

## “Book Banning and Boggarts:” Harry Potter and Issues of Accessibility to Children’s Literature

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### Abstract

The Harry Potter series has become an international children’s literary sensation. But despite his popularity, Harry Potter has had to face real life evils in the form of would-be censors. While book banning and censorship of children’s materials have been occurring for centuries, this year’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Harry Potter series creates a unique opportunity to revisit and examine policies and practices to prevent censorship of children’s reading materials internationally. Using the Harry Potter series as an example of frequently challenged and banned books, this paper will examine how various libraries and library organizations in several North American and European countries prevent and respond to challenges to popular children’s literature.

In the future, individuals and groups will most likely continue to challenge children’s popular literature. Therefore, it is important that libraries have an international perspective to understand the best tools and practices to meet these challenges.

Confronting challenges to children’s materials is an important component of library accessibility. Using the popular Harry Potter series to examine and analyze book banning and related intellectual freedom policies will hopefully generate the interest for the attention this subject deserves.

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The Harry Potter series has sold millions of copies worldwide, has been translated into several languages, movies, and has created a phenomenon in children’s literature. In fact, it is rumored that because Harry Potter took the top three slots on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for such an extraordinarily long time, the *Times* had to come out with a separate children’s list, which [in 2003] still had two Harry Potter books in the top five (Knapp, 2003, p. 78). This beloved book is the story of wizard Harry Potter and his life and challenges at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. But Harry has also had to face even more dangerous and more frightening challenges in the real world in the form of book banning and censorship around the globe.

The Harry Potter series is “arguably the most popular series ever in children’s fiction, but also one of the most controversial (Knapp, 2003, p 78).” Some critics assert that if kids love Harry Potter so much, there must be something fundamentally wrong, while others believe that anyone who makes so much money on the backs of hard-working parents must be some kind of moral degenerate, and the books must be bad too (Denton, 2002). Most critics, however, oppose Harry Potter because of the witchcraft and wizardry in the books. It is “just the latest

in a long tradition in children's literature of stories pitting 'good magic' and 'bad magic,' from Grimm's Fairy Tales through *The Wizard of Oz*" (Knapp, 2003, p 87).

The Harry Potter series has been banned around the world, from the United States and England to Greece and Australia. The American Library Association documented 125 attempts during 1999-2003 to restrict access or remove the Potter books from classrooms, curricular or school or public libraries (Karolides, Bald & Sove, 2005, p. 241). The Ministry of Education and Youth of the United Arab Emirates banned Harry Potter from private schools because it believes the story is contrary to Islamic values. In fact, the schools there that teach expatriate children need to turn in their books for "vetting." This ban comes even though the Harry Potter movie had been popular in the country (Emirates Ban Potter Book, 2002).

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* was challenged in Moscow, Russia, in 2002 by a Slavic cultural organization that alleged the stories about magic and wizards could draw students into Satanism (Doyle, 2007, p. 139). The series was banned from the Christian Outreach College library in Queensland, Australia, in 2000, because the book was considered violent and dangerous (Doyle, 2007, p. 139) and from over 60 Seventh-Day Adventists schools in Australia (Knapp, 2003, p. 78). A national chain store in Great Britain banned the book from its 28 stores, citing demonic influences (Dresang, 2002, p 9.) And the list continues.

According to Jonathan Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, revisers of the *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, the first cultural censor was the Roman Catholic Church, which dominated all Europe until the Reformation. The early Indexes of Prohibited Books dealt in ideology, not obscenity, but consistent with the very nature of the church as the arbiter of public morality. (Green, et. al. 2005).

The moral censorship of the 18th and 19th centuries sought to control "dirty" books. It was at this time that moralists came from outside the formal structure of the church, to regulate mass behavior, both by pressuring the government and by running a personal and often vociferously supported campaign (Green et al., 2005). This style of censorship was not designed to protect the power at the top, as the Roman Catholic Church did, but to supposedly protect the "weak" and vulnerable.

Green and Karolides assert that today's citizen censors all are self-appointed moralists, asserting their own beliefs in order to control those of others (Green et al., 2003, p. xx). Censorship is international, continuous and pervasive, but it is not a seamless monolith (Green et al., 2003). Censorship issues vary from country to country, though there are noticeable geographic patterns. Green asserts that the censorship issues that pervade Great Britain, America, parts of Western Europe and Australia are often irrelevant elsewhere.

By examining the ways in which library associations work to ensure freedom of access to children's literature in Croatia, Great Britain and the United States, we also see, as Green and Karolides predict, many similarities. Especially as all three countries are members of the International Federation of Library Associations, as well as United Nations, there are similarities among the countries' beliefs, policy statements, and efforts to ensure the freedom to read.

