Sex and other reasons why we ban books for young people

Michelle Smith, The Conversation, 14 September 2015.

©2015, Conversation Media Group

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NoDerivatives Licence

Available from THE CONVERSATION:

Available from Deakin Research Online:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30079730
Sex and other reasons why we ban books for young people

September 14, 2015 11.23pm AEST

Michelle Smith
Research fellow in English Literature, Deakin University
A prize-winning New Zealand novel for teenagers has been effectively banned because of complaints from Christian lobby group Family First. After the decision by the country’s Film and Literature Board of Review, Bruce Dawe’s *Into the River* is now subject to an interim ban that prohibits its supply, display, and distribution.

Into the River is the first book to be banned since the current law was enacted in 1993. The novel confronts important subjects like bullying and racism through its narrative about a Maori boy. As the winner of the 2013 New Zealand Post Children’s Book Awards, it is in some respects a surprising target for censors.

Into the River has been classified in several different ways. It was initially judged suitable for audiences over 16, then received an R14 classification at the beginning of 2014 (making it an offence to supply the book to a child younger than 14), which was overturned last month.
mass-produced, commercial, interminable, formulaic, and repetitive […] had no redeeming value and would harm any children exposed to it.

Nevertheless, the Board felt that younger readers without a sufficient “level of maturity” were at real risk of being shocked by “powerful and disturbing scenes”.

In 2013, Family First sought an R18 classification and shrink-wrap covering because of the book’s sexual content, representation of paedophilia and drug taking, and use of swear words. Leader Bob McCroskie must have been busy with the search function on an ebook, as he noted that “it’s a book that’s got the c-word nine times, the f-word 17 times and s-h-i-t 16 times”.

When most people think of book censorship, they imagine political regimes and potentially book burning in Nazi Germany. What is little considered is that most books that have been challenged or banned are books for young people.

The American Library Association’s list of the Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books of 2000-2009 includes dozens of books for young people. Eight of the books or series named in the top 10 are children’s or young adult titles.

JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series occupies the number-one position because of its depiction of magic. Christian schools across the United States, United Kingdom, and even some in Australia, have refused to allow the phenomenally popular novels about the boy wizard to circulate in their libraries.

What Harry Potter shares with four other titles in the top 10 is that it is a series. Series books for young people are typically understood as having little educational value or literary merit.

L Frank Baum’s Oz books, for example, were removed from numerous public library shelves in the United States throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As Laurie Langbauer explains, librarians believed that series fiction like Oz was:

mass-produced, commercial, interminable, formulaic, and repetitive […] had no redeeming value and would harm any children exposed to it.

Books for young readers are often challenged or banned because they conflict with adult perceptions of childhood innocence. Depictions of sex pose the most obvious threat to adults’ understanding of the sacred space of childhood.

Judy Blume’s teen novels were highly sought after in my primary school because of their discussion of puberty and developing sexuality. Four of her novels appear on the challenged books list from 2000-2009, even though the most recent of these was published more than three decades ago.

Blume began publishing in the 1970s and has pointed out that this period was more open to discussions of teen sexuality. Her controversial novel Forever, she explains, was:
used in several school programs then, helping to spur discussions of sexual responsi-

Blume laments that her novels would never be used in this way today. In 2013, she used her fame to assist after The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (number 10 on the ALA banned list) was removed from one Chicago school district after a complaint by a parent about sexual content.

Into the River has received literary awards and praise that distinguish it from popular series fiction. The New Zealand Review Board even highlights its potential to educate young readers. It has been reclassified and now banned because sex troubles adult ideas about what young people should be exposed to in fictional stories.

While age recommendations for disturbing content in books for young people are potentially useful, legal restrictions and bans are mystifying and fruitless for several reasons.

For one, young people can readily access adult fiction in public libraries and via ebooks. An obsessive focus on the books specifically marketed to young people ignores the mature themes, such as sex, drugs, violence, and horror, that they are free to explore elsewhere.

Second, young people access mature content in a range of formats, including largely unregulated internet sites and videos, and in video games, which aren’t usually expected to have an educative function.

Finally, through gritty realism and challenging content, books such as Into the River attempt to appeal to a demographic of teen boys who are reluctant readers. If the harshness of life for Indigenous, working-class, or sexually abused teens is too disturbing for adults to accept, then we would be better placed to improve these lived realities than condemn their representation in stories for young people.