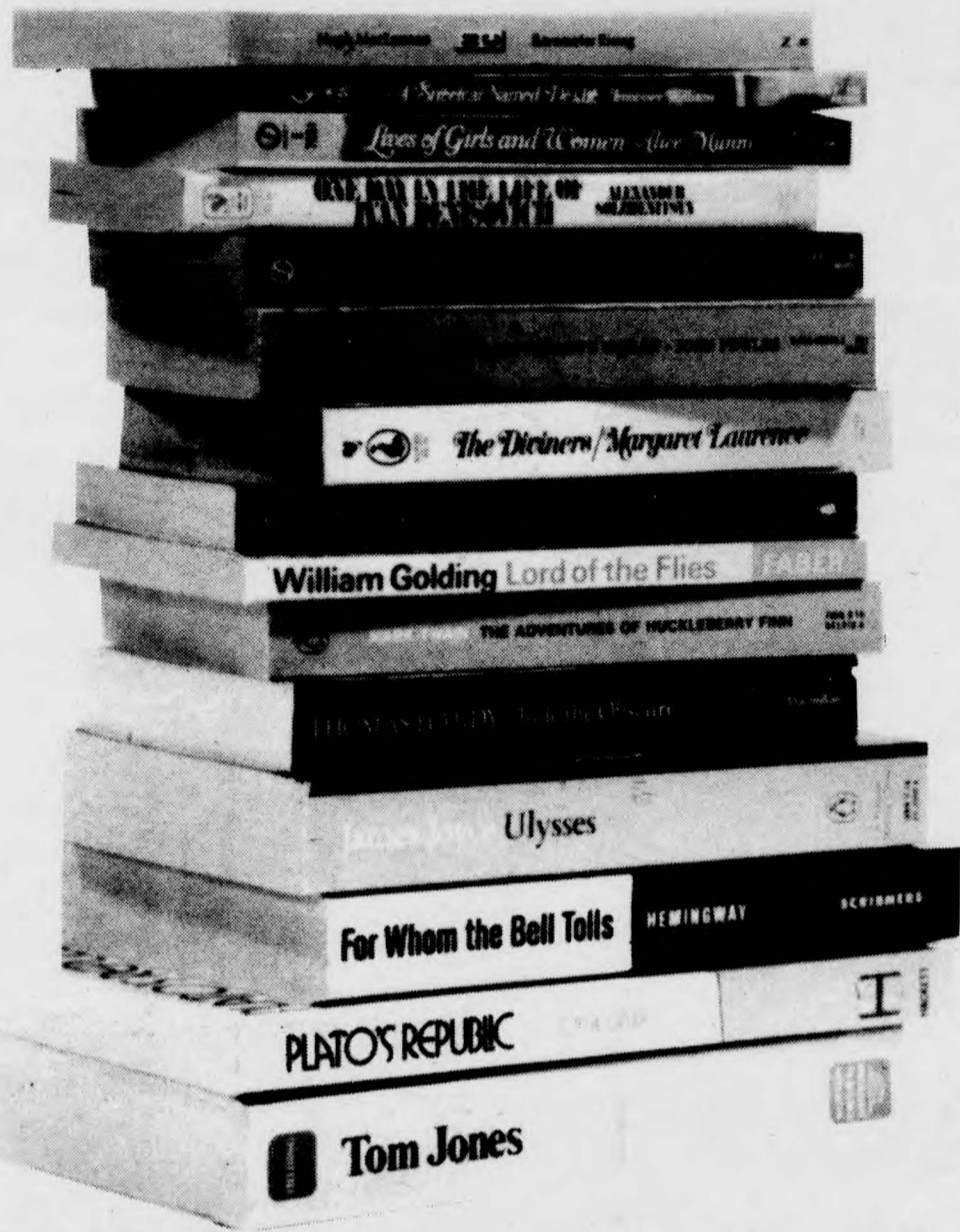


Emptying the shelves



Barb Mainguy

If this country is free, and governed by intelligent, educated people, why are Canadian children being denied access to the literature of their choice?

Books by Margaret Laurence, J.D. Salinger, W.O. Mitchell, Mordecai Richler, John Steinbeck and William Shakespeare have recently been banned from Canadian schools, for the most part on the basis of the "dirty bits", or attitudes called "pessimistic" or "nihilistic". Fundamentalist minister Ken Campbell calls it "literary sewage", and states that "the religion of secularism propagated by public funds in the classroom is brainwashing millions of our youth into becoming passive slaves to Freudian and Darwinian cults."

