

Ann Curry, PhD
Graduate Program in Communications and Technology
Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta

Paper: Bums, Poops, and Pees: A Scholarly Examination of Why Children Love and Adults Censor the Scatological in Children's Books

Abstract: Interviews with Canadian children's public librarians reveal that they believe fiction and non-fiction scatological content has an important place in library collections, that children have an intellectual freedom right to access this material, and that adults have many misconceptions about the role of library collections and the development of juvenile humour.

Résumé: Des entrevues auprès de bibliothécaires jeunesse au Canada révèlent qu'ils croient que le contenu scatologique dans les documents de fiction et de non-fiction a sa place dans les collections en bibliothèque, que les enfants ont un droit intellectuel d'accès à ce type de matériel et que les adultes ont de nombreuses fausses idées quant au rôle des collections en bibliothèque et au développement d'un sens de l'humour juvénile.

1. Overview

Scatological content has a long history in adult stories (e.g. the old Anglo Saxon tale of *Beowulf*, Chaucer's Miller's Tale in *Canterbury Tales*, and many passages in Shakespeare), but a much more recent history in children's literature. The primary purpose of this research project was to provide a deeper understanding of how children, their parents, and children's librarians make sense of the increasing scatological content in children's books and to explore their reported reactions to this information. Scatological information in children's books has been one of the key censorship targets in Canada and the U.S. over the past four decades: through a study of the interactions/reactions of children and adults to scatological information, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the overarching phenomenon of censorship can be achieved, as well as understanding the specific cultural, psychological, sociological, and historical factors that influenced those reactions. Data were gathered through in depth telephone interviews with sixteen experienced Canadian children's librarians from across the country, and from subsequent examination of all materials that they noted in the interviews. This investigation of the scatological encompassed both a local and global context; over forty books from eight different countries (published or translated into English) were examined, and questions in the interviews explored the librarians' perceptions of different cultural and ethnic parental reactions toward scatological information.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

Theories from several areas - law, psychology, and education - served as the foundation for this interdisciplinary research. The work of American legal scholar Martha Nussbaum (2004) provide key scaffolding: her theory regarding how and why the western world has sought to codify in law the reactions of disgust and shame (particularly toward body parts and bodily functions)

informed the project overall. In the world of psychology, the 19th century theories of Charles Darwin (1872) offered some of the earliest explanations regarding why humans (and animals) evince disgust when confronted with scatological content. The theories of British psychologist Michael Apter (1992) regarding adult and juvenile conflicting feelings of allure and ambivalence toward disgusting objects and activities also provided grounding for the study. Lastly, in the field of education, the theories of Martha Wolfenstein (1954) about the development of humour in children provided a strong foundation on which to construct the study.

3. Methodology

A thorough search of the library and education literature revealed that no research studies had been done regarding scatological content within school or public libraries, nor regarding the opinions/reactions of children or adults to scatological material within this context. Because this area within the larger areas of censorship, children's services, and collection management had been unexplored, it was decided that semi-structured interviews with key informants would provide the best data gathering instrument for this exploratory study (Palys 1997, 79). Invitations to participate in telephone interviews about this topic were issued across Canada via national and provincial listservs that would reach as many children's librarians as possible. The invitation specified that participants must have an MLS (or equivalent) and at least five years of experience as a children's librarian. This call for participation resulted in 20 responses and ultimately 16 interviews with children's librarians from across Canada. The respondents represented 7 of 10 provinces plus the NWT, and their years of experience ranged from 5 to 35 years, with an average of 19 years of experience as a children's librarian. The length of the telephone interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes and loosely followed a schedule comprised of nine major questions.

The interview questions sought to elicit the librarians' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding scatological materials. The questions were loosely arranged to cover six different aspects of the topic: 1) familiarity with these materials, 2) children's reactions to scatological materials, including age and gender differences, 3) adult reactions to this material, including age and cultural differences, 4) appropriateness and use of this material in a public library collection and in children's programming/school visits, 5) perception of trends with regard to publication and level of complaints regarding scatological material, and 6) the overall current situation regarding challenges to children's materials and the place of scatological materials within this larger context of complaints.

After completion of the interviews during the February to May, 2011 time period, the data were transcribed and copies of the text mailed to the sixteen interviewees for fact checking. Subsequently, the texts of the interviews were analyzed for emerging ideas and opinions (Mellon 1990).

4. Results

The respondents were very familiar with children's materials containing scatological content, and in response to the first question about relevant titles they knew, quickly named five to fifteen fiction and non-fiction titles that ranged from *Farley Farts* to *Zombie Butts from Uranus* to *Jurassic Poop*. They spoke extensively about their observations regarding children's interactions with scatological information: all sixteen noted that little boys were far more enthusiastic about this material than little girls, and most made comments about the differing learning styles and language development rates of each gender and the constraints of "propriety" imposed on girls,

all factors important to understanding children's reactions. Almost all of the respondents also spoke about children's delight when exploring "taboo" subjects within the safe context of a book, and the importance of children becoming comfortable (and unashamed) about their body parts and functions.

