CENSORSHIP AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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The present arguments over censorship of books for the young reveal, among other things, the conflicts in current social attitudes toward childhood and children. This essay attempts to place such arguments in some historical perspective. It suggests that the relative peace that prevailed in the field of children's literature from, roughly, 1900 to 1965 was the result of a broad consensus within the field about the needs of childhood and the function of literature for children. That consensus was, in turn, the result of the general homogeneity of the people involved in the production and purchase of books for children. Agreement broke up in the mid-1960s, when groups heretofore unconcerned with children's books began to see their social and political implications. Enormous changes in the content of children's literature followed with some paradoxical shifts in liberal-conservative positions on censorship. The 1980s promises to be a period of conflict, as conservative reaction against the liberal trends of the 1970s tries to reverse an accomplished transformation in the literature.

The major arguments against censorship of books for adults have been familiar for a long time. Most of them were well expressed in John Milton's Areopagitica, published more than 300 years ago. Milton's notion of a free marketplace of ideas where intellectual wares are available for comparison, his insistence on the right of free adults to choose for themselves their moral and intellectual fare, his argument on the impossibility of suppressing ideas successfully in a free society and on the dangerous weapon that censorship can become in the hands of authority—all these are still basic to the case for uncensored access by adults to printed material. To them must be added another argument, very common in modern (though not in Milton's) discussion: that in any case, it does not much matter, that the written word is but one of many influences on an individual and by no means the most decisive. This

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attitude was perhaps most succinctly stated by a former mayor of New York, Jimmy Wagner, in a long-ago legal fight over the restriction of pornographic literature. “Well,” the Mayor is said to have remarked in laconic defense of liberty, “no girl was ever ruined by a book.”

At a time of serious controversy over whether children’s reading should or should not be subjected to some kind of restriction, the question arises whether these same arguments are applicable to children and to children’s books. Do children have the same intellectual rights that adults have? Or, to put it more basically, are children free citizens of a free society in the same sense that adults are? Should children be encouraged to make comparisons among intellectual and moral concepts freely available to them? Can children be assumed to be as capable as adults of making reasoned choices among ideas? Is the “harmlessness” argument appropriate—that is, should children’s books be free of censorship, if for no other reason then because they are a relatively unimportant influence in children’s lives? Do the dangers of restricting children’s access to the full range of moral, social, and political attitudes outweigh the dangers of exposing the young to pernicious ideas—or is it the other way around? In short, is the concept of intellectual freedom applicable to children? Is that concept, in fact, even compatible with the concept of childhood?

Even to raise the issue suggests that we are in the midst of a historical shift in our thinking about children and childhood. For a long time, certainly for well over 200 years, most adults in Western society would have given an unhesitating no to any and all of these questions. Until quite recently, there existed in our society a very general agreement that the rules on moral and intellectual matters applicable to children belonged to a category altogether separate from those applied to adults. Adults considered that children were beings different from adults intellectually, emotionally, and socially as well as physically, whose proper development required that they be insulated from certain kinds of knowledge and influences, shielded for their own good, from too direct contact with the full range of adult activity.2

The idea of childhood as a distinct and, ideally at least, protected period of life has become so familiar as to seem “natural,” perhaps even inherent in the human outlook. It is worth remembering, however, that such a view of childhood is neither eternal nor universal. It has a historical beginning and development and, like any other cultural attitude, it is subject to change.

2. This is an ideal more often achieved, of course, by the middle and upper-middle classes than by those below. Nevertheless, if lower-class families rarely had the means or the space to make the ideal practicable, they often embraced the concept and deplored their inability to protect their children from too much knowledge too soon; see [1, p. 499].
Historians of childhood differentiate between modern concepts of childhood and those that preceded them. Philippe Ariès, whose *Centuries of Childhood* was a seminal work in the field, locates the beginning of modern childhood in the early seventeenth century [2]. According to Ariès, medieval culture separated children from adult life only through the period of infancy, which ended at about the age of seven. After that, children moved into the adult world, living and working alongside adults, hearing, saying, and seeing what adults heard, said, and saw. Ancient and medieval culture made few efforts to protect children from contact with violence, sex, coarse humor, vulgarity, and brutality of various kinds. All those elements of adult life which later generations excluded from the category of knowledge suitable for children were an accepted part of a child's experience once he had left the primary care of mother or nurse.

