

Reading Like A Kid

What constitutes the banning of a book? What themes found in a book cause them to become controversial? Why is literature that dares stray from the typical case prototype of a children's book so often challenged, and looked at with disgust and fear? The banning of literature dates back to the 1600's, back when books were being banned for placing certain religions in negative light.¹ Since then, book banning has evolved, and is now used as a tool to shield the eyes of children from books that adults deem to be too inappropriate, dangerous, disturbing, or in some other way offensive to young minds. However, the children's books that are often banned, are the same ones that children often can't wait to pull off library shelves and delve into. The themes that are deemed controversial are the same ones that appeal to children and make them interested in a book.

Maurice Sendak is one of the most beloved authors of children's books. He's also one of the most controversial. His books have sparked cries of outrage and peaked interest throughout the country for decades, and they're still creating a stir today. Themes seen in Sendak's books include but aren't limited to themes of scariness, smallness, and aliveness.² He has written books about children disobeying their parents and running away from home, children running around

¹ Badarasso, Wolf. "Banned Books Awareness: America's First Banned Book." *Banned Books Awareness and Reading for Knowledge Project*, Word Press, bbark.deepforestproductions.com/column/2016/05/02/banned-books-awareness-americas-first-banned-book/.

² Hentoff, Nat. "Maurice Sendak's Fantastic Imagination." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 14 Feb. 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1966/01/22/among-the-wild-things.

cities at night naked and nearly being baked alive, orphans being stolen by rats, and his illustrations have been deemed by many to be “not pretty, crude, and overly sensual.”³

The banning of his books can be attributed to the reasons previously listed. The 24th most challenged book of all time is Sendak’s book, “In The Night Kitchen.”⁴ But why exactly are his books, and children’s books in general so often banned? In Sendak’s own words, “Too many parents and too many writers of children’s books don’t respect the fact that kids know a great deal and suffer a great deal. My children also show a great deal of pleasure, but often they look defenseless, too. Being defenseless is a primary element of childhood.”⁵ Adults often falsely believe in the idea of a child’s everlasting innocence. They see children through a tilted kaleidoscope, a blurred, tainted version of them that they’d rather look at than the real thing.

Children are intelligent, intuitive creatures that shouldn’t have their choice of books stifled due to what adults believe is inappropriate content. Some of the main reasons why books are banned have to deal with themes including sexuality, drugs, homosexuality, offensive images or language, nudity, religious viewpoints, anti-family, anti-adult, rebellion, and disobedience.⁶ Many adults believe that these topics shouldn’t be in books read by “impressionable” young children, lest they be corrupted and tainted by the evils in a story. However, children aren’t given credit for the things they do and don’t understand. Research show that nearly 10% of children

³ Popova, Maria. “Maurice Sendak's Darkest, Most Controversial Yet Most Hopeful Children's Book.” *Brain Pickings*, 23 Dec. 2015, www.brainpickings.org/2014/09/09/maurice-sendak-we-are-all-in-the-dumps-with-jack-and-guy/.

⁴ Hentoff, Nat. “Maurice Sendak's Fantastic Imagination.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 14 Feb. 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1966/01/22/among-the-wild-things.

⁵ Dayal, Geeta. “Remembering Maurice Sendak.” *Wired*, Conde Nast, 27 June 2018, www.wired.com/2012/05/maurice-sendak-rip/.

⁶ Rohrer, Finlo. “Why Are Parents Banning School Books?” *BBC News*, BBC, 27 Sept. 2010, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-11417672.

understand some aspect of death by age 3, and 58% of four years also have some understanding on the subject.⁷ Children do understand a lot more than people want to believe, and research backs that up time and time again. Keeping children from reading certain books may be done in an attempt to help them and keep their minds innocent and pure, but many fail to see that it does much more harm than good.

