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## Book Bans and the Bowdlerization of Life

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## Book Bans and the Bowdlerization of Life

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### Abstract

In recent years, the number of book bans and book challenges directed at schools has increased considerably (Meehan et al.). Much of the angst expressed in these cases is directed towards children's and Young Adult literature containing "sexually explicit" content ("About Banned and Challenged Books"). However, as one censorship case involving *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* by Anne Frank, published posthumously in 1995, shows, what censors deem to be inappropriate sexual content is sometimes adolescent sexual development itself (O'Toole). The objections raised against the diary, which was written by a middle-school-aged girl, prompt questions about what censors consider to be inappropriate for young readers and why. Definitions of children's and Young Adult literature reveal an age overlap of four years between the two readerships, meaning that readers between those ages might have the standards of both genres applied to them ("About the Program"). An investigation into the origins of children's literature reveals that Western beliefs concerning what is appropriate for young readers have their rather recent basis in 18th-century ideologies (Miller 122). These ideologies implode when their application results in censoring adolescents' own lived experiences from themselves. Censorship that seeks to bar young people from reality ultimately tasks literature with maintaining a separate, sanitized version of reality in which young people are expected to exist. Attempting to maintain this false space runs contrary to the reality that young people already experience and disregards the valuable insights that young readers can bring to controversial topics.

Keywords: *Anne Frank, censorship, book bans, children's literature, young adult literature*

Over the past few years and particularly the past several months, the U.S. has seen an alarming increase in book bans within school curriculum and school libraries. PEN America, an organization dedicated to protecting free expression, observes that “During the first half of the 2022-23 school year PEN America’s Index of School Book Bans lists 1,477 instances of individual books banned, affecting 874 unique titles, an increase of 28 percent compared to the prior six months, January – June 2022” (Meehan et al.). The majority of these censorship cases target Young Adult literature, or literature intended for readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen (Meehan et al.). However, the prescribed age range for Young Adult literature intersects with that of children’s literature by four years, or between the ages of twelve and fifteen (“About the Program”). This overlap requires one to examine how definitions of childhood and children’s literature impact censorship of both children’s and Young Adult literature. As the American Library Association notes, book challenges are often “motivated by a desire to protect children from ‘inappropriate’ sexual content or ‘offensive’ language” (“About Banned and Challenged Books”). However, this desire to protect can inadvertently lead to the pathologizing of natural human development. For example, in 2010, the classic work *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* by Anne Frank was challenged by the parent of an eighth grader for containing “sexually explicit” material (“Banned Book Awareness”). The material in question is a passage in which the fourteen-year-old Frank describes her observations of her maturing female body, one undergoing the changes of adolescence (O’Toole). The censorship of Frank’s diary poignantly illustrates an important issue at the heart of school book bans: a desire to maintain children’s innocence well into their young adult years by restricting their access to books which portray anything beyond what the censor deems a sanitized, safe version of reality (Miller 124).

Current censorship campaigns’ focus on books in particular highlights the special significance that adults place on the role literature plays in shaping young people’s developing selves (Miller 123-25). Meehan et al. assert that “YA [(Young Adult)] books are understood as texts that help students gain knowledge about the contemporary world, their own sense of identity, and social responsibility, and serve as a tool for developing empathy.” Books written for a demographic of people who are not quite children but not quite adults must, by Mee-

han et al.’s definition, include difficult topics that help to orient and prepare the reader for issues they will face in the real world. Banning books that mention difficult topics undermines the purpose of those books and denies the needs of the demographic they are written to serve. Young readers face many of the challenges addressed in controversial literature, and their experiences and ways of coping with those experiences should not be disregarded or denied by adults wishing to maintain a separate, sanitized reality for children and adolescents from that of adults. Preventing children and young adults from reading books that address controversial topics denies the reality of young people’s own experiences and excludes them from contributing their unique insights to conversations surrounding such topics.

