

Censorship and Children's Literature: Thomas the Tank Engine almost meets the Controller, an American Psycho is wrapped in Plastic, and Hannibal Lecter goes free

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THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE is very proud of his branch line. He thinks it is the most important part of the whole railway. He has two coaches. They are old, and need new paint, but he loves them very much. He calls them Annie and Clarabel. Annie can only take passengers, but Clarabel can take passengers, luggage and the guard.

(Awdry, 1986 : 4)

There can be few people in Australia who are not familiar with Thomas the Tank Engine. He lives on the fictional island of Sodor:

He is a cheeky little engine with six small wheels, a short stumpy funnel, a short stumpy boiler and a short stumpy dome. (Awdry, 1987).

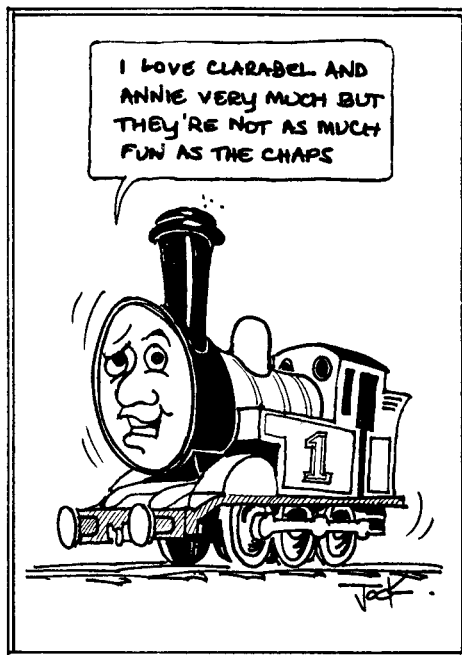
The introduction to Thomas the Tank Engine, on the cover of the books, seems harmless enough. The British television series, narrated by the ex-Beatle Ringo Starr, has been a marketing triumph, with children's bedrooms littered with Thomas the Tank Engine books, school bags, pillow cases and wallpaper.

He has many friends who work at the station which is always busy. Thomas and his friends have lots of adventures which you can read about in this series. (Awdry, 1987).

Thomas and his friends have a problem, however. The clue lies in their names: Gordon, Percy, Trevor, Bill and Ben, Harold, and James. According to the English newspapers, at least one council in the United Kingdom was reported to be accusing Thomas of sexual stereotyping, and was calling for the books to be banned from local libraries. Thomas might be cheeky and short and stumpy, but he was also a six-wheeled sexist.

The complaint was that Thomas and the other engines who have all the exciting adventures are males while

the carriages have female names. A report on gender inequality for Dudley Council suggested that these books gave a clear message that men lead and women follow. According to *The Times*, the Council concerned was Labour-controlled, and the conservative party later used this news in an election broadcast as an example of Labour excess (*The Times*, 11 May 1991).



Concern over the stereotypes portrayed in children's literature is not new. Jenny Pausacker, writing nearly twenty years ago, maintains that a sexist

children's book is:

...one in which girls and women are assigned only traditional female roles and personalities, or, if they fail to fit that definition, are seen as unfortunate, troubled human beings. (Pausacker, 1976:8).

Enid Blyton is one author who has been roundly criticised for such sexism. It is the boys in her stories who have the really gripping adventures while the girls have supportive roles, with mothers serving food when required (Ray, 1982:68-69). In the "Famous Five" adventures, one girl, Georgina, is a more active character but she insists on being called George and makes it clear she wishes she were a boy (Ray, 1982:161-162). I understand that some Enid Blyton books are actually being re-written in order to make them more acceptable to today's readers (or perhaps to librarians and parents).

The question of censorship has always seemed to me to resemble an area of quicksand placed in a vital area of the artistic and literary playing fields: sooner or later someone has to fall in and the game then becomes irrelevant as they struggle to extricate themselves and the ball from the mess. Like many people, my views on censorship have changed over the years. In the much-maligned 1960s, I regarded censorship as bizarre. This was largely because of the way in which it was applied and the subjects censored.

