

# Books Our Children Read

## Study Guide

**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.**

### OBJECTIVES

1. To document a constructive, non-confrontational approach to resolving parent-teacher conflict over the books children read.
2. To explore the concerns and feelings of parents in relation to adolescent literature.
3. To explore the value of literature in the school curriculum as it relates to the larger sphere of human experience.
4. To demonstrate the broad educational value of on-going parent-school communication.

### BACKGROUND

Impassioned debate over what children should be allowed to read is not new to American life. Nor should we be surprised that such debate frequently centers on the public schools. As American society becomes more complex, pluralistic, and secular, the broad mission of public education inevitably results in curriculum choices offensive to some parents.

In school systems where parents and educators cannot otherwise reconcile their differences, they may resort to legal action. But legal resolution of these disputes leaves no real winners in the school community. However the court rules, the adversary litigation process is likely to leave the disputants more divided, more hostile, and more alienated than before.

What sort of education is possible in an environment of confrontation? Can meaningful education occur if teachers feel that their best efforts are resented or mistrusted by parents, or if parents feel that their deepest convictions and values may be undermined in the classroom? Can children caught between loyalty to family and identification with school feel other than confused?

If we wish to preserve our system of public education, it seems clear that we must find constructive ways of resolving communal strife over curriculum. "Books Our Children Read" documents the constructive approach developed in one American community to resolving conflict between parents and teachers over what children should read.

### FORT FRYE'S EXPERIENCE

The film focuses on the Fort Frye Local Schools in a rural district of southeastern Ohio. The pivotal conflict there began in the late seventies, when parents objected to a book teacher Alan Stacy was using in his seventh-grade English class. The

book was *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, an autobiographical novel by Robert Newton Peck. Honestly and lovingly told, it is the moving story of a Shaker farm boy's coming of age, in poverty but with dignity and courage.

Though the district served by Fort Frye is rural, and largely agricultural, some parents objected to the novel's explicit descriptions of animal sexuality. Without considering the morality of the work as a whole, they were also disturbed by the author's occasional use of profanity.

Stacy and his co-teachers had selected *A Day No Pigs Would Die* with great care and were sure of its literary and educational value. Yet they respected the fundamental right of parents to question it.

As recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Fort Frye English Department has long had a well-developed philosophy and detailed procedures and guidelines for selecting instructional materials, and for responding to parental objections. Implicit in the entire process is the understanding that any parent has the right to question aspects of the curriculum, and that teachers have the professional responsibility to explain the educational program and to hear out parental concerns.

At Fort Frye a parent can always request an alternative assignment for a child. But no one parent can demand a curriculum change for the entire class. If, after reasoned discussion, a majority of parents in the community were to object to a particular book or assignment, however, serious consideration would be given to revising the assignment.

When the Fort Frye teachers learned that vehement objections to *A Day No Pigs Would Die* had been voiced in a local mothers' group—objections based largely on hearsay and misinformation—they felt that some response beyond the usual NCTE procedures was called for. The approach the teachers decided upon was to set up evening discussion sessions for parents, entitled "Books Our Children Read."

In the words of June Langford Berkley, who headed the English Department at the time, the idea was to have the



parents “come in and look at the books as the students did, to ‘walk through’ some of the things we did with the book.” Since the teachers were willing to give freely of their time, the discussion program required no school funds and had no difficulty winning the approval of the school board. The program was so well received by the community that similar discussion sessions have been held every year since then.

The effect has been not merely to protect *A Day No Pigs Would Die* from would-be “censorship”—and forestall the bitter strife over books that has erupted in too many other American communities — but also to foster parental appreciation of a broad English curriculum and enhance communication between parents and students, as well as between parents and teachers. Not everyone agrees on every book, as Alan Stacy is quick to point out. Yet a climate of mutual trust and respect between teachers and parents has been created in which learning can flourish.

### THE FILM

Through scenes and dialogue from a recent discussion session between Fort Frye parents and teachers—intercut with scenes of students in and away from school and with excerpts from interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators—“Books Our Children Read” explores the highly charged emotional, moral, and educational issues involved in the question of “censoring” children’s reading.

