

Won't Someone *Please* Think of the Children?

Seventy-Five Years on the Battlefield of Books for Kids

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Tell it to me straight. If I mention the title *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* to you, does it happen to ring any bells? Odds are, it probably does. Unless you've been living under a very comfortable and well-supplied rock you're aware that this particular book by Ramin Ganeshram is the most controversial children's book released by a major publisher in the past year.

The New York Times articles, magazine articles, even late night talk shows have discussed, debated, mocked, and talked about the book, to say nothing of the folks on social media. Coming close on the heels of debates surrounding books like *A Fine Dessert* by Emily Jenkins and other recent publications, one could be forgiven for thinking that we live in a world where people are far more critical of children's literature than they've been in the past.

Not so.

From the moment children's books became more than mere didactical teaching texts, they have been recognized for what they truly are—some of the most influential modes by which to teach and inform children of every age. What power! And, if Spider-Man has taught us anything, with great power comes great responsibility.

So it is that controversies have *always* erupted over children's books. Some years these debates have been small and contained. Other years they have exploded, sometimes with good results and sometimes with bad. And if we are to assess the current debates, aided and abetted as they are by social media, it is absolutely essential to look to our past. In the past seventy-five years, ALSC has seen fascinating discussions and debates on

the appropriateness and inappropriateness of children's books. I think it is safe to say there's no stopping it anytime soon.

To clarify, there are two particular types of children's literature controversies—those discussed within the community of people who work with books for kids and those discussed by a public with no professional connections to children's literature. Internal discussions may be hot and heated, but they carry with them at least a thin veneer of respect and understanding. We're all in this together.

Discussions (a polite word) outside of the children's literature community have the capacity to spin out of control. They are not hampered by an understanding of a child's right to read. They are informed instead by a steel-like certainty that children must be protected and that the book in hand is harmful. Most times, these objections manifest in a typical book-banning situation, but from time to time, they spread above and beyond that. Let us then consider the debates by the community of children's book professionals first.



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Internal Discussions

Censorship, as defined by *Webster's Dictionary*, says that to censor is "to examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable."¹ Children's librarians, as part of their jobs, select the books that appear on their library shelves. Selection and censorship, at their best, stay far away from one another. Yet there's no denying that children's librarians must use their own personal and professional judgment (informed by reviews) to determine what children will be able to access on their shelves.

Influential librarians also have a great deal of influence, and few in our history were quite as influential as New York Public Library's original Superintendent of the Department of Work with Children Anne Carroll Moore.

Because of her strong opinions and schoolmarmish looks, Moore has long since been delegated the historical villain of children's literature. Never mind that she was the original #WeNeedDiverseBooks librarian, making a concentrated effort to bring to New York Public Library's branches not just children's books but international children's books in a wide variety of languages, for the kids pouring into the city.

Unfortunately, it's much more fun for folks to recall the books Moore didn't like than the ones she did. During her time, she was instrumental in keeping series books, Little Golden Books, and books that straddled the line between literature and toys (*Pat the Bunny* for example) off of library shelves. Like many children's librarians, she had a distinct feeling for what would and would not work in a children's book.

Her dislike of *Stuart Little* is one of the better known cases. Communicating regularly with the writer E.B. White, Moore was greatly disappointed when she read his first foray into children's literature. Likewise she was not much taken with the books of Margaret Wise Brown. The state of children's publishing being what it was, these views were not seen as particularly controversial. It was only decades after her decisions that people would begin to challenge notions taken, by some, as the norm.

As the state of children's book publishing flourished post-World War II, it reflected the needs and state of our nation. And as the Civil Rights Era came into existence, so too did people begin to notice the sheer lack of diverse children's books. *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats was all well and good, but it was one little book about a dark-skinned child in a sea of white. For years, librarians had attempted to bring some notice to books about children from diverse backgrounds (which, for the record, may explain why *Secret of the Andes* by Ann Nolan Clark beat out *Charlotte's Web* for a 1953 Newbery Award). Now authors and illustrators were publishing books in the same vein.

Amongst the librarians, there existed a great deal of active interest in children's books. People today might poo-hoo these women (and they were mostly women) for old-fashioned attitudes, but to a large extent this is a myth. Even the controversies

surrounding children's books that we later believed to exist, didn't really. For example, in her 2012 *School Library Journal* article, "The Naked Truth: Librarians Stood by Maurice Sendak, No Stranger to Controversy," K.T. Horning confronted the longstanding rumor that a vast number of children's librarians objected so much to Maurice Sendak's naked-as-a-jaybird Mickey in *In the Night Kitchen*, that they would paint tiny underpants on him.² In truth, when Horning looked into just how common it was for librarians to diaper Mickey, she found only two documented cases.

