

Thorburn uses books by Dr. Seuss to analyze the censorship of children's media and raise difficult questions about rights and responsibilities. By placing the problem in a rich historical and cultural context, she represents a variety of points of view while ultimately affirming children's right to make their own choices. (Instructor: Eric Ozawa)

DR. SEUSS, LEADER OF THE RESISTANCE

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I know, up on top you are seeing great sights,
but down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights.

—Dr. Seuss, *Yertle the Turtle*

It was this heroic declaration that brought the crushing weight of censorship down on Dr. Seuss's classic tale of a turtle's rebellion against dictatorship. In British Columbia in 2012, *Yertle the Turtle* was pulled from the shelves of the Prince Rupert School District for being "too political" for young readers, as demonstrated by the above apparently incendiary line (Shi). Though the picture book is indeed an allegory for Hitler's domination of Germany and much of Europe, banning the book and thereby oppressing young students' right to read freely was perhaps not the most elegant way to express objection to a book about the abuse of power. The situation is ironic in more ways than one: the contested line itself takes on a new meaning after the book's banning, suggesting perhaps that when issues of censorship arise, the rights of children to intellectual freedom are threatened.

When the children's literature industry began to take off as a separate genre in the nineteenth century, most books for young readers were written to convey strong "moral content" rather than to entertain. Authors and publishers alike tended to adhere to "an implicit code" of what material was appropriate for children (MacLeod 30-31). As the pool of early creators of children's literature was "relatively small" and like-minded, there was little cause for controversy about the content of children's books until the 1960s (33). At that point, the socio-political climate became so tumultuous that more controversial

writers, now seeing children's literature as an untapped medium through which one could promote social change, began to add their voices to the mix. Books for children and teens began to "reflect the changing society that produced them," depicting sensitive but realistic issues such as drug abuse, violence, and sexuality far more openly, and, consequently, provoking an unprecedented rise in censorship controversies (37).

Parents and critics alike were uncertain how to respond to the increase in progressive, realistic, but often troubling narratives entering the children's book market, and throughout the 1960s and '70s, consumers objected to some seemingly ridiculous subjects while sometimes accepting far more explicit ones. For example, *Harriet the Spy*, which describes "an adult [telling] a child that it was sometimes necessary to lie," was banned, whereas *Steffie Can't Come Out to Play*, which features "teenage prostitution," somehow slipped by untouched (36). The panic surrounding the increase of objectionable topics in children's literature peaked when, in 1972, the landmark court case *Adler v. Board of Education* reached the Supreme Court. In *Adler*, a school board challenged Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* for containing "obscene words" (White 4). The Court voted to allow the school board to censor the book, only fueling parents' panicked convictions that they must shelter their impressionable children from such troubling narratives. This frenzied literary oppression did not seem like the wisest course of action to all involved, however; Justice William O. Douglas, one of the three Supreme Court justices to object to the school board's censorship, later wrote: "Are we sending children to school to be educated by the norms of the school board, or are we educating our youth to shed the prejudices of the past, to explore all forms of thought, and to find solutions to our world's problems?" (qtd. in White 4).

Indeed, how can children become progressive members of society if they are kept in ignorance of troubling realities such as stereotyping, violence, and racial tension? In his well-known and much-contested book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim writes that to attempt to shelter children from the corruption of reality is unproductive; in fact, if children's "unconscious is repressed and [its] content denied entrance into awareness," their sense of "selfhood," "self-

worth,” and “moral obligation” may be damaged (6-7). A child is prone to make choices “not so much on right versus wrong, as on who arouses his sympathy and who his antipathy,” and oftentimes the former and the latter are not the same (9). Censorship often stems from a place of genuine concern for the peace of mind and well-being of a child, as “we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good.” Consequently, we assume that “a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies” (7). However, children easily recognize in themselves “that *they* are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be” (7). Thus, their instinctive concept of self-morality and the one-dimensional, unflinchingly good outlook on human society that is fed to them by adults are at odds with each another, and, in his confusion, “the child [becomes] a monster in his own eyes” (7).

Bettelheim proposes a solution: fairy tales. While we should not hide the shortcomings of human nature and the more distressing aspects of society from children, we also do not have to overwhelm them with complete, undiluted knowledge of these failings in order to teach them that we are flawed. Fairy tales allow a child to comprehend complex and sometimes troubling realities through the more accessible context of fantasy, a genre that more closely mirrors the imaginative nature of a child’s mind. Through “spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures”—a child “can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope” (Bettelheim 7). Thus fairy tales may provide us with a channel through which to communicate more effectively with children about the complex realities of life.

The fact that it is less productive to engage with children about difficult topics in the same way that we would with adults suggests that while children are certainly not incapable of comprehending complex issues, they process them more effectively with a degree of removal from the issue itself. Fairy tales allow children to understand the imperfections of society and of their own characters because they present them in a more abstract, creative context. But this distancing must be approached with subtlety: while adapting the mode of com-

munication can improve the efficacy of communication with children (reading a child *Yertle the Turtle* to introduce the distressing subject of the Nazi regime, for example), the facts of the issues being presented should not be altered. Attempting to excessively simplify or water down difficult subjects for children can unintentionally result in truly harmful misrepresentation.