The themes that are often the reason a book is banned are the same ones that children are able to relate with most. Children get scared. They question their sexuality. They don't always like adults. They want to be disobedient and do dangerous and stupid things because they're children, and they have to learn for themselves. Censoring books for children can lead to them feeling alone and afraid. Books are a great way for children to relate to things they see and gain a better understanding of not just themselves, but the world around them. But they have to be given the chance to explore first. No one should have a say on what another human being can and can not read.

Maurice Sendak's book, "Where the Wild Things Are" is one of his most controversial books because of the main themes in his book: disobedience, scariness, and smallness. In this book, a child becomes angry with his mother, so he "runs away" to a magical island with giant monsters who make him their king. Eventually, he decides he wants to go home and does just that. The end. This story -parents, teachers, and adults in general argue- promotes children disobeying their parents, ignoring their parents when they are disciplined by them, and running off to do whatever they please. Adults also don't like how scary they think the story is for children, and how the monsters are so much bigger than Max and ready to tear him up and eat

⁷ Hughes, Virginia. "When Do Kids Understand Death?" *National Geographic*, National Geographic Partners, 26 July 2013, www.nationalgeographic.com/science/phenomena/2013/07/26/when-do-kids-understand-death/.

him if he dares try to leave them. But children get upset with their parents. Children throw temper tantrums, they don't like being punished, they act up. It's a normal part of growing up to have these emotions. This book actually helps children because it shows that they aren't alone and that they aren't the first to disobey their parents and have confusing feelings, and not know what to do. The book shows that it's okay to be angry, sad, and hurt, and want to disappear into a magical land.

As for the art in the story and the argument that the monsters are "too scary," this often comes from the mouths of adults, not children. People too often want to generalize children and put them in this narrow category. They think that children are sweet little angels that need to be protected and are still innocent to the world. This is simply not the case. Children can be all of these things, absolutely, but they can also be so much more. They can be dirty and mischievous and want to cause havoc. They can be terrified of scary things, or they can absolutely adore anything scary. Children differ, and their books should reflect that. Children's books need to be something that all types of children can read and enjoy. Creating books for a "certain type" of child and banning all other ones is not only unproductive, it can actually negatively impact the children with no creative outlet growing up.

Another one of Maurice Sendak's controversial books is "In The Night Kitchen." In this book, a young boy runs through his town naked, while he's "dreaming," and is almost baked alive by hungry chefs. The story ruffles adult's feathers because they think the theme is overly dark, and they think the book is overly sexual and inappropriate, because Sendak draws the little boy's genitals into the story.

Children as young as two and three begin to understand gender, and have a sense of whether or not they are a boy or girl.⁸ One of the biggest misconstrued ideas about children is that showing them naked people or any kind of genitals in literature will cause children to be overly sexualized, and become sexual deviants and perverts when they grow older. In fact, the same research referenced earlier shows that it is completely normal for children to look at their own genitals, look at other's genitals, and to touch and "explore." This all occurs at a very early stage of development. Children's books don't make children question their sexuality or start to be somewhat sexually aware, this is happening on their own. Children's books can actually be a positive way to help children understand that what's happening to them isn't abnormal or cause for concern, it's something many go through. By banning books that try to deal with sex and sexuality in any way, adults actually risk alienating children and making them feel alone and confused.

Authors such as Maurice Sendak understand this thought process. They understand that children need to be exposed to the outside world. They also understand that their books aren't corrupting children, instead they're a source of light and understanding for children who are trying to comprehend different situations and changes that they are going through.

Apart from the blatant nudity in the books, the artistic style he chooses to use and the actual visuals in the book have come under controversy many times. His books, "In The Night Kitchen," and "Where the Wild Things Are," both have artistic styles that have come under controversy for many different reasons. In "Where the Wild Things Are," Max, the main little

⁸ "Understanding Early Sexual Development (for Parents)." Edited by Steven Dowshen, *KidsHealth*, The Nemours Foundation, Oct. 2014, kidshealth.org/en/parents/development.html.

boy, runs away from home. Everytime Max acts up, his character is high on the page. When he tries to stab his dog he's at the top of the stairs, and at the top of the picture. When he runs away and is playing with the Beasts, he is at the top of the page climbing trees or riding their backs.

