

# Out of the blue: Coping with the book-banners

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**Résumé:** A la lumière du cas de Margaret Buffie, qui a connu divers ennuis lors de sa tournée de 1990 dans les écoles, l'auteur analyse le comportement des censeurs. Joanne Stanbridge observe qu'à la base de leurs réactions, il y a le désir légitime de guider et de protéger les enfants, mais elle offre en contrepartie six recommandations aux bibliothécaires et aux éducateurs qui veulent développer une stratégie de défense contre les groupes de pression.

When Margaret Buffie arrived at our Montreal library for her scheduled reading in November of 1990, she was still dealing with the unexpected news that Queenswood School in Orleans, Ontario, had suppressed her book *Who is Frances Rain?* and cancelled her visit. School officials objected to some of the vocabulary used in the text, citing words and phrases such as "bastard," "damn," and "to hell with the city."<sup>1</sup> Even though she was exhausted from the demands of the tour and from the strain of the sudden media blitz, Buffie gave an upbeat and entertaining presentation. Later, she expressed her frustration over the incident; she felt helpless in the face of the attack.

The incident at Queenswood School highlights attitudes and problems which typically arise when censorship becomes an issue. Using the *Frances Rain* situation as an example, this paper will identify some symptoms of censorship, briefly consider the dangers it poses for all parties concerned, and outline methods which can be used to prevent or minimize the damage caused by the request to remove an item from the shelves.

In a *Globe and mail* article on censorship, Elizabeth MacCallum observed that "librarians are not chosen for their morals, but because they have studied what makes a good book, and the standards of good literature" ("Censorship"). The librarian who overrules the literary value of a book with a moral judgment bypasses three of the basic tools used to establish the importance of a literary work: reviews, best-book lists and awards, and popular demand. Upon publication, *Who is Frances Rain?* was widely and favourably reviewed both in Canada and in the United States. It won the Young Adult Canadian Book Award in 1987, was runner-up for the CLA Book of the Year for Children Award in 1988, and was nominated for the Ruth Schwartz Award. It is an ALA Notable Book, and has been recommended in *Read up on it* (National Library of Canada), *Our choice* (Canadian Children's Book Centre), and in *Canadian materials* "Notable

Canadian fiction books.” In Great Britain, it has been recommended by the *Sunday times*, *The Jewish chronicle*, and *The times educational supplement* (Kids Can; Buffie, open letter). At the time of the Queenswood incident, the book had sold 20,000 copies and was in its fourth reprint (Zaleski). So the decision to ban the book at Queenswood School rejected professional considerations in favour of moral ones.

The behaviour of school officials in this situation was absolutely typical. A librarian caught in a censorship controversy should expect to see any or all of these behaviours, which are typical of the censor:

(1) The censor denies that the action he or she is taking constitutes censorship, even if this means simply replacing the word “censorship” with another, less loaded, term like “removal.”

(2) The censor dissembles. Having participated in extensive discussions about the moral value of a work, the censor will make a sudden leap in logic to draw attention away from the central issue.

In the *Wilson library bulletin* Linda Waddle lists many examples of this type of dissembling: one school removed a book from reading assignments because of objections to swear words in the text, another school removed a book from its library and recommended that it “be made available only in the secondary schools,” yet another removed its entire video library from the shelves because of objections to a handful of titles—and in each situation school officials denied that they were practising censorship (Waddle 68-70). Waddle goes on to say that censors “are realizing that ‘censorship’ is a dirty word these days...Librarians will say, rather primly, ‘It’s not censorship, it’s selection,’” and censors are doing the same thing, saying “It’s not censorship, it’s removal” (Waddle 70).

(3) One of the censor’s most effective behaviours is silence. When asked to discuss or to explain the action taken, the censor finds it most expedient to say nothing. In cases like the one at Queenswood School, this ensures a speedy end to the controversy, as those who oppose the ban have no authority to get the book reinstated.

(4) The censor’s strong feelings about a work can overflow into his/her treatment of other work by the same author, and may involve attacks on the author’s integrity or morals. Visits are cancelled, lest the author corrupt the audience, and those who defend the book are accused of being insensitive, or lacking in moral character. The censor finds it difficult to understand that those who support his/her cause can argue against the suppression of a title; that the two issues are separate. It is occasionally difficult, when feelings run high, even for the librarian to remember this point.

(5) It is also typical of the censor to object to “offensive” portions of a work out of context, never having read the entire book. At Queenswood School, neither the teacher who instigated the ban nor the principal who carried it out had read *Who is Frances Rain?* (Collins 64; Buffie, letter to author). Case studies of book banning include examples of the “out of context” phenomenon taken to

outrageous extremes: in several cases, censors have painstakingly compiled and circulated—even published—lists of the offending portions of a work. One of the standard procedures in the librarians' reconsideration process is to require all parties in the discussion to have read the entire work. A standard question on the Request for Reconsideration form is "Have you read the entire book? If not, what parts have you read?" and "In your opinion, what is the theme of the book?"