Censorship records show that books tend to be censored from children if they contain “violence,” “offensive language,” or “sexually explicit” material (Niccolini 25). Some critics argue that any mention of sex or sexuality in children’s literature particularly provokes adults’ anxiety because sexual knowledge is seen as “one of the chief demarcations between adulthood and childhood” (Niccolini 25). The desire to preserve children’s and adolescents’ innocence from sexual knowledge is closely linked to modern ideas surrounding childhood and adolescence. Those ideas have their origins in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment ideologies. In fact, Alyson Miller argues that “the Western notion of childhood as a distinct stage of life did not fully consolidate until the late eighteenth century” (122). Through the writings of Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, children came to be recognized as a psychologically and emotionally unique demographic with specific needs. Children came to be seen as innocent, impressionable, and “morally neutral,” and childhood as “a stage in which external influences play a crucial role in formulating subjectivity” (Miller 122-23). According to Miller, “Children in this view are not biologically determined beings, subjectivities fixed by birth, but rather identities in process, selves in construction” (123). Children’s perceived moldability led to a perceived need to shape their identities. “Thus,” as Miller explains, “from the earliest conceptions of childhood, children have been situated in discourses concerned with their pliability and associated with a state of being that is impressionable and in flux” (123). Once children came to be seen as impressionable products of their environment, it became imperative to control any influencing factors, one of which was literature.

Society identified the power of literature as a persuasive force at the same time that it recognized the imperative need to shape children's minds (Miller 123-25). Thus, the censorship of children's literature became a primary means of controlling the ideas presented to the impressionable child. Miller notes that "The literary experience was one that could be carefully supervised to ensure exposure was isolated in the most appropriate of works" (123). Once the power of censorship was realized, it began being employed as a tool for social control. Literature became "...fastidiously controlled by institutions such as the school, the increasingly privatized family, and the church in order to ensure that the literary experience taught the child the value systems of the society into which it was to be integrated" (Miller 124). It became imperative that children's reading be carefully censored to ensure that children were being infused with their societies' current values. The concepts of the child as impressionable, requiring careful mental shaping, and ideas about the power of literature to inform and persuade formed the foundation of modern attitudes towards children's literature.

Despite being a medium that receives so much attention for its purported influence over the developing human psyche, apart from a general age range, children's literature as a genre lacks a concrete definition. The debate surrounding the common traits of children's literature has been ongoing for decades, as Marah Gubar states: "Certainly, influential children's literature critics have been arguing back and forth about whether or not it is possible to define their subject of study since this academic field came into being in the 1970s" (209). Just as there are conflicting ideas about what is appropriate for young readers to read, there are conflicting ideas about what constitutes children's literature as a genre. Children's literature is essentially a genre created to meet the perceived needs of the recently invented childhood construct. The criteria used to sort literature into and out of the children's literature genre are tentative and inconsistent. As Gubar points out, many of what are now typically labeled "children's books," such as *Peter Pan* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, were originally written for mixed audiences or even intended for adults (209). The difficulty of defining children's literature is related to the difficulty of defining childhood since the concepts of children and childhood are largely unfixated, varying across cultures and time periods (Gubar 212). The instability of these concepts suggests their artificiality.

One reason children's literature is difficult to define might be because those doing the defining often fail to take the readership's opinions into account. As Lesnik-Oberstein notes, the creation and criticism of children's literature is primarily an adult-run endeavor. She states, "Children's books are written by adults for children. The subsequent criticism of this fiction is then produced by adults on behalf of the children who are supposed to be reading the books. There are thus multiple layers of adults writing, and then selecting and analyzing, children's fiction" (222-23). However, relegating children solely to the role of consumers rather than producers and critics of texts diminishes the quality and authenticity of texts intended for children. Gubar points this out, stating, "Cutting children out of the loop closes down inquiry, whereas acknowledging that their reading, viewing, and playing practices can function as one of the fibers that help determine whether a text counts as children's literature opens it up" (215). By excluding children from debates surrounding children's literature, adults ignore children's agency as a readership. One researcher asserts, "...students value the power of choice and the results of making their own decisions, just as any other reader does" (Denzin 10). Children are not only ignored as a capable readership, but they are also an often-ignored pool of authors. Gubar notes, "...because scholars presume that children's literature is an adult-run activity, the fascinating phenomenon of texts written by young people for young people has been excluded from serious study" (212). Youth-authored texts tend to be ignored when considering age-appropriateness standards for youth literature, meaning those age-appropriateness standards are instead imposed from the outside by members of other age demographics. Ignoring the voices of the target demographic of youth literature ensures that the genre will never accurately reflect the needs or the potential of its readers. The works produced can only fulfill a circular demand for texts that cater to children not as they are, but as adults wish them to be.