The scope of the film is best illustrated through representative statements by key participants. The starting point is the question of “censorship.” Mercedes Self, a parent who had been a vocal critic of the curriculum, comments:

*I think, as far as our children are concerned, that as parents we owe it to them to “censor” what they read and to kind of guide them.*

*I know when they get to be juniors and seniors this is a little beyond us—by then, you know, they have formed their own ideas. But I do think that we owe it to our 12-, 13-year-olds and that age group to “censor” what they read. . . .*

*. . . . I know a lot of people say: “You can’t be corrupted by a book.” But if we’re going to say you can’t be corrupted by a book, we’re going to have to say you can’t learn anything from it.*

Delving beneath the surface of the “censorship” question, the film goes on to examine underlying motives and feelings. Confides Mrs. Self:

*My first reaction always is: “I know my child better than anybody else. . . . I don’t want this teacher taking my place.”*

Another parent explains:

*I think one of the reasons that parents won’t come to school and talk to teachers is because here are parents talking to people with degrees, and we’re thinking “Oh, this is going to be a wasted cause, I can see it already”—because they’re intimidated by this diploma you have that says you are a certified teacher.*

In the accompanying classroom sequences, we see not “people with degrees” but skillful, sensitive teachers presenting a broad and varied curriculum (which includes works by Shakespeare and America’s black authors, as well as contemporary young adult novels like *A Day No Pigs Would Die*). Moreover, we see students responding to the power of literature to enlighten, move, and delight.

The parent-teacher discussion then shifts from *A Day No Pigs Would Die* to Judy Blume’s *Forever*, a book popular among teenagers but not part of the school curriculum. The parents’ initial reaction to this frankly explicit novel about a teen-aged girl’s first sexual experience is one of shock.

*I didn’t know whether to go ahead and read it or pitch it in the trashcan or what to do with it.*

Laments one mother:

*It hurts me to think that our children have to grow up so soon. . . . I don’t believe my 13-year-old needs to know these things yet.*

As the discussion continues, however, other views emerge.

*My daughter and I were talking about the book, and she evidently has not picked up a great deal, because she said, “Mom, they were doing things that people don’t do.” And I thought, “Oh, my gosh!” So we had quite an area to cover there. And I wouldn’t have realized it if the book hadn’t come up.*

Both parents and teachers allude to the near impossibility, in a free society, of limiting teenagers’ exposure to controversial books or questionable influences. But they seem to recognize that parents who are aware of whatever it is their children are reading can strengthen cherished family values by open, thoughtful discussion of the ideas and values presented in the books.

Scenes of the students’ lives outside the classroom expand our perspective. We perceive their emerging sexuality, their susceptibility to peer pressure, their devotion to adolescent ritual and mass culture; we eavesdrop on their romantic fantasies. The parent-teacher dialogue continues over these scenes, creating a counterpoint between the adult viewpoints and the realities of youth.

The closing sequences of the film convey the inherent dilemma of parenthood. The parent’s need to protect and nurture must gradually give way to the child’s need to be independent. In the words of one mother:

*There’s nothing that you can do—after a certain point your child has to make his own decisions. I mean, he’s going to be alone, you’re not going to be holding his hand all the time. . . . You hope your child has enough sense, or common sense, and uses it.*

Returning to the “censorship” issue, Mrs. Self concludes:

*Anybody that’s read a lot knows that you can get something completely different from a book than I would. And I think that was what the teachers were trying to tell us. They have a classroom full of different*

people. And even if I didn't think this book was good for my child, I didn't have the right to say it wasn't good for somebody else's.

The spirit of the Fort Frye experiment is expressed in June Berkley's final statement, over images of parents and teachers in animated dialogue:

*Sometimes when I explain this program to colleagues around the country, they'll ask me: "Well, how did you finally get through to them?"*

*But they don't understand that what we were doing was not confrontational. It was kind of an extension of what education ought to be—wrestling with ideas, and respecting one another's points of view.*

*And we had people come to our program who were not there to confront, but who were there because they love literature, and they wanted to talk to someone about it.*

Over the end credits we hear the voice of June Berkley reading the titles of some of the books that have been available to students at Fort Frye—books that have been banned, even burned, in many American communities.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*The following questions are intended to explore the concerns of a variety of groups. Choose the questions most appropriate to the focus of your group.*

1. What aspects of the film made the strongest impression on you? What was the main point of the film?
2. How do issues raised in the film relate to the following statements by Thomas Jefferson?