Since one of the hallmarks of good writing is its complexity, we can't use our interpretation of a text in deciding whether to promote or to suppress it. When a school principal argues that the phrase "to hell with the city" is inappropriate and we are sure it is in keeping with Lizzie's character and with the overall tone of the book, it is tempting to move the discussion onto this plane. But the "interpretation" argument leads us back into the censor's quagmire of assumptions and implications. If we argue about interpretations, it means we have already accepted the premise that a novel which "says" *this* deserves to be treated in a different way from one which "says" *that*. We must fight our censorship battles on some other ground. We must accept the principle of intellectual freedom above and beyond our interpretation of the text. We must strive to select and promote good writing on the most objective grounds possible, even if there are objections to certain interpretations of it. This holds true even if, and this is the most difficult part, *we* have objections to certain interpretations of it.

At Queenswood School, as in many other incidents, the censor admits that he/she is acting out of fear of political pressure. This adds another layer of assumptions and implications to already existing layers. When the censor admits that he is afraid of what parents would say about the language in a particular book (Vincent; Kennedy; Bruce) he assumes that (a) everyone will read the book in the same way—i.e., everyone's interpretation will be the same as his, (b) everyone's objections, based on this interpretation, will be as strong as his are, and (c) everyone agrees that the appropriate course of action, given (a) and (b), is to ban the book. His certainty on these matters allows him to defer responsibility for the banning without actually consulting the parents. According to Dave Jenkinson, it is typical of school librarians and administrators to mistake their *in loco parentis* role to include control over what students are permitted to read (Jenkinson 6).

It may be useful to consider the admirable qualities which characterize the censor's position, and to recognize the same tendencies in ourselves. Ken Kister quotes Will Manley on the irony inherent in the situation: "...one of the main tenets of intellectual freedom is that both sides of an issue should be represented. However, intellectual freedom is the most one-sided issue in the profession" (Manley 41).

In *Bookbanning in America*, William Noble quotes a mother in Mayfield, Kentucky, who instigated a much-publicized ban on Faulkner's *As I lay dying*. LaDone Hills showed courage and good intentions in speaking out against what she considered to be a terrible wrong: "The fact that my son had been excused

from reading this book did not extend to others...because of my concern for other students and to make other parents aware of the contents of the material in this book...I began to pursue a way to get such materials removed from our educational program” (Hills 22-23).

The censor is committed to the well-being of children, and operates out of an impulse to guide and protect them. Knowing that censorship is deplored, but convinced that the title under discussion is dangerous, the censor summons the courage to speak out, even when this means facing a public outcry. It is sobering to find that librarians, who are quick to condemn censorship, often possess many of the censor’s admirable qualities and even, on occasion, seek to apply them—by declining to purchase or to promote a title, by reclassifying it into a “more appropriate” part of the collection (e.g., closed stacks), or by labelling or expurgating it. If librarians are alert to the fact that the censor’s impulses may be admirable but that these *methods* are unacceptable, our position will be more informed and consistent. When we recognize the courage and good intentions behind an act we find so damaging and misguided, we are more likely to address the issue satisfactorily. In dealing with a censorship issue, the censor and the librarian operate out of the same admirable beliefs—the well-being of the child and the courage of their convictions. It is the *application* of these beliefs which comes into question during a censorship dispute.

Another distinguishing feature of the censor’s approach is the set of unshakable assumptions which underlie the request to remove a title. Assumptions about the nature of a work of fiction include the following: that the primary effect of literature is didactic; that in recommending a work of fiction, a librarian or educator is understood to have placed a moral stamp of approval on the ideas expressed in it and even on the possible ways in which those ideas might be interpreted; that the strength of our agreement or disagreement with the censor’s point of view will have something to do with the way in which we treat the book; that the existence of certain words, images, and stereotypes in a text should automatically condemn the entire work because young people will believe in and mimic everything they read. These are the assumptions from which the censor operates.

In almost every way, the administration of Queenswood School exhibited typical censorship behaviours. In addition, several other factors served to accelerate the process. First, there was the lack of a defender for the book. When school librarians and administration trade their role as defenders of intellectual freedom for a new role as *protectors of morality*, there is no one left to stand up for the book. In the Queenswood situation, the school librarian, who might have played the “defender” role, would not or could not speak out against the situation. While the Canadian Library Association, the Writers’ Union of Canada, and the National Library of Canada expressed concern over the issue, no one stepped in at a local, immediate level to defend the book.

