

# Censorship – a personal response

Libby Gleeson

My first novel, *Eleanor, Elizabeth*, 1984, is a coming-of-age novel about a young girl in rural Australia in the 1960s. I learnt, through *inCite*, that the book had been removed from the shelves of some secondary schools. The reason? The main character swears. Because of the use of the words 'shit' and 'bloody bastard', some schools deemed the book inappropriate for the minds of schoolgirls.

I wasn't outraged. The book had received an award from the publisher, Angus and Robertson, and from the Children's Book Council so I was confident that some were reading and enjoying it. I felt contemptuous of anyone who saw the need to protect the young from words that came straight from my memory of my childhood thoughts. I was upset that the use of two or three words had attracted such a response and the value of the work — the ideas, story, characters, structure, the experiment with literary form, the literary merit of the work, was being overlooked!

That was twenty books ago and as far as I am aware, nothing I have written since has been removed from the shelves by the censor. But one result of that experience was a hardening of my own resolve against censorship. I have spoken many times about my position. As a writer, I weigh up every word that I write. I ponder the morality, the ideologies, the subtext of my work. I abhor some of what I read that is written for young people but I would never endorse a ban on publication. The existence of that with which we do not agree is the price of a free and democratic community. Freedom of expression — freedom

to write and to read is fundamental. And that means for everyone, including the young.

The censor views children and adolescents as innocent, needing protection from anything that is deemed inappropriate. There is no trusting of the young reader, no trusting that experience, family, peers, education and other reading will be the filters through which material is measured. And there is the assumption that the censor knows what is best for every reader. By all means choose not to read what you find abhorrent, but don't impose your views on everyone else.

Writers for young people face situations of censorship unheard of among those who write for an adult audience. And not all cases are in the predictable area of 'morality', 'obscenity' and 'profanity' — the areas most often cited in the study by Williams and Dillon, *Brought to book* (ALIA/Thorpe 1993)

Liz Honey's poetry collection, *Honey sandwich* (Allen and Unwin, 1994), was the subject of condemnation. The 'offending' poem, 'Looking after Granny' was felt to denigrate the elderly. Liz, and many readers, felt it was an affectionate, humorous and ironic exchange between a young child and her grandmother.


Last year, the focus was on a successful picture book *Mr Magee and the biting flea* (Pamela Allen, Penguin 1998). The small character of Mr Magee danced across the pages, tearing off his clothes to rid himself of the tormenting flea. Towards the end of the book he was naked and a miniscule penis was visible. Children laughed and enjoyed the story. So too did many adults, teachers and librarians among them. But some found the illustration offensive and chose to not purchase the title, return the book to the shop, white-out the offending square millimetre of flesh or draw on a pair of shorts! There is no moral rights legislation in this country — if there were, the people who so defaced the image of Mr Magee may have found themselves in breach of the law!

When our work is censored, many of us feel attacked and unfairly judged. Perhaps that is the wrong response. Perhaps we should take heed of the words of John Mortimer, creator of the famous Horace Rumpole:

*Writers should ... feel complimented by the fact that so many people in and out of authority, regard all print with deep fear and suspicion. Words are seen as unexploded mines, lying on deserted beaches, which may be gingerly approached in the course of morning walks, cautiously examined, perhaps prodded with a stick, but ever likely to blow up in the face of passers by ...*

Despite the examples I have given, writers for young people in this country do not face as much community group pressure to sanitise their work as do the writers in the United States of America. Perhaps we are a more relaxed, tolerant and open society, or perhaps we are merely apathetic. Whatever the cause it means our literature for children and adolescents can be more daring, innovative and irreverent than that of our colleagues in the USA. Long may it remain so.

*Libby Gleeson is currently chair of the Australian Society of Authors. Her most recent picture book, The Great Bear, illustrated by Armin Greder, Scholastic 1999, won the Bologna Raggazzi, 2000. This prize is awarded for the best picture book at the Bologna Book Fair and has never before been won by an Australian title. Both The Great Bear and a junior novel, Hannah and the Tomorrow Room have been shortlisted in this year's Children's Book Council Awards.*



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