

Books

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REVIEW/5

Teenagers are looking for books that face the truth... the use of obscenities in books is incidental and unimportant

Do four-letter words spell reality to kids?

Should books for teenagers be censored or should they read about the world as it is? It's a touchy subject, as HARRY BLUTSTEIN discovered

VIRGINIA Ferguson received an unexpected complaint from her publishers. They asked her to change the ending of her children's book on pirates. The final sentence - "Yo ho ho and bottle of rum" - could offend, they said.

When questioned, her editor explained that children should not read about alcohol. The author joked that they could substitute "Yo ho ho and a cup of tea" for all she cared. The publishers did just that.

To what degree should books for teenagers be censored? Should all mention of sex, drug use, violence, obscenity and other influences considered unsuitable for teenagers be excised? Should controversial subjects such as abortion, divorce, contraception and homosexuality be avoided? Should books portray only positive examples with moral or uplifting endings? Or should teenagers read about the world as it is, and be allowed to make up their own minds?

The nature of childhood is changing; today, teenagers have less restraints and are exposed to a large range of temptations. While young people are under peer-group pressure to grow up faster, they are also staying longer at school and not establishing themselves as independent adults until their early 20s.

Adolescents face many problems in growing up - alienation, defining relationships with their peers, coming to terms with emotional and sexual maturity. Books can provide them with insights as they read about people their own age who face and try to resolve similar problems.

Censorship of teenagers' fiction has become a vexed question, and publishers, booksellers, librarians, parents and teachers have had to decide whether they should intercede with what is read.

When Anne Godden of Hyland House Press first read the manuscript of *Beyond the Labyrinth* by Gillian Rubinstein, she knew it was well worth publishing. "We were just glad that we had at last found an author who could write about real children in real language. The swearing in it was in context and didn't worry us at all."

Her instincts were rewarded when the book won the 1990 Children's Book Council of Australia award for Book of the Year for older readers. "One of the reasons this is such a good book is that Gillian Rubinstein uses swear words with such effect - as when a slightly round-the-bend woman swears at children," Godden says.

The four-letter words are less important than the child's reaction.

Victoria, *swears and blazes amazed. She has never heard an adult swear at a child in this fashion. She has always thought of adults as essentially benign. This one seems to be entirely different species, and definitely a hostile one. The still between childhood and adulthood has never seemed so vast. And Vicci knows that she has already been launched across it; there is no way she can stop it mid-air and go back, though right now she desperately wanted to.*

Godden was first surprised then out-

raged when a councillor in Ballarat had the book placed on the restricted list in the municipal library. It is lent out only with parental permission. The northern region of the Melbourne Archdiocese and the Catholic Women's League urged Hyland House to withdraw the book or face a boycott. Parents also wrote in to condemn the book.

While Hyland House is small enough not to be intimidated by the threats, Godden is concerned that authors, booksellers and librarians facing intimidation may not have the same resolve. Large and specialist publishers are particularly vulnerable.

Attempts to ban books outright are rare in Australia. Schools have largely avoided the controversy of official censorship, and when attempts have been made, they have been isolated and short-lived. In November 1989, the NSW Director-General of Education banned Judy Blume's novel *Fever*, which dealt with contraception and sexual awakening in teenagers. The decision was withdrawn within three weeks after resistance by schools and editorial criticism of the action.

One teacher who risked his job by standing up to this attempt to censor was Michael Kindler, Head of the English Department at Stasland High School. Kindler is pleased with the victory, but remains suspicious of the present Government, which he believes still has designs on restricting books read in schools. Following pressure from the Festival of Light, the Ministry for Schools and Youth Affairs established a Reference Advisory Panel to advise on reading lists for students in Years 11 and 12. While no recommendations have been made by the panel, Kindler objects to its very existence, which operates on the premise that school reading lists need vetting.

The general rule in Australia has been to leave the decision on book purchases to schools. The Victorian Education Department, for example, issued guidelines in September 1989 in which librarians were asked to "avoid bias, and present controversial issues in a balanced manner". Otherwise, they were left to develop their own policy.