Not only is defining children's literature difficult, it may not even be possible. Gubar states, "the idea that all children's texts share even a single trait that remains the same over time and across cultures is untenable" (210). Pinning a static definition on children's literature is difficult because society's standards of appropriateness for children are not static. As Lesnik-Oberstein observes, "The whole concept of the 'child,' or 'childhood,' is inherently problematic: it is neither agreed upon, in

terms of definitions and characteristics, within one time period or culture, nor is it consistent through history or across cultures and societies” (224). Attempting to rigidly define children’s literature may also be detrimental. Gubar points out how categorizing children’s literature according to arbitrary definitions can result in the exclusion of good texts when those texts do not conform with society’s current values. She notes, “the attempt to find essential traits tends to narrow our vision, leading us to ignore, misread, or arbitrarily out-of-bounds texts that do not share these qualities” (211). A strict definition of children’s literature may rule out texts that offer valuable insights but break standard expectations; the same is true of young adult or adolescent literature. Such out-of-bounds texts might include first-hand descriptions of adolescent sexual development and human anatomy.

The artificiality of the childhood construct results in children’s literature being written “by authors who conceptualize young people as a distinct audience, one that requires a form of literature different in kind from that aimed at adults” (Gubar 209). While young people may be a distinct audience, the trouble with children’s literature as a separate medium is that it is often charged with upholding a sanitized version of reality that bears little similarity to the real world. Gubar argues that “just as ‘children are not a separate form of life from people,’ children’s books are not a discrete and distinctive type of literature” (210). While it might be going a step too far to state that children have no unique needs as a readership, it is important to note that the separateness that children’s literature creates exists only within its own artificial boundaries. Outside of the pages of books, children live in the same world as adults. As Alyssa Niccolini states, “The reality is that young people live in and read about—as we adults also did—a decidedly complex world where sex, violence, intolerance, and profanity are a reality” (27). Censoring children’s and adolescent literature can only maintain a very weak and temporary façade when the reality children and adolescents experience outside of the classroom is uncensored and unfiltered.

The censorship of children’s and adolescent literature is not founded on any concrete standards of the genre, since in fact there are none, but it rather stems from the desire to enforce and maintain the artificial construct of childhood as conceptualized in the 18th century. As Niccolini states, censorship is part of “The quest to protect the imagined innocence of ‘the young

and inexperienced”” (24), and “commonly banned or challenged books map strikingly onto broader cultural constructions of ‘proper’ or ‘healthy’ adolescence” (23). Censorship of children’s and adolescent literature operates under certain broad assumptions of what is appropriate for people at specific ages. Niccolini further explains that “Cultural constructions of youth tend to be focused on notions of teens as predictable and hardwired for certain behaviors,” and “Healthy adolescent development is thought to unfold in a slow and steady manner, punctuated by particular age-defined milestones. Developments outside of that linear arc are often pathologized” (Niccolini 23). The pathologizing of adolescent experiences outside of the accepted cultural constructions of healthy adolescent behavior leads to the censorship of texts depicting such experiences.

