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Peter Hunt

Censorship and Children's Literature in Britain Now, or, The Return of Abigail

But man or woman who publishes writings inevitably assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind.
—George Eliot, Leaves from a Note-Book: Authorship (Allott, p. 94)

Exercising any degree of control over the kind of books written for or read by children is a highly doubtful policy. . . . What terrifies one child may seem merely comic to another, or may be completely ignored; one can't legislate for fear.
—Joan Aiken (p. 63)

The answer to the central question of censoring children's books is simple. Why do people censor children's books? Because they can.

As the relationships within children's books between writer and reader (if not addresser and addressee) are necessarily to do with power (Knowles and Malkjaer, 1996; Hunt, 1988; Rose, 1984). It is hardly surprising to find this reflected in the world outside the book. Adults have power over children and their books, and use it, sometimes in what might appear to be bizarre ways (Jenkinson, 1982; West, 1996); that is nothing new. What might give one pause is the contrast between the subtlety and concern expended by one part of the community on writing and analyzing books for children, and the crudity and unreflectiveness with regard to the reading process demonstrated by those who would control the books directly. And in Britain at least there is a further ironic contrast between those who think that they are censoring children's books and those who actually are.
We may not, as in more direct societies, enter schools, burn books, and dismiss teachers, but for the least democratic society in Western Europe (Britain has fewer elected officials and more surveillance cameras than any other country in the area) there are other ways. Books may be rarely attacked directly—and "high-profile" attacks tend to have a comic-opera quality—but if we define censorship in broad terms as the limitation of the freedom to read books, then there is a lot of serious "invisible" censorship. What is available for British children to read is severely circumscribed by a combination of two silent forces: government policies, which have in recent years severely cut school library budgets and school library services, and (as in the U.S.) the selection procedures of those powerful bookselling companies that dominate the market.

The censorship of children's books in Britain demonstrates very clearly what a complex matter censorship is. For example, "literature" and, indeed, "the Book" have sufficient mystique in this multimedia age to make them, if not invulnerable to censorship, problematic for the censor. Children's books, part of "popular literature," accessible to and apparently understandable by all, linked to childhood and dominated by women, and having (therefore) very little cultural status, have no such protection. Texts assumed to be simple are accorded a simple response. And equally, paradoxically, children's books (as opposed to everyday videos or comics) are particularly susceptible to attack because they are a kind of Book that can be attacked. Books form a very small part of most children's experience of media, but they are not therefore thought to be unimportant; rather, the general status of the Book gives them a disproportionate visibility, and their specific status makes them vulnerable.

Take the case of Abigail at the Beach (Pirani, 1988). This small picture book was something of a cause célèbre in 1988. Then 54 members of the House of Commons signed an "early day motion"—an attention-getting Parliamentary device—requesting that it be withdrawn (Hunt, 1991, pp. 32–33). After a certain amount of ironic publicity, the book's editor, Rosemary Sandberg of Collins, agreed to withdraw the book if there was proof that any child had been corrupted by it (Sandberg, 1989, p. 23). There being no such proof, the book sold quietly, was at last remaindered, and went out of print. Very British.

One of the basic problems with censorship—and with writing about it—is demonstrated by the fact that the only way to adequately demonstrate what annoyed those virtuous Members of Parliament (MPs) would be at this point to reprint the whole of Abigail at the Beach, for any description that I give will only be my reading of the book. No one can read or report without interpreting. Nor could a simple tran-