*To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical.*

*It is better to tolerate the rare instance of a parent refusing to let his child be educated, than to shock the common feelings and ideas by the forcible. . . education of the infant against the will of the father.*

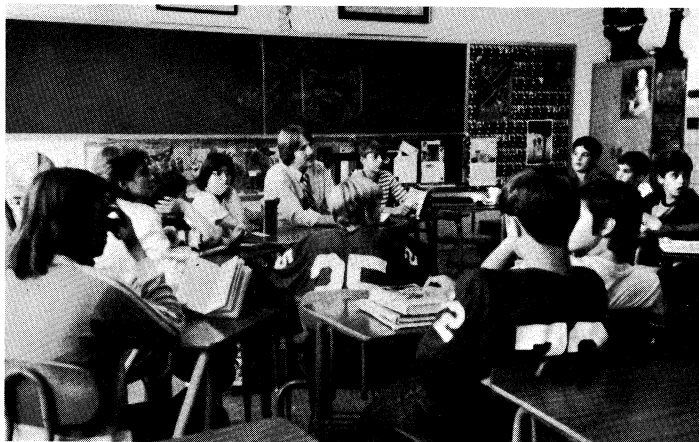
*I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.*

3. How does the film relate to the following view expressed by Professor Allan Glatthorn in *Dealing with Censorship*?

*There is a need for a new dialog between schools and the communities. But such dialog needs to go far beyond the patronizing condescension and manipulation that too often pass for school public relations. . . . For one thing, we as English teachers need to show more acceptance and respect for values other than our own.*

*Most of us are intellectuals who see ourselves as liberated; but too often such intellectual independence becomes distorted into a smug conviction that the traditional values of church, country, and family are childish aberrations that must be corrected.*

4. What emotional factors underlying some parents' objections to school curriculum are alluded to in the film? How can educators be more sensitive to these factors?
5. How do humor and candor facilitate the discussion between parents and teachers?
6. What was the value of the "Books Our Children Read" discussion program at Fort Frye? In particular, how has the program benefited teachers, parents, students? How might such a discussion program be adapted for social studies, science, or other subject areas?
7. What elements do you think contributed to the success of the "Books Our Children Read" program at Fort Frye? How might such a program work in different communities? How could it be most effectively presented in your own community?
8. The term "censorship" is often misused. What are the dictionary definitions of the term? Is it properly used in the context of the issues discussed in the film?
9. In addition to Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*—Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and black author Paul Lawrence Dunbar's short story "The Scapegoat" are taught in classes shown in the film. What do these scenes reveal about the educational philosophy and teaching styles of the Fort Frye teachers?



10. How do the film sequences showing students outside the classroom relate to the issues discussed by parents and teachers?
11. The traditional Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" is used as a *leitmotiv* throughout the film. How does it relate to the issues, viewpoints, and feelings explored in the film?
12. Both parents and teachers in the film refer to the importance of considering age level in determining the suitability of literature for children. Until what age does a child require adult oversight in the choice of books? Should the age be the same for all children? If not, what criteria should be used?
13. The National Council of Teachers of English recommends that anyone objecting to school reading materials be asked to

fill out a complaint form like that shown in the film. If such a request might intimidate a parent with poor verbal or writing skills, how might the situation be made less threatening?