As a significant piece of literature of the Holocaust written by an adolescent, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank has been assigned reading for many years in some middle school and high school classrooms. However, since its publication in 1947 and as recently as 2010, the work has been criticized, challenged, and banned from classrooms and school libraries for reasons ranging from its containing “sexual content” to its being “a real downer” (“Banned Book Awareness”). Censoring Frank’s diary for its alleged “sexual content” is problematic because the challenged passages merely depict natural adolescent development. Frank, writing from a first-person perspective, depicts a youth experience that some parents cannot reconcile with their preconceived notions of childhood innocence. The motivations behind the censoring of the diary stem from the two-fold ideology that arose during the 18<sup>th</sup> century which depicts children as innocent and literature as persuasive (Miller 122-23). The desire to control how children grow into adulthood and what ideas shape their worldviews leads adults to meticulously select texts deemed suitable for children and to reject those deemed unsuitable (124). The ideological breakdown of such censorship occurs when the cultural constructions being enforced attempt to bar juveniles from their own lived experiences. The censorship of the diary serves as just one example of how book censorship ultimately represents a desire to enforce an unrealistic set of expectations for adolescent awareness that contradicts the reality experienced by adolescents themselves.

*The Diary of a Young Girl* is the firsthand account of a girl who was forced to live in hiding with her family for

two years during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in World War II. Writing between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, Frank describes her family's living conditions, the various interpersonal dramas that unfolded during the years they spent confined in their hideout, and the personal changes she experienced as a maturing young woman. In August 1944, the Franks were discovered by Nazi soldiers and sent to concentration camps. Frank's father, Otto Frank, was the only member of the family to survive. After the end of the war, Otto compiled and began editing Frank's diary with the intention of publishing it. He published the first edition in Dutch in 1947 and then in English in 1952. The first edition contained the majority of Frank's original writings, but certain passages which were included by Otto were omitted by his publishers such as especially personal passages and passages that the publishers deemed might be offensive to the general readership (Lin). In 1995, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* was published. It contains all of the passages from Frank's original diary, including passages excluded from the first edition.

Since its publication, the diary has been incredibly popular and influential. One author writes, "There is no exact way of measuring its effect; we can only cite its translation in twenty-one languages, its distribution in ninety-five countries...The statistics alone say nothing of the meaning of the book as an experience to the millions upon millions of separate readers" (Dworkin 24). The diary occupies a unique space in literature as it was written by an adolescent living in hiding during the Second World War. Frank's youth status lends a unique perspective to both the events of the Holocaust and the relatable human experience of growing up. As one scholar notes, "Frank represents not only Holocaust victims, but a young girl coming of age" (Lagerwey 51). The diary's accessibility makes it popular in school curriculums not only to teach young readers about the Holocaust but also as a springboard for other topics. In one study, a researcher describes a program implemented in a New York school that used the diary as its main text. The program's goal was to cultivate emotional intelligence in both teachers and students in order to create a school culture of emotional understanding. After four years, the results of the study showed a positive increase in academic growth and an improvement in teacher-student relationships (Kremenitzer). As positive as the diary's impact has been, however, it has also received criticism. The definitive edition in particular has appeared at the

center of censorship scandals.

In 2010, a parent of an eighth-grade student complained to a Virginia school board that certain passages of *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, part of the school's eighth grade reading curriculum, contained "sexually explicit" material ("Banned Book Awareness"). The offending passage comes from Frank's March 24, 1944 entry, found only in *The Definitive Edition*, in which she describes her own genitalia (O'Toole). After giving an ingeniously descriptive account of the appearance of the various parts, she concludes, describing the vagina: "The hole's so small I can hardly imagine how a man could get in there, much less how a baby could come out" (Frank 236). Frank, who originally wrote her diary with no idea it would ever be read by anyone besides herself, writes as a fourteen-year-old girl experiencing natural curiosity and a growing awareness of the physical changes of adolescence. Other passages that have incited scandal depict Frank's developing sexual awareness ("Banned Book Awareness"). In her January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944 entry, she writes, "Once when I was spending the night at Jacque's, I could no longer restrain my curiosity about her body, which she'd always hidden from me and which I'd never seen. I asked her whether, as proof of our friendship, we could touch each other's breasts. Jacque refused" (Frank 162). Whether these entries constitute "sexually explicit" material is debatable; the purpose of the first passage is to describe the female anatomy, not sex, and the second merely shows Frank's growing awareness of sexuality and the female body. Since the passages relate the changes of adolescence from the perspective of an adolescent, the question becomes why the passages were deemed inappropriate for someone the same age as the girl who wrote them.