Lady Chatterley's Lover, for example, was described by prosecuting counsel in the now-famous British court case as "unsuitable for 'your wife or servants to read'" (Tribe, 1973:38). The court itemised each rude word and how many times it appeared in the text; many adolescent minds (including mine) spent happy hours checking to see if prosecuting counsel had miscalculated.

There were, of course, other famous cases concerning offensive literature. Ten years or so after *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Oz 28 - 'the schoolkids issue'*, edited by the Australian, Richard Neville, was produced by a group of schoolchildren in London. The editorial and managerial staff were charged with conspiracy to produce:

...a magazine containing diverse obscene lewd indecent and sexually perverted articles, drawings and illustrations with intent thereby to debauch and corrupt the morals of children and young persons within the realm and to arouse and implant in their minds lustful and perverted desires. (Sutherland, 1982:120-121).

It was the various attempts to censor Monty Python's Flying Circus that made me determined to question the value of censorship. So much of the television program, and the accompanying books and records, seemed to me to be not only funny but also, at times, a sharply accurate portrayal of British society. Monty Python's "Silly Party", for example, led by the Rt. Hon. Loopy X, could apply equally well to Australia.

Support the Silly Party. The only party that is publicly committed to:

- * raising prices
- * destroying industry
- * causing inflation
- * ruining the economy

A Silly Government would:

- * raise the school leaving age to 43
- * encourage naughtiness in high places
- * maintain confidence in British silliness abroad.

(Monty Python, quoted in Hewison, 1981:7).

Hewison has written a highly informative and entertaining case study of the censorship faced by Monty Pyth-

-on's Flying Circus. Twenty years later it is hard to believe that so much of Monty Python caused such controversy. In challenging what was acceptable, Monty Python met problems, and different forms of censorship, all over the world. The "Silly Walks" sketch was not shown in Japan because it might offend the Japanese tradition of respect for people in authority (Hewison, 1981:93). Although countries such as Greece, Israel and Switzerland accepted Monty Python's *Life of Brian* without comment, there was a "flurry of concern" in Queensland (1981:92).

As Robert Hewison has noted, a great deal of censorship passes completely unnoticed. There is, Hewison asserts, a range of forms of censorship: apart from the open censorship of the law, there is institutional censorship practised by large organisations, the commercial censorship of companies who decide not to produce or market the product, and self-censorship, where the creator of the idea realises that an idea is unlikely to be used, or needs to be modified (Hewison, 1981:5).

In a recent article in *New Statesman and Society*, Jolyon Jenkins (1991) makes a number of valuable points about censorship. He reviews the well-known arguments of John Stuart Mill against censorship in "On Liberty", and suggests that censorship might change its form but it never goes away. Everybody, Jenkins proposes, is in favour of freedom of speech but everyone has exceptions to make. In addition to these special cases everyone wants to describe, there are other restrictions to freedom of speech which include, for example, the laws against inciting racial hatred and those against publishing rape victims' names (Jenkins, 1991).

Censorship has been in the news again recently with the release of a novel by Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*. The newspapers have been full of stories about the book that "disgusted America". *The Sunday Age* appeared to me to come close to some of the sentiments more usually seen in the tabloid press, when it ran the following advertisement for an article about, and extract from, the book:

HE SEXUALLY ASSAULTED WOMEN, WAS A NECROPHILIAC AND ATE HUMANS. SHOULD HE HAVE BEEN BANNED FROM AUSTRALIA? "American Psycho" by Brett (sic) Easton Ellis. The book that disgusted America and makes "Silence of the Lambs" look like a bedtime story. It describes murders, tortures and mindless violence in numbing detail. Should it have been banned or even published in the first place? Why is it the first novel in Australia to receive a restricted classification? Is it the product of a sick mind or a sick society?

