perhaps so it didn't get reclassified as R?

71. *Native Son* by Richard Wright

72. *Women on Top: How Real Life Has Changed Women's Fantasies* by Nancy Friday

73. *Curses, Hexes and Spells* by Daniel Cohen. Daniel Cohen only writes nonfiction and this is a look at the history of incantations. At third grade reading level.

74. *Jack* by A.M. Homes

75. *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo A. Anaya. This one, plus Richard Bradford's

Red Sky at Morning, which tells the saga of an Anglo boy growing up in Lower Des Montes (Taos) amidst Hispanic ostracism are cross sections of the ancient roots of Spanish mysticism (and los Conversos, the hidden Jews of Northern New Mexico who came disguised as conquistadors to escape the Spanish Inquisition and expulsion order of 1492). The grandmother in Anaya's story is a real bruja, i.e. witch.

76. *Where Did I Come From?* by Peter Mayle. Cartoonish characters, flippant tone and (omigod) pubic hair made this one the darling of the censors since the moment it came out. Scholastic bookfairs stopped carrying it because it got stolen five times more frequently than it got purchased. You will find this in most elementary school bathrooms, well-read and in tatters.

77. *Carrie* by Stephen King. Pig blood, ostracism, telekinesis, revenge, prom night horror, snubbing. It's all there, it's all fantasy, but the master of "what if." Actually, I am reminded of the bodice-ripper mysteries that Caroline Cooney wrote, with their lurid neon titles and catchy subtitles. One had a body-outline chalked on the gym floor, with prom decorations all around and it was title *Last Dance* and the subtitle on it was "She was dead....but she had to come back for one last dance." Literature for the Freddy Krueger fans.

78. *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume. A girl whose father is murdered in a Circle K robbery is relocated to Los Alamos where she learns that the non-Anglo employees are not treated the same as the Ph.D's when it comes to toxic exposures. This was before they discovered nuclear waste buried on the playground at the elementary school up by the cement bunkers on the hill. Judy Blume was living in Los Alamos at the time, in a short-lived marriage to

Tom Kitchens, and wrote what she knew. My favorite line: “There isn’t sky like this anywhere” (when the girl gets off the plane in Albuquerque).

79. *On My Honor* by Marion Dane Bauer

80. *Arizona Kid* by Ron Koertge

81. *Family Secrets* by Norma Klein. I vaguely remember this as being about a divorced mom having a live-in boyfriend and how the girl just doesn’t like him telling her what to do. Gasp.

82. *Mommy Laid An Egg* by Babette Cole. Sex, reproduction, and Babette Cole’s nutty illustrations. She also did an outrageous book about dead people that angered lots of people. She’s very British and has this screwball sense of humor that reminds me of Benny Hill crossed with Charles Addams (of the Addams Family fame).

83. *The Dead Zone* by Stephen King. Certainly not a children’s book.

84. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. See Huckleberry Finn.

85. *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison. Not a children’s book.

86. *Always Running* by Luis Rodriguez

87. *Private Parts* by Howard Stern. And who decided THIS was a children’s book?

88. *Where’s Waldo?* by Martin Hanford. Find Waldo amidst the thousands of almost-clones. This was more infuriating than finding out that Donald Rumsfeld was the CEO of Gilead Sciences when they sold biological weapons to Iraq.

89. *Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene. A farmgirl meets a Nazi prisoner who teaches her that war ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. She befriends

him and helps him escape.

90. *Little Black Sambo* by Helen Bannerman. Oh, I love this one. First of all, he's East Indian, not African, and he outwits the tigers and gets all his stuff back. I think it outraged a lot of people because at the time (early 1900s) there were no blacks in books for children (except in *Gone with the Wind*, long before *De Wind Done Gone*). By the way, you can buy this at BOOKS!

Located at 124 N. Pinon in Cortez.

91. *Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett. Certainly not a children's book.

92. *Running Loose* by Chris Crutcher

93. *Sex Education* by Jenny Davis

94. *The Drowning of Stephen Jones* by Bette Greene

95. *Girls and Sex* by Wardell Pomeroy

96. *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell. Never bet with a kid who has a cast iron stomach. The bet is that for \$100 I can eat a worm every day for two weeks. It's gross, but not lethal. A long-time favorite of eight year olds.

97. *View from the Cherry Tree* by Willo Davis Roberts

98. *The Headless Cupid* by Zilpha Keatley Snyder.

99. *The Terrorist* by Caroline Cooney. I hate this book. In it, a kid is handed a box to take up the escalator. Halfway up, he realizes it's a bomb and he throws himself on it to prevent the death of the other people on the escalator.