While in hiding, Frank became aware of the possibility of someday publishing the diary she was then in the process of writing. This led her to create a self-edited version of her diary in which she omitted passages that dealt with deeply personal thoughts and feelings. Interestingly, when her father began editing the diary for publication after Frank's death, he "considered such passages essential and reinstated them" (Lin). Frank's father did not find her developing awareness inappropriate, but rather saw it as a testament to her humanity. Lin notes, "As adolescence is a universal life stage, presenting Frank's adolescent development helps induce reader identification with her, which in turn would facilitate the cause against racism." Not only are the passages

age-appropriate, but they are also vital in undermining the ideologies that led to the Holocaust. Otto's editorial decisions show an awareness of Frank's personal entries as crucial displays of her humanity and, thus, a powerful refutation of racist ideologies. Furthermore, "excluding passages about adolescent development would present the teen author unnaturally" (Lin). As a fourteen-year-old girl, Frank was experiencing the physical and emotional changes associated with adolescence, and those experiences naturally made their way into her diary.

Eighth graders in the United States are typically around the age of thirteen ("What Are the U.S. Education Levels?"). This means that upon reading the controversial passages, the students at the Virginia school would have been about the same age as Frank was when she wrote them. It is very likely that they were experiencing the same kinds of changes and shifting awareness that Frank records in her diary. To state that the writings of an adolescent girl which record the changes of adolescence are inappropriate for other adolescents to read seems absurd. The implication is that adolescence itself is somehow inappropriate. While the 2010 case came about as the result of an individual parent's objections, the ideological reasoning behind the objections themselves run deeper within the fabric of Western society.

*The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* challenges the 18<sup>th</sup>-century concept of childhood innocence because it was written by a juvenile and yet contains passages that some adults find inappropriate. Some agree that the author's age and the insights she provides make her work suitable for others her age, yet others point to the traumatic aspects of Frank's life as reasons to disqualify the diary as adolescent literature. On the one hand, "The reception of the Diary as an edifying, universal message to humanity contributed to its classification as adolescent literature" (Brenner 106). Some believe that the very humanity of the text, its raw, honest passages, make it universal. However, another researcher notes, "The classification of the text as 'adolescent literature' evokes notions of innocence that do not seem entirely compatible with Frank's observations of imminent death, displacement, and alienation, which are, essentially, traumatic experiences" (Pabel). Here, the researcher blatantly states the expectation that the content in adolescent literature must maintain an unspecified level of "innocence" in order to be suitable for its readers. The implication is that even though the events mentioned were experienced and documented by an ad-

olescent, they are still not suitable to be read about by other adolescents.

