

*Volume 5, 2002*  
*ISSN: 1523-4320*

*Approved December 2002*  
[www.ala.org/aasl/slr](http://www.ala.org/aasl/slr)

# **Moving toward a Method to Test for Self-Censorship by School Library Media Specialists**



Young adults are attracted to realistic fiction for a number of reasons. These stories are seen as truthful, inspiring, and true to life (MacRae 1998), and often enable teenagers to “see themselves or people like themselves” (Rochelle 1991, 9). Works of realistic fiction commonly address problems that teens do not feel they can talk over with their parents (Fuchs 1984). Horton (1986), in a study that analyzed the content of seventy-eight YA books, found that these books expanded learning. Such literature can demonstrate to young people that they are not the only ones facing the problems in their lives, that there are effective strategies for problem-solving, and that it is possible to rehearse certain aspects of life through vicarious experiences (Baggett 1985). Richard Peck, author of the Newbery award-winning YA novel *A Year Down Yonder*, defends the existence of cutting edge, realistic fiction when he states that, “It’s hard to be young today. That’s why we have YA novels to provide companionship and raise questions” (1999, 243).

Ironically, decades ago juvenile fiction, such as the Horatio Alger stories, was criticized not on the basis of an excessive level of realism as is true today, but rather because these books “were improbable and adventurous, creating ‘false notions of life’”(Geller 1976, 1256) Realistic literature for teenagers has changed so much over time with respect to its forms, formats, boundaries, and perspectives that it is often viewed as unsafe (Simmons and Dresang 2001). Norma Klein (1985), the author of banned YA novels, believes that at least one reason these books are labeled as unsafe lies in the fact that they are typically reviewed by adults, rather than teenagers, and these adult reviewers often encounter themes and content they find disturbing. However, Hielsberg (1994) perceives such works as some of the best books because they challenge us and reveal aspects of our society that we do not enjoy co

in

## Research Question

This article examines whether SLMSs engage in self-censorship as part of the collection development process with regard to YA literature having content that significantly increases the probability the materials will be challenged.

## Review of the Related Literature

Self-censorship has been variously described by researchers as “a secret practice [that is] the least obvious but arguably most powerful and pervasive form of censorship which is informal, private, and originates with the decision maker” (Dillon and Williams 1994, 11), “a quiet kind of censorship that we try to justify with high-sounding phrases” (Waddle 1988, 66), “our greatest problem as librarians” (Evans 1995, 519), “a personally imposed limitation designed to avoid confrontations” (McKee 1977, 210), and “the restriction of resources by librarians *before* they become available to information users” (Harmeyer 1995, 102). A number of studies have confirmed that self-censorship exists for various types of libraries in different regions of the country (Agler 1964; Dillon and Williams 1994; Fiske 1959; Harmeyer 1995; Jenkinson 1994; Kerns and Bly 1987; McClure 1995; McMillan 1987; Vrabel 1997; Woods and Salvatore 1981). However, not all investigations detected the presence of self-censorship (White 1988).

In addition to confirming the existence of self-censorship in many libraries, the studies enumerated above revealed several interesting collateral findings. Smaller libraries tended to be more conservative and own fewer potentially controversial works (Agler 1964; Moon 1962), while all libraries were generally more restrictive of fiction than nonfiction (McMillan 1987). The typical pro-censorship librarian worked in a community of less than 35,000, managed their own library, was a female over forty-five years of age, and generally possessed less professional education (Busha 1972a, 1972b).