The rise of the middle class, dating, roughly, from the end of the sixteenth century, brought about fundamental changes in attitudes toward family life in general and toward childhood in particular. Ariès describes a steady in-drawing of the family from that time, a separation of family from the larger world beyond; he sees the extended relationships of medieval society narrowing, and the old, rather careless, attitude toward children giving way to a more anxious and demanding view. Increasingly, middle-class people came to regard childhood as a period of preparation for adult life, and, increasingly, preparation became identified with education. As their concern for the education of their children grew, the middle classes steadily lengthened the period they called childhood. School became the central task of a child's life. In school, children were at a remove from adult life for longer than they had ever been in medieval society—"quarantined" is Ariès's term.

Whether or not they follow Ariès in all respects, most historians of childhood agree that attitudes toward children began to change in important ways around the turn of the seventeenth century. They generally agree, too, that the change was closely connected with the expansion of the middle classes, and with all the economic and social changes that that expansion implied. Because they were not dependent upon the labor of their children for survival, middle-class families could assign their children to the unproductive (in the immediate economic sense) pursuit of formal education for ever-lengthening periods of time—a process which has continued into the present. Because they increasingly tended to regard children as incomplete or unformed until their education was finished, middle-class parents also tended to emphasize the differences between child and adult, to see childhood as a distinct phase of human life and children as distinctly different from adults.

This is not to say that a single view toward children has prevailed since
the seventeenth century. On the contrary: while all "modern" views insist on the differences between childhood and adulthood, there have been important shifts in how adults characterize the nature of children themselves. Over the past several centuries a number of ideas, each quite different from the other, have at various times seemed inseparable from the idea of childhood. In some periods, adults have viewed children as depraved from birth, marked by original sin, in need of the most stringent spiritual training to prepare them for salvation; at other times, they have seen children as innocent creatures, better than adults, whose innocence must be protected as long as possible from the inroads of sordid reality. Adults have sometimes looked on children as a mixture of good and bad, whose goodness must be nurtured and badness suppressed, whose character must be formed and firmed before it was exposed to a corrupt world. At other times, they have thought of children as blank slates, whose characters were written by adults during the childhood years. More recently, adults have tended to see children primarily in psychological terms, to judge influences on children by their psychological rather than their moral effects, and to be concerned for children's mental health more than for their character.

These examples by no means exhaust the list; the adult view of children has changed, sometimes drastically, sometimes subtly, many times over the past 300 or so years. Whatever their differences, however, there are two assumptions common to all modern views of childhood. The first is that children need to be separated to some degree from adult life until they have been educated or ripened in some important way. The second is that adults have something of value to teach children, so that the very concept of childhood in modern history is closely associated with that of the nurture, training, and conscious education of the child by responsible adults.

What these assumptions have meant in practical terms is that modern middle-class childhood is managed, directed, organized, and defined by adults, for the good of the child and for the good of society, as adults see both. And management of childhood implies restriction of children, usually by separating them from some aspects of society and by curtailing their access to some kinds of knowledge, experience, and resources—including books.

A managing approach to childhood reached a high point in the nineteenth century and is closely allied with the whole genesis of a separate literature for children. Ideally, if not always actually, nineteenth-century parents regulated their children's lives fully, certainly including their reading. It is scarcely coincidental that the concept of children's books as a special genre found a congenial home in the nineteenth century and flourished accordingly. Nor is it surprising that
adults of the period were at least as concerned with the moral content of children's books as with their literary quality. Nearly all books for children before midcentury were more or less frankly moral tracts, and even when authors set about to write what they were pleased to call "entertaining" stories for children, they often had in view obliterating the folk and fairy tales of which they heartily disapproved. Samuel Goodrich, the "Peter Parley" of early nineteenth-century fame, based a long and busy career on his fervent opposition to fairy tales. Even in the second half of the century, when entertainment and literary merit found a place in children's books, adult concern with the moral content of the literature remained high. The movement that created special collections of children's books, housed in separate children's rooms in public libraries and supervised by specially trained librarians, was very much part of the effort to meet the dangerous challenge of trash literature, to provide an attractive alternative to the lurid nickle and dime juveniles so popular in the latter nineteenth century [3, chap. 4]. The idea of selecting children's books for their suitability as moral influences on children was built into library service to children from the beginning.