However, there is a concealed form of censorship that goes largely undetected. Every author of teenage fiction interviewed for this article was able to point to instances. Award-winning children's writer Libby Hathorn recently released an anthology called *The Blue Dress* which showcases some of the best Australian literature to offer. There are stories dealing with difficult issues such as the pain of divorce, death and relationships in conflict, as well as others about the joys of growing up. "Because the stories are written with understanding and compassion, it allows the kids to make their own judgements on the issues raised," she says.

Hathorn is convinced young readers should read about good and evil if they are to develop critical judgements of their own, and believes, from her own experience, that censorship is widespread in NSW. Her book *Thunderwith* was banned by a North shore high school library, while in the Western Region she was warned, before addressing a class, not to mention magic or fantasy. Another author, who did not wish to be named, found that a bookseller had added a warning to his novel saying it was unsuitable for school libraries.

Jocelyn Harewood was pleased when her first book, *Voices in the Wash-house*,



Life's hazards begin early: The *Danger of the Holy Innocents* is re-enacted in a church courtyard in Spain and recalls the slaughter decreed by King Herod in his attempt to kill the baby Jesus. The man leaping over the infants represents the danger; when he lands safely the danger is passed. From *The Circle of Life: Rituals from the Human Family* by David Cohen (Harper, San Francisco)

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and challenging role models.

He does not believe books should reflect the lifestyle children face today nor the language they use among their friends. He insists the characters should be portrayed as optimistic, well-spoken and making the correct moral decisions.

But how far can adolescents be protected in the modern world? They are exposed to violence on TV, music lyrics that preach all sorts of anti-social messages and use language that would give the Niles of this world a shock. Yet for some reason books are largely left.

Agnes Nieuwenhuizen spends much of her time promoting good fiction to young people. She is about to publish a good reading guide, and visits schools and libraries encouraging young people to read. She believes that the written word has greater authority than other mediums. "There is still a respect for the printed word. People expect wisdom and truth in a way that they don't expect from a video or TV."

To focus attention on censorship, Nieuwenhuizen organised a seminar at the Victorian Writers Centre in early October. More than 30 authors, librarians, teachers, booksellers and publishers attended.

A certain ambivalence towards bad language emerged. While some teachers would not tolerate it in the classroom, they accepted it as a fact of schoolyard life and, used in context, believed it had a legitimate place in teenage literature.

However, Joan Milne, a teacher from Maryborough Secondary College, disagreed. "I feel it is part of our role as schoolteachers to improve language. Inclusion of swearing is unnecessary. There are better words, less aggressive words, available." Her principled opposition to bad language in books prevented her from recommending books, even well-written ones, if they contained obscenities.

Nevertheless, the authors Nieuwenhuizen interviewed for her book *No Kidding* said her tale teenagers are looking for

books that face the truth that they can recognise. "They look for characters that they can identify with, people like themselves, books that deal with issues they may face in their daily lives and challenge their imagination. The use of obscenities in books is incidental and unimportant."

From the publisher's point of view, Godden has a clear view of her responsibilities. "We have no right to censor books. The only books I wouldn't publish are ones that incite hatred. We would never censor a book because we did not agree with what was in it. Publishing is about putting a mirror up to nature."

"The only criterion is that it is a good work of literature. If we let publishers give way to those who shout loudest, children are going to suffer a lot in this country."

Godden is pessimistic about the future. "The concentration of ownership of publishing houses in Australia is a worrying trend and could result in a reduction of variety of books as they play it safe."

I asked the authors I interviewed whether they saw any value in exposing the pernicious censorship prevalent in Australia. One way of dealing with it, Hathorn said, is to bring the issue out in the open. Her view is not universally shared... other writers argue that public exposure of censorship could galvanise religious and right-wing groups into initiating a campaign.

"Young people should be given the opportunity to talk about censorship, and made aware of how it can curtail their intellectual freedom," Hathorn says.

The frightening thing about censorship is that when it occurs, it is seldom obvious. Certain publishers, booksellers and librarians have taken it upon themselves to determine what children should read - and it is all being done quietly, without the people who are the subject of the censorship knowing about it.

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