

Freedom to Read and the Stories We Need



So if a fellow author's work is challenged by a special-interest group, or by offended parents, I side with the book, knowing that it was likely written in a similar spirit. We may disagree with choices the writer made in crafting her story, but then as readers we can put the book down, and keep it away from our children. We oughtn't take the liberty of making that decision for others.

But that doesn't quite work either, to say that a wider censorship has no place. Obviously, this doesn't apply to hate literature and child pornography. Since I believe literature has power, I have to acknowledge that this power can be used both ways. And I have to listen when others take literature as seriously as I do, even if I want to disparage their views.

And with kidlit and YA, there's an added factor that only parents understand: in caring deeply for our children, we are made more vulnerable than we were before – which makes us anxious and sometimes angry. Sometimes our caring even makes us more vulnerable than our own children. I believe that we parents find it more painful to read about young people in harrowing situations: "It's just a story, Dad," as I've heard one daughter gently remind her parent, during a cosy reading time with *The Lord of the Rings*. We parents can no longer read about orphans, the bullied, the abused and neglected, in the same spirit that our children can.

Years ago, I was upset when my three-year-old told me the story of a movie he'd been allowed to watch, called *Grave of the Fireflies*. It's a Japanese animated war-drama in which two orphans face neglect, sickness and starvation. The story ends when the young boy – alone after the death of his little sister – dies quietly among crowds (of adults) in the Tokyo Metro. I was horrified by the story, but apparently my son had been riveted throughout, and showed no sign of upset thereafter. And as I learned later, this movie also happened to be a particular favourite of one of his little friends, and she enjoyed repeated viewings.

In contrast, I recently insisted the same son, now 12 years old, read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. It is an excellent book and happens to have much useful material for a boy entering his teens. I was pleased and proud that I'd inadvertently found this resource for him. And he loved it. He read it in a day; he re-read parts, and read them aloud. I took comfort in the fact that his world had been enriched by a story that neither his parents, nor teachers, friends or classmates could have given him.

But there is a scene in *Part-Time Indian* in which a racist joke is told, and the protagonist is compelled to fight. For me, the joke was nothing more than a tool to propel the plot. In the story it is duly vanquished and forgotten. But the joke stayed with my son, and he continued to be bothered by it.

Perhaps I'm still glad that he read the book; perhaps all its benefits outweigh the upset; or perhaps he should have been older before reading it. Perhaps I'll never know.

Perhaps it helps to get some perspective. The Red Riding Hood that lives in my mother's childhood edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* is devoured by the wolf, as is her grandmother. A huntsman finds the sleeping wolf, cuts him open and saves them. Red Riding Hood collects many big stones, which they put inside the wolf. Then they sew him up. When the wolf wakes and tries to run away, he is pulled down by the stones and dies. The huntsman skins the wolf.

The Red Riding Hood in my daughter's picture book shows Grandmother bundled into a cupboard, and Little Red Riding Hood has the wits scared out of her. Luckily, a passing woodsman (no longer a huntsman) chases the wolf away.

When I was a kid, Jack was a resourceful boy who climbed a beanstalk, stole treasure from a terrifying, bad-tempered giant and got away with it by chopping down the beanstalk so the giant crashed into the earth, making a big crater.

In my son's old picture book, Jack steals from the giant and cuts the beanstalk, too. This causes the giant to fall and subsequently disappear without any evidence of death or a broken body. Also, at the end, Jack's mother exclaims in joy to see Jack's absent father's treasures, which had been stolen by the giant before Jack was born. Personally, I find this version clumsy, but my son tells me it was a great story and the pictures were awesome.

We need stories to know our world, who we are and who we aspire to be. Today, the best in us aspires to be tolerant and aware, to accommodate many viewpoints without resorting to violence. We want to write and read stories that make us better and smarter. We are growing increasingly uncomfortable with the beastly side of our natures. After all, what use is it now that we are no longer fighting the other animals for their skins and meat? And yet we all know – readers, writ-

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ers, parents and children – that it's still with us, and we turn it on each other when threatened or angry, or when just being evil.

So what do we do with that? What do we do with genocide, child soldiers or the torture of a gay adolescent by his peers? Do we stop reading and writing about it? Do we keep our thoughts off the shelves?

We are lucky in this part of the world: we can equip our children to manage and process issues in the relatively safe medium of an honest book.

And for all of us, we can be grateful to have a written history of human thought – for wisdom, for comfort, for perspective – that has thus far survived all our bannings and burnings. ☺

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Freedom to Read Week takes place February 26 to March 3, 2012. For more information, visit www.freedomtoread.ca

LITERATURE HAS ALWAYS COME UNDER FIRE for saying the wrong thing. People get upset and they burn the paper on which it is written.

Books for children and young adults come under fire more often than most, except that when people get upset, they want the book placed out of reach, with all the other harmful substances. The author, the publisher, librarians, teachers and school administrators then get involved – where does this book belong?

As an author, I deplore the idea of frightened parents trying to block access to children's literature. But, hey, this is the just the flip side of the reason that I'm even published in the first place. In the world of young people, books matter. As a writer, as a parent and as an avid reader myself, I'm grateful for this.

Good books give us the stories we need. Since our ancestors bundled up in the skins of their fellow animals and gathered around a fire, we've needed stories in order to know our world, who we are, and who we aspire to be. When I'm writing, I want to achieve that same around-the-campfire thrill, with the same sense of responsibility to the message. My responsibility to the reader is an inseparable part of this. Even if my reader is only imaginary (which happens more often than I like), she is with me through everything I write, guiding my choice of content and language.

Fall for our books



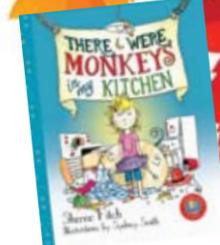
Sable Island
by Wendy Kitts

A non-fiction book targeted to middle-grade readers.



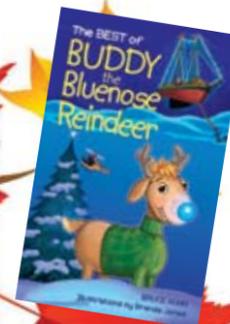
My Goat Gertrude
by Starr Dobson
illustrated by Dayle Dodwell

A children's story about Starr Dobson's real-life pet goat.



There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen
by Sheree Fitch
illustrated by Sydney Smith

A children's classic now back in print with new illustrations.

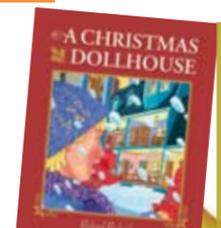


The Best of Buddy the Bluenose Reindeer
by Bruce Nunn
illustrated by Brenda Jones

Both Buddy books—truly the “best of”—now in one handsome edition!



Mabel Murple
by Sheree Fitch
illustrated by Sydney Smith (paperback)



A Christmas Dollhouse
by Richard Rudnicki

A new holiday story from an award-winning illustrator.



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