

Susan Musgrave: An interview



Marie Davis

Susan Musgrave, currently writer-in-residence at The University of Western Ontario, is one of Canada's most distinguished writers. Long associated with witchcraft, Musgrave comments in a November 1992 interview on the censorship she has experienced in her personal life, as well as the philosophical and moral issues it raises for her as artist and mother of Charlotte (10) and Sophie (4).

DAVIS: Alvin Schrader quotes one person who submitted a complaint to a library about your children's story, *Hag Head*, which reads: "Witchcraft is represented as being a real and vital threat to the lives of children.... The resolution of the story leaves the witches and underworld figures in the same powerful and threatening position" ("Too Young to Know? 81). Do you often get that kind of complaint about your work?

MUSGRAVE: This is an odd complaint because I can't tell whether it's a *witch* complaining or somebody complaining about witchcraft. It's like that bumper sticker I used to see in Berkeley in the 60s—"if you outlaw guns, only outlaws will have them." I never knew whether that was a left-wing or right-wing bumper sticker. This quote is like that: does this person think it is or isn't a "real and vital threat"? I don't particularly think it is myself; but I know there probably are people who do think that witchcraft is threatening; some Christians do. My ex-husband is a born-again Christian who thinks I'm a witch and is very worried about the way I bring up my children.

Actually, the kind of overt censorship I have experienced—and this was a very odd case—involved a complaint made through Human Resources [in B.C.]. Somebody called the Help Line and said that there was no sign of a child living in my house and that there was evidence of witchcraft everywhere. I don't have the kind of house where I have kids' things everywhere. Charlotte had her own wonderful, bright room which was off the kitchen, full of her art. And the evidence of witchcraft was *The Witches of Eastwick* by John Updike. When the social workers came in, they looked around and just started laughing. I was

supposed to have red and black images everywhere; well, I had a few paintings—North West Coast art is red and black. I couldn't believe the person had called, but they had.

I went to the Head of Human Resources over it and put in a complaint. I think it's good that people are investigated when there is a report but I said I didn't want a record of this. Besides, if I wanted to raise my child as a witch, then there was no reason that I couldn't—RIGHT? They just laughed. The Head of Human Resources said, "I thought you would think this was funny. I have always thought of you as the sanest of the sane" or something like that.

DAVIS: But the complainant caught you where you were vulnerable, where many parents are vulnerable.

MUSGRAVE: Yes. And it was someone who had been in my *home* and with my *daughter*. It's such a long story. I had a lodger, who turned out to be kind of a crazy woman, and she met a woman at a singles' group and brought her home to my house while I was out at my grandmother's funeral. I believe it was my lodger, or the woman from the singles' group who objected to the "images of witchcraft everywhere" and called the Help Line.

DAVIS: Do you think she really believed you were a witch?

MUSGRAVE: No. I think it was that she had never had any kids, and she was really jealous that I had a child. It was very complicated. In fact, I had to leave my own house to get away from her in the end. It was just awful.

DAVIS: You moved?

MUSGRAVE: I moved out of a house that I had lived in for *twelve* years. I left. I just couldn't bear the hassle anymore. Most things don't happen to me this way, but this was a real disaster. Especially since, as a parent, you question every day whether you are doing the right thing, and then when someone in authority questions you, you feel vulnerable. It all had to do with what this woman felt wasn't the right environment for the child, so she tried to, in a way, censor me.

DAVIS: Do you yourself censor—say, what your children watch and read? Do you believe in *any* form of censorship?

MUSGRAVE: Well, Mulroney is now saying he's going to censor violence on television. What do you start with—cartoons? They're some of the most violent images you see for kids. I mean all the figures—cats, the roadrunner—get squashed and then come back again. I think that there is a kind of naivete about cartoons. So, for my kids I don't censor them. But there are a lot of programs with guns in them and violent killings where women are being hurt that I don't want Charlotte to watch.

DAVIS: Children's shows?

MUSGRAVE: No, these are adult shows she is flipping through and I think Whoa! It's a bit much. I don't see that as censorship. I think you draw your own personal lines in places but you don't necessarily inflict that upon anyone else.

