



PEI

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS OF IOWA

September 11, 2013

REMEMBER THE LESSONS



It would be easy to forget the lessons of 9/11. Many of us watched it happen and lived through the moment of the attack on the United States. Never since Pearl Harbor has there been such an attack. How did it change our lives? Who did this and how many wars will change it? It has also been a year since Bengazi. That too was an attack on America. We at PEI believe in the foundational principles on which the United States has been built. We believe that true history is a basis for our conduct and response when envious or misinformed aggressors jealously want to



tear us apart. We have been promoting the Kathryn Koob event which is just around the corner. Even though most of our students may find the day and the events seemingly irrelevant to their personal social needs and wants, the importance stands as a rock. Our state is flying the flags at half mast today. Men are dying for our protection and principles. Aren't you glad that you have an audience to whom you can explain our heritage?

For your Consideration!

Every now and then an exceptional article emerges and I think, "Why didn't I write that"? We are doing a reprint of one from Imprimis that is exactly that outstanding. We sincerely hope you will read the entire article and will appreciate your response whether you agree or not. For years I pondered how to keep from being a one man censoring review board and yet how to protect our children and young adults from mind bending information of a degenerate nature.



We as a nation, are very concerned and maybe obsessive about the quality of the food we put in our bodies and as a result spend billions on that very issue. But what about the mind? Each person will ultimately produce what they have been thinking about, but what if we are thinking about negative and non-productive or unhealthy things? How do we discern the healthy from the harmful? The approach by Meghan Cox Gurdon in her article "The Case for Good Taste in Children's Books" is absolutely excellent and well worth your time. As a matter of fact, we need to consider how to protect the minds of us all. Let us know about your response to this essay. Drop a note to info@peiowa.org. We will love to hear from you.

Jim Hawkins, State Director

July/August 2013

Meghan Cox Curdon Children's Book Reviewer *The Wall Street Journal*

The Case for Good Taste in Children's Books

MEGHAN COX GURDON has been the children's book reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* since 2005. Her work has also appeared in numerous other publications, including the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Examiner*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *National Review*, and the *Weekly Standard*. In the 1990s, she worked as an overseas correspondent in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and London, and traveled and reported from Cambodia, Somalia, China, Israel, South Korea, and Northern Ireland. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Bowdoin College in 1986 and lives near Washington, D.C., with her husband and their five children.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on March 12, 2013, sponsored by the College's Dow Journalism Program.



ON JUNE 4, 2011, the number one trending topic on Twitter was the Anthony Weiner scandal. I happen to remember that, because the number two topic on Twitter that day—almost as frenzied, though a lot less humorous—had to do with an outrageous, intolerable attack on Young Adult literature . . . by me. Entitled "Darkness Too Visible," my article discussed the increasingly dark current that runs through books classified as YA, for Young Adult—books aimed at readers between 12 and 18 years of age—a subset that has, in the four decades since Young Adult became a distinct category in fiction, become increasingly lurid, grotesque, profane, sexual, and ugly.

Books show us the world, and in that sense, too many books for adolescents act like funhouse mirrors, reflecting hideously distorted portrayals of life. Those of us who have grown up understand that the teen years can be fraught and turbulent—and for some kids, very unhappy—but at the same time we know that in the arc of human life, these years are brief. Today, too many novels for teenagers are long on the turbulence and short on a sense of perspective. Nor does it help that the narrative style that dominates Young Adult books is the first person present tense—"I, I, I," and "now, now, now." Writers use this device to create a feeling of urgency, to show solidarity with the reader and to make the reader feel that he or she is occupying the persona of the narrator. The trouble is that the first person present tense also erects a kind of verbal prison, keeping young readers in the turmoil of the moment just as their hormones tend to do. This narrative style reinforces the blinkers teenagers often seem to be wearing, rather than drawing them out and into the open.

Bringing Judgment

The late critic Hilton Kramer was seated once at a dinner next to film director Woody Allen. Allen asked him if he felt embarrassed when he met people socially whom he'd savaged in print. "No," Kramer said, "they're the ones who made the bad art. I just described it." As the story goes, Allen fell gloomily silent, having once made a film that had received the Kramer treatment.

