

Kristina Kampf

17:610:547:90

Censorship Exercise

November 24, 2013

Tara,

I understand that you and the other seventh grade language arts teachers have received complaints from a parent about one of the titles on the required reading list for this year: *The Midwife's Apprentice*, by Karen Cushman. Her complaint is in regard to some of the language in the book as well as the scenes involving the appearances of the devil. To help you defend this book selection, I have compiled a list of book reviews, awards it has received, and explanatory statements made by the author. In addition, I have included information concerning the actions you can take in regards to this complaint. I have created a list of alternative book titles for you to suggest to the parent and student. The references at the end are for both of us to use if needed.

The following reviews show resounding praise for Cushman's novel both for its portrayal of a young woman during medieval times and her coming of age and the grueling hardship she endures:

Booklist – starred review, Grades 7-12

- “A strong, young woman in medieval England who finds her own way home”
- “Kids will like this short, fast-paced narrative about a hero who discovers that she's not ugly or stupid or alone”

School Library Journal – starred review, Grades 6-9

- “Alyce struggles to understand how she can allow herself to fail and yet have the determination to reach for her own place in the world”
- “Earthy humor, the foibles of humans both high and low, and a fascinating mix of superstition and genuinely helpful herbal remedies attached to childbirth make this a truly delightful introduction to a world seldom seen in children's literature”

Kirkus Reviews – starred review, Ages 12+

- “A gripping story about a time, place, and society that 20th century readers can hardly fathom”
- “This is not for fans of historical drama only. It's a rouser for all times.”

Publisher's Weekly – Ages 12-up

- “Cushman has an almost unrivaled ability to build atmosphere, and her evocation of a medieval village... is supremely colorful and pungent.”

- “The force of the ambience produces more than enough momentum to propel the reader from start to finish in a single happy sitting.”

Horn Book Magazine – starred review

- “The brisk and satisfying conclusion conveys the hope that the self-reliant and finally self-respecting Alyce will find her place in life.”
- “The graphic and convincing portrayals of medieval life and especially the villagers – given to superstition, casual cruelty, and duplicity – afford a fascinating view of a far distant time.”

Book Report – Recommended, Grades 7-10

- “A glimpse into everyday life during the Middle Ages: the hardships, the poverty, the superstition”
- “The setting is really the main focus of the novel.”
- “Readers interested in this period or in understanding the incredible misery of children living in past ages will enjoy this novel.”

English Journal – Grades 8 and up

- “A delightful and wise and witty story of a nameless young girl”
- “It has humor and compassion for its character and its time”
- “A marvelous portrait of the stench and wonder of medieval England”

To further attest to Cushman’s status as an outstanding author for children and young adults, here are some of the awards she has won for this book (Cushman, 2012):

1996 Newbery Medal

ALA Best Book for Young Adults: 1996

ALA Notable Book for Children: 1996

Booklist Editors' Choice – Books for Youth – Older Readers Category: 1995

Horn Book Fanfare Selection: 1995

School Library Journal, Best Books of the Year: 1995

Hungry Mind Review Book of Distinction

Notable Children's Book in the Language Arts

Not Just For Children Anymore! Selection (CBC)

Parenting Magazine Reading Magic Awards

Pacific Northwest Library Association Young Readers Choice Award Short List: 1998

Parents' Choice Gold Award – Story Books: 1995

American Bookseller "Pick of the Lists"

New York Public Library, 100 Titles for Reading and Sharing

ABC Children's Booksellers Choice Award

NYPL Books for the Teen Age List: 1996

YALSA 100 Best Books (1950-2000)

YALSA Best Books for Young Adults: 1996

During Cushman's consideration for the American Library Association's highest award for children's literature, the Newbery Medal, these comments were expressed by the Newbery Award Selection Committee:

- "Readers will find this world so fascinating and the characters so real that they will be compelled to keep turning the pages to see what happens next" ("Karen Cushman and Peggy Rathman," 1996, p. 65)