Librarians, as it happens, have been stalwart defenders of Sendak from the start, though as in the case of Anne Carroll Moore it is much more fun for the public to think of them as stodgy and out of touch.

There is, however, one case in which librarian selection was equated with censorship, and it involved a little picturebook called *Jake and Honeybunch Go to Heaven*. Published in 1982, the book follows an African American worker and his mule as they are hit by a freight train. Its author, white Caldecott winner Margot Zemach, then proceeds to portray what *School Library Journal* called "a zesty, irreverent look at heaven and its habitues."³ However, when the library systems of San Francisco, Chicago, and Milwaukee declined to add the book to their collections, *The New York Times* got involved, demanding to know why.

It was the coordinator of children's services for Chicago Public Library who explained that this depiction of black heaven by a white illustrator, "would offend many people and that it reinforced many stereotypes which are not offset by a wealth of children's literature portraying the black experience."⁴ Publisher Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (FSG) fought back, calling the situation "insidious."⁵

Zemach had spent eight months researching black culture, which provided her sources.⁶ *The Wilson Library Bulletin* backed up the librarians' concerns, however, saying the book was, "designed to make white audiences laugh at alleged Afro-American childishness and instability."⁷

Roger W. Straus, company president of FSG, was confident in the book just the same. "Fifty years from now . . . this book will still be enjoying a long, fruitful life in most of the libraries of America."⁸ *Special note: We're now thirty-three years along since the debate raged. Is it on your shelves?*

In all these cases, debates were kept relatively contained. However, in cases where the greater public was involved, controversies have always had a tendency to spiral a bit out of control.

External Outrage

Plenty has been written about books that have been traditionally banned over the years. From *Bridge to Terabithia* to *Diary of*

a *Young Girl to A Wrinkle in Time*, if you can think of a popular children's book that takes any kind of a risk, you can bet it's been challenged by an angry parent somewhere. Far more interesting are the discussions that occur when these challenges spark a larger debate.

In 1998, when Ruth Sherman, a white teacher, read her classroom of Bushwick, New York, third-graders the book *Nappy Hair*, written by African American author Carolivia Herron with the express purpose of celebrating rather than shaming black hair, Sherman had little idea how the situation would look to the concerned parents of her children. For many who had been taught over the years to view the term "nappy hair" as a racial slur, the discovery that the new white teacher of their kids was throwing that very phrase in their children's faces was intolerable. The outraged response from the community caught the teacher off guard and ultimately resulted in her transfer to a different school.

The situation was little helped by *Washington Post* articles labeling the community "a gritty black and Hispanic neighborhood in Brooklyn notorious for drugs and graffiti" and saying that Sherman had come in "to turn things around, really make a difference."⁹ Editorials too were quick to blame the parents, saying this situation was more about "many African-Americans' enduring discomfort with some of the physical features of blackness than about the book."¹⁰ In this complicated issue, few were sympathetic to the black and Latino parents who objected to the title.

In other cases, the question of cultural appropriation has raised its ugly head. In 1999, when Ann Rinaldi wrote *My Heart Is on the Ground* as part of the "Dear America" diary series, people took great issue with many of the factual errors and liberties taken by the book. Amongst some of the most egregious liberties was the fact that the names of the characters had been taken from the gravestones of real children outside the Carlisle Indian School. Rinaldi writes in her Author's Note: "Although many of these children attended Carlisle at dates later than that of my story, I used some of their names for classmates of Nannie Little Rose. . . . I am sure that in whatever Happy Hunting Ground they now reside, they will forgive this artistic license, and even smile upon it."¹¹ As nine women writing in the Summer 1999 edition of the periodical *Rethinking Schools* put it, "That these children might smile upon Rinaldi from their 'Happy Hunting Ground' is the epitome of white fantasy: that Indian people will forgive and even smile upon white people, no matter the atrocities past and present."¹²

A case similar to the *Nappy Hair* incident happened not long after, in 2005. For a time, Gary Soto was the most prominent, and one of the very few, male Latino authors of children's books. Little wonder that he was, in time, tapped by Mattel to write the books to accompany Marisol, the new Latina American Girl doll released by the company. As Soto writes in his 2015 collection of essays, *Why I Don't Write Children's Literature*, the deal was pretty straightforward. Soto would write some early chapter books, Mattel would pay him, and that was that.

He was told he could set the books in either Chicago or New York so he selected Chicago, specifically, the Pilsen neighborhood. And so, in the first book, Marisol's mother explains to her daughter that they'll be moving away from their neighborhood because the parents think it's too dangerous. The editor gave the thumbs up to the book, it went to press, and then all hell broke loose.