How then did the various practices that make up self-censorship originally enter professional librarianship? Historically, “the concept of social control, if not paramount, was a significant component of library selection and service policy” (Geller 1976, 1255). Josephus Larned, a prominent librarian in the late 1800s, advocated that his colleagues use the excuse of limited budget as a means of avoiding the appearance of self-censorship, and the 1881 selection policy for the Boston Public Library contained the statement that “no public library should furnish books to young readers, or to those of any age, which will influence their passions or pervert their moral sense” (Geller 1976, 1257). Early studies into self-censorship were not concerned with the appropriateness of this behavior, but rather wished only to ascertain what effect such a policy had on circulation statistics and the number of patron complaints (ALA 1881). This however does little to explain why present-day librarians, trained to value and defend the concept of intellectual freedom, choose to adopt self-censorship as part of their collection development strategy. Several investigators offer rationales. Some believe that books, such as realistic fiction, may come into conflict with the librarian’s personal beliefs (Bump 1980; Callison 1990; Jenkins and Odean 1988; White 1988). Others attribute the problem, at least in part, to low self-esteem among librarians (Fiske 1959; Hopkins 1992), or to the librarian’s perception of community standards (Callison 1990; Hopkins 1998). Most commonly, researchers hold that fear of anticipated challenges motivates the majority of self-censorship (Bump 1980; Donelson 1981, 1987; Jenkins and Odean 1988; Woods and Salvatore 1981).

Regardless of the actual motivation, self-censoring librarians use a wide range of reasons for rejecting books they believe should not become part of the collection. These reasons include limited budgets; lack of demand or interest; literary quality; limited shelf space; values of the community; the author's integrity; content; moral values; taste; theft; poor, unfavorable, or unenthusiastic reviews; and at times discrimination against fiction generally (Asheim 1953; Donelson 1981; Moon 1962). While materials may be legitimately rejected for reasons that involve legal, financial, selection standards, and library policy issues (Moon 1969), it is difficult to determine when such standards are applied appropriately and when they are simply being used as an excuse for self-censorship.

Investigators have identified the type of content that typ( )]TJ T2 Tc[(a)-t1 0 .r,l 4ta 9rc739Be;72(, s)-11(e)446-

For the purposes of this investigation, self-censorship is defined as the process by which a librarian chooses not to purchase a given book because of the item's potential for being challenged. Patterning this study's criteria after those of Harmeyer (1995), only a single copy of a book on the target list from any publisher and with any type binding had to be found in the OPAC of a library in the investigation for that library to be given credit for owning the book. Based on the standards established by Gies and Polhamus (1974) and Moon (1962), a library had to own at least 50 percent of the YA works on the list to avoid a self-censorship designation.

## Selection of Books

Self-censorship investigations in the past have commonly used a list of twenty works as the basis for the YA books were selected as the sample utilized in the study on the basis of the following criteria:

1. **Content** commonly found to be a basis upon which challenges are tendered
2. Six or more

would include profanity, sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual, and descriptions of sexual activity), religion/witchcraft, violence/horror, rebellion, racism/sexism, substance use/abuse, suicide/death, crime, crude behavior, and depressing/negative tone. Consideration of the number of reviews in criterion two was based on research that indicated that books receiving the greatest number of reviews were more likely to be purchased (Harmeyer 1995; Serebnick 1981). Criteria three, four, and five were relied upon because of the degree of visibility and probable quality each suggested for specific books. Works receiving superior review ratings, recommended for purchase by prominent lists, and written by noted authors were both more likely to be noticed and favored by SLMSs during the collection development process.

## **Selection of School Libraries**

The study included one hundred randomly selected Texas public high schools. Each school had to be a member in good standing of the Texas Library Connection (TLC). “The Texas Library Connection is a statewide technology initiative established . . . in 1993. Its mission is to provide current, relevant information equitably to school districts. . . . Currently, over 5,300 campus libraries have merged records for over 44 million items held in those libraries into 4 million unique, standardized electronic records” (TLC 2001). TLC provides member schools with a number of resources, including an extensive union catalog consisting of all the MARC records from the OPACs of the member schools.

The public high schools of Texas are organized under the state’s University Interscholastic League (UIL) into five categories based on student population. The classifications 1A through 5A, based on the following breakdown of student enrollment, define each teolld on t





---

	Walter Dean						
--	-------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

*Pedro and Me:  
Friendship,  
Loss, and What  
I Learned*

the works, UIL categories 1A and 3A had the fewest with one each, while nine 5A high schools owned at least half of the books on the sample list. As a general trend, the larger the size of an UIL category the more likely it was to have schools owning fifty percent or more of the books, and the less likely it was to have institutions owning none of the titles. Table 3 summarizes these data.