Finally from the author herself, Karen Cushman, states:

- "I write so children can begin to grow, to see beyond the edges of their own experience" (Cushman, 1996, p. 413)
- "Alyce is a girl with no place in a world all about place, a girl who has to give birth to herself" (Cushman, 1996, p. 416)
- "Alyce is every child who is parentless, homeless, and hungry, who lives on the edges of our world who is mocked, or excluded for being different" (Cushman, 1996, p. 416)
- "the Middle Ages [are] almost like adolescence, that western society was changing from a childhood to a young adulthood with more of an emphasis on manners and privacy and responsibility" (Hendershot & Peck, 1996, p. 198)
- "I like writing for young people because I think what we call adolescent issues in this society are also my issues, issues that deal with identity and responsibility" (Hendershot & Peck, 1996, p. 200)

Actions that you can take

When I am dealing with individuals who are concerned with allowing their children to read certain book titles, I like to use the quote by 2007-2008 American Association of School Librarians President Sara Kelly Johns (2007), who stated that "Parents always have the right to decide what their children can read, but not what other parents allow their children to read. [Students need to be exposed to all] sides of an issue and to have materials that help [them] challenge their thinking and to grow" (p. 6).

In order to deal with this challenge and to show how you chose this book I think you should utilize the Staff Manual for the Curriculum Materials Selection policy and delineate how *The Midwife's Apprentice* meets the following criteria:

- It enriches and supports the curriculum.
- It stimulates growth in factual knowledge, literacy appreciation, aesthetic values, and ethical standards.
- It is representative of many religious, ethnic and cultural groups and their contributions to our American heritage.
- It is relevant to the area of instruction, accurate, and authoritative.
- It was recommended by one or more of the recognized professional materials in book selection.
- It was recommended by a teacher, librarian or school administrator who had previously reviewed the material.

- Recommendation reflects awareness of the grade level and interest at which the materials will be utilized and consonant with the needs of the curriculum and the interests of the teacher and students (Brick Township Public Schools Policy 6141.1)

If this explanation of why *The Midwife's Apprentice* was chosen is not sufficient for the parent, then you should direct the complainant (parent) to submit his or her complaint in writing to the principal, who will forward a copy to the Superintendent of Schools. There is a form for this purpose: Citizens Request for Reconsideration of Materials, attached. Once the complaint is submitted, the book will be reviewed and discussed by the Curriculum Materials Review Committee, who will submit their written response to the complainant and the Superintendent of Schools. The decision can be appealed to the Board of Education through the Office of the Superintendent of Schools (Brick Township Public Schools Policy 6141.1)

I also took a look at the NCTE Guidelines for The Students' Right to Read (2012), with which I am sure you are familiar. It reiterates that:

“The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. Education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself” (para. 12).

“English teachers must be free to employ books, classic or contemporary, which do not lie to the young about the perilous but wondrous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be. English teachers forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of mankind” (para. 16).

If serious enough a complaint, I can contact the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom for support and help in dealing with it. They will provide materials to help counter a claim, letters to interested parties, and a strategy for handling the situation. They will also put us in touch with legal counsel if it goes that far.

After much consideration and in keeping with the medieval time period you are covering in conjunction with the Social Studies unit, here are my recommendations for alternate titles:

1. *Catherine, Called Birdy* (1994) by Karen Cushman, grades 6-9; *Kirkus Reviews* starred review
 - The thirteen-year-old daughter of an English country knight keeps a journal in which she records the events of her life, particularly her longing for adventures beyond the usual role of women and her efforts to avoid being married off.