The Sunday Age might not have been able to spell the author's name correctly but it certainly managed to clearly spell out the unspeakable acts that the central character of this book carries out.

I have not read *American Psycho*. What I have read about the book convinces me that I will not. The novel is apparently about a man, Patrick Bateman, who works on Wall Street and kills people in his spare time. Philippa Hawker in a review for *The Sunday Age* describes his life:

He uses a nail gun, a power drill, a knife, an axe, mace and matches separately and together; he slices up beggars in the streets, he slowly tortures women in his apartment ... He feels nothing approaching remorse or guilt: he has more of a sense of transgression when he buys an item of food with a coupon whose use-by date has expired. (Hawker, 1991).

Australia's chief censor, John Dickie, has decided that *American Psycho* must be sealed in a clear plastic envelope and that it cannot be sold to anyone under the age of 18 years. According to John Dickie, the use of the plastic envelope was considered by those who framed the legislation to be a way of stopping young people reading the material when it is on display.

While the merits of *American Psycho* was being debated, one of the top box office films in Australia was *The Silence of the Lambs*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster. This film is about a psychopath kidnapping women, killing them, and making a dress out of the skin of his victims.

The film has an "M" classification which means that it can be seen by fifteen-year-olds.

The effect such literature and films might have on some is the concern of many. At the same time that *Thomas the Tank Engine* was being criticised, *American Psycho* was being wrapped in plastic (presumably not biodegradable), and Hannibal Lecter was given an "M" classification, a judge in the New South Wales Supreme Court sentenced a man to 24 years in jail for murder. According to newspaper stories, on the day he committed the murder the man watched a video which featured a psychopath who roamed around killing people with a large knife. The man then armed himself with such a knife and killed a woman on a neighbouring farm in front of her two young children (*The Age*, 22 May 1991; *The Herald-Sun*, 22 May 1991). According to the judge, the video triggered the killing. The judge said that:

The viewing of this film had a real part to play in the tragedy that followed. Certainly, the prisoner was already a vulnerable and disturbed person... As far as I could see, [the video] was nothing more than a vehicle for depicting gratuitous, mindless and ghoulish violence. (*The Age*, 22 May 1991).

The arguments about censorship have been taken up by *The Bulletin* and *Quadrant*. Robert Manne, in his editorial, "The Silence of the Lambs", in *Quadrant*, notes that the two groups who oppose pornography - feminists and conservatives - are not usually identified as potential allies. Manne, however, argues that if the opposition to pornography is to succeed then allied they must be.

There are a number of issues, I believe, that need to be debated more vigorously in the consideration of our use of censorship. There is something particularly concerning for me about the process of re-writing children's books. I am reminded of Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* in which history was rewritten and, by means of Newspeak, undesirable thoughts and even words were eliminated. It was Winston Smith's job, in Orwell's novel, to rewrite history, to ensure that back numbers of newspapers

were changed so that they did not conflict with new policies or with actual events. If Big Brother promised in a speech that the chocolate ration would not be reduced, and it was necessary later to reduce the chocolate ration, then Big Brother's original promise was changed to a warning that further rationing would be necessary. In this way, a copy of *The Times*:

...which might, because of changes in political alignment, or mistaken prophecies uttered by Big Brother, have been re-written a dozen times still stood on the files bearing its original date, and no other copy existed to contradict it. Books, also, were recalled and rewritten again and again...(Orwell, 1954:44).

It has long been claimed, in feminist theory for example, that women as well as children are treated in much literature as "helpless and dependent" (Paul, 1991:50). Lissa Paul suggests that part of the process includes the way children's and women's literature is treated; it is "devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral" (1990:149). Re-writing Noddy books, or suggesting that *Thomas the Tank Engine* be banned, is surely nothing more than a demonstration of the truth of those claims. Re-writing "Othello" or "Twelfth Night" would not be discussed so lightly.

...we must surely recognise that access to violent and degrading films, videos and books ... might also influence the behaviour of some people. As historical documents they will in turn be taken as measures of how we regarded the weak and vulnerable, especially women, at the end of the twentieth century.