Respondents expressed numerous opinions, based on their years of advisory service, about adult reactions to scatological materials. Most related stories of their frustration with parents who believed that public library children's collections should contain just the "best literature": immensely popular books like *Captain Underpants* were deemed by these parents to be a waste of taxpayer dollars and more appropriate for low-class bookstores. Echoing ideas from the psychological literature, respondents believed that some parents wanted to censor this material because they felt it fostered the "animalistic" tendencies of their young children, instead of the higher moral thoughts of a well-behaved child. Observations were also made regarding differences in attitudes toward scatological material of younger versus older parents, and of parents of differing cultural backgrounds.

All respondents strongly defended the place of scatological materials within a public library children's collection, with particularly strong support for non-fiction materials. The intellectual freedom rights of children to access materials that they want to read and enjoy were noted by over half of respondents. Observations were made about the evolving nature of children's humour and comparisons made between the right of children to laugh when enjoying *The Fartiste* and the right of adults to enjoy similarly "questionable" literature such as Harlequin romances. Experiences with using scatological materials as resources in story hours, summer reading club programs, and during school visits varied widely, however. Some respondents said that they frequently used such material to encourage boys to read and that they had enjoyed great success (and no opposition from teachers or parents) using this material in school visits. Other respondents were far more cautious: some used titles very occasionally, and avoided materials with explicit pictures of poop (such as *The Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business*), while four librarians noted that their communities were very conservative. Shelving such books in the collection was accepted, but "promoting" these titles in a children's story hour would draw strong opposition.

Most respondents noted the publishing avalanche of titles with scatological content after the publication of the groundbreaking book *Everyone Poops* (published in Japan 1978, English translation available 1994), followed by the *Grossology* series, *Captain Underpants* and *Walter the Farting Dog*. Librarians with more than ten years experience maintained that scatological material is far more accepted by parents today than it was in the 1970s – 1990s. This was due to parental exposure to far more explicit content on television, with bowel movements being even being discussed on Oprah! Reservations about the quality of some recently published books were expressed, however, with one librarian saying that authors and publishers just wanted to make fast money on the "fashion of farting." When asked if they considered any of the scatological content in children's books to be 'beyond the pale,' one-third of respondents named titles that they were uncomfortable with. Within their responses were a surprising number of books in translation (such as *That's Disgusting*, translated from French). The number of translated titles named in response to this question and in response to the opening question regarding titles with which librarians were familiar are aspects of this topic worthy of more in depth investigation. Due to the small sample size, the results of this research cannot be assumed to represent the views of all Canadian children's librarians. Because no previous research about librarian's opinions regarding this topic could be located, the study was exploratory in nature and best

operationalized with a small cohort. However, these 16 experienced librarians proved to be very knowledgeable key informants who provided a rich cache of interview data on which further studies can be based.

5. Conclusion

The results of this research project revealed much new information about child and adult interactions with this controversial subject matter, informing us about reactions to scatological material specifically but also providing insight into the larger phenomenon of censorship. The truism expressed by the title *Everyone Poops* reveals the common intercultural and international aspects of this topic: perhaps this shared connection explains the impressive number of translated books available on this topic.. Children around the globe all need to make sense of their body parts and body functions. The reported opinions of these key informants should be of interest to librarians as they manage this “on the edge” material in their collections and their children’s programs, and to publishers as they try to capture children’s attention and their laughter. Overall, the research results should help us all reflect on how we make sense of information that might shock or disgust us, and understand the origins of our reactions.

References & Selected Bibliography

- Apter, Michael. 1992. *The dangerous edge: The psychology of excitement*. New York: Free Press.
- Baxter, Kathleen. 2007. “Gross them out: Body function yuck can lure even the most reluctant readers.” *School Library Journal* (March): 38.
- Baxter, Kathleen. 2009. “Útterly unrefined.” *School Library Journal*. (August): 17.
- Bergen, Doris. 2003. “Humor, play, and child development.” Chapter 2 in *Humor in children’s lives: A guidebook for practitioners*. Edited by Amelia Klein. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Darwin, Charles. 1872. *The expression of the emotions in man and animals*. London: John Murray. (Reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 1965)
- Inagaki, Kayoko, and Gio Hatano. 1993. “Young children’s understanding of the mind-body distinction.” *Child Development* 64: 1534-1549.
- Mellon, Constance. 1990. *Naturalistic inquiry for library science: Methods and applications for research, evaluation, and teaching*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2004. *Hiding from humanity: Disgust, shame, and the law*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Op de Beeck, Nathalie. 1996. “The Great Gross-Out.” *Publisher’s Weekly*. (May 13): 34-35.
- Palys, Ted. 1997. *Research decisions: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives*. Toronto: Harcourt and Brace.
- Wolfenstein, Martha. 1954. *Children’s humor*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press