I don't presume to have a nose as sensitive as Hilton Kramer's—but I do know that criticism is pointless if it's only boosterism. To evaluate anything, including children's books, is to engage the faculty of judgment, which requires that great bugbear of the politically correct, "discrimination." Thus, in responding to my article, YA book writers Judy Blume and Libba Bray charged that I was giving comfort to book-banners, and *Publisher's Weekly* warned of a "danger" that my arguments "encourage a culture of fear around YA literature." But I do not, in fact, wish to ban any books or frighten any authors. What I do wish is that people in the book business would exercise better taste; that adult authors would not simply validate every spasm of the teen experience; and that our culture was not marching toward ever-greater explicitness in depictions of sex and violence.

Books for children and teenagers are written, packaged, and sold by adults. It follows from this that the emotional depictions they contain come to young people with a kind of adult imprimatur. As a school librarian in Idaho wrote to her colleagues in my defense: "You are naïve if you think young people can read a dark and violent book that sits on the library shelves and not believe that that behavior must be condoned by the adults in their school lives." What kind of books are we talking about? Let me give you three examples—but with a warning that some of what you're about to hear is not appropriate for younger listeners.

A teenaged boy is kidnapped, drugged, and nearly raped by a male captor. After escaping, he comes across a pair of weird glasses that transport him to a world of almost impossible cruelty. Moments later, he finds himself facing a wall of horrors, "covered with impaled heads and other dripping, black-rot body parts: hands, hearts, feet, ears, penises. Where the f— was this?"

That's from Andrew Smith's 2010 Young Adult novel, *The Marbury Lens*. A girl struggles with self-hatred and self-injury. She cuts herself with razors secretly, but her secret gets out when she's the victim of a sadistic sexual prank. Kids at school jeer at her, calling her "cutterslut." In response, "she had sliced her arms to ribbons, but the badness remained, staining her insides like cancer. She had gouged her belly until it was a mess of meat and blood, but she still couldn't breathe." That's from Jackie Morse Kessler's 2011 Young Adult novel, *Rage*.

I won't read you the most offensive excerpts from my third example, which consist of explicit and obscene descriptions by a 17-year-old female narrator of sexual petting, of oral sex, and of rushing to a bathroom to defecate following a breakup. Yet *School Library Journal* praised Daria Snadowsky's 2008 Young Adult novel, *Anatomy of a Boyfriend*, for dealing "in modern terms with the real issues of discovering sex for the first time." And Random House, its publisher, gushed about the narrator's "heartbreakingly honest voice" as she recounts the "exquisite ups and dramatic downs of teenage love and heartbreak."

The book industry, broadly speaking, says: Kids have a right to read whatever they want. And if you follow the argument through it becomes: Adults should not discriminate between good and bad books or stand as gatekeepers, deciding what young people should read. In other words, the faculty of judgment and taste that we apply in every other area of life involving children should somehow vaporize when it comes in contact with the printed word.

I appeared on National Public Radio to discuss these issues with the Young Adult book author Lauren Myracle, who has been hailed as a person "on the front lines in the fight for freedom of expression"—as if any controversy over whether a book is appropriate for children turns on the question of the author's freedom to express herself. Myracle made clear that she doesn't believe there should be any line between adult literature and literature for young people. In saying this, she was echoing the view that prevails in many progressive, secular circles—that young people should encounter material that jolts them out of their comfort zone; that the world is a tough place; and that there's no point shielding children from reality. I took the less progressive, less secular view that parents should take a more interventionist approach, steering their children away from books about sex and horror and degradation, and towards books that make aesthetic and moral claims.

Now, although it may seem that our culture is split between Left and Right on the question of permissiveness regarding children's reading material, in fact there is not so much division on the core issue as might appear. Secular progressives, despite their reaction to my article, have their own list of books they think young people shouldn't read—for instance, books they claim are tinged with racism or jingoism or that depict traditional gender roles. Regarding the latter, you would not believe the extent to which children's picture books today go out of the way to show father in an apron and mother tinkering with machinery. It's pretty funny. But my larger point here is that the self-proclaimed anti-book-banners on the Left agree that books influence children and prefer some books to others.