There is, then, an enormous lot of historical baggage to be sorted through when the question of censorship of children's reading is raised today—as it is with great frequency. Attitudes toward children and childhood have undoubtedly changed in the second half of the twentieth century, as have attitudes toward books and morals. Yet the intensity of current arguments over restriction of children's reading, ringing through journals, meetings, and associations, is ample evidence that the changes have not followed a single direction, nor proceeded at the same pace. The discussion that follows attempts to describe today's situation, together with its background in the first half of the twentieth century, in broadest outline. It cannot detail, though it does try to suggest, the immense intricacies that lie behind today's passionate debates over censorship in children's books. Adult attitudes toward children's books, as toward childhood are, in any period, an amalgam of personal, social, and sometimes political convictions. The mix has rarely been so complex or so explosive as it is today.

The first half of the present century was a burgeoning season for children's books. Publishers built on the successes of the late nineteenth century, adding luster to an already golden period in children's book production. As the market for children's books expanded, more and more publishing houses created separate children's book divisions, presided over by editors who specialized in the genre. By 1900, children's rooms were an established part of many public libraries; later, and more slowly, libraries began to be added to public schools as well. By 1915, most library schools and teachers' colleges offered courses in children's
literature; children’s librarians became specialists in their field. The specializing trend also affected writers of children’s books. Unlike authors of the nineteenth century, who frequently turned their hands to both adult and children’s books, those of the twentieth century usually chose between the two audiences, both reflecting and reinforcing the increasingly firm line drawn between the adult and the juvenile fields.3

Throughout this time, and indeed until the fateful decade of the 1960s, the issue of censorship within the mainstream of the children’s book field was virtually quiescent. While there were sporadic assaults on the evils of comic books and other “trashy” material read by children, the major products of the children’s book business, the trade books published by standard, respectable publishing houses and bought by libraries, were pretty much exempt from criticism, or even scrutiny. Libraries generally refused to buy cheap series books—Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books and such—but the decision was rarely challenged as an act of censorship. If children were disappointed not to find these perennial potboilers in their local public library, few adults chose to raise the banner of intellectual freedom on their behalf.

In fact, the concept of intellectual freedom had little place in most discussions of children’s reading in this period. The peace that prevailed was grounded in the common set of values shared by the adults who dealt, whether personally or professionally, with children’s books. Those values had evolved since the nineteenth century, but not so far as to make intellectual freedom an issue where children were concerned. Childhood was still considered a stage of life in need of adult protection, a time in which restriction of children, and of the influences on them, was considered a natural duty of adults toward children. The moral preoccupation of the nineteenth century lingered, too, though in far less insistent and preachy form. While authors, publishers, and reviewers of children’s books all rejected the openly moral lessons that had dominated books of the past, they had by no means lost interest in what they now called “values” in children’s literature—by which they meant moral and social values. Children’s books were written, published, reviewed, and purchased in accordance with a remarkably consistent point of view about what was suitable reading for children. The community of adults engaged in bringing children and literature together endorsed, apparently without much real dissension, an implicit code of values which was observed virtually unbroken in thousands of children’s books published between 1900 and 1965.

