1986

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Making Kids Safe for Books

James S. Jacobs
(A reprint of Dr. Jacobs's column in This People, October 1985)

Voices calling for reform in books for young people have never been more strident than they are today. Nor have they been more varied. In recent years I have heard scores of books condemned for a multitude of reasons. Some were attacked because they contained swearing, mentioned drugs, or dealt with child abuse. Others were denounced because they portrayed improper lifestyles. Mary Poppins, for instance, was identified by a group of librarians as undesirable because of the demeaning and limiting picture of womanhood represented by the mother. In another instance a call was issued to boycott a publisher responsible for a paperback romance series depicting adolescent girls as being interested primarily in boys, a limited and dangerous outlook which sets back recent female gains at least twenty-five years. And one woman denounced a book about Halloween because of the lifestyle of its main character, a witch. The woman herself was a practicing witch, and she complained that the portrayal of the witch in the book was unfair and damaging.

The messages of the reformers are as broad as their personal beliefs, but their method for delivering it is singular: Save our children by making books safe for them. The idea has a certain appeal, for each of us has seen titles which would improve the world by their absence. Yet, most of us realize if every book which makes someone unhappy were torched, we could operate the city library from the trunk of a Japanese import.

The task of making books safe for kids is as impossible as making life safe for kids. Even if we did purge the library shelves, what about the lingerie section of the Scars catalog, those National Geographic articles on tribal life in New Guinea, and the unabridged dictionary? The pitfalls can never be removed completely. Instead of trying to make books safe for kids, we can better dividends working to make kids safe for books.

And how do we make kids safe for books? Three guidelines:

Read the books our kids read. Our first responsibility is to know whereof we speak, and we can't speak clearly without knowing the books. In reading children's books, those titles become our books. We pay our dues and earn the right to speak as a participant instead of an observer.

But the rights of citizenship in the literary world are less important than the clarifying of our own views. We can't read without responding, and in the responding we find important questions. "This book bothers me. What, exactly, do I find troubling?" "I'm not sure I want my daughter to read this book just yet. In a few years I wouldn't object. What are my reasons for wanting her to wait?" "Some very frank scenes are in this book, yet I think it is valuable. How do I explain my liking it?"

While I was single, a married friend told me dating was important because it provided comparisons. "We can't know who to marry," he said, "until we can look at today's date in light of yesterday's." He did not suggest a checklist comparison but the subtle knowing which comes of experience.

We judge almost everything by our experience. In reading their (our) books, we begin to identify the difference between an offensive death book and an enlightening death book, between
worthwhile violence and sensationalized violence, between swearing which can be overlooked and gratuitous gutter language. We learn that credible judgments are not made in sweeping generalities but on a book-by-book basis.

Remember that our view is not everyone's view. The best stories are not lived fully in one reading. Part of their appeal is the ring of truth which echoes through a number of layers. No one hears all the resonance, not without rereadings, and usually not even then.

In judging books, we often are guilty of what is sometimes called The Christmas Present Syndrome. What do we give at Christmas when we are not sure of the receiver's taste or need? What we would like to get, of course. Why? Well, anyone with taste would naturally respond the way we respond.

I remember learning from my friend Sam how wrong we can be in our judgments. Years ago Sam's teenage daughter Julie made plans to see Love Story, a movie containing young love, physical commitment, and language not heard from the pulpit. Sam knew of these elements and was not thrilled Julie wanted to go, but she was in high school and he said nothing.

After the movie, Julie and her two girl friends came home for ice cream. Sam was painting a closet within earshot of the kitchen but paid no attention to the girls' conversation — until he heard Julie say, "Know what I learned in the movie?" Sam stopped painting in time to hear her continue, "I am never getting married unless it's in the temple." Julie's response was neither predictable nor programmable.

Younger children can respond just as unexpectedly. Some fairy tales contain scenes of violence which leave parents uneasy. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim counsels parents not to skip those tales in which the violence makes sense in the story. His contention is that children pay little attention to the violence in time-polished fairy tales but its inclusion adds to the believability and power of the tale. G. K. Chesterton, the English writer, had much the same belief. When asked by a mother if violent fairy tales shouldn't be kept from children, Chesterton replied he saw no reason to do so for "children, who are pure, demand justice; adults, who are otherwise, naturally prefer mercy."

Can we know how our children are responding without eavesdropping or turning to psychologists? Yes, if we plan and follow through on guideline number three.

Talk to our children about the books they read. In The Chestry Oak (Kate Seredy), Nazi troops occupy Hungary and the ancestral castle of Prince Michael and his parents. The boy prince is subjected to daily lessons at the hand of a calculating professor whose goal is to win him to the new order. A butler who has been with the family for years is worried about Michael'sindoctrination and mourns his treatment in conversation with Nana, Michael's personal maid since birth. She responds to his concerns, "I, too, have heard and I have seen those books. But there is nothing they can do to him during the day that I have not the power to undo while I have him alone."

In Nana's comment is the essence of making children safe for books. Talking with a child alone allows any parent the chance to undo indoctrinations, correct misinformation, and more. Children learn about their parents when the adults talk about what they found in the books. ("I know your principal is not fond of A Day No Pigs Would Die and I can see his reasons, but on the way to work I find myself thinking about the relationship between the boy and his father.") The children also learn how to consider new points of view. ("I didn't like the ending of Wild in the
World because the world was depicted as meaningless and human life useless. The author's belief and mine seem to be basically different.”) And parents show respect for children by asking for opinions (“What did you remember/notice/treasure/abhor about the story?”) and then listening.

Whatever the outcome of honest, unhurried conversations about books, our children participate in a process of responding to print which teaches far stronger and far longer than lecture or blanket caution. And in the pursuit of literature's secrets, like life's, young people may even learn that the proper search can be more important than the correct answer.