Indeed, in the early years of the Cold War, many left-wing creative people in America gravitated toward children's literature. Philip Nel, a professor at Kansas State University, has written that Red-hunters, "seeing children's books as a field dominated by women . . . deemed it less important and so did not watch it closely." Among the authors I am referring to are Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and Ruth Krauss, author of the 1952 classic *A Hole is to Dig*, illustrated by a young Maurice Sendak. Krauss was quite open in her belief that children's literature was an excellent means of putting left-wing ideas into young minds. Or so she hoped.

When I was a little girl I read *The Cat in the Hat*, and I took from it an understanding of the sanctity of private property—it outraged me when the Cat and Thing One and Thing Two rampaged through the children's house while their mother was away. Dr. Seuss was probably not intending to inculcate capitalist ideas—quite the contrary. But it happened in my case, and the point is instructive.

Taste and Beauty

A recent study conducted at Virginia Tech found that college women who read "chick lit"—light novels that deal with the angst of being a modern woman—reported feeling more insecure about themselves and their bodies after reading novels in which the heroines feel insecure about themselves and their bodies. Similarly, federal researchers were puzzled for years by a seeming paradox when it came to educating children about the dangers of drugs and tobacco. There seemed to be a correlation between anti-drug and anti-tobacco programs in elementary and middle schools and subsequent drug and tobacco use at those schools. It turned out that at the same time children were learning that drugs and tobacco were bad, they were taking in the meta-message that adults expected them to use drugs and tobacco.

This is why good taste matters so much when it comes to books for children and young adults. Books tell children what to expect, what life is, what culture is, how we are expected to behave—what the spectrum is. Books don't just cater to tastes. They form tastes. They create norms—and as the examples above show, the norms young people take away are not necessarily the norms adults intend. This is why I am skeptical of the social utility of so-called "problem novels"—books that have a troubled main character, such as a girl with a father who started raping her when she was a toddler and anonymously provides her with knives when she is a teenager hoping that she will cut herself to death. (This scenario is from Cheryl Rainfield's 2010 Young Adult novel, *Scars*, which *School Library Journal* hailed as "one heck of a good book.") The argument in favor of such books is that they validate the real and terrible experiences of teenagers who have been

abused, addicted, or raped—among other things. The problem is that the very act of detailing these pathologies, not just in one book but in many, normalizes them. And teenagers are all about identifying norms and adhering to them.

In journalist Emily Bazelon's recent book about bullying, she describes how schools are using a method called "social norming" to discourage drinking and driving. "The idea," she writes, "is that students often overestimate how much other kids drink and drive, and when they find out that it's less prevalent than they think—outlier behavior rather than the norm—they're less likely to do it themselves." The same goes for bullying: "When kids understand that cruelty isn't the norm," Bazelon says, "they're less likely to be cruel themselves."

Now isn't that interesting?

Ok, you say, but books for kids have always been dark. What about Hansel and Gretel? What about the scene in *Beowulf* where the monster sneaks into the Danish camp and starts eating people?

Beowulf is admittedly gruesome in parts—and fairy tales are often scary. Yet we approach them at a kind of arm's length, almost as allegory. In the case of *Beowulf*, furthermore, children reading it—or having it read to them—are absorbing the rhythms of one of mankind's great heroic epics, one that explicitly reminds us that our talents come from God and that we act under God's eye and guidance. Even with the gore, *Beowulf* won't make a child callous. It will help to civilize him.

English philosopher Roger Scruton has written at length about what he calls the modern "flight from beauty," which he sees in every aspect of our contemporary culture. "It is not merely," he writes, "that artists, directors, musicians and others connected with the arts"—here we might include authors of Young Adult literature—"are in a flight from beauty . . . There is a desire to spoil beauty . . . For beauty makes a claim on us; it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world."

We can go to the Palazzo Borghese in Rome and stand before Caravaggio's painting of David with the head of Goliath, and though we are looking at horror we are not seeing ugliness. The light that plays across David's face and chest, and that slants across Goliath's half-open eyes and mouth, transforms the scene into something beautiful. The problem with the darker offerings in Young Adult literature is that they lack this transforming and uplifting quality. They take difficult subjects and wallow in them in a gluttonous way; they show an orgiastic lack of restraint that is the mark of bad taste.

