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Books

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More than two-thirds of the challenges to school classroom or library settings, and most of the rest are to public libraries. In several cases, the challenges are successful and the books are banned. The *Harry Potter* series, with its heavy emphasis on wizardry and witchcraft, raised the most complaints reported to the ALA in 1999.

The case cited by ALA occurred in Bloomfield, Ontario in 1999 and July 2000. Parents at the schools debated whether three books — *The Bell Jar*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Lord of the Flies* — were appropriate for the ninth-grade English class.

The Catcher in the Rye is considered an autobiography of author Sylvia Plath's life. At age 30, depicts the breakdown of a young woman preoccupied with her life. The novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, chronicles two days in the life of an angst-ridden 16-year-old after he is kicked out of prep school. And the novel *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, deals with the breakdown of civility among young boys plane-wrecked on a desert island.

Bloomfield's school board voted to keep all three books in the curriculum, although *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* only passed by a 4-3 margin. The subject remains a touchy one to this day, according to those interviewed.

Meg Murphy, a parent in the Bloomfield district, said she was against the book banning because it would signal an unhealthy air of repression.

"I read some of these books in the 1960s, and I went to a Catholic school in Staten Island. I wonder if we're backtracking, because a very small minority are wanting to change the way we do things," said Murphy, a parishioner at St. Bridget/St. Joseph Parish in East Bloomfield.

Jack Whiting, also from St. Bridget/St. Joseph, was one of the three school board members who voted that *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* did not meet curriculum needs. He maintains that he did not seek to censor, so much as protest what he felt was a forcing of inappropriate material on students.

"I don't care about what somebody wants to read. I care about what are required readings," Whiting said.

Defining appropriateness

Because there is no clear-cut ratings system for books, such as the "PG-13" and "R" tags for movies, opinions on appropriateness can vary widely from one school district or household to the next.

Sister Margaret Mancuso, SSJ, diocesan assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, is the chief liaison for book selection in all diocesan grade pre-K-eight schools. She weighs a potentially controversial book for its treatment of such topics as racism, discrimination, abuse and abortion. For instance, she recalled being concerned about one book because it contained the word "nigger."

Sister Mancuso noted that all diocesan grade pre-K-eight Catholic schools consult state guidelines, as well as Catholic principles, in their book selection.

"We take a look at it in light of our Gospel values and beliefs," she said. "Certainly I would hope that the Catholic dimension is there."

This measuring stick is applicable not only with required reading, but also with material available in school libraries, Sister Mancuso said. "If it's not appropriate in the classroom, it's not appropriate in the school."

At the high-school level, each public school district and private high school comes to its own conclusions. Aquinas Institute librarian Sandy Stevens said she and the school's English department collaborate to determine which books make it to the classrooms and library. They rely on state guidelines as well as recommendations from national library associations, she said.

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it ... every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry ... chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach ... dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back ... and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he gotten his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

— *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling



Sister Mary Walter Hickey, RSM, principal of Elmira Notre Dame High School, said that her school's selection of books is guided by its "mission to educate young people with Christian values and moral ideas." However, that doesn't mean that she would automatically withhold controversial material from her library or classroom.

"I think you have to look at the whole picture. You have to give them the exposure," Sister Hickey said.

"I would not reject a book necessarily because it's controversial," added Lorie Brown, school librarian at Elmira Notre Dame. "Students are living in the real world, and the real world does contain controversial issues."

Remarked Stevens: "I want kids to come out of here being critical thinkers, because they're going to get everything thrown at them in college. I don't think it's our job to censor."

When parents feel they don't want their children exposed to certain books, Sister Hickey said they have the option of selecting alternative reading. Brown noted that this is a standard option in most private and public schools.

Stevens said a similar policy exists at Aquinas and has been used frequently. She said complaints have always been raised by the parents, rather than students.

"Most kids are afraid to say anything because of peer pressure," she observed.

Stevens said that she feels such a policy is fair. However, she added, she would not respond favorably to a demand for a book to be completely removed from the school.

"One person should not dictate to an entire population what they can or cannot read," Stevens stated.

Divided opinions

In Bloomfield, Whiting acknowledged that a formal complaint he made to the school district, in the fall of 1999, touched off the ensuing public squabble. Whiting said that as parents, he and his wife, Jeanne Guzik, had serious reservations about their son reading *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* when he reached ninth-grade English.

"We wanted to understand," Guzik said, "that since this appeared to be very mature reading material, why would it be in a ninth-grade class?"

Whiting said that students were given the option of reading alternate material.

But he and his wife felt that a letter sent to parents by the class's teacher, Jane Circh, smacked of coerciveness. The letter read, in part: "Please be aware of the books read as they contain mature topics. I can substitute another title if you find any unacceptable, however, this leaves your son/daughter out of class discussions and works geared toward the research project. This will be a major handicap."

In December 1999, the Bloomfield school board — including Whiting — voted 7-0 to keep *Lord of the Flies* in the ninth-grade curriculum. Two months later, the board voted 4-3 to support Superintendent Tiffany Phillips' recommendation that *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* remain.

