

Censorship and classification the Australian way

In the early to mid 1970s fierce battles were waged in Australia over censorship and the rights of adults to see, hear and read what they wanted — with occasional references to the parallel rights of those who didn't want to see certain types of material not to be confronted by them.

I well remember a tutorial on censorship during my grad dip lib days, when one student triumphantly produced a selection from the State Library's 'locked cupboard' collection of serious erotica as an example of what the debate was about.

He poured scorn on people wanting to deny access to such material but was somewhat subdued when I countered with some examples that I had obtained from a Vice Squad contact of 'over-the-counter' sexually violent pornography and bestiality magazines.

Were we, as librarians, going to defend this equally? Would we be willing to spend scarce resources on material that on the face of it didn't seem to have much, if any, literary merit. Would we store it, and if so, how? I don't think we resolved the issues that day.

What emerged at the end of the public debate was basically a system of classification with very little censorship, in the sense of prohibition or of government agencies 'cutting bits out'. Films, videos, literature and more latterly video and computer games, and television programs are now all classified, rather than censored. The first four categories are dealt with on a federal basis but television programs are classified by individual networks. Individual items in this broad range of materials are given a label that indicates the type of content the viewer or reader can expect.

The only materials now 'censored', in the sense of being banned or more correctly 'refused registration' in Australia, include depictions of child sexual abuse, bestiality, unduly detailed or relished acts of extreme violence or cruelty, explicit or unjustifiable (in terms of plot) acts of sexual violence against non-consenting persons, and detailed instruction in matters of crime or the abuse of prescribed drugs.

The federal co-operative system for classification of films, videos, literature, and video games is now administered by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) based in Sydney. The office is headed by the chief film censor, who also presides over the staff of the Film Censorship Board, statutory officers who carry out the day-to-day classification of films and videos.

When a distributor or publisher is dissatisfied with the classification decision of the OFLC, they may appeal to the Film and Literature Board of Review. This is a group of six citizens from diverse backgrounds employed on a part-time basis and who meet when necessary to hear the appeal and view the material in question. Their decision is then binding. The Review Board hit the news in January 1993 amid controversy over its decision to reverse the

Film Censorship Board's 'banning' of Pasolini's *Salò*.

With the expiry of the terms of service of several members of the Review Board in late 1993, it has had a turnover of members. I joined in April 1994 and was appointed Chairperson from 1 July. So that I can attend I take time out from my paid job as part-time library manager for the Child, Adolescent and Family Health Service in Adelaide, and as honorary director of Young Media Australia, a national information, research and training agency about children and the media.

The present membership of the Review Board includes Sydney newscaster and presenter Anne Fulwood; head of psychiatric services at St Vincent's Hospital Brent Waters; principal of a Brisbane high school William Wilcox; and Sydney-based family therapist Jan Williams. There is one vacancy to be filled shortly.

The emphasis of the work of the OFLC and of the Review Board is on utilising the classification system to give the public accurate information about the type of content that they will encounter. The work is not all

about looking at material on 'the fringe'.

In my five months on the Board we've looked at two films that had been refused registration and have had to make judgments involving the essential differences between classifications G and PG, between PG and M, and between M and MA. My nearly nine years of experience in applying classification criteria as a member of the Children's Program Committee of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal provides a very useful background.

The classification criteria for films, videos and literature are detailed in a couple of useful booklets published by the OFLC, and which ought to be part of the range of community information available in public libraries.

They are: *What to see before you see a movie*, and *Printed matter classification guidelines*, both available from the Office of Film and Literature Classification, 255 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW 2000.

When new legislation is passed through federal parliament later this year, as part of a package to bring about some uniformity and a reduction in the complexity of Australia's censorship laws, the name of the responsible bodies will finally reflect the reality of the situation: we will have a classification, not a censorship, system.

The new federal legislation will be known as *The classification (publications, films and computer games) Bill*; the Film Censorship Board will become the Classification Board; and the Film and Literature Review Board changes to the Classification Review Board.

The names of the Boards will change but the faces will remain the same. I'm keen to encourage feedback from the community about the appropriateness of classifications given to films and videos, and also to promote the use of the classification system as a useful consumer information tool. Assistance from library networks to achieve these aims is most welcome.

In the previous issue of inCite we reported the appointment of Barbara Biggins to the position of Chairperson of the Commonwealth Film and Literature Review Board. Barbara, who is a librarian, reports for us in this issue on censorship and classification issues, with an eye to the contribution to be made by the library community.