On January 5th, 2016, the publisher Scholastic dropped a bombshell onto the children's literature market. *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram introduces young readers to the story of George Washington's beloved enslaved black chef, Hercules, and his daughter, Delia. Almost immediately after it hit the shelves, the picture book ignited heated controversy. Objectively, the story is light and fun, telling of the quaint, wholesome troubles Hercules encounters when he discovers, while trying to bake a cake for the president, that he is out of sugar. The delightfulness of this tale is precisely the problem, however. Though Hercules and Delia are in bondage, they smile obliviously through the pages, fretting over confectionary sweeteners rather than their own human rights. Instead of longing for their freedom, they wish only to please their white master, whom they love and respect despite being enslaved by him. Upon the book's release, it became apparent what an egregiously harmful portrayal of slavery *Birthday Cake* contained, essentially showing its young audience, through jaunty illustrations and cheerfully obedient slaves, that maybe slavery wasn't so bad after all. The Internet was soon set aflame with criticism. In an online review, Kiera Parrott of the *School Library Journal* wrote that *Birthday Cake*'s "light tone . . . convey[s] a feeling of joyfulness that contrasts starkly with the reality of slave life," and warned that "young readers without sufficient background knowledge about the larger context of American slavery may come away with a dangerously rosy impression of the relationship between slaves and slave owners" (qtd. in Flood). It wasn't long before Twitter users caught wind of the questionable book, and thousands of people added their voices to the debate, starting a change.org petition to recall the book and circulating their opinions about the controversy using the hashtag #SlaveryWithASmile (Flood).

Readers rebelled, and Scholastic listened. Only two weeks after it was released, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* was pulled

from circulation, and Scholastic released the statement:

While we have great respect for the integrity and scholarship of the author, illustrator and editor, we believe that, without more historical background on the evils of slavery than this book for younger children can provide, the book may give a false impression of the reality of the lives of slaves and therefore should be withdrawn. (qtd. in Flood)

Responses to the banning of *Birthday Cake* were mixed. The National Coalition Against Censorship took issue with the book's banning, arguing that "while reasonable people can disagree about the book's historical or literary merit, Scholastic's decision to pull it in response to controversy is a shocking and nearly unprecedented case of self-censorship" (qtd. in Flood). Meanwhile, author Daniel José Older, who also publishes with Scholastic, countered that critics were focusing on the wrong issues: "pulling a book because it's historically inaccurate and carries on the very American tradition of whitewashing slavery is classified as 'censorship,' while maintaining an ongoing majority white industry that systematically excludes narratives of color is just business as usual" (qtd. in Seltzer).

Regardless of whether Scholastic was right to censor the book, perhaps the heated controversy itself actually gives Ganeshram and her children's book merit despite its problems. In his essay "What Is an Author?" Michel Foucault describes how the concept of the "author function" allows authors to become catalysts for discourse, and, eventually, to dissolve into the discourse they have generated (211). Foucault claims that writing now speaks for itself: once a piece of writing is put out into the world, the writer's individuality becomes irrelevant. The author's work, "which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer," as writing now serves simply as a launch pad for further discourse as other authors add their commentaries to the dialogue created by the original piece (Foucault 206).

When a writer's "author function exceeds her own work," the author becomes what Foucault calls a "founder of discursivity," or one who generates new discourse (217). Perhaps, then, as *Birthday Cake*

created such heated, but valuable, discussions about racial tension, whitewashing, and American slavery in books for young audiences, Ganeshram herself has been made a “founder of discursivity” through the objectionable nature of her work. Thus, the issue of censorship of children’s literature is complicated. Though censorship can be viewed as an affront to free speech, when an author’s controversial work is censored, it effectively turns that author into a “founder of discursivity” because their work spurs polarized reactions and creates a new, productive conversation.

It is necessary to avoid sheltering children from the troubling realities of American slavery through the whitewashing of such a history, as depicted in *Birthday Cake*. Without such knowledge, children simply become helpless pawns in the debate surrounding their own intellectual rights, at the mercy of adults who tamp down their freedom to read what they please. But in order to allow children themselves to act as “founders of discursivity” in such debates, they must be given, as Bettelheim proposes of fairy tales, an accessible medium through which to enter the conversation.