Once you start drawing lines, you'll have somebody who finds sexual intercourse obscene and the next person who finds kissing obscene. There are

people who don't believe we should kiss in public. And so, what point do you say we'll allow this? So, I think that you have to allow violent T.V. shows and hate literature, too. Who's to say what hate literature is? It's like giving Customs officials at the border the right to decide what's pornographic. It's ludicrous. So who is judging? Who is it up there who says they're so superior and knows more about what we can take than we do? I don't know anybody.

Now there are people who are very suggestible, who believe everything they read. I tend to believe everything I read. But then I read something else that tells me the opposite and I believe the opposite. But I figure that's just the way you learn and eventually you come to your own conclusions—by seeing all those points of view. You just cannot start drawing lines and say “this can't be published,” or “this can't be read” because it does not give us choices then to make up our own minds about how we view the world, or how we would like the world to be.

I never have watched a snuff movie and wouldn't advocate the making of them, but if I am going to believe that there should be no censorship I have to accept that those will exist in the world. But my own personal line is that I choose not to watch them. Other forms of pornography I don't have any trouble with, but I do when someone's hurt or killed, especially killed. Personally, I like bondage. The idea of it. I am really on Camille Paglia's side about this: there's a kind of violence in sexuality. I have never had the kind of bed that I could be tied up to so it looks as if it isn't for me.

Also, I've always liked anything to do with sex, myself. I don't have any feeling that it's obscene or pornographic. I don't have a problem with it. You know, Charlotte at a very young age asked me “What's oral sex?” Well, I had trouble explaining because it does sound pretty yucky to a kid when you are saying this is what oral sex is. She said “Uhh! Don't you get germs?” I said “Well, I don't know.” But at least I have tried to always tell her the truth, you know.

Now, Charlotte's a great fan of Madonna. She's got everything to do with Madonna everywhere. But I think Madonna's videos are great. I really like them because they upset people, and I think that art is about upsetting people; shaking up the status quo. And I think what is happening is that people want to go more and more back to not being upset. Where do you start drawing those lines and who is it that is making those decisions? That's what I want to know. Is Brian Mulroney more capable than me of telling me and my family what we should watch on T.V.? I hope not. I mean, given the other decisions he has made I don't fairly trust that he could make a decision for me about censorship.

Back to what you said: Do I make those decisions at home? Well, yes. You hope to instruct and guide and there are things that Charlotte watches that are too old for her.

DAVIS: So, you would not really want to impose your ideas on other people but you would with your children.

MUSGRAVE: Well, you have to. I mean you can't raise children and say "Anything goes, kids!" You don't let a two-year old cross the street alone. Is that censorship or is it just common sense? I really loathe T.V. so I am apt to say things like "What is this program? It looks stupid. TURN IT OFF!" My father said the same thing all the time. Anything with canned laughter I immediately think that it is not something I want Charlotte watching, or things that portray women in stupid, ditsy roles, I don't like either. But what I try to do now is sit down and *make* myself watch these things and say "Okay, is there some redeeming quality in them?" Usually, I can't bear to watch them, but Stephen, my husband, will and say, "This is actually a good message." But I don't think that I have ever censored a book or a story. There is nothing I have ever had to.

DAVIS: Do you worry, though, about your kids not reading imaginative stories that use really wonderful language? Do you worry about them being overexposed to more sensational literature, like some problem novels?

MUSGRAVE: Well, so far Charlotte goes through phases. She went through a phase of reading *Archie* comics. I knew this was going to pass and sure enough it has. Now it's *Teen Beat* but she also reads books. *Listen to Me, Grace Kelly* was the last book she read—she really liked that—and she'll read any kind of horse book you can find. I sort of encourage it. I used to read to her a lot when she was little and I read to Sophie now a lot. I do find a problem with books that aren't well-written or where the grammar is wrong. So I find myself correcting the grammar. I mean if someone says "laying" when it should be "lying" I change that, or if they leave out the "and," and say "Go get your mum," I always put "go and." I'm kind of pedantic about the last. But Stephen speaks a kind of street jargon. He says "I don't know nothing." And Sophie has already picked that up, and is always saying "I don't feel good," like a little gangster. I say "You don't feel well?" I try to correct it by just saying how I would say it. "You don't feel well today?" I don't think it sinks in. I see them going to school and people saying "God, what sort of parents did she have? She can't even speak English." "I don't know nothing."