3. This separation was due to more liberalized adult literature in the twentieth century than to greater restrictions on the content of juvenile books. It also reflected the growing tendency of children’s books to revolve around child characters, making the books of limited interest to adults.
The code is most easily described in the negative, by its taboos. The list is long and often has more to do with how a subject was treated in a book for children than with what the subject was. Violence, for example, was not—as many have assumed—entirely absent from children’s books before 1965. Given the plethora of pioneer and frontier stories in children’s literature, that would hardly have been possible. What was taboo was a lingering on the details of violence and, even more, the depiction of a child, or even someone near and dear to a child, as the object of serious violence. Neither was death the absolute taboo that many present-day commentators insist it was. But the sentimental death scenes of the nineteenth century were certainly out of favor in the twentieth century, and it is clear that children’s book people were concerned that the subject might be harrowing to children unless carefully handled. For this reason, children rarely died in children’s books, and the death of parents, if it occurred at all, took place off-stage or in the past; death and grief were rarely central issues in children’s stories. That, in fact, was the general approach to such painful topics as were given space in children’s books: they were peripheral, rather than central, to the narrative; acknowledged, but not dwelt upon.

A more absolute blackout applied to problems classed as purely adult. Divorce, mental breakdown, alcoholism, rape, drug dependence, suicide, prostitution, sexual deviance—it would never have occurred to most writers of children’s books, let alone their editors, that these were suitable topics for the young. Even crime, except for an occasional and relatively innocuous theft, was rare.4 Racial conflict was touched upon gently and gingerly in a few—very few—books for children before the middle 1960s. Florence Cranall Means, Jerrold Beim, and Frank Bonham were among the early writers on the subject. They wrote honestly but with constraint in a field where most publishers feared to tread.

Most obvious to today’s observer was the taboo on the subject of sexuality in books for the young. Not only was prepubescent sexuality unacknowledged in children’s books—it was hardly widely acknowledged elsewhere in the culture, either—but even the sexual awareness of teenagers found only restrained, oblique recognition. “Romance” was handled nearly as gingerly as race where the young were concerned. One has but to read Maureen Daly’s famous Seventeenth Summer (published in 1942) to catch a glimpse. The book was written for older

4. Even Nancy Drew, whose repetitive adventures usually involved some crime, encountered only the most ludicrously harmless and klutzy thieves. She was often knocked on the head, but never beaten, raped, or murdered.
teenagers and, at the time, its portrayal of first love was considered reasonably frank. Today, when it is read at all, it is by eleven- or twelve-year-olds, and to any reader its narrow morality, acute anxieties, and personal naïveté must make it seem a period piece easily as remote from modern experience as *Little Women*.

While these (and other) taboos did not altogether preclude literary realism in children’s books, they did ensure that a protective attitude dominated. Reality was tempered and selective for young audiences. Pain and fear were kept at some distance from child protagonists, wrongs were righted, injustice redressed; things generally turned out well at the end. The same protective optimism applied to the child characters the books portrayed. The extreme idealization of the latter nineteenth century had largely disappeared. In twentieth-century stories, children had faults, made mistakes, and strayed (mildly) from the paths of righteousness. But the books insisted that children lived universally within a firm and supportive social and familial system. Parents or other wise adults were always on hand in children’s books to correct the wayward child, gently but effectively, and to assert the claims of the community. The message of the books was that American society operated according to a single moral code; that adults were reliable sources of wisdom, justice, and caring; that childhood and children were sheltered under the protection of responsible adults in a responsible society.

It should be emphasized again that the code I have described was not explicit, for the most part, was not an iron set of rules to which writers pledged obedience, was not the result of a conspiracy between book editors and librarians or anyone else. Nor was it imposed, in most instances, by conscious censorship, or against any very fervent opposition. In the first sixty years of the twentieth century, the issue of censorship in children’s books simply did not arise very often, for two reasons. First, the community of adults involved in the production and purchase of books for children was both relatively small and relatively homogeneous. Broadly speaking, librarians, teachers, authors, and editors of children’s books were the same kind of people, members of a community which shared the general point of view that the code expressed. The rule was one of consensus, rather than coercion.

Second, the children’s book field was something of an island in the larger culture. Few adults not professionally involved in children’s literature read much or widely in it. Whether the reason was indifference, confidence in the selection processes of public and school libraries, lack of information or misinformation, or the conviction that what children read was unimportant so long as they read—whether it was some of these or all of them, the fact is that until quite recently, most adults,
including parents, paid little attention to the content of children's books. Children's literature was sheltered by neglect.