Perhaps the most effective way to both shed light on the censorship of children’s literature and involve children themselves in censorship discourse is through children’s media. “The Scare Your Pants Off Club,” an episode in the first season of the PBS show *Arthur*, does exactly that. In the episode, Arthur and his friends are unable to put down the *Scare Your Pants Off* book series (a riff off of R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* books), getting into trouble as they read them under their desks at school and with flashlights under the covers late at night. On the much-awaited release date of the series’ most recent installment, though, the dozens of kids waiting eagerly outside the library are horrified to learn that the books, until further notice, have been pulled from library shelves after the library received complaints from the censorship-bent parental group, P.A.W.S. (Parents Against Weird Stories). Arthur and his friends leap into action, getting adults to sign a petition to bring the beloved books back. When Arthur and his group are bribed by their friend Muffy Crosswire, whose parents founded P.A.W.S., with an invitation to a party at Wonderland for anyone who withdraws from the protests, Arthur hesitates, but is

advised by his parents to keep up the fight and not “be afraid to look foolish for what you believe in” (“The Scare”).

As the group most directly affected by censorship of children’s literature, children should certainly not be left out of the conversation. Censorship already deprives children of complete intellectual freedom. They should not also be deprived of their awareness of this intellectual oppression. Using children’s media to communicate a controversial issue like censorship creates an entrance through which children can become active participants in the debate, hopefully learning, as Arthur’s parents advise, “when you add everything up, you have to do what you think is right. Even if it’s a sacrifice” (“The Scare”).

Though “The Scare Your Pants Off Club” makes a valuable move toward involving children in the discourse surrounding the suppression of their own intellectual rights, its impact differs from that of the conversation surrounding an actual banned book such as *Birthday Cake*. *Arthur* dramatizes the concept of censorship to make it more comfortably accessible for children. “The Scare Your Pants Off Club” itself has never been controversial, but it engagingly and informatively tells the story of a book series that was. Just as Bettelheim’s fairy tales are a nonthreatening, accessible medium through which children can confront the unconscious and the uncomfortable, so too does “The Scare” create a degree of separation between children—the subjects—and the issue—censorship. *Arthur* attempts to reclaim autonomy for children by educating them about their systematic intellectual oppression, but still falls just short of giving them the reins and making them the agents of their own freedom. Rather than involving children in issues of censorship from the beginning, the episode gives them arm’s-length access to the debate. “The Scare” provides a window for observation rather than a door for entrance. This begs the question: do we deny children full involvement in the discourse of their own oppression to protect them? If so, then which issues are they mature enough to confront?

Lauren, head librarian in the children’s room at the Jefferson Market branch of the New York Public Library, doesn’t think we should underestimate children. She says that “not only is a child capable, but they will let you know exactly what they are thinking. You

typically don't have to ask them if they are enjoying something." She explains that children gravitate toward what they are familiar with, and what they are able to understand. If a child does not yet have any knowledge of a subject and cannot comprehend it, they will most likely not enjoy or be interested in the story and will not pursue it. Lauren acknowledges that the intentions of an adult who censors what books a child has access to usually "come from a place of good," a true desire to act in the best interests of the child. However, she also proposes that, much like British Columbia's inadvertently totalitarian reaction to *Yertle the Turtle*, some censors of children's literature act more reflexively out of the "impulse to control" those below them (Lauren).

In the article "Born to Choose: The Origins and Value of the Need for Control," published in *Trends in Cognitive Science*, researchers explain that "perception of control is likely adaptive for survival," because "if people did not believe they were capable of successfully producing desired results, there would be very little incentive to face even the slightest challenge" (Leotti et al.). Our need for a sense of control is hardwired into our system, as our desire for choice is "biologically motivated" and is "present in animals and even very young infants before any societal or cultural values of autonomy can be learned" (Leotti et al.). However, the biological need for control easily becomes disproportionately dominant when one feels as though they lack autonomy: "individuals who do not perceive control over their environments may seek to gain control in any way possible, potentially engaging in maladaptive behaviors" (Leotti et al.).

Our compulsive need for control has implications beyond the already catastrophic effect of motivating those who infringe upon the intellectual freedom of children. Censorship not only threatens freedom of speech and open access to knowledge, but also signifies the demise of creative freedom. As Gayle Greeno writes in "Random Notes from a Midnight Censor," censorship breeds fear and fosters creative inhibition in authors, "[forcing] them into self-censorship as they strive to second-guess what 'big buyers' want or will accept," and leading them to fear a major controversy attached to their literary reputation (19). The more writers feel they are losing control over how their work will be received, the more they will seek to regain control by anticipating potentially controversial material in their work prior to

publication. Doing so “holds a chilling potential for stifling an author’s creativity and ability to write honestly and honorably” (Greeno 19).

Perhaps what is most important, beyond attempting to decide what is ‘appropriate’ for children, is that we teach children to value autonomy above all else. Ultimately, only the individual has the right to make up their own mind and seek their own knowledge. Only the individual can choose to defend their right to creativity and free thought.

I sit cross-legged on the rug in the Jefferson Market Library Children’s Room, small piles of picture books scattered around me as I conduct ‘research.’ I secretly just enjoy losing myself in colorful illustrations, silly plots, and rhyming phrases. From a stack by my feet, I pick up another Dr. Seuss classic, *Oh the Places You’ll Go!* and lift the cover:

You have brains in your head.
 You have feet in your shoes.
 You can steer yourself
 any direction you choose.
 You’re on your own, and you know what you know.
 And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.

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