Murphy — whose daughter Caitlin was in the class last year — was concerned that the board came so close to getting the books out of the classroom altogether.

"That's a very scary thought, very disheartening," Murphy said.

Murphy and her daughter attended public school-board hearings about the potential book banning. She said they were strongly in favor of the books, stating that teenagers can handle mature material with good classroom and parental guidance.

"I had trust in (Circh's) ability to give the kids what they needed," Murphy said.

Meanwhile, Whiting said he never set out to get *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* banned. But he voted against them, he said, because his original questions about appropriateness — which he said were made as a parent, not a school board member — were never answered.

Whiting's son is taking the ninth-grade class this year. Although *The Bell Jar* and *The*

Catcher in the Rye remain on the curriculum, Whiting noted that students are now offered a wider range of alternatives.

"I think this response, had it been offered earlier in the process ... I don't think this controversy would have even started," Whiting said.

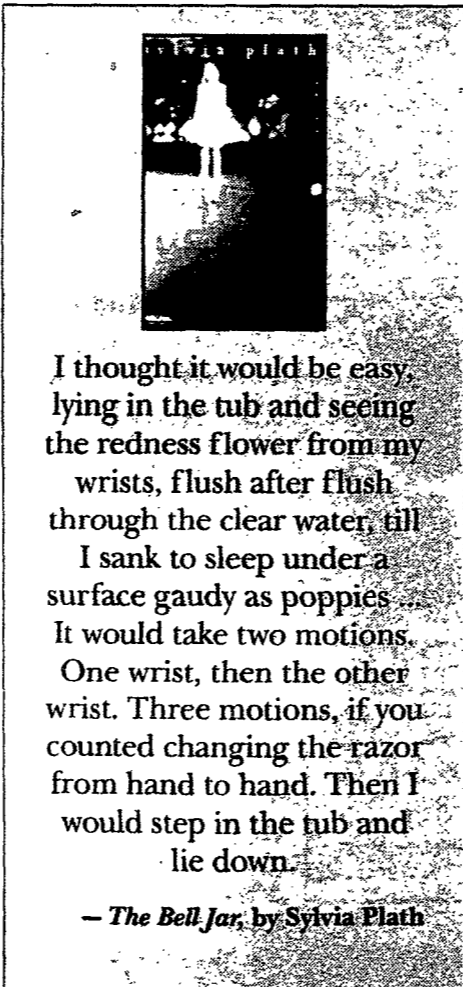
Judie Worhacz, parish secretary at St. Bridget/St. Joseph, said that the issue been an extremely sore one in the village.

"It divided our church," she remarked.

The trouble with Harry

Book-banning controversies stand to surface at any time, Stevens said.

"I find very few books the kids are



I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists, flush after flush through the clear water, till I sank to sleep under a surface gaudy as poppies. It would take two motions. One wrist, then the other wrist. Three motions, if you counted changing the razor from hand to hand. Then I would step in the tub and lie down.

— *The Bell Jar*, by Sylvia Plath

reading today that are not on somebody's banned book list," she remarked.

The *Harry Potter* series, which chronicles the adventures of a young boy with magical powers, has sparked a reading frenzy among all ages. But the four books have also been accused, in some quarters, of promoting wizardry and witchcraft — something that younger readers are most apt to buy into.

Ann Coone, an elementary religious education coordinator from Minnesota, told Catholic News Service in a Aug. 23 story that she's concerned that young children will confuse *Harry Potter's* supernatural works with Catholic teachings.

On the other hand, Sister Mancuso said she would have no objection to the presence of *Harry Potter* books in diocesan schools or libraries.

"At the children's level it's fantasy, magic," Sister Mancuso said.

Brown, at Elmira Notre Dame, feels that "the presentation in *Harry Potter* is a sense of fantasy, not a sense of any reality. I think that the distinction has been made very clear." Brown added that if students begin to request the *Potter* series, "I would get it for them."

Meanwhile, *Potter* author J.K. Rowling said she never intended to promote magic as an alternative to religion.

"I believe in God, not magic. I don't think children will be seriously disappointed to hear that I don't believe in magic," Rowling told Catholic News Service in January.

Judy Blume, no stranger to controversy over children's books, addressed *Harry Potter* in a Jan. 5 article she wrote for *The New York Times*. The author compared *Potter* to L. Frank Baum's *Oz* series of the early 1900s, which was also filled with wizardry and witchcraft.

"You know what those subversive tales taught us? That we loved to read!" Blume wrote.

But Blume remarked that she isn't surprised that Rowling's books have come under fire.

"The protests against *Harry Potter* follow a tradition that has been growing since the early 1980s and often leaves school principals trembling with fear that is then passed down to teachers and librarians. What began with the religious right has spread to the politically correct," Blume charged.

"And now the gate is open so wide that some parents believe they have the right to demand immediate removal of any book for any reason from school or classroom libraries. The list of gifted teachers and librarians who find their jobs in jeopardy for defending their students' right to read, to imagine, to question, grows every year."

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