Not, mind you, that it's illegal to read Laurence, Salinger, Richer et al. On the contrary, they are readily available in most libraries and on the Canadian market.

Then why remove them from the school system? The reason, largely, is offended morality. Small local community groups quietly garner enough support, and apply enough pressure, to have the books removed from the classroom shelves. They fear, it seems, the corruption of our youth.

Teachers are outraged because they feel it is unfair criticism of their judgement. Students complain that it is a slap in the face to their intelligence. But the censors remain adamant.

The current wave of book banning is another chapter in Canada's history of the sheltered molding of our children's education.

Books like Tom Jones, The French Lieutenant's Woman, For Whom the Bell Tolls, and Barometer Rising have been forbidden because of implied extra-marital sex. A Streetcar Named Desire, Catcher in the Rye, Rabbit Run, and Rabbit Redux have been banned because of the side of life they portray. The list goes on to include One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Jude the Obscure, The Butterfly Revolution, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, James Joyce's Ulysses, and Huckleberry Finn.

Much of the momentum for this movement comes from one source. In

1974, Fundamentalist Ken Campbell of Milton, Ontario, became distressed by the books (Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux) in his daughter's school curriculum. He refused to pay school taxes for that year and founded Renaissance International. His aim was to take education out of the hands of the teachers and put it into the hands of parents. Campbell was of the opinion that much of the literature present in schools was "contrary to the ideas of the family expressed by Jesus Christ."

Campbell says he received thousands of letters from parents agreeing with him and voicing concern over health, financing, housing, family stress and schooling. Committees were formed which began to take action on what they believed to be the faults of the education system. Meetings were held to discuss the presence of The Diviners and Catcher in the Rye in school curriculums. Finally, hearings were held and in Lincoln and Huron counties the books were banned. According to a report by Stephen Franklin of the Writers' Development Trust, delegations sometimes arrive at schools unannounced demand that the offensive books be withdrawn, and suggest that more Bibles be stocked.

The reaction was immediate from authors, teachers and students. 1984, it seemed, was pending. An assault was beginning on intellectual freedoms of access and expression.

The Book and Periodical Council responded with the booklet "C*ns*rsh*p: Stopping the Book Banners", which among other things includes advice for English teachers on how to prepare for the censors before their damage is done. "Curricula materials should," they adjure, "be appropriate to the age, ability, social and emotional maturity of the students, provide growth not only in factual knowledge, but also in literary and aesthetic appreciation, represent a balance between today's world and the world of the past, stimulate the critical faculty" and "be chosen for their positive features, rather than rejected for their negative qualities."

This rationale would ensure a book's

defense on the same basis. "It is not enough to reply that the book isn't filthy. It should be possible to explain why the book is important."

The Writers' Development Trust, part of the Writers' Union of Canada, began to show up at Renaissance meetings, making parallel presentations against censorship. Stephen Franklin, interim chairman of the political committee of the Trust, says that "any indication of expansion of censorship, or repression, or loss of freedom of expression is of concern to the Writers' Union of Canada. We are opposed to any attempts to prevent people reading what they will, and the attempts being made by Renaissance Canada and other groups to pressure schools to take out books."

One of the gravest current dangers, he feels, is self censorship. "Teachers feel threatened because of declining enrollment, and overcrowding on the market, so they are avoiding hassles." He objects to this kind of pressure being put on the teachers.

Franklin notes, "Parents feel threatened that children can see the world as it is. In The Diviners, they see the sexual relationship between Morag and Jules (a white girl and a Metis man) as a threat to their daughters, and worry that they will instantly adopt the same attitude. People are so terribly threatened by words."

Franklin is further dismayed by the perverse ignorance of the banners. "In Huron County," he stated, "no banners had read the book. Ken Campbell says he has not read a novel in 20 years (including The Diviners), and is proud of the fact."

"In Lincoln County, people were standing at the door handing out sheets with excerpts from The Diviners outlining scenes of explicit sex and selected phrases. "There is a Supreme Court ruling," says Franklin, "which forbids banning books on the basis of excerpts. The work must be considered as a whole."

Unfortunately, the Writers' Union does not always hear of instances of attempted book banning before it is too late to make a presentation at the hearing. Limited funds and time prevent them from being able to attend all the hearings. Campbell's organization extends across the country. However, Franklin feels that the Union has been a force, and there seem to be fewer concerted attacks on literature.