**Table 2. Titles Owned by UIL Category**

<b>UIL Category (n=20)</b>	<b>Total Titles Owned</b>	<b>Percentage Titles Owned*</b>	<b>Number of Schools Owning No Titles</b>	<b>Percentage of Schools Owning No Titles</b>
--------------------------------	-------------------------------	---	---	---





conducted to test if this is simply a result of small budgets based on lower student enrollment, and therefore less room for a wider spectrum of young adult literature. Additional possibilities to investigate include the possibility of more extensive self-censorship taking place in smaller schools where the school librarian may not have a co-librarian who might add support to controversial selections. Size of the budget, size of the collection, and support structure among local librarians, teachers, and administrators are all factors that require further measurements. The numbers gathered for this study suggest, but one cannot conclude, that small schools function in an extremely conservative environment and restrict student access to controversial titles more so than in larger schools.

Because of the attraction teenagers experience toward realistic YA literature and the opportunities such literature offers teenagers to vicariously experience many of the more negative aspects of their culture, it is important that teens have access to realistic YA works. Therefore, all SLMSs need to begin a period of close examination of both their collections and their selection patterns. They must determine, as Asheim (1953) suggests, whether they are positive selectors or negative censors. They also must ask themselves if they seek reasons to keep a book, as a selector would do, or if they look for reasons to reject it, as with censors (Asheim 1953). SLMSs must make themselves aware that “reasons [for rejecting a book] like ‘lack of funds,’ ‘no demand,’ or ‘poor quality’ may be true, or they may be rationalizations for not selecting an item that might make life troublesome” (Evans 1995, 523). As SLMSs, we “must recognize our biases and struggle against them to help insure we are providing a balanced program that will help our students become not only readers, but also lovers of literature” (McClure 1995, 19). If we neglect our responsibility to give more than lip service to the precepts of intellectual freedom and to provide our students with balanced exposure to the opposing ideas in our culture, we may rob them of the opportunity to achieve their full social, emotional, and intellectual potential.

## Works Cited

- Agler, Raymond B. 1964. “Problem” books revisited. *Library Journal* 89, no. 10: 2019–30.
- American Library Association. 1881. Cooperation committee and the fiction question. *Library Journal* 6, no. 12: 314.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. [Library bill of rights](#). Accessed March 14, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. [Code of ethics of the American Library Association](#). Office of Intellectual Freedom. Accessed March 14, 2002.
- American Library Association and Association of American Publishers. 2000. [The freedom to read statement](#). Accessed March 14, 2002.
- Asheim, Lester. 1953. Not censorship but selection. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 28, no. 1: 63–67.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. Selection and censorship: A reappraisal. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 58, no. 3: 180–84.