Both consensus and complacency began to break up about the middle of the 1960s. Social upheaval in such manifestations as the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, the bitter dissensions of the Vietnam era, and the changing mores and altered family structures of a new era raised questions about the world traditionally pictured in children's books. Belatedly, but inexorably, the winds of change sweeping through American society reached children's books, scattering indifference and consensus once and for all. Every group working for social and political change suddenly discovered what the nineteenth century had so often proclaimed: that children's reading is a potentially powerful influence on society. The closed world of children's book production was opened to newcomers who held no brief for the agreed-upon code of the near past. Peace shattered as hundreds of new voices demanded to be heard; unity gave way to a passionate diversity of views. By the 1970s, children's books had become a battleground for the personal, social, and political forces of a changing society.

Again, looked at broadly, the struggle can be seen to have proceeded along two quite contradictory lines. On the one hand, there was a strong movement to loosen the strictures on subject matter in children's books. Slowly at first, then with ever-increasing speed, children's books began to reflect the liberalized moral code and the changing family structures of contemporary society. The old insistence that every American family was intact unless broken by death gave way to facts; divorce was soon nearly as common in children's books as it was in reality. By 1972, Norma Klein could even write of a one-parent family in which the mother had simply chosen not to marry the man who had fathered her child [4]. Teenage sexuality, including homosexuality, became a commonplace topic, discussed with varying degrees of explicitness by such writers as Paul Zindel, John Donovan, Isabelle Holland, and Sandra Scoppettone. Judy Blume casually broke dozens of traditional barriers with her flat-footed but frank stories admitting the interest that even fairly young children had in their own bodies [5, 6]. The so-called "problem novel," dealing with such matters as alcoholism, drug dependence, and a staggering variety of other personal and family troubles, became the major staple of the teen reading market.

There was, to be sure, some shock and some resistance to these books as they came to the hands of traditional selectors of books for the young. But the trend was unstoppable. Times had changed, social attitudes had altered, writers and publishers responded eagerly to new demands for "realism"—and the books were, moreover, an undoubted success with
their intended audience. Judy Blume's books sold by the thousands in paperback; libraries that refused to buy her novels lost patrons to drugstores. Besides, there was strong, if not unanimous, sentiment within libraries and schools for greater frankness with children. Most teachers recognized that their students' lives were not so sheltered; most librarians were uncomfortable with the role of censor. Those who wanted to maintain protective barriers found themselves at odds with a highly visible, highly vocal liberal-radical coalition which argued forcefully for applying the same standards of intellectual freedom to children's literature as to any other.

Ironically, the concomitant movement ran directly counter to the concept of intellectual freedom. An aroused social consciousness had brought about, at last, an examination of the underlying messages in children's books, and many adults were startled to see what these books did and did not say about race, social responsibility, and the social conditioning of girls or the children of minorities. In the name of social justice long delayed, critics in many quarters began to demand that libraries remove from the shelves books that they, the critics, characterized as racist or sexist. The Council on Interracial Books for Children, founded in 1966, became a powerful voice pronouncing judgment on books for their racial or sexual biases.

Thus, by the latter 1960s, the children's book profession found itself confronting two quite contradictory sets of demands. On the one hand, there was enormous pressure to liberalize children's books, to open them and the collections that housed them to every aspect of reality, so that they might better reflect the pluralism of contemporary American society. At the same time, from the other side of a curious equation came an equally strong pressure on writers, publishers, reviewers, and selectors of children's books to rid the literature of racism and sexism. While a raised social consciousness might accomplish this task for present and future books, the only answer to those already written, according to many social critics, was to remove the offending volumes from children's access. Libraries were pressed to review their children's collections for racist or sexist literature and to discard what they found. (The critics, of course, identified many books they wanted removed from the shelves.) It is one of the many ironies of the time that more than a few liberals and radicals found themselves with a foot in each camp, demanding freedom in one cause, censorship in another. Just as remarkable was the fact that many libraries managed to comply with both of these apparently contradictory demands, defending Blume, Klein, and Zindel in their children's collections while retiring Little Black Sambo, Mary Poppins, and Dr. Doolittle.
Whatever the differences of direction, change there surely was: the distance traversed in just over fifteen years is nothing short of astonishing. Its measure may be taken from the books themselves: from Betty Cavanna's prom-centered teen romances of the 1950s and early 1960s to Judy Blume's _Forever_, that 1975 how-to manual of teen-age sex; from Frank Bonham's _Durango Street_, which managed to depict (with commendable realism for its 1965 date) slum gangs without mentioning drugs, lethal weapons, or death, to _Headman_ (1975) in which the main character dies with a corkscrew in his stomach. Or it may be taken by adult reactions to the books: from the furor over _Harriet the Spy_ (1964) because an adult told a child that it was sometimes necessary to lie, to the silent acceptance of such novels as _Steffie Can't Come Out to Play_ [7] (teen-age prostitution), _Are You in the House Alone?_ [8] (rape), or any of Lois Duncan's sour tales of high school "life" [9].