Second, a poor selection process was in place at the school. Using standard

selection techniques (reviews, best-book lists, awards, popular demand), the school librarian could have presented an excellent defence for the book. Instead, these standard techniques were rejected in favour of a moral judgment on *Frances Rain*. If, for some reason, standard selection criteria were insufficient for this school—i.e., if a particular religious or moral slant were required in the collection—this should have been written into the selection policy and applied to every title being considered for the school. One of the librarian's chief responsibilities is to struggle against subjectivity in building collections. The selection policy is one tool for ensuring impartiality. It makes clear that the library will select materials which present a variety of different viewpoints. It includes a commitment to the Canadian Library Association's "Freedom to read" statement. It states that works will be added to the collection based on their literary and historical importance, and that no work will be excluded on the basis of words, ideas, or illustrations which may be found to be unacceptable.

Third, no procedure for reconsideration of the title was in place. The ALA *Intellectual freedom manual* sets out guidelines to be used in reconsidering a title (a 1992 update is available from ALA). Once again, the process is designed to be as objective as possible, while allowing real selection errors to be corrected. Ken Kister relates an incident in which a woman objected to a certain book in a school library collection. The reconsideration committee found the book to be an obscure work, intended for adult readers, from a publisher of undistinguished reputation. It had received poor reviews and was absent from standard lists of recommended reading. In short, it represented a mistake in selection, and was removed from the shelves (Kister 45-46).

The consequences of the Queenswood School incident were also, unfortunately, typical. In his attempt to protect students from the "bad language" in the novel, the principal quoted the offending words out of context to newspaper reporters and on television. Attempts at censorship often backfire in this way, drawing attention to the "objectionable" parts of the text without reference to strengths which made the book a success. In the end, the "offensive" words are made more public than ever and the unexpected publicity fuels sales of the book. Furthermore, the Press is by its very nature one of the greatest defenders of freedom of expression, and it is unlikely that the school could emerge from its sudden media exposure with anything but bad publicity.

Effects on the writer are often overlooked. The controversy propels sales, while the author laments, "Yes, I want good sales, but not *this way!*" Self-censorship is bound to have an effect, if only in the author's struggle not to succumb to it.

One of the most insidious effects of book-banning is the way in which it opens the book up to further attacks. A few months after the Queenswood incident, *Who is Frances Rain?* was banned again—this time at Victoria Albert School in Winnipeg. It is difficult to believe that the controversy over the first incident did not spark the second. Once again, an author visit was cancelled by

an administration which claimed it was not censoring—the book would remain on the shelves, but it would not be used in the classroom as originally planned. Once again, because the attack came from within an organization which traditionally supports intellectual freedom, the book was without a defender, and the author had no recourse.

The following recommendations, some of which are suggested in the ALA's *Intellectual freedom manual*, form the basis of any librarian's successful defense against a censorship attempt:

- (1) have a written selection policy including a "portions thereof" statement (i.e., stipulating that no work will be excluded from the collection because of certain words, phrases, ideas or illustrations which may be considered by some to be offensive);
- (2) have a well-documented reconsideration process for titles which come into question;
- (3) in dealing with a censorship situation, avoid the censor's technique of keeping silent. Insist on discussion, debate and dialogue;
- (4) avoid using an interpretation of the text as a basis for a censorship debate—the principle of intellectual freedom must operate above and beyond our interpretation of a text;
- (5) respect the individual's right *not* to read, while opposing censorship. The student who has moral objections to a text should be free to choose a substitute title without fear of ridicule, but his or her decision should not lead to an infringement of the group's right to read a given text;
- (6) accept responsibility for defending intellectual freedom. Librarians and educators are uniquely qualified for this role. If we become confused about this, no other group is likely to bridge the gap. In situations where we strongly agree with the censor's point of view, or where the majority of the population seems to, or where we are particularly sure about a title's inappropriateness, we must be especially careful. Whenever our role as defenders of intellectual freedom comes into conflict with our role as protectors of children or promoters of self-evident good, we had better think hard before taking action. The current push for "political correctness" is one area where we may be tempted to step over the limits of our profession, confusing others (and, possibly, ourselves) about our commitment to freedom of expression.

In the end, as the Queenswood book-banning shows, nobody wins a censorship controversy. In libraries unprepared for a censorship incident, the storm of emotions and accusations can cause a great deal of damage. The censor, the students, the library and the writer suffer. However, this damage can be avoided if we re-examine our commitment to intellectual freedom—to see it as more than a "motherhood" statement and to understand that it is at the very root of our profession. Then, having established sound selection policies and reconsideration guidelines, we can feel confident that the best books are finding their way into our collections, uncensored.

## NOTES

- 1 Alison Bruce, "War of words," *Quill and quire*, Dec. 1990; Paul Zaleski, "School cancels readings," *The star* [Orleans, Ontario], 14 Nov. 1990; "School cancels reading over book's language," *Kamloops daily news*, 7 Nov. 1990; "Author's reading cancelled," *The evening patriot* [Charlottetown, P.E.I.], 7 Nov. 1990; Janice Kennedy and Angela Mangiacasale, "Cancelled: School turns away writer because of book's language," *Ottawa citizen*, 7 Nov. 1990; Isabel Vincent, "Book banned by Ontario school," *Globe and mail*, 7 Nov. 1990.

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