- Gies, Diane, and Donna Polhamus. 1974. Sex and the working class child. *Bay State Librarian* 63: 8–10. Discussed in Judith Serebnick, Self-censorship by librarians: An analysis of checklist-based research, *Drexel Library Quarterly* 18, no. 1(1982): 35–56.
- Grant, Cynthia. 1995. Tales from a YA author: Slightly uneasy. *School Library Journal* 41: 48–50.
- Harmeyer, Dave. 1995. Potential collection development bias: Some evidence on a controversial topic in California. *College and Research Libraries* 56: 101.
- Hielsberg, Amy. 1994. Self-censorship starts early: A library school student learns an unexpected lesson when she tackles a touchy topic. *American Libraries* 25: 768–770.
- Hopkins, Dianne McAfee. 1990. Factors influencing the outcome of library media center challenges at the secondary level. *School Library Media Quarterly* 18, no. 4: 229–44.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1991. Challenges to materials in secondary school library media center: Results of a national study. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 4: 131–40.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. Perspectives of secondary library media specialists about material challenges. *School Library Media Quarterly* 21, no. 1: 15–24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. Library media challenges: The Wisconsin experience. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 45, no. 1: 1, 28, 31.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. Toward a conceptual path of support for school library media specialists with material challenges. *School Library Media Quarterly* 1. Accessed March 14, 2002; [www.ala.org/aasl/SLMQ/support.html](http://www.ala.org/aasl/SLMQ/support.html).
- Horton, Nancy Spence. 1986. Young adult literature and censorship: A content analysis of seventy-eight young adult books. Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas, 1986. Abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts International* 47, no. 11A: 4038.
- International Reading Association. 2001. Censorship in the cyber age. *Reading Today* 18: 22–23.
- Jenkins, Christine. 1996. From queer to gay and back again: Young adult novels with gay/lesbian/queer content, 1969–1997. *Library Quarterly* 68, no. 3: 296–334.
- Jenkins, Christine, and Kathleen Odean. 1988. Recently challenged children's and young adult books. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 1: 283–89.
- Jenkinson, Dave. 1994. The changing faces of censorship in Manitoba's public school libraries. *Emergency Librarian* 22, no. 2: 15–21.
- Kerns, Bettye, and Linda Bly. 1987. Lust in the dust: Are our selections just? *Arkansas Libraries* 44, no. 4: 14–17.
- Klein, Norma. 1985. Being banned. *Top of the News* 41: 248–55.

Kovarsky, Lee, Becca Peters, Marina Vishnevetsky, and Jeremy Wright. 1997. "Banned and challenged books in Texas public schools." American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, Austin. Accessed Feb. 7, 2002; [www.labnet.com/aclutx/pubed/banned.htm](http://www.labnet.com/aclutx/pubed/banned.htm).

LaRue, James. 1994. Reading with the enemy. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 68, no. 5: 43–45.

Leffingwell, S. L. 2000. Banned and challenged books in Texas public schools 1999–2000: A report of the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas. American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, Austin. Accessed Feb. 7, 2002; [www.aclu.org/issues/freespeech/bannedbooks\\_tx.html](http://www.aclu.org/issues/freespeech/bannedbooks_tx.html).

MacRae, Cathi Dunn. 1998. The myth of the "bleak" young adult novel. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 21, no. 5: 325–27.

McClure, Amy. 1995. Censorship of children's books. In *Battling dragons: Issues and controversy in children's literature*, edited by Susan Lehr. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

McKee, Richard E. 1977. Censorship research: Its strengths, weaknesses, uses, and misuses. In *An Intellectual Freedom Primer*, edited by Charles H. Busha. Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited.

McMillan, Laura Smith. 1987. Censorship by librarians in public senior high schools in Virginia. Ed.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, 1987. Abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts International* 48, no. 02A: 0356.

Moon, Eric. 1962. "Problem" fiction. *Library Journal* 87, no. 3: 484–96.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. 1969. *Book selection and censorship in the sixties*. New York: R. R. Bowker.

Peck, Richard. 1997. From strawberry statements to censorship. *School Library Journal* 43: 28–29.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. A young adult author speaks out: The many faces of censorship. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 22, no. 4: 242–43.

People for the American Way. 1995. *Attacks on the freedom to learn 1994–1995*. Washington, D.C.

Rochelle, Warren. 1991. A sense of responsibility in realistic children's fiction. *Emergency Librarian* 18: 8–13.

Rothbauer, Paulette M., and Lynne E. F. McKechnie. 1999. Gay and lesbian fiction for young adults: A survey of holdings in Canadian public libraries. *Collection Building* 18, no. 1: 32–39.

\_\_\_\_\_.



Saykanic, Donna. 2000. Censorship of library books in school library media centers today. In ERIC [database online]. Washington, D.C.: Education Resources Information Center, 2000



## Appendix

Anderson, Laurie Halse. 1999. *Speak*. New York: Puffin.

Block, Francesca Lia. 1998. *I was a teenage fairy*. New York: HarperCollins.

Burgess, Melvin. 1996.