However one measures, it is clear that adult attitudes toward children's reading have undergone some major changes during the turbulent years just past. The wide (though not universal) acceptance of a greatly broadened content in children's books seems to stem from the conviction that children should learn as soon as possible the realities of the world they live in—even the hardest and most unsavory realities. The rationale behind the conviction varies: some books are accepted as awful warnings (_Steffie_, surely); some because adults reason that if children's lives are not protected, it is pointless to restrict their reading. And of course, some adults are morally neutral toward the content of children's books, simply endorsing the concept of intellectual freedom for children, as for adults.

At the same time, the arguments for restriction of literature for children have moved to new ground. Barriers of the past were meant to protect the innocence of childhood. Today, it is the good of society that is invoked in favor of censorship more often than children's innocence, and this is true whether the call for censorship comes from the right or from the left.

Liberal censors arguing for the reform of what they call a racist society see no possibility for neutrality if social change is to be effected: "In the end, a failure to work for change actually supports the status quo. . . . At this point in history, directly or indirectly, one serves either the racist past or a humanistic future" [10, p. 11]. Essentially the same argument is made about sexism in children's books: if society is to change, the books cannot be neutral. If they are not liberating, they are by definition damaging. Those who see the issues this way are willing to call for censorship, by libraries, by schools, by authors, editors, and publishers, to bring about social change.
Conservative censors have also cast their argument primarily in social terms. They too want to reform society by eliminating harmful influences in children's books: their target those books they consider "biased toward increasing the centralized power of a secular humanistic state, [books that] will ultimately destroy the family, decent social standards, and basic principles of decentralized government that safeguard every American's individual freedom" [11, p. 9]. In both camps, the ascendant value is social morality.

At the beginning of the 1980s, censorship of children's books continues to be a lively issue. The prospects for peace restored soon to the field of children's reading are, to say the least, dim. Only if all parties to the arguments of the past decade and a half should suddenly agree to agree or, as suddenly, lose all interest in the questions now vigorously debated, could the quiet of earlier years be restored. Neither seems likely.

Nor is it likely that anyone can predict with confidence what the arguments or even who the antagonists will be. We are seeing now a conservative reaction against the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s. The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom anticipates that the trend will continue, encouraging "would-be censors" to "step up efforts to impose their own moral and social values on library patrons." More than a year ago, Judith Krug, Director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association, saw the conservative movement well underway: "All of the pressures that were just below the surface are now coming out, pressures to remove those materials that people object to on moral grounds or because they believe the materials do not reflect 'traditional American values'" [12, p. 1]. The apparent ascendance of such groups as the Moral Majority lends weight to liberal fears of increased pressure to restrict the content of children's books and to roll back some of the changes of recent years, as do the growing number of attempts to restrict both text and trade books in schools across the country.

But the changes in the literature over the past decade and a half are far-reaching, and many of them grew out of fundamental movements within the society. Reaction may modify how these social transformations are reflected in children's books, but it is unlikely that it can return the literature to the codes of the past. Children's books have been opened to a wider range of influences, as well as to a wider scrutiny since the mid-1960s. Inevitably, they reflect, directly and indirectly, the changing society that produced them. The present situation is neither static nor predictable. The only certainty is that children's books themselves and the debate about children's reading will continue to reflect the shifts and seasons of the American view of childhood, society, and truth.
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