The 2010 censorship case demonstrates the cultural perception that potentially inappropriate content is especially dangerous to children when presented through the medium of literature. Children's books are more likely to be challenged if they contain "sexually explicit" material (Niccolini 25), yet other research suggests that the topic of sex is perceived as less dangerous when presented in other forms. For example, a study published in 2017 by Leslie Kantor and Nicole Levitz shows that most parents in the U.S. believe sex education to be an important part of middle and high school curriculum. The study found that "More than 93 percent of parents place high importance on sex education in both middle and high school. Sex education in middle and high school is widely supported by parents regardless of their political affiliation" (Kantor and Levitz). As the study demonstrates, even across political parties, a majority of parents in the U.S. agree that their adolescents should be exposed to sex education in school, yet within the same country, the diary of a fourteen-year-old girl has been banned for mentioning adolescent sexual development. This implies that literary censorship might have less to do with the age-appropriateness of particular subjects and more to do with the perceived persuasive power of literature and a fear of how children and literature interact. Elisabeth Johnson further points out the disconnect between what children and adolescents are allowed to read about versus what they are exposed to in other settings by examining various age requirements and expectations across mediums. She states, "The construction of conceptions is visible in variations for the age of 'consent,' criteria for PG-13 and R-rated films, or crimes that constitute 'juvenile' offenses" (62). Content that is acceptable in the format of a movie might not be acceptable in a book, and the age group for which content is deemed appropriate may shift depending on the format through which it is presented. The contradictions between age restrictions across mediums demonstrates the artificiality of those age restrictions and suggests that through other mediums young people may be exposed to a variety of topics beyond what is deemed allowable within the confines of literature. Targeting books for censorship merely denies that many young people are likely already exposed to inappropriate subjects in a variety of contexts in their everyday lives.

Censoring a book for containing challenging materi-

al runs contrary to the reality of what adolescents know and are capable of understanding. One researcher challenges the assumption that students should be barred from reading about traditionally banned topics, stating, “If I censor a racy or an erotic book, how much is my decision motivated by the implicit notion that my students aren’t mature enough or ready to handle the content?” (Niccolini 23). Niccolini goes on to challenge censorship by noting that students may have more to bring to a reading than the modern ideological constructs of adolescence allow. She asks, “By desiring to censor it, am I pinning an ‘utter ignorance’ onto my students, already ruling out that they might bring critical perspectives and creative approaches to these materials?” (23). Instead of censoring books from children and thus excluding them from the discussion of complex topics, young readers should be recognized as not only capable but valuable contributors to those discussions.

As *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* shows, children and adolescents are not only capable of processing difficult subjects, but they also have useful ideas to contribute to conversations around them. Barring youth from reading Frank’s diary infantilizes them in a way that the diary itself challenges. While, yes, Frank experienced traumatic events that no one should ever have to live through and which parents would understandably want to shield their children from, her diary provides a snapshot of an adolescent effectively coping with extreme situations. Her diary is a testament to the resiliency of mankind and the depth of adolescent understanding. Likewise, the controversial passages which describe her sexual development not only make her more relatable as a human being, but they also legitimize both the common adolescent experience and adolescents’ processes of coping with those physical and emotional changes.

If the censor’s goal is to shape children’s perceptions, then it would be in the censor’s interest to do a little less censoring and a little more engaging. Instead of defaulting to censorship when confronted with texts that contain seemingly inappropriate content, a more effective approach to protecting young readers might be to openly challenge those texts by engaging in classroom conversations centered around them. The difficult subjects addressed in banned books should be discussed for the very reason that they are difficult, and the books themselves offer a convenient platform from which to begin those conversations. As Niccolini states, “Banned

books bring up uneasy topics – topics that often make adults uneasy. These topics are also un-easy in the sense of being difficult and complex. Uneasiness can be used to generate, rather than shut down, conversations in the English classroom” (27). If adults and students engage in conversations about difficult topics, then clarity and whatever “correct” ideas adults believe are vital can be logically cultivated. On the other hand, if students are told that certain topics are off-limits, then they will have little recourse but to satisfy their curiosity in secret and run the risk of developing “false” ideas. Banning books from classrooms also bans students from participating in the meaningful discussions those books might inspire.

Furthermore, engaging in difficult conversations might challenge adults to reevaluate their beliefs about children and children’s literature. Controversial texts present society with the opportunity to re-evaluate its beliefs about what children know and are capable of understanding while also challenging its views on the offensive topics themselves (Niccolini 27). As the censorship of *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* shows, the desire to protect young readers can become so confused by vague notions of appropriateness that the natural processes of adolescence themselves become targeted as inappropriate, as *unnatural*. Using controversial texts as a segue to engage in conversations with young readers might help reorient society’s perception of young readers into a more realistic view.

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