Librarians play an important role in providing access to children's materials, and therefore necessarily must be involved in issues of censorship, either through their own institutions

and/or larger organizations. Studies have shown that there is a link between good books in the school library and student achievement, and therefore even more important that school libraries and public libraries provide what the customer wants (Knapp, 2003, p. 79).

The United States has shown love for Harry Potter but also some of the most extreme forms of censorship. For example, in December 2001, in Alamogordo, New Mexico, the city's Christ Community Church held a Harry Potter book burning with several hundred congregants. The theatrics had a counter effect, however, as people reacted with generous cash donations to the city libraries (Goldberg, 2002, p. 19). This example demonstrates both the love and distain for Harry Potter in the United States. For the most part, complaints and banning the book have *not* come from librarians, and in fact it is the library associations that are helping to protect the book. Most of the challenges in the United States have come from local citizen based organizations and individuals.

The American Library Association (ALA), founded in 1876 in Philadelphia, has as its mission "to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all. (ALA, n. d.)" ALA adopted a Library Bill of Rights in 1948, and among many articles, states that:

- I. "Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation."
- II. "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.
- III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas (ALA, 1996).

On its website, ALA provides a variety of tools to librarians, teachers, and parents concerned about censorship, from manuals on "how-to" conduct a challenge hearing, useful definitions, how to handle media if you are a librarian with a challenged book, and other toolkits. Whereas some people believe they must protect children from questionable materials, ALA "believes strongly that young people are entitled to freely access ideas and information, subject only to limitations imposed by their parent or guardian (Shaevell, Becker & Morgan, 2006, p. 49).

The American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom also works with other censorship-fighting organizations such as The Freedom to Read Organization. The Freedom to Read Statement summarizes many of the beliefs that drive ALA and other organizations regarding the freedom to read:

The freedom to read is essential to our democracy. It is continuously under attack. Private groups and public authorities in various parts of the country are working to remove or limit access to reading materials, to censor content in schools, to label "controversial" views, to distribute lists of "objectionable" books or authors, and to purge libraries. These actions apparently rise from a view that our national tradition of free expression is no longer valid; that censorship and suppression are needed to counter threats to safety or national security, as well as to avoid the subversion of politics and the corruption of

morals. We, as individuals devoted to reading and as librarians and publishers responsible for disseminating ideas, wish to assert the public interest in the preservation of the freedom to read (ALA, 2004).

This statement is endorsed by several key organizations in the United States that combat censorship, including but not limited to, The Children's Book Council, Freedom to Read Foundation and the National Coalition Against Censorship.

The United State's American Library Association, along with other organizations mentioned, together with IFLA and other international agencies and associations demonstrate librarians' dedication and struggle to ensure access to all children's materials. Individuals, too, have taken important steps to ensure access. When the Harry Potter series was restricted in the Zeeland, Michigan, public schools, it was a group sponsored by the American Library Association as well as concerned students and parents calling themselves *Muggles for Harry Potter* that were responsible for getting the ban lifted.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) strongly supports intellectual freedom and showed their commitment in 1995 when the IFLA Council confirmed commitment to the United Nations Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (IFLA, 2007).

In 1997, the IFLA council established a Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) to advise IFLA on matters of international significance to libraries and librarianship in this area, including but not limited to censorship of library materials (Byrne, 2003).

FAIFE was formed with 22 members from 20 nations. The goal of the initial program was broad, but included to establish alliances, respond to specific incidents, wherever possible in cooperation with the national library associations, to communicate and provide a clearing house of relevant information (Byrne, 2003). FAIFE made alliances with other organizations such as the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, ALA, Council of Europe, Index on Censorship and the Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression. IFLA/FAIFE monitors the state of intellectual freedom within the library community world-wide, supports IFLA policy development and co-operation with other international human rights organizations, and responds to violations of free access to information and freedom of expression (IFLA, n. d.).

IFLA/FAIFE conducts world reports on libraries and intellectual freedom for over 40 countries, including Croatia, England, and United States. The Croatia Library Association, an umbrella library organization for the regional library associations has a code of ethics, written in 1992, that affirms that librarians must resist all forms of censorship (IFLA, 2000) The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990; amended in 2000) guarantees to all citizens freedom of expression. Censorship is explicitly prohibited (IFLA, 2000).

