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Petrified

We move now to a kind of objection for which book censors are not generally known but which seems to me so emblematic of their concerns that I will begin to close this survey with it.

Probably few short stories have been anthologized as frequently, in *and* out of school, as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," which we included in a book called *Fictional Chronicle* that featured group experience. "*Objection:* An absurd story about a town which offers a human sacrifice by way of a lottery."

The story ends with the kind of shocking surprise that O. Henry or de Maupassant often deliver, but it is so widely admired, I believe, because the details leading up to the human sacrifice read like the preparations for some folksy Vermont fair and because when friends and family turn on the lottery-chosen woman the stoning comes with the force of some primitive psychological truth made all the more chilling by our having let the sociality lull us, once again, off-guard.

I don't know why the objector deemed this story "ridiculous." Since an unfamiliar act happened in a familiar setting—small-town America—one could consider it unrealistic. Perhaps the objector would say that friendly, normal folks like those in the story would not sacrifice a neighbor or any member of their own community. Police tell us that, statistically, we are far more likely to be murdered by someone near and dear to us than by a stranger.

Judging from the pattern of other reactions to selections, I would speculate that book censors of the type we are considering find this story appalling because it points to the possible price of groupiness—the sacrifice of the individual—and suggests that close community—the very lifeblood of our objectors—thrives on traditions that retain rude exactions as well as support and security. Our rationally appearing institutions reveal sometimes their substrate of ignorance and passion. Even if readers do not agree with this theme as a proposition, most are willing to entertain the idea momentarily in exchange for having been so well entertained by the story embodying it.

But even selections clearly not meant to be set against criteria of familiar realism received the objection "ridiculous." For secondary school we put together *Humorous Stories*, a zany collection that clearly signaled its outlandish intentions through title, art, and selection, ranging from older authors like Saki, O. Henry, and Mark Twain to H. Allen Smith, E. B. White, James Thurber, Art Buchwald, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Kurt Vonnegut, and Joseph Heller, among others. A couple of the simpler stories first encountered in the book were two parodies of "Little Red Riding Hood." Wayne Figueroa's ghetto version, called "Little Black Riding Hood," begins like this.

> As we open our story, we notice a small dark figure tripping down to High Street to the subway. Her name is Little Black Riding Hood and she is going to visit her father who works at the Cheetah Night Club on Broad and 57th Street. He is the clean-up man there.
>
> She's taking him his feed bag. In it she has pigs' feet, grits, collard greens, and some black-eyed peas. She's a boss little broad, with her mini skirt, a boss Afro, and a cool dasheekie.
>
> As Little Black Riding Hood came off the A train, she spotted someone she wished she hadn't. It was the Big Bad Banker to whom she owed money.[1]

"*Objection:* Ridiculous."

"Ladle Rat Rotten Hut," by Howard Chace, tells its version entirely, like the title, by using real words that are not the actual words but sound like them. It is of course pure wordplay. On entering her grandmother's:

> Ladle Rat Rotten Hut entity bet rum, an stud buyer groin-murder's bet.
>
> "O Grammar!" crater ladle gull historically, "Water bag icer gut! A nervous sausage bag ice!"[2]

"*Objection:* A so-called 'story' which is a collection of words that make absolutely no sense."

This unique story requires an interesting mental operation by the reader that can be frustrating and annoying. One has to suspend the ordinary meanings of the printed words and truly "go with the flow" of the words as sounded. Aided by one's memory of the original story, and settling for approximations of sound, one must allow the spoken words to evoke the meaningful words they somewhat resemble. It is not necessarily easy to put out of mind the normal meanings of the printed words and to recognize familiar oral words when their pronunciation is consistently off.

It is a new and disorienting experience, and if one becomes anxious or irritated about not being able to figure out some passages, the experience can, like learning a new language, be so unsettling as to leave a bad feeling. Perhaps the objector had trouble, since he or she said the story was

"a collection of words that make absolutely no sense." Children love the story and may have less difficulty than some adults figuring it out, because they can more readily yield up old ways and adopt new. Reactions to this game are significant to the extent that the game entails flexibility, creativity, and an ability to hold the ordinary in abeyance until one can arrive at it by an unaccustomed route.