Thomas the Tank Engine, Annie and Clarabel are at least friends. There is no doubt some sexual stereotyping in the Reverend Awdry's stories, for they reflect the times in which they were written. (The sexual stereotyping is not always one way, for it is Thomas who leaves his guard behind and refuses to listen to Annie and Clarabel when they try to tell him, and it is

Thomas who refuses to wear a snow-plough and gets them all stuck in a drift).

Thomas the Tank Engine and the "Famous Five" books are historical documents that are remarkably free of violence and degradation. If we are concerned that they are reinforcing sexual stereotypes we can give our children access to alternatives. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, it is Lucy who discovers another world at the back of the wardrobe. By acknowledging that literature can create such influences, we must surely recognise that access to violent and degrading films, videos and books such as *American Psycho* might also influence the behaviour of some people. As historical documents they will in turn be taken as measures of how we regarded the weak and vulnerable, especially women, at the end of the twentieth century. As Jocelyn Scutt writes:

Only men who hate women could see any value in producing a movie which unforgettably shows women, skinned, face down... Only men who hate women could see any worth in publishing a book which graphically depicts women, pinned to the floor by their hands with nails shot from a nail gun... (Scutt, 1991:81).

By using a series of dots I have, in turn, cut what Scutt says happens in the book and the film, judging it too distressing to repeat. But soon, no doubt, the video of *The Silence of the Lambs* will be available for viewing in the lounge rooms of Australia. The film of the book, *American Psycho*, is yet to be announced but will almost certainly be made. That, no doubt, will become a video...

It is apparent that much of what is freely available in print and on film is deeply offensive to many people because it graphically portrays extraordinary and sadistic violence towards people in general and women in particular. These are documents that express how some people view the vulnerable in our society and how they can be degraded and violated. To propose that we might ban *Thomas the Tank Engine* and re-write Enid Blyton, while publishing extracts from *American Psycho* in newspapers and allowing fifteen-year-olds to see *The*

Silence of the Lambs, suggests to me that not only is the quicksand of censorship in the middle of the playing field in danger of swallowing us completely but also that we have forgotten what the game is. If we are serious about changing community attitudes towards women and children we must take extreme care not to be judged as glamorising such appalling sadism.

"I hope you'll be sensible now, Thomas," said his Driver severely.

"I'll try," said Thomas, as he puffed home. (Awdry, 1986:46).♦

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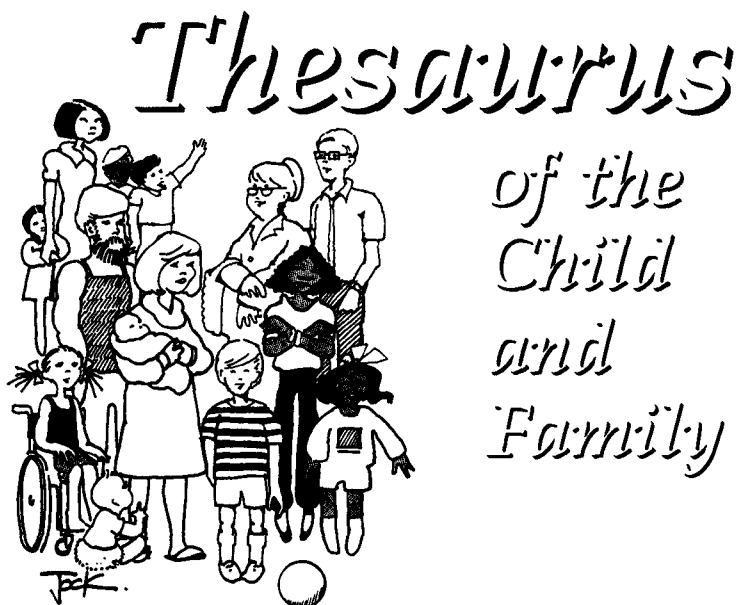
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