Young Adult book author Sherman Alexie wrote a rebuttal to my article entitled, "Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood." In it, he asks how I could honestly believe that a sexually explicit Young Adult novel might traumatize a teenaged mother. "Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?" Well of course I don't. But I also don't believe that the vast majority of 12-to-18-year-olds are living in hell. And as for those who are, does it really serve them to give them more torment and sulphur in the stories they read?

The body of children's literature is a little like the Library of Babel in the Jorge Luis Borges story—shelf after shelf of books, many almost gibberish, but a rare few filled with wisdom and beauty and answers to important questions. These are the books that have lasted because generation after generation has seen in them something transcendent, and has passed them on. Maria Tatar, who teaches children's literature at Harvard, describes books like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Jungle Books*, and *Pinocchio* as "setting minds into motion, renewing senses, and almost rewiring brains."

Or as William Wordsworth wrote: "What we have loved/others will love, and we will teach them how."

* * *

The good news is that just like the lousy books of the past, the lousy books of the present will blow away like chaff. The bad news is that they will leave their mark. As in so many aspects of culture, the damage they do can't easily be measured. It is more a thing to be felt—a coarseness, an emptiness, a sorrow.

"Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as if it does not matter." That's Roger Scruton again. But he doesn't want us to despair. He also writes:

It is one mark of rational beings that they do not live only—or even at all—in the present. They have the freedom to despise the world that surrounds them and live another way. The art, literature, and music of our civilization remind them of this, and also point to the path that lies always before them: the path out of desecration towards the sacred and the sacrificial.

Let me close with Saint Paul the Apostle in Philippians 4:8:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

And let us think about these words when we go shopping for books for our children.

Copyright © 2013 Hillsdale College. The opinions expressed in *Imprimis* are not necessarily the views of Hillsdale College. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from *Imprimis*, a publication of Hillsdale College." SUBSCRIPTION FREE UPON REQUEST. ISSN 0277-8432. *Imprimis* trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.



5 Beliefs That Will Transform Our Wants Into Needs

The teenager was asked how she had become a successful entrepreneur at such a young age. She replied, "I learned when I was very young the difference between wants and needs."

What a discerning philosophy for a teenager! A philosophy that eludes many adults today, and might be the reason so many of us

have a pattern of financial difficulties.

Have you ever given this subject any thought? Have you ever wondered why it is so difficult for so many people to distinguish between a "want" and a "need?"

I do not have all the answers, but I think I may have one answer to the problem. I believe an answer may lie in a very subtle false belief system. False beliefs are so hard to identify because they "feel right" at the time. But, as you know, good sounding reasons are not always good sound reasons.

Consider these five false beliefs and see if you don't agree that they contribute to the problem of distinguishing between wants and needs.

Belief 1: "If I can get it, I need it." Let's suppose on your daily walk, you found two \$100 bills caught in a bush by your path. As you celebrate your good fortune, you begin to construct a mental list of things you "need" to buy with that \$200.

Isn't it funny that five minutes before you found the money in the bush, everything on your list of needs were just "wants." Why? What made the difference? How did those "wants" become transformed into "needs?"

The transformation took place the moment we realized we were able to actually get the things we had been wanting. Once we have access to get what we want, we tend to call it a need.

Belief 2: "If I deserve it, I need it." Similarly, once we convince ourselves that we "deserve" to have something, the want often magically transforms into a need.

"You work hard, and you deserve to play hard! This boat will help you relax on the weekend and get your mind off the stress of your work."

"Our shampoo is a bit more expensive, but you deserve the very best for your hair! You are worth it!"

"You have earned the right to eat out at a nice restaurant once in a while. You are just as deserving as your neighbors, and they are always eating out at nice restaurants."

"You have given to others all your life, and now it is time to give to yourself! You deserve to have a timeshare in a warm climate."

On-and-on it goes, the constant bombardment of people with products telling us how much we deserve to have what they are selling.

And with our present society of people who think they are entitled to have what everyone else has, the "hook" is set and the fish is reeled in.

Be careful. This "I deserve" thinking is very subtle, and it is one of the main reasons so many of our wants are changed to needs.

Belief 3: "If it makes me more important in the eyes of others, I need it." This is especially dangerous for parents who are buying for their kids. The kids have a certain brand they want based on the "cool factor" among their peers.

We all fall prey to this thinking to some degree, because we all want to be liked and accepted. But this thinking can lead us to purchase things far beyond our ability to pay for.