Librarians in the former Yugoslavia were occasionally branded with an unfavorable image, accused of book cleansing, burning and purging in the war and post-war years. But Croatian Library Association, however, has made many changes since 2000. The Croatian Library Association has dedicated issues of its library journal *Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske*, to the

topic of freedom of expression and free access to information (IFLA, 2000). In 2000, The Croatian Library Association Assembly adopted a Declaration on Free Access to Information modeled after the IFLA/FAIFE Libraries and Intellectual Freedom statement. The purpose of the statement was to emphasize the responsibility of the profession to provide free access to information for their users and to provide a set of principles the profession can rely on (IFLA/FAIFE, 2000).

The FAIFE World Report 2005, “seem[s] to indicate that the country’s libraries are providing access to information free from restraints at this point in time” (Shaevel et al., 2006, p. 112).

While they do not concentrate on the details of book banning and censorship, Croatia does have library organizations that promote the goals of their libraries, including access to the children’s materials. One such organization in the European Bureau of Library, Information and Document Associations that states on its website that it is “lobbying for libraries (EBLIDA, ND)” EBLIDA is an independent umbrella association of national library, information, documentation and archive associations and institutions in Europe (EBLIDA, ND). In a 2002 minutes executive meeting, EBLIDA considers future involvement with Information for Social Change, an activist organization that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers (EBLIDA, 2002).

The Great Britain national library association, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), has a statement and guidelines on censorship. The Statement on Intellectual Freedom, Access to Information and Censorship clearly states its commitment to access to information and free expression. It states “If publicly available material has not incurred legal penalties then it should not be excluded on moral, political, religious, racial or gender grounds, to satisfy the demands of sectional interest (CILIP, n. d.)”

The IFLA/UNESCO *School Library Manifesto* (Cylde, 2003) states that access to school library “services and collections should be based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms, and should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, or to commercial pressures”. In addition, “school library services must be provided equally to all members of the school community, regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, professional or social status (Cylde, 2003).” The *Manifesto* has been recognized officially by a number of other organizations, including the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL), whose 2002 Annual General Meeting endorsed it. The *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines* support the *Manifesto*. The *Guidelines* recommend that the “school library should be managed within a clearly structured policy framework (Cylde, 2003)” that includes, among other things, a collection management policy that reflects “the diversity of society outside the school (Cylde, 2003)” and carries statements about intellectual freedom and freedom of information.

Children are often in the middle of censorship battles in libraries, from Harry Potter, to books with gay and lesbian themes, to the controversy over internet filtering. It is up to librarians and their respective organizations to not only support free access to literature, but also to support diverse viewpoints, encourage a variety of readings, and to provide the tools that librarians or parents may need to ensure this free access. Finally, these library organizations need to educate the public on the importance of free access to literature and to the dangers that accompany censorship.

If it is not Harry Potter today, it may be another beloved book or series tomorrow. Even though the last book in the Harry Potter series was already released in the summer of 2007, new revelations that Hogwart's Headmaster, Dumbledore, is gay may bring about new challenges. ("JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay" 2007)

Those who are lobbying for what they call "family-friendly libraries" maintain that all members of a community must take responsibility for the upbringing of the community's children. This is a laudable concept, but a difficult one to put into practice because members of the community have different ideas about that responsibility. To some, it means protecting children and young adults from challenging and difficult ideas. But to most librarians, that responsibility includes introducing young people to those ideas through books that reveal the complexity of a world of conflicting voices in which sexual images are pervasive but sex itself is forbidden, diversity and tolerance are celebrated but gays and lesbians are beaten, and individualism is encouraged but rebellion is condemned (Curry, 2003).

In her op-ed piece on Harry Potter, famed author Judy Blume wrote that the "real danger is not in the books, but in laughing off those who would ban them. The protests against Harry Potter follow a tradition that has been growing since the early 1980's and often leave school principals trembling with fear that is then passed down to teachers and Librarians" (Blume, 1999). This reinforces the idea that librarians need to be aware of accessibility issues, at home and abroad: that is it the responsibility of librarians to be knowledgeable in issues of censorship; and to work together across borders to ensure access to everyone, especially our children.

So what is the significance of the title of this paper? Well, in *Harry Potter*, a Boggart is a shape-shifting monster that takes the form of whatever it believes will frighten those it encounters the most. In a sense, confronting the censorship of the *Harry Potter* series and other such books for children and young people, is a bit like confronting a Boggart. The shape and nature of the of the censor may shift from incident to incident, but the goal is to confront those who fear for the safety of children and youth by claiming frightening consequences if they are exposed to the literature targeted. We need to be aware that regardless of the shape the censor may take, the goal must be to protect the free access to critically acclaimed literature regardless of the shifting shapes the censor may assume.

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