Andrew Herman of *The Chicago Sun-Times* was the first to report on what he interpreted to be a slight on the Pilsen neighborhood. Says Soto, "The first of nearly hundreds of calls began, calls from the mayor of Des Plaines, aldermen, Chicano activists, an art director, *Time*, the *BBC*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, NBC's 'Today Show,' ABC's 'World News Tonight,' a journalist from Spain, students, professors—all because I had written a controversial piece of dialogue uttered by Marisol's mother."¹³

All this before the age of Twitter. In the end, Soto gave up writing books for kids altogether. On his *Horn Book* blog "Read Roger," current editor Roger Sutton took issue with Soto's exit, though he pointed out that, "If your book is sexy or foul-mouthed or anti-authority, you have no better friends than the American Library Association and its adjacent professions. They will—and they should—stick up for you. But get accused of racism (or, more euphemistically, 'cultural insensitivity') and you're on your own."¹⁴

What these two pre-social media moments have in common is the good intentions that accompanied them. Intentions that prevail and continue when we look at the controversies surrounding *A Fine Dessert*, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*, and any number of titles retelling American Indian myths without consulting the myths' respective tribe members. The controversies that we prefer (if indeed we prefer controversies at all) are the clear cut cases where a parent wants *Captain Underpants* removed from the shelf for overuse of the word "poopy." We have a great deal more difficulty knowing how to handle accusations of, as Sutton so eloquently put it, "cultural insensitivity," even though we have seen and dealt with these issues for decades.

In ALSC's first seventy-five years, our children's books have grown in wisdom and understanding. Classics old and new belong on our library shelves. In the next seventy-five years, we will see far more of these debates, as we navigate the heady waters of appropriation, appreciation, and good old-fashioned discussions. I have faith that as much as we like yelling about how angry we are about something, we'll enjoy *talking* about why they do and do not work even more. ☺

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Carle Museum Presents Art of Robert McCloskey through October

The work of Robert McCloskey will be featured in *Americana on Parade: The Art of Robert McCloskey* at The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, MA, through Oct. 23. In celebration of the 75th anniversary of McCloskey's most famous and enduring tale, *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941), The Carle's retrospective will include much of the original art from this beloved book.

The recipient of two Caldecott Medals and three Caldecott Honors, McCloskey was a major force in twentieth-century children's literature, despite working on fewer than twenty titles during his lifetime. He wrote and illustrated eight books of his own and illustrated ten stories by other authors—including *Journey Cake, Ho!* (1953), written by his mother-in-law Ruth Sawyer. "I'm not prolific," he once said. "It had to be right, and it often was."

The exhibit will feature more than ninety original artworks, ephemera, and rare preliminary book materials. While the exhibition centers on *Make Way for Ducklings*, it also considers McCloskey's entire career ranging from *Lentil* (1940), *Homer Price* (1943), and *Centerburg Tales* (1951), which recall the artist's youth in Ohio, to the family-based stories set in his adopted home state of Maine, such as *Blueberries for Sal* (1948) and *Time of Wonder* (1957).

Curated by H. Nichols B. Clark, founding director and chief curator emeritus, the exhibition also showcases a selection of independent work—watercolors and paintings that connect McCloskey to such prominent American painters as Thomas Hart Benton and Edward Hopper.

McCloskey, born in 1914 in Hamilton, Ohio, won a scholarship to study art in Boston after high school. Legendary children's book editor May Massee was the aunt of one of McCloskey's high school classmates. Reviewing

his portfolio of drawings and ideas about Pegasus, Spanish galleons, and other exalted literary subjects, Massee counseled the fledgling artist to focus on what he knew. McCloskey went home to Ohio and took her advice

to heart. In 1939, he presented Massee with a highly-rendered dummy for *Lentil* (1940), a partially autobiographical story about a boy whose harmonica-playing talent "saves the day" for a big event in a small Ohio town. Massee enthusiastically acquired the story for Viking Press, thus laying the first stone of a new career path for McCloskey.

McCloskey often expressed bemusement at his fabled career. He claimed he didn't know anything about children's literature: "I think in pictures," he said. "I fill in between pictures with words. My first book I wrote in order to have something to illustrate."

It was a story McCloskey heard about a family of ducks that stopped traffic in the streets of Boston that piqued his interest and led to the book that would catapult him to fame and firmly establish his vocation. He showed a preliminary dummy to Massee, who advised him that he needed to learn more about ducks in order to draw them well.

He spent two years studying mallard specimens at the American Museum of Natural History and consulting an ornithologist. Eager to accurately capture their movements and personalities, he bought sixteen ducks that came to live in his small Greenwich Village apartment and serve as models. McCloskey hoped to illustrate the book in watercolor, but Massee declined, concerned about the high cost of color printing. *Make Way for Ducklings* was printed in warm sepia; incredibly, McCloskey drew the final images on zinc lithographic plates backwards. McCloskey died in 2003, at the age of 88, at his home on Deer Isle.

For more information, visit www.carlemuseum.org