This was back in 1999, before WTC and 9/11 redefined "Let's Roll."

100. *Jump Ship to Freedom* by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier

This list was compiled from 6,364 challenges reported to or recorded by the

Office for Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association. The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom does not claim comprehensiveness in recording challenges. Research suggests that for each challenge reported there are as many as four or five which go unreported.

An illustrated edition of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Trina Schart Hyman was the artist) was banned in two California school districts in 1989. Following the Little Red-Cap story from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the book shows the heroine taking food and wine to her grandmother. The school districts cited concerns about the use of alcohol in the story. Wait until they find out about *The Dyer's Hand* by W.H.Auden in which Little Red is told by the wolf-in-granny's clothing to "get in the bed, little one" and "take off your clothes, little one" and when she (duh) figures out this ain't granny, she says she has to "go" and he says, "do it in the bed, little one." That ought to unglue them.²

Bowdlerism still exists today, but nowadays cleaning up sexual references is waning in popularity, and cleaning up racial references is growing in popularity. Case in point: *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* was silently "cleaned up" from the 1920 original, in which Polynesia the parrot occasionally used some impolite terms to refer to blacks (the author was a notoriously provincial segregationist). In 1988, after the book had fallen from favor enough to have dropped out of print, the publishers issued a new edition that removed nearly all references to race from the book (and cut out a plotline involving Prince

² John Mark Ockerbloom, onlinebooks!pobox.upenn.edu

Bumpo's desire to become white). In contrast, the Newbery-winning *Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* has been available in its original form (impolite words and all) for a long time, in part because the Newbery committee forbade their medal to be displayed on altered texts.

Similar concerns about the handling of race apparently caused *The Story of Little Black Sambo* to be banned from Toronto public schools in 1956, according to a book by Daniel Braithwaite. (Much of the fuss over Sambo has been over the illustrations rather than the text)

To see a list of books have been the targets of recent school censorship attempts in the United States see Challenged and Banned Books from the American Library Association. (Number 1 was the Harry Potter series, which was banned for a time in Zeeland, Michigan schools.) The ALA also has a similar list covering the entire 1990s. This 1998 list published by the Christian Science Monitor also includes reasons cited for recent challenges. The American Library Association has designated September 20-27 as Banned Books Week 2003. Their web site has information on the observance. For a banned books kit, contact ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom , 800-545-2433, ext. 4220, jhammond@ala.org. \$29.95 plus \$7s/h. Visa/MC/Amex accepted.

Now, I can just hear some people saying, “But children shouldn’t be exposed to this sort of thing. It’s why they grow up too fast. It’s why they kill each other in the lunch room with automatic weapons.”

I am not in favor of traumatizing children by reading them

inappropriate literature at any age. I would no more inflict Trina's *Snow White* or *Little Red Riding Hood* on a two year old than I would ask a ten year old girl to read Toni Morrison or Nancy Garden. There is such a thing as inappropriate material, I agree. But I do NOT agree that it is somebody else's job to tell me or my kids what we can and cannot read, what can and cannot be purchased and shelved in the library with public dollars, and I certainly do not want my child proselytized by someone else's religious views and told what is right and wrong according to *that* set of by-laws and not mine.

Censorship is not about protecting children. It's about having power over children. Censors do not want to educate or enlighten children: they want to control them. Instead of honest literature written by real live authors, they would rather have the kids read sanitized versions of Mother Goose, fairy tales, and published books. They cannot control controversy so they want to eradicate it, in the only arena where the other side has no constitutional power to defend itself. Censors are intellectual bullies and thugs, and more often than not, are not willing to reveal the sources of their funding or information, which in my view cooks down to institutional deceit.

Too many censors I have known do not read much of anything, banned or not. They do watch a lot of TV, and they do depend on the tube for their worldview, without question. They have extremely constrained literary contexts into which they can intellectually place a large controversial conundrum. They have trouble with big words sometimes, too.

There are already lots of laws on the books outlawing pornography, defining community standards of decency, and criminalizing pandering to the

detriment of a minor. We don't need more. We certainly don't need reactionary non-readers telling us what is and is not appropriate literature.

My own personal response to censors has been to ask them: *How Many Children's Books Have You Read This Year? This Month? This Week?* When we have reached some parity in terms of reading and book-related experience, then we can talk.

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Gwynne Spencer is the author of *What's Cooking in Children's Literature, Recipes for Reading, Have Talent Will Travel: Authors, Illustrators and Storytellers Directories East/West of the Mississippi* all from Linworth Publishing. She reads lots of children's books every year.