Personal musings and reflections on books and censorship

“The ancient Roman Censor undertook the census, counting and overseeing the public to maintain social order, and censuring those causing affront to public morals - all in all (and keeping up the Latin derivations), a very patriarchal responsibility. The social assumption of the role, and the duty and the authority, to censor is so closely linked to the role, and the duty and the authority, of the parent over the child" (Beagels, 2008).

It is almost impossible to work in a public or school library for any length of time without bumping up against the issue of censorship. A patron or parent will complain that a book or other resource is inappropriate for their child and therefore equally inappropriate for everyone else's. According to the American Library Association parents are more likely than any other group to challenge a book (ALA, 2013). As our branch librarian is fond of reminding those patrons, ours is a "Public" library and as such caters for all of the community in our catchment no matter how their beliefs or ideas may be regarded by others.

During my first career as an English teacher in a large public high school in the mid 1980s, I was fortunate enough to be a member of a “teen” book club where members of our faculty and library staff shared their reading of new titles with each other over a gourmet bring-a-plate and the odd glass of wine. Margaret Mahy was hugely popular at that time and her special combination of the supernatural and first relationships proved a heady mix for young readers and just too much for some of the more conservative parents who challenged her books. Judy Blume also came under fire regularly for her realistic portrayals of adolescent angst. Fortunately our librarian was a woman of charisma and enthusiasm and was able to persuade the Principal to stand firm against those who wanted to remove these books from our shelves.

Like Judy Blume (Blume,1999) many of the books I read as a teenager would have been considered unsuitable (both then and now). But my parents chose not to hide books or try and censor my reading, trusting that I would ask them if I had questions. I think their chief trust was that they had brought me up to have an enquiring mind and that anything I read
would not corrupt me. I have been working in public libraries for nearly 12 months now and it pleases to me greatly to be in an environment which regards censorship as anathema.

I worked as a bookseller until fairly recently and found myself embarrassed more than once by the Office of Film and Literature Classification and Queensland Government’s continued censorship of books under the Category 1 ruling. Books under this ruling can only be sold in a sealed plastic cover with a sticker advising they are for sale only to persons over 18 years of age, and cannot be sold in Queensland at all! Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* was given this rating on its publication in 1991 (Moore, 2012, p 300). We regularly attempted to order it for our Brisbane store but always had our orders cancelled by our local suppliers. (Strangely no attempt was made to stop us stocking the audio version!)

My experiences would suggest that there will always be those who want to censor and, rightly or wrongly, act on their fears and insecurities and influence others as to what is best for the majority. In the case of parents it is often the result of an understandable desire to protect their children from harm. This is problematic for those parents seeking to bring their children up within a particular framework when faced with the materials created by living in a heterogenous and secular society; this can be particularly difficult as children grow into young adults and seek to challenge their parents’ ideas and assert their own individuality (Douvan, 1997).

As Blume points out, overt censorship of young adult readers, can actually make a book more desirable (Blume, 1999, p 62.). Young people are generally curious and figure if it is important enough to ban it is probably worth reading. A cursory glance at the most frequently Banned and Challenged Books in the US for the last 20 years would certainly suggest this is the case (Doll, 2012).

Harking back to Lester Asheim's (Asheim, 1956) treatise “Not censorship but Selection” I have found that most parents and the librarians or booksellers advising them are more inclined to select rather than censor. Ideally this is about matching the book with the child; figuring out what they would like to read and finding something that will stretch them a little bit or as Anne Carroll Moore would have it “to place into the hands of the right child, the right book at the right time” (Jenkins, 1996, p 815). I have also noticed a tendency for children who are "too young" or not really ready for more difficult young adult themes to
regularly self censor. One girl sent her mother in to get a "non-scary" version of "The Hunger Games!" As library and information professionals censorship is generally abhorrent to us (IFLA, 2103) - but we also need to respect that parents generally have the best interests of their children at heart. It’s a balancing act. When parents challenge a book we need to be able to respond in a way that encourages them to think more broadly about the issues at hand because books are such a great way to experience the scary and dangerous without having to live through it (Doll, 2012).

References


