A Dirty Little Secret: Self-Censorship

Debra Lau Whelan

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Boy Toy by Barry Liga

About a 12 year-old who has sex with a beautiful teacher twice his age

Expected to:
- Spark letters
- Trigger complaints
- Incite parents
But none of those things ever happened
Why not?

“The book just didn’t get out there. Kids weren’t getting the book because adults weren’t letting them get the book.”

“It’s sort of a soft, quiet, very insidious censorship, where nobody is raising a stink, nobody is burning books. They’re just quietly making sure it doesn’t get out there.”

- YA author Barry Liga
Self-censorship:
A dirty little secret

Presentation by Valerie Kyriakopoulos
LIS899: Capstone
Fall 2010
Karen Brown
Self – censorship

Why isn’t it talked about more?

- ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom only documents written challenges

- ALA estimates only one out of five challenge cases are actually reported
Self - censorship

Almost impossible to quantify

- No one is monitoring
- No one is collecting stats
- No open discussion
- No one wants to admit to it
“In a way, self–censorship is more frightening than outright banning and removal of challenged material.”

- Author and former librarian Susan Patton
Why do some librarians reject books with edgy content?

A survey of 655 librarians conducted by School Library Journal found:

- 70% - Terrified of how parents will respond
- 29% - Fear backlash from administration
- 28% - Fear backlash from community
- 25% - Fear backlash from students
- 23% - Have personal objections
Reasons why librarians censor

- Sexual content: 87%
- Objectionable language: 61%
- Violence: 51%
- Homosexual themes: 47%
- Racism: 34%
- Religion: 16%
Books with objectionable content

- Tyrell
  Coe Booth
  - Homeless family

- ttyl
  Lauren Myracle
  - Vulgar language
  - Descriptions of sex
  - Teen drinking

- Jibberwillies at Night
  Rachel Vail
  - Children’s nighttime terrors

- Sandpiper
  Ellen Wittlinger
  - Oral sex
A progressive mom asked that this book be removed from her daughter’s class because it included a scene with a dead turtle.

Fun fact: All of the covers feature a turtle!
A new wrinkle: Labeling

- Books with African American characters are being labeled as street-lit

- Street-lit is then considered inferior so the entire category is dismissed

This is yet another form of censorship
Genres often picked on

- Street-lit
- Classics
- Horror
- Fantasy

Special attention is paid to

- GLBT

(Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered)
GLBT examples

Rainbow Boys
Alex Sanchez

Boy Meets Boy
David Levithan

Geography Club
Brent Hartinger

Annie on My Mind
Nancy Garden

Box Out
John Coy
Librarians often let “fear, not principle, guide their choices, which is deeply unfair to the teens they serve.”

- YA author David Levithan
However…

The fear of retaliation is very real

The LeRoy C. Merritt Humanitarian Fund

- Created by ALA
- Helps pay for fees and expenses associated with First Amendment clashes
- Dozens of grants have been awarded since the fund was created in 1970
More fears and concerns

- Discrepancies in determining age-appropriateness
- Relentless attacks by parents
- Pressure from publishers
Pressure from publishers can cause authors to think about self-censoring

For example:
Lauren Myracle was pressured to change the name of her book from *The Bitches* to *Rhymes with Witches*
Now there are complaints from people who think the book is about witchcraft
What authors think

- Driven by a moral compass
- Have a special responsibility to kids
- Sometimes crude language is necessary to convey true feelings

“’He lied to me’ and ‘He fucking lied to me’ are two very different sentences – the latter has an amount of rage and disbelief that the former can’t convey.”

- David Levithan
What can librarians do to protect themselves?

- Have a *written* selection policy
- Have a *written* reconsideration policy that addresses challenges to books

- It’s not the librarians job to:
  - Impose their own ideologies
  - Parent children
  - Protect people from ideas or language
Questions to ponder

1. How can we remove the stigma of these self–censorship incidents?
2. Why is there no open discussion between librarians regarding this issue?
3. How can we get principle to trump fear?
4. Who gets to decide what words are offensive and why?
More questions to ponder

5. Can we create better guidelines for discrepancies in age – appropriateness?

6. Shouldn’t opinions and feelings from teens be taken more seriously by parents, teachers and librarians?

7. Why don’t all libraries have specific written selection and reconsideration policies?
Citations

http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6632974.html
(accessed September 16, 2010).

(accessed September 16, 2010).
Image citations

Censorship poster:
http://1.bp.blogspot.com/__KYcViNHO8s/TG1zKFWI3oI/AAAAAAAEQ/1mOMv__2A7s/s400/censorshipPoster.jpg

Censored book:
http://www.efc.ca/pages/chronicle/censorship.gif

The worst part of censorship:
Book cover citations

Annie on My Mind - http://img1.fantasticfiction.co.uk/images/n6/n34305.jpg
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Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing -
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The worst part of censorship is