Being at the top of the page represents freedom. You aren't being weighed down and oppressed by anything, you are able to do whatever you want. Because Sendak puts his characters at the top of the page moving freely when they're acting up, parents think it sends the wrong message to children. Some argue that when you depict children being bad or equate freedom with being naughty, as Sendak's books do at times, it sets a bad precedent and seems to normalize bad behavior.

However, that is a very shallow interpretation of his drawings, and when analyzed more closely one can see that that's not Sendak's intention at all. Sendak isn't normalizing bad behavior, he's normalizing being a kid and expressing yourself and figuring out who you are. Max is just an upset child expressing his emotions. Yes, he acts up, but he's a child. Children get upset and don't always follow the rules. Max's character is a productive one, meaning what he is doing is helpful and teaching people something when they read the book. However, Max and the illustrations of him don't fit a typical-case prototype for the way a children's book should be, so it is often challenged.

Another visually stunning but challenged book by Sendak that was mentioned earlier is, "In The Night Kitchen." When the little boy in the story, Mickey, falls out of his clothes and begins his adventure in the night kitchen he goes all over the page. Nothing is off limits for him, and he exemplifies both freedom and lightness. Mickey literally flies across the pages of the book, exuding aliveness in everything he does. Mickey is truly carefree, which some adults don't

like, because they think the story's message encourages children to possibly put themselves in dangerous situations. Sendak however, has differing views when it comes to children and how impressionable they are. Sendak has been open about the fact that he believes children are intellectual, competent, capable human beings. He doesn't believe he has to shelter children, and he doesn't think that he has to hide things from them. One of the main reasons adults have books banned is because they think that children will imitate the books. However, children are smarter than adults give them credit for, and can and should read things they enjoy without going out into the real world and acting out the things they read about. Children who read "In The Night Kitchen" won't roam the streets naked and talk to older men. The book is an entertaining one, but it won't corrupt children or harm them in any way.

One other area where Sendak won't confirm that causes controversy is the ideology, or lack of, in Sendak's books. Sendak's books lack surface and passive ideology, at least in the way we interpret the two. The only passive ideology that can be seen in his books is his belief that children should be children. Adults want their children to read books that contain the ideologies that they believe in, so Sendak's lack of ideology in his books is alarming to some. If his books aren't in some way being didactic, or telling children to do their chores and be polite and listen to their parents, then they aren't books people think have value, which is a tragedy. Books don't have to teach a lesson to have a message. His books are filled with messages about being free and creative and doing what you want, but people don't or won't see past the words on the pages. And if they think there's no use for books like Sendak's, they get rid of them.

Sendak's books and other author's works have their literature questioned because they share similar themes: aliveness, smallness, and scariness. Adults don't want children to see

pictures of other kids doing what they want and having a vast amount of agency and disobeying adult figures. They want didactic stories that teach children how to have proper manners and to listen and do what they're told.

Those books are great, but so are scary books filled with monsters and witches and the dark. So are books where children are made to look small and are made to look weak and vulnerable at times. So are books that show children acting wild and disobeying adults and being, well, children. It's important that while we may be trying to protect our children from what we view as harmful literature, banning books doesn't help them. Banning books is a way of limiting children's creativity, and banning books limits the outlets children so desperately need as they grow up and begin to explore the world around them. It's unfair and dangerous to ban books that disagree with the morals and beliefs of some. Books should never be banned, especially children's books. They should be readily available for the minds of children to enjoy and consume. Freedom to read whatever you want is just as important as any other freedom, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom to write and publish, and that freedom shouldn't be stifled because of content some adults don't want their children reading. Banning books is banning creativity and freedom, and it isn't just something to be debated, it's something that should be stopped entirely.

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