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Great words about censorship and why it's not good;

How They Do It

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In 2004 one of my books, *Whale Talk*, was chosen as an all-school read in Fowlerville, Michigan, a rural town not far from Detroit. They had done what I thought was a brilliant and innovative thing: decided to teach the book in every discipline, sophomores through seniors. Math teachers, social studies teachers, science teachers, P.E. teachers, etc., all were to find something in the story that could be taught through their discipline. The results, through my perspective, were amazing. I received emails from students and teachers alike chronicling personal, emotional responses to the story.

High school scheduling being what it is, different classes were at different places in the book when a parent, who had been home schooling her child through junior high, read a particularly disturbing scene wherein a five-year-old mixed race foster kid played out the racial horror of her life with a racist stepfather. The little girl recreates her anguish in the language she hears directed at her on a daily basis. If you read the book I dare you not to find the scene heartbreaking, but if you just read the girl's words, displayed in large font because she is screaming, you might say Chris Crutcher has some mouth on him. If you're a parent who has been home schooling your child in order to control what goes into her head for the past eight years, and you read only the girl's utterances, you might be horrified enough to confront the school and demand that *Whale Talk* be removed from the curriculum.

What happened next was particularly disturbing, not because of anything to do with me or my book, but because of what happened to the educational process in Fowlerville. The complaining parent went public, using particularly vitriolic language concerning the book and the educators that would dare bring it into the curriculum. In response, the powers that be halted all reading and discussion until a resolution could be reached. Some students had finished, others were in different phases, but all were required to hand the book over.

Teachers took personal abuse; the school came under public fire. The *Detroit Free Press* and at least one TV station got involved. By the time the air had cleared it was decided to allow the school to complete its *Whale Talk* project, but to take the book out of the curriculum beginning the following year.

The damage had been done. The flow of the project was interrupted, various teachers and administrators intimidated, and what had been a successful, innovative project, crashed. I was informed through back-channels that many teachers simply told their students to finish the book with no further discussion.

The letters and emails I received while the project was full-steam-ahead remain some of the most gratifying ever. Teachers talked about kids who never read, reading. Some even talked about how the story changed their perspective because of the connection created between them and hard-to-reach students. Mainstream students related how the story changed their perspective about "outsiders." Outsiders thanked me for giving them characters who felt the way they did.

They shouldn't have been thanking me. They should have been thanking their teachers. Sometimes a book is better than it ever had a right to be because of the history the reader brings to the reading and because of the methods educators use to bring a particular story alive.

If the Fowlerville story were an isolated incident, I could throw up my hands, and my lunch, and say "What the hell? Who ever heard of Fowlerville, Michigan?" But it plays out again and again across the country, with far better books than those I write. The educational process gets irreparably interrupted and educators get vilified. When the good and righteous censors of Alameda, California failed to banish *And Tango Makes Three* from their elementary school libraries, they turned personal and vitriolic against the school board members who disagreed with them. If you haven't read it, *And Tango Makes Three* is a non-fiction picture book about two male penguins in New York's Central Park Zoo who hatch an unwanted egg and raise the chick to productive penguin citizenship. Not that it matters, but never is mentioned the word "gay" or "homosexual." In the past four years, *Tango* has been the most banned book in the country three times and second once. Let me reiterate: it is non-fiction. It happened.

My first book, *Running Loose*, was censored back in 1983 or '84. Every book I've written since has been censored somewhere. In the early years I believed the censors had the same agenda I had -- the good of kids -- and that we just perceived the meaning of that differently. I have come to believe something else altogether. These people embrace their philosophy over their humanity. No matter how many teenagers respond, testifying to their particular connection to a given book; no matter how many gay kids attest to the emotional relief they feel reading Jackie Woodson or Alex Sanchez or Brent Hartenger; no matter how many invisible, rejected, power-struggled kids speak to the empowerment that comes with knowing they're not alone; no matter how many so-called normal kids declare they understand their wounded peers better, these folks cling to some obscure holy pronouncement that allows them the illusion of control. This is the trick, folks: within ignorance lies safety. So they attack the educational community -- the enemy for the time being -- with disruption.

There's an easy antidote. In a constitutional context it's one we all recognize: Innocent until proven guilty. Don't convict the story until it has gone through the process and been proven criminal. That, of course, requires administrators to stand up for their teachers before they stand up for non-educators with squeaky wheels.

There is, as always, a possible exception to my rule. *And Tango Makes Three* worries me. I'm afraid if we allow that book into our elementary schools, large numbers of those children will want to grow up to be penguins.