

# Books Our Children Read

What books shall children be allowed to read?

In recent years this question has divided communities and has shaken the foundations of public education in the United States.

This film explores how one American community has dealt with the question.

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*"I felt my child was trapped in a classroom situation — having to listen to and read this book. He was trapped. Maybe he liked it, maybe he didn't. Maybe I didn't like it. But I feel that he should have a choice."*

— Parent

Recent years have seen a revival of the practice of book banning. Prior to 1960, censorship in America was relatively common. Writers now considered masters of the art such as James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence were commonly "censored". But throughout the sixties and seventies, freedom of publication and freedom of access came to be staunchly defended, basic rights of all Americans. Yet the current renewal of book banning has touched many of the great and the good works of literature, including *A Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bible*. Public schools and libraries from Long Island to Texas have had books swiftly removed from the shelves. Hotly contested debates have invariably followed each act of censorship, with both sides arguing at emotional pitches that confused more than clarified the issues.



**Books Our Children Read**, funded in part by the Ohio Humanities Council (under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities), and the Ohio Arts Council, provides an impartial but probing treatment of the complexities surrounding book censorship. Focusing on the Fort Frye Local School District in southeastern Ohio, the film explores the logic and beliefs of the parents who want certain books banned, the parents who disapprove of censorship, the teachers, and finally, the feelings of the students most affected by the decisions being made for them.

*"You have to say: I'm proud of my values and I want you to have the same values."*

— Parent

*"We don't want a parent or a few parents to impose their value system on everyone else. At the same time, we want to respect their values."*

— Teacher

The problem began when teacher Alan Stacy received several complaints regarding a book — *A Day No Pigs Would Die* by Robert Newton Peck — he was teaching to his junior high students. The complaints leveled against the book were that it included objectionable language, offensively explicit details, and that it dealt with inappropriate subjects for a classroom.

**Books Our Children Read** objectively presents all the local participants in the debate. The teachers at the Beverly school invited all concerned parents to meet and discuss their differing attitudes about *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. This documentation of the attitudes of the parents and teachers provides the viewer the rare opportunity to evaluate the conflicting sides of the same issue, exploring the value of literature in education and human experience while demonstrating the resolution of conflict through open communication.

As **Books Our Children Read** progresses, we see and hear worried parents, rural people from America's heartland, express their common fear that their children are being introduced to too much too soon. Their children are growing up too swiftly, and these parents want very much to slow down this process. The parents want to make certain their children learn traditional values along with, or prior to, learning about all the new options the world offers.

*"The same kinds of concerns that parents feel here are the concerns that parents feel everywhere. They're anxious about their children becoming adults in such an imperfect world."*

— Teacher



While these same parents also mention concerns about another book, *Forever*, popular with many teenagers, other parents argue that the exposure to such books, if under adult guidance, might be of value to their children. And throughout, though they listen to and consider each parent's opinion, the teachers maintain that while a book may be wrong for a few students, this must not be allowed to determine the fate of the book for all students.

**Books Our Children Read** clearly presents all sides of the question of book censorship. The film does not offer neat answers, but probes the different points of view and their underlying assumptions and beliefs. Book censorship can affect all of us; this film is recommended for all to improve awareness of one of the most basic American rights: freedom to read. By Michelle Marder Kamhi. Special Merit Award — Athens, International Film Festival