A bit of autobiography whipped into whimsy might describe E. B. White's "The Doily Menace," in which he recounts his mock vicissitudes with doilies. As a child he did not know what the word meant and, as he was accustomed with words he did not know, especially if they had a sound like this one, he assumed it had something to do with sex. Later, after he knew what the word meant, he failed to see doilies when they appeared in paper form at the dining table and twice in public ended by devouring doily along with dessert. "*Objection:* A ridiculous story."

It is of course one thing to call a story one found unfunny a ridiculous or absurd story; it is quite another to throw a book out of school with such words. Partly, White is poking fun at himself, because he perhaps should have known what "doily" meant, since the word was used around his house, but, as he says, he did not connect word to object, a failing similar to his not noticing doilies placed under his nose on dishes from which he was eating. Perhaps this self-ridiculing is so foreign to our objectors that they cannot see a point to the story. Actually the self-ridicule serves as a vehicle to fool around with experience and with words while making a point about repression. It is play, and that may be, most of all, why such a story seems "ridiculous."

From Carl Sandburg's classic children's book, *Rootabaga Stories*, we excerpted for *Folk Tales*, an upper elementary book, the account of the train ride by Gimme the Axe and his family through marvelous places to the Rootabaga country. One scene from this journey will convey some of the flavor of these popular tales.

> Next they came to the country of the balloon pickers. Hanging down from the sky strung on strings so fine the eye could not see them at first, was the balloon crop of that summer. The sky was thick with balloons. Red, blue, yellow balloons, white, purple and orange balloons—peach, watermelon and potato balloons—rye loaf and wheat loaf balloons—link sausage and pork chop balloons—they floated and filled the sky.
>
> The balloon pickers were walking on high stilts picking balloons. Each picker had his own stilts, long or short. For picking balloons near the ground he had short stilts. If he wanted to pick far and high he walked on a far and high pair of stilts.
>
> Baby pickers on baby stilts were picking baby balloons. When they fell off the stilts the handful of balloons they were holding kept them in the air till they got their feet into the stilts again.[3]

The objection to this reads: "This story is pure nonsense. If this is for remedial or slow reading students, it is doubtful that they could manage to make any sense of it."

So far as content is concerned, even preschool children are delighted by this story, as many a bedtime-reading parent knows. I read this often myself to my two daughters when they were quite small. The nonsense is of course part of what they like. To object to nonsense in children's stories betrays a grave incomprehension of children's minds and of the literature written for those minds (and for those parents able to share the transformations of the world that go on in the child's world).

What is strange is to think that children do not understand fancy and whimsy and nonsense. They live in a world not yet fastened down to predictable laws, like that of fairy tales and folk tales, where many more things are possible than for most adults. In fact, they resist a great deal the restriction of reality to only what one observes in the everyday world. They may already accept the adult view that these fantastic things can't happen, but they want to play with the possibilities anyway. I feel just this element of creativity and play bothers the objectors, as if they take too seriously the rearranging of reality just for sport and somehow believe that playing in the imagination will upset knowledge and leave reality up for grabs.

My final example may help illuminate this inappropriate objection of "absurdity" applied to literature that is supposed to be absurd. A book called *Short Plays*, again aimed at upper elementary children, contained a short radio play by Rod Conybeare, "A Spider Spectacular," that had been played on the "Rod and Charles Show" on the Canadian Broadcasting Company. In this droll little fantasy we hear, after a narrator's introduction that takes us close up into a spider web, a husband-wife dialogue designed to echo human domestic exchanges all while smacking of the spiders' world. The female threatens to eat the good-for-nothing male and then proceeds to catch a fly who confesses to being sluggish from eating too much chocolate cake the night before. Then she approaches another insect caught in the web with whom she chats before discovering, too late, that her interlocutor is a wasp tricking her.