In an article printed by Quest magazine, Franklin pointed out that Campbell's objectives have recently changed. He once envisioned "a rating system for school books similar to that for motion pictures, with restricted, adult only and general categories. But now he no longer thinks it germane to argue about Margaret Laurence's The Diviners, which has the distinction of being both the winner of the 1975 Governor-General's award for fiction, and the most banned book in Canadian high-school. Campbell is after bigger game. He wants...to create a parallel system of 'Heritage Schools'...eschewing the 'Filthy' literature published in the last half century."

"They nibble away at freedom of expression," says Franklin. "Once you back down, you get to a state of 1984 without realizing it."

Ten years ago, Thornhill Collegiate was threatened with censorship. A teacher who was there at the time believes "censorship is unnecessary for sophisticated and responsible people. There is no scientific evidence that a book can corrupt. It goes against ideas of why we have literature, why there is art. Northrop Frye in The Educated Imagination states that 'There's no such thing as a dirty book, just people with a dirty mind.' A book is not reality and should not be taken that way."

The teacher feels that censorship is inevitable, just because a teacher must select one book over another. "But it is my professional responsibility as a teacher to choose the books which suit a student's age and understanding."

"The objections made to The Diviners (i.e. explicit sex), are a small and necessary part of the book. But if you read the book, and become involved with it, and see its true qualities, you see that it deals with real problems, problems of communication and crucial things concerning human living. To say that there are books which deal with the problems, that are just as good only they don't have the objectionable parts is to say that a book has

no meaning, no sacredness. Books like The Diviners are sacred. You're bloody lucky if you get them."

"The censors," he continues, "still conceive education by traditional standards where a student is taught the teacher's biases along with the material. I think this is what some teachers want."

Ideally, he thinks students should be presented with a selection of literature, and encouraged to make their own choices. They can then choose their own level, and progress at their own pace, learning to enjoy reading, though not necessarily reading the teacher's way.

He too finds most of the pressure coming from one source. "The Renaissance Group represent everything I am against. It scares me, their willingness to sacrifice freedom of the individual. We're all vulnerable to them. This is a time when many questions are being asked, and they provide answers, a feeling of safety. That's a dangerous direction to go in."

Dr. Blair Shaw is chairman of the Renaissance Institute of the Family. It is an autonomous commission set up to examine the position of the family unit in society, and it carries on with Campbell's work.

Shaw, who is a psychologist, considers English literature to have great potential for moral damage. In a recent interview with Excalibur he said, "There is no question that literature is the source of a very significant effect on our children. Children are being led to believe that the lifestyles, ideals, and values presented in Canadian literature are normal, good, and fun."

He adds that he know of cases where children are told in the classroom "not to let the nineteenth century attitudes of their parents stunt their growth."

He says they are told not to tell their parents what they are given to read in the classroom, and are ridiculed by the teacher in front of their peers if their parents should object. "Everybody can read this book but you, Johnny, your parents think your ears are too delicate." These instances have made him wonder "whether our children should be raised by wise, enlightened, liberated intellectuals or by their parents."

"Government institutions," he says, "including schools, were established to serve families, not the other way around. It is a dangerous state when education is decided by the government, and not by the family. Schools, as they are, make it very difficult for the parents to get involved. They are hurried through parent-teacher meetings, seldom encouraged to participate. Literature affects our children. Parents object to literature which is nihilistic, pessimistic, or which contains violence or explicit sex. Parents have a right to decide on their children's education."

The solution he proposes is not censorship. Shaw objects to accusations leveled at the Renaissance institution. "Renaissance has been misinterpreted," he claims. "The Institute rejects censorship is unbecoming a democracy. Education should cater to all individuals, within reason and the bounds of the system."

Like Campbell, Shaw disapproves of "monolithic education in a pluralistic society." He too envisions a secular/non secular division in the school board.

Shaw envisions an education system removed from certain realities of life. When asked whether or not a student would gain from the eclectic background of experience to be found in literature, he replied that such an attitude is liberal, also known as permissive. He notes there still exists a clause in the Ministry of Education's Regulations which states that a school teacher is to "inculcate Judeo-Christian values".

In the words of Elmer Umbach, one of the leading censors in Huron County, "We believe that a child is not mature until he is physically mature, at about the age of twenty one. Until then he is not able to handle things like sex, and should not be exposed to them."

The apparent impossibility of ever keeping a child that much in the dark does not seem to be considered seriously by the likes of Shaw. Sooner or later a child will leave home. What will then happen when he confronts complex contemporary problems by himself. If his previous teaching has been to avoid these issues, which are the essence of literature, what adult response can he have but apathy?