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SECTION 5

May 13, 1992

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Debate hits libraries over controversial books

Parents seek rating system

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Sandra Slovacek believes her two young sons should be free to read whatever books they choose. But thumbing through "Little Red Riding Hood" in the children's section of the Dundee Township Public Library, Slovacek wasn't sure she wanted Matthew, 8, or Timothy, 4, to read that particular edition of the classic children's tale.

This 28-page Grimms brothers edition, illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman, not only depicts a wolf swallowing Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, but also shows the girl bringing her grandmother a basket of goodies and a bottle of wine during her trip through the woods.

"As teetotalers and Baptists, we wouldn't be bringing wine to Grandma," the East Dundee resident said. "I also prefer versions of the book where the grandma and Little Red Riding Hood don't get eaten."

Slovacek is not the only one concerned that what her children could read at the library might not reflect values she and her husband try to teach them.

Joani Heavey could barely conceal her shock when she read the book that a friend of her 12-year-old son had checked out of the children's section of the Des



Sandra Slovacek of East Dundee reads a story to her sons, Timothy, 4, (left) and Matthew, 8.

Daily Herald photos/John Konstantaras

Plaines Public Library.

When she paged through the book, "Slim Down Camp" by Stephen Manes, Heavey saw enough sexual references and what she considers foul language to earn

the story about a boy's trip to a weight loss camp an R rating in her eyes.

But Heavey was not disconcerted by the book's mere existence on the library's shelves — she realized the library reflected the variety of its patrons' tastes and opinions, including some that might conflict with her own.

It was the lack of any sign or rating system that would have alerted her that the book in the library's section for fourth- to eighth-grade readers contained potentially offensive scenes, dialogue and double entendres that goaded her.

"This book is inappropriate for the age level that it is targeted for in the library," said Heavey, who has banded together with at least 50 other Des Plaines residents to press the library to establish a system to single out books that some children and parents may find offensive.

"I would want to know, if my kids take a book out of the li-

brary, what that book is about," said Heavey, a 39-year-old former elementary school teacher who also has a 9-year-old son.

However, library administrators, who have made a concerted effort to respond to Heavey's and other parents' concerns and who may conduct a public hearing on the issue, said such a system not only would be impractical but also tantamount to censorship and could make the 157-page book more alluring to some young readers.

Furthermore, some librarians said, the recent outrage over "Slim Down Camp" and other books is another example of some parents' increased efforts to censor what children see, hear and read in school and public libraries.

In the last year, some school districts in the Northwest suburbs have engaged in sporadic, but bitter, debates over the Impressions textbook series that



Librarians defend keeping some controversial books, like these at the Dundee Township Public Library, on the shelves.

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some think promotes satanism and witchcraft.

Meanwhile, some suburban libraries have been part of similar highly publicized, national debates over the content of "Final Exit" by right-to-die activist Derek Humphrey, and whether it belongs within the reach of everyone on public library shelves.

Though the hue and cry against "Slim Down Camp" shrinks in comparison to the Impressions and "Final Exit" controversies, the fact that Heavey's petition follows so closely on the heels of those debates is the source of some consternation among library curators.

"We seem to go in cycles," said Des Plaines library administrator Bernard Oppenheer. "I believe the pendulum has swung in one direction and now it's starting to swing a little more toward the conservative end."

A national survey of nearly 1,200 people conducted last fall by the Library Research Center at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign appears to lend some credence to Oppenheer's concerns.

The poll, which had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent, showed that nearly 70 percent of the respondents supported banning from library shelves materials such as Playboy and Penthouse magazines and books that describe how to commit suicide.

The survey also found that 44 percent of those questioned did not think that records or tapes with sexually explicit lyrics should be available at libraries, and that 31 percent of the respondents thought that parents should have a great deal of influence in what kind of material is available

at libraries.

The American Library Association in Chicago recorded more than 500 challenges to school and public library books between September 1990 and August 1991, said Anne Levinson, assistant director for the ALA's office of intellectual freedom.

The challenged books included contemporary works such as "Christine" by Stephen King and "Then Again, Maybe I Won't" by Judy Blume, as well as classics such as the "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain and "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck.

And Slovacek is not the only parent to have doubts about "Little Red Riding Hood" by Jacob and Wilhelm K. Grimm. The children's book also came under fire last year because parents in two California school districts thought the Grimms were condoning alcoholism by depicting the girl toting wine in her basket.

Levinson, who thinks that for every reported case of potential or real censorship there are as many as five unreported cases, blamed the apparent rise in book challenges on the nation's socio-economic condition.

As the country's recession lingers, crime rate increases and tales of the bizarre, profane and macabre become commonplace, parents seem to be becoming more suspicious of what their children digest during the long periods of time they are left alone at schools, day-care centers or libraries, Levinson said.

"There really does seem to be a perception that there is a subversion taking place," Levinson said. "I think it arises from the feeling that things are falling apart. I really think that is really at the core of this ... that there is a threat to children that can be remedied through censorship."

There is nothing wrong with parents being concerned about what their children read, area librarians said. In fact librarians and educators encourage parents to help their children choose what they read.

However, by trying to influence what materials are on library shelves and how they are presented to patrons, parents are in fact trying to impose their personal values on a wider constituency that may not share those beliefs, librarians said.

Libraries, by their nature, are designed to serve as an unbiased source of information from all points of view.

Labeling books, setting them aside in a special section, or hiding them under a counter because some patrons may find them offensive would prejudice the information presented by the library, as well as violate the First Amendment, which protects all forms of speech, no matter how disturbing.

"I think that there will always be something in a library that will offend somebody," Levinson said. "But it is not up to any self-appointed group or librarians to label books. We just don't do that because the right and the responsibility rests with the library user."

It is impossible to ban or restrict literature that one person finds offensive without infringing on the rights of someone who finds the work challenging and stimulating, local librarians said.

"We buy a lot of different kinds of books for all kinds of people," said Mary Jo Wagner, who is in charge of children's services at the Dundee Township Public Library. "Something may be offensive to one person, but not to another."

Also, labeling or storing certain books behind public library desks

defeats the library's purpose to inform and educate the public, she said.

"It infringes on the rights of the children. When you start putting things aside and hiding them, then nobody is going to be looking at them," Wagner said.

"If we put sex-education books behind the shelf, who is going to ask for them? I think it's important that children get correct information," Wagner said. "Wouldn't you rather have your child get information from a library book than a street corner?"

And, labeling a book as pornographic or immoral sometimes defeats the label's own purpose, some librarians said.

"All you really have to do is say it is controversial and children want to read it," said Kathleen Balcom, executive librarian at the Arlington Heights Library.

In the end, the parents should be the arbiters of what they and their children consider suitable to read, librarians said.

"Parents just have to keep an eye on what their children are reading," Wagner said. "You should just flip through a book before you share it with your child."

Slovacek agreed, saying she would even allow her sons to read the Grimms brothers version of Little Red Riding Hood and other books she feels don't promote her values as long as she were able to explain those beliefs.

"There's no harm in reading it to Matthew because I can tell him my side, too," she said. "That's my job as a parent."

"I would have no problem with my son looking at the teachings of (Adolf) Hitler as long as I was there to say, 'You know this is not right and is not what we believe.'"