14. A series of newspaper clippings related to school book

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The starred items are especially recommended to provide a balanced overview of the issues dealt with in the film.*
- \* Berkley, June. "Teach the Parents Well: An Anti-Censorship Experiment in Adult Education." In *Dealing with Censorship*, pp. 180-86. (Describes the Fort Frye program.)
  - \* Blume, Judy. *Forever*. Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1975. Reprinted New York: Pocket Books, 1976.
  - Burress, Lee, and Edward B. Jenkinson. *The Students' Right to Know*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.
  - Campbell, Colin. "Book Banning in America." *The New York Times Book Review*, December 20, 1981, p. 1.
  - Censorship Litigation and the Schools*. Proceedings of a colloquium held January 1981. Chicago: Office for Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association, 1983.
  - Davis, J. Christopher, and James E. Davis. "Censorship in Ohio Schools: A Survey of Teachers of English." Athens, Ohio: The Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts and the Ohio University English Department, 1981.
  - \* *Dealing with Censorship*. Edited by James E. Davis. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.
  - Educational Ideas in America: A Documentary History*. Edited by S. Alexander Rippa. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1969.
  - FitzGerald, Frances. "A Reporter at Large: A Disagreement in Baileyville." *The New Yorker*, January 16, 1984, pp. 47-90.
  - . "A Reporter at Large: A Disciplined Charging Army." *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1981, pp. 53-141.
  - Foley, Robert. "The Community's Role in Dealing with Censorship." *Educational Leadership*, January 1983, pp. 51-54.
  - \* Glatthorn, Allan. "Censorship and the Classroom Teacher." In *Dealing with Censorship*, pp. 48-53. (Explores the responsibility of teachers to the community.)
  - Harens, Bonnie Louise. "Protecting the Students' Right Not to Read." *English Journal*, December 1981, pp. 21-22.
  - \* Hefley, James C. *Are Textbooks Harming Your Children? Norma and Mel Gabler Take Action and Show You How!* Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1979.
  - Hentoff, Nat. *The First Freedom: The Tumultuous History of Free Speech in America*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1980.
  - \* Hogan, Robert F. "Some Thoughts on Censorship in the Schools." In *Dealing with Censorship*, pp. 86-95. (Examines the issue of power in parent-teacher conflicts.)
  - Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 2d ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 1983.
  - \* Jenkinson, Edward B. *Censors in the Classroom: The Mind Benders*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979. (Documents key schoolbook controversies of the 1970s.)
  - \* Kamhi, Michelle Marder. "Censorship vs. Selection—Choosing the Books Our Children Shall Read." *Educational Leadership*, December 1981, pp. 211-15. (Summarizes *Limiting What Students Shall Read*—see below.)
  - . *Limiting What Students Shall Read: Books and Other Learning Materials in Our Public Schools—How They Are Selected and How They Are Removed*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Publishers, American Library Association, and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1981. (Summary report of a nationwide survey. Available through ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.)
  - \* Marshner, Connaught Coyne. *Blackboard Tyranny*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1978.
  - McNulty, F. "Children's Books for Christmas [Judy Blume]." *The New Yorker*, December 5, 1983, pp. 191-201.

banning are shown in the film. How have the press and the mass media tended to deal with this issue? Have all sides been fairly represented? If not, why? How can the public contribute to balanced, responsible media coverage on this matter?

- Oboler, Eli M., ed. *Censorship and Education*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1981.
- \* O'Neil, Robert M. *Classrooms in the Crossfire: The Rights and Interests of Students, Parents, Teachers, Administrators, Librarians, and the Community*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981. (Comprehensive analysis of the social and legal implications of conflicts over public school curriculum.)
- Park, J. Charles. "Preachers, Politics, and Public Education: A Review of Right-Wing Pressures against Public Schooling in America," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1980.
- \* Parker, Barbara, and Stefanie Weiss. *Protecting the Freedom to Learn: A Citizen's Guide*. [Washington, D.C.:] People for the American Way, [1984].
- \* Peck, Robert Newton. *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972; reprinted by Dell, 1977.
- "Rationales for Commonly Challenged/Taught Books," *Connecticut English Journal*, Fall 1983. (Available from Connecticut Council of Teachers of English, P.O. Box 2211, Enfield, CT 06082.)
- Ravitch, Diane. *The 1982 Martin Buskin Memorial Lecture*. Delivered April 23, 1982, at the Education Writers' Association National Seminar in Washington, D.C. [Woodstown, N.J.: Education Writers' Association, [n.d.]]

## FILMS AND VIDEO PROGRAMS

- "Books Under Fire" (56 min., color, 16mm, ¾" and ½" vc). Produced and directed by Arnold Bennett and Grady Watts, Jr. Broadcast on PBS, *Crisis to Crisis*, September 10, 1982. Distributor: Films Incorporated. Transcript available from Transcript Library, P.O. Box 701, Kent, OH 44240.
- "Censorship or Selection: Choosing Books for Public Schools." One-hour videotape (¾" U-matic, BETA, and VHS) with discussion guide. Produced and distributed by Media and Society Seminars, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, New York, NY 10027.

## CREDITS

"Books Our Children Read" was conceived, produced, and directed by Michelle Marder Kamhi, a writer whose articles have appeared in *Education Week*, *American Education*, and *Educational Leadership*, among other publications. The film was edited by Scott Morris. Funded in part by the Ohio Humanities Council (under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities), the Ohio Arts Council, the Sunnen Foundation, and the George Gund Foundation, "Books Our Children Read" was produced under the sponsorship of Ohio University and the Fort Frye Local Schools.