- Awards: 1994 Newberry Honor, 1995 ALA Notable Children’s Books, 1994 Booklist Editor’s Choice Books for Youth, 1994 Golden Kite Award: Fiction, 1994 Parents’ Choice Award, YALSA 100 Best Books (1950-2000)
2. *Matilda Bone* (2000) by Karen Cushman, grades 6-8
 - Fourteen-year-old Matilda, an apprentice bonesetter and practitioner of medicine in a village in medieval England, tries to reconcile the various aspects of her life, both spiritual and practical.
 - Awards: 2000 Parents’ Choice Award: Fiction, 2000 School Library Journal Best Books, 2002 Maine Student Book Award
 3. *The Edge on the Sword* (2001) by Rebecca Tingle, grades 7-10; *School Library Journal* and *Publisher’s Weekly* starred review
 - In ninth century Britain, fifteen-year-old Aethelflaed, daughter of King Alfred of West Saxony, finds she must assume new responsibilities much sooner than expected when she is betrothed to Ethelred of Mercia in order to strengthen a strategic alliance against the Danes.
 - Awards: 2002 Amelia Bloomer Lists: Young Adult Fiction, 2002 YALSA Best Books for Young Adults
 4. *The Ramsay Scallop* (1994) by Frances Temple, grades 7-10; *Kirkus Reviews* and *Booklist* starred review
 - At the turn of the fourteenth century in England, fourteen-year-old Elenor finds her betrothal to an ambitious lord’s son launching her on a memorable pilgrimage to far-off Spain.
 - Awards: 1994 Booklist Editor’s Choice Books for Youth, Thumbs Up! Award (Michigan)
 5. *The Book of the Maidservant* (2009) by Rebecca Barnhouse, grades 7-10
 - In 1413, a young maidservant accompanies her deeply religious mistress, Dame Margery Kempe, on a pilgrimage to Rome. Includes author’s note on Kempe, writer of “The Book of Margery Kempe,” considered by some to be the first autobiography in the English language.

Please let me know if I can get you any other information or you need any further assistance.

Kris

Kristina Kampf

Middle School Librarian

(732) 555-1234

kkampf@someschool.org

References

- Adams, H. R. (2010). What happens when you call the ALA office for intellectual freedom for help? *School Library Monthly*, 26(7), 47-48.
- Brick Township Public Schools. (1983). *Curriculum Materials Selection Policy No. 6141.1*. Retrieved from <http://mms.brickschools.org/POLICIES/6000Instruction.aspx>
- Books for youth: Older readers. (1996). *Booklist*, 92(9), 740.
- Cushman, K. (1996). The booklist interview. *Booklist*, 92(19), 1700.
- Cushman, K. (1996). Newbery medal acceptance. *Horn Book Magazine*, 72(4), 413-419.
- Cushman, K. (2012). *The midwife's apprentice: Awards and honors*. Retrieved from (http://www.karencushman.com/reviews/midwife_r.html)
- Donelson, K. L. (1996). Review of the midwife's apprentice. *English Journal*, 85, 131-132.
- Flowers, A. A. (1995). The midwife's apprentice. *Horn Book Magazine*, 71(4), 465-466.
- Hendershot, J., 1940-, & Peck, J. K. (1996). Interview with Newbery medal winner Karen Cushman. *Reading Teacher*, 50, 198-201.
- Johns, S. K. (2007). Who's protecting whom? AASL and intellectual freedom. *Knowledge Quest*, 36(2), 4-6.
- Karen Cushman and Peggy Rathmann win 1996 Newbery and Caldecott medals. (1996). *Emergency Librarian*, 23(5), 65.
- Miller, S. (1995). Book review: Junior high up fiction. *School Library Journal*, 41(5), 118.
- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). (2012) *The Students' Right to Read*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline>
- Rochman, H. (1995). Starred reviews: Books for youth. *Booklist*, 91(14), 1328.
- Tiernan, M. L. (1995). Reviews: Fiction. *Book Report*, 14(2), 36.
- The midwife's apprentice. (1995). *Kirkus Reviews*, 6, n/a.
- The midwife's apprentice. (1995). *Publisher's Weekly*, 242(9), 104.