What worries me most in kid's books—it's even in *Charlotte's Web*—is the mistakes in grammar. I remember thinking E.B. White uses "is" instead of "are" and it's not in the dialogue, which would be forgivable, but it's in the text. Also, "laying" instead of "lying." I thought: "How can an editor let that go?" But you never hear of people trying to censor a book because of bad grammar—just "bad language."

DAVIS: Well, in your case it's the distribution of power, not language, that's objected to—the witches are not reduced to powerlessness at the end of the story.

MUSGRAVE: Yes, but I don't think they are in the same powerful condition. Hag Head is banished to the marsh, the wand is lost. Usually in mythic tales, even in *The little mermaid*, once the wand or sceptre is lost, power is lost; so when the wand is gone, Hag Head is reduced.

DAVIS: But I guess it's because you intermix the two worlds—the real and the

supernatural—that it does not seem really like one world wins out over another. **MUSGRAVE:** No, but I don't think it does. I think that would be too neat a way to end a story. I have always thought that good and evil co-existed and that the power of darkness and power of light co-existed. Hag Head is simply banished but then there is always the possibility that she will come back. I think that kids understand that. I think that I understand that as an adult. Banishing it would be what we would like to be able to do, like banishing violence off T.V.; but in reality it is always there lurking as a possibility.

I don't know why people are so afraid of violence. Violence is out there. To pretend it doesn't happen by not showing it in visual images or in books seems silly to me—you can pretend all you like but it's still going to be there. So, why not directly confront it?

And people seem to accept more in visual images than they do in a book. If they see the word "fuck" in a book, they go berserk; but it's in movies and on T.V., it's everywhere, and people accept that.

DAVIS: Why is that?

MUSGRAVE: I don't know. I can never figure it out. The printed word seems to still have more power. I can have a violent scene in a book I write and people will feel sick about it and say so, but there are horror movies like *Cape Fear* out there that are way more diabolical than anything that I could think of writing. Not to mention the things that happen in real life, like Jonestown. Where can you get more surreal, and violent and awful than things that really happen in the world?

So, just to say that we're going to take violence off television and that will stop women from being raped and killed seems so naive and simple-minded as to be shocking. I just can't believe that anyone thinks there are cures like that.

DAVIS: Do you think violence, then, is an inevitable part of human life?

MUSGRAVE: I think it is. I think that people are violent. You watch kids beating on each other before they watch T.V. And animals. They don't watch T.V. and they're pretty violent!

I think there are violent streaks in us; and I suppose we try to civilize ourselves. Certainly, for me the violence goes into my work so that I'm not a violent person. I suspect I would be if I didn't write poetry. I'd probably be a murderer. I know that I sublimate a lot of tendencies. As many writers have. And I've talked about that. Many convicted murderers compose poetry the night before they are to be executed; there's definitely a connection between the criminal mind and the artistic mind, the world of violence and the world of creativity. And I think writers and artists and musicians have a way out; other people play golf, or sew, or knit—they do something—people have to sublimate those confusions that lead to frustration and anger and violence in us.

But by banning anything, all you do is actually send it underground. I mean my friend Linda Rogers has this great song, "The booger Song," that's caused all sorts of controversy on their record *Brown bag blue* and it caused them to be banned from reading at a private school in Victoria! It's just a fabulous song.

Kids love it. They hear it once and they sing it forever. And they'll do it behind your back *even more* if you ban it.

DAVIS: How does it go?

Musgrave [singing]: It goes "I got a little booger,
A tickle up my snout,
I don't know how I'll do it,
But I've got to get it out."

Then they play the kazoo. "I could put it in a booger bank
Or stick it on my chair
But I'd really rather stick it
In my sister's frizzy hair."