One suggestion to parents might be to allow the child to contribute to the more expensive items. For some reason, a personal investment by the child has a way of helping to identify whether the child needs it or just wants it.

Belief 4: "If I am accustomed to having it, I need it." When we saw a number of old classic cars on the highway the other day, I commented to my wife, "You know, none of those cars had air conditioning originally, but they all do now. It was seen as a need in their restoration."

Then I thought of the 1954 Ford, the 1957 Chevy (wish I had it now!), the 1962 Volkswagen Bug, and the 1966 Chevy BelAire I had owned in my early years. None of them had air conditioning, and further more, I did not miss it! I had never had it, was not accustomed to it in my cars or in my home, so it was not a need.

But how did we carry on conversations with the car windows down? How could we hear the radio? How did we keep our hair (I had it then) combed? I do not know, but we never gave it a thought!

But now we would not think of buying a car without air conditioning. It is an absolute need! We have grown accustomed to it, and when that happens, wants become needs.

My point is not that we ought to have only the bare necessities of life, but that it is extremely difficult to be honest with ourselves when assessing needs from wants.

Belief 5: If it is a good bargain, I need it. Let me use the custom of couponing as an example. Couponing is a good thing, but it can become a hindrance if we allow the coupons to determine what we "need" to purchase.

For instance, if I have a coupon that will save me \$.10 on a bottle of ketchup, that does not necessarily mean I need to purchase a bottle of ketchup, especially if I have nine bottles of ketchup in the pantry already.

Another example would be going to garage sales. We can end up buying all kinds of things that we do not need just because we successfully negotiated the price down. It can become more about "the game" than the need.

Bargain hunting is good however it is done, but be careful - it can transform wants into needs. This is not a big deal if we are talking about ketchup or a \$5 golf bag, but if we are talking about bargains on big-ticket items, we can easily spend more than afford.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us use one or more of these beliefs to give ourselves permission to buy what we "want" under the guise of calling it a "need?"

Supplying some of our wants is fine, but if you begin to view most of your wants as needs, one or more of these five false beliefs are responsible.

© Jim Garnett.

The information on this site should be understood to be a general discussion of the subject matter and DOES NOT constitute a legal opinion about the situation. For further information please consult a qualified attorney.

AskMrG Consulting, LLC
2216 SW 35th Street
Ankeny, Ia 50023
askmrg@yahoo.com

LAST CHANCE NOTICE - A GREAT OPPORTUNITY!

Tuesday, September 17, 2013 6:30 pm

Clive Community Room
1900 NW 114th St.
Clive, IA

PEI is excited to receive this exclusive breaking news for this powerful event. We consider it a timely and exciting opportunity to help in **introducing our students** to the events that form our national policies and reactions.

Seating will be limited.
For more information contact:
Nelson: tnelson@cityofclive.com

Iowa's Argo Connection

Kathryn Koob

Mark your calendars for a fascinating evening as Ms. Koob discusses her experience as a hostage for 444 days during the Iran Hostage Crisis.

Join us at 6:30 p.m. on Sept. 17 in the Community Room.

The Clive Book Club will be discussing Ms. Koob's book, *Guest of the Revolution*, during the regular meeting in August. Ask for this book at the front desk.

Teri

STUDENT'S RIGHTS HANDBOOK

We still have some copies available

We receive numerous questions each year concerning what are the rights of students, teachers, coaches and church groups concerning religious freedom? Can they use a classroom? Do students need a sponsor? The list grows and grows.

We recently received a box of booklets on this subject from Alliance Defending Freedom (www.alliancedefendingfreedom.org). Although the booklet may not address every local question, it serves as a very good general resource. Contact our office to request a copy (supplies limited) or click on this [link](#) for the electronic download.



info@peiowa.org
www.peiowa.org

Social Media

'Like' and 'Follow' PEI!

PEI has both facebook and twitter accounts, and we update them daily to provide you with insightful links, helpful articles, and opportunities to give feedback! 'Like' and 'follow' us to take advantage!



['Like' us on facebook!](#)



['Follow' us on twitter!](#)

"If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction."
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Professional Educators of Iowa
974 73rd St., Suite 30
Windsor Heights, Iowa 50324
www.peiowa.org