And it goes on. Every verse has something different, like putting it in the teacher's desk. I don't know why it's so funny myself. I guess it's because they know it's taboo.

DAVIS: To get back to the witchcraft issue: do you consider yourself a witch?

MUSGRAVE: Well, I wouldn't call myself a witch. Other people call me a witch.

DAVIS: But a lot of critics always refer to...

MUSGRAVE: Well, that's because my first book was called *Songs of the Sea Witch* which was not me at all. It was a muse figure. I was reading a lot of Robert Graves and thinking about the white goddess and that's my sea witch: a white goddess figure to whom I wrote these poems when I was sixteen, thinking this was very romantic. And then I got stuck with this typecast image. After a while I stopped denying it. I thought, "what's the point?" I deny it and I get a headline "Witch gives way to woman." That was what was in *The Globe and mail*. I couldn't believe it.

About this complaint: "Witchcraft is represented as being a real and vital threat." My witch friends would say that it isn't. Robin Skelton is a witch and he would say "Of course, witchcraft isn't a threat. We'd never hurt children." Now satanism does. I have nothing to do with satanism at all, and I don't know any satanists. Most people don't know the difference between Wicca and Satanism.

DAVIS: What is the difference?

MUSGRAVE: Satanists practice black magic, they desecrate graveyards, they put curses on people. Witches are the original pagans who worship nature and do healing spells, usually using herbs. The witches are into white magic. I have done a bit of white magic myself and I know it takes a tremendous amount of energy; Robin said I was not grounding myself properly, that's why I was burned out for days after I did any kind of spell, and he said there's a little ritual to ground your energies. But, I stopped doing it.

I have a hard time with my youngest daughter because she thinks witches are bad, and scary and I'll say "Well, a lot of people think I am a witch, Sophie." I love spending time in the wilds. I would in the old days probably have been

burned as a witch simply because I had power. I think witches were women with power, personal power. When I am out in the woods I feel the *most* kind of power, just right there. I can blend in. I can sit and read and something will come up to me or fly right by me or stop on the ground. I can be that still.

So, witches are not threatening to children, but there are a lot of misconceptions out there about them.

DAVIS: Do you ever censor yourself—worry about political correctness or appropriation of voice?

MUSGRAVE: No, I certainly don't. In my new novel, I've got Colombians, I've got West Indians, I've got black women, and my protagonist has one hand; I don't have one hand, I have two. I have this strange mixture of people united by their visits to a prison; I've sort of got a mini-United Nations inside a prison. Now, it is up to me as a writer to *know* the world I am writing about. I'd look like a fool if, for instance, I got the accent or the dialogue of the black women wrong; people would say that I don't know what I'm talking about.

DAVIS: What gives you the "right," though, to speak from another race's perspective?

MUSGRAVE: They're *characters*. I am not saying that I *am* them. My main character is a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant like I am, only with one hand. But what gives anyone the right? Do I have to write like a forty-one year old white woman from Vancouver Island? Can I set my novel in Toronto, if I've never lived there?

DAVIS: So, are you arguing for the rights of the imagination?

MUSGRAVE: Yes, we must allow that right. But writers should always try to know what they're talking about. If they don't, it will show in the writing. If I decide to set my novel in Jamaica and write about a Jamaican family, it's going to show right away if I don't know what I'm talking about. And I wouldn't write about Jamaica because I have no clue as to how people live there, or how they speak, except from what I've heard in reggae, but that's not going to get me very far. If I went and spent a year in Jamaica I might very well feel that I could do it.

I have lived with Indian people in villages, and I know their dialect, so I feel I know a certain amount that qualifies me to write about them. But they're all peripheral characters in my novel. I wouldn't make *myself* an Indian character. I write my own rules and the world I know best is the WASP world. My main character has the kind of mother that's like mine: neurotic and obsessed (doesn't go to a prison because she once went to a dungeon that was stuffy).

So, that's the world I am comfortable with and that's where I write. I think in the world of art there should be "no-go" areas. As artists, we should be able to write about anything we want—witches included.

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