INSECT: Say, you must be an *Aranea diadema* to have such glue inside you.
FEMALE: Yes, I am.
INSECT: Well, don't prolong it, honey. Give me the old stinger and let me rest in peace.
FEMALE: You're a female.
INSECT: Well, sure.
FEMALE: Females are usually the most clever insects.
INSECT: I'll go along with that.
FEMALE: What do you call yourself?

INSECT: Oh, nothing in particular. Say, you know you're going to have to get closer if you want to paralyze me, aren't you?
FEMALE: You don't seem worried.
INSECT: Oh, maybe I'm tired of life, uh, huh.
FEMALE: Well, well if that's what you want.[4]

The objection to this variation of anthropomorphizing animals for humor throws back to previously mentioned attitudes about people and animals: "The subject matter of this play is almost nauseating. Most humans have an inborn revulsion to insects and this play indicates why." In addition to instances already pointed out of similar revulsion, an Ivory Coast myth included in *Myths*, for elementary school, "The Giant Caterpillar," was called a "Disgusting story about a giant caterpillar."

> Long, long ago there was a caterpillar as fat as an elephant. His mouth was as red as his tail. His body was covered with hair, and on his head was a long pointed horn.[5]

After the caterpillar swallows a child, the villagers seek it out and kill it, recovering the unhurt child, but as they cut it up into bits, hordes of tiny caterpillars swarm out. "And that is why, even today, we find caterpillars everywhere on the earth." This myth typifies the how-the-leopard-got-his-spots explanatory function of mythologizing.

Children like monsters that they know do not exist. Why do they bother some adults? Revulsion to animals may represent an effort to break attachment to one's own animality, symbolized by fat caterpillars, voracious and venomous spiders, or human heads with animal bodies. But I feel that the answer has something to do also with literalness and an anxiety about departing from daily realism and the known, safe world. Such concern must reject play, imagination, and invention as "unrealistic" and "absurd," because these may open the mind to new possibilities that will make it reel and lose control. Without confidence to cope with the unknown, we feel we must restrict reality to the familiar. And, too, if things are not what they seem, well, that's so terrifying a thought that it seems to pretty well justify the desire to know no more.

To ban fantasy, zaniness, and absurdity is to cancel the uniquely human powers of transforming world in mind, of envisioning from what one has seen what one has not seen, and is hence to reduce people to animals, whose solemn adherence to things as they are prevents them from understanding how things might be . . . and may be already. This stand represents another form of not wanting to know, of evasion. Without the ability to transcend appearances, how would humans manage even to conceive of God, of the soul, and of invisible planes of reality? To banish imagination would be to diminish our spiritual potentiality and relegate us indeed to bestial limitation.

Imagination, then, is not only a way to play but a major mode of knowing. It is, like reason, a faculty for extending understanding beyond mere physical appearances. Practical perception requires, in fact, that people relate for themselves the known elements of reality so as to arrive at the unknown. Failing to do so may well bring on catastrophe, as dramatized in a definitive way in "The Stone Boy," a short story by Gina Berriault and a selection in the *Language of Man* series from a book called *In the Fictional Mode.* First the objection.

> This is a story of Arnold, a young boy who accidentally kills his brother while knowingly hunting out of season. He was on his way to pick peas with his brother (early in the day). After the shooting, Arnold continued to pick peas because the early part of the day was the best time to pick them!
>
> When he goes home, his father takes him to town to see the Sheriff, who questioned him as to why he hadn't gone for help. His answer was, "I come to pick peas." "It's better to pick peas while they are cool." (He felt nothing, not any grief.)
>
> The rest of the story relates his feelings about his mother, etc. (He had gone to his mother's room expecting to tell her, "He had come to clasp her in his arms and to pommel her breasts with his head.")
>
> *Objections:*
>
> 1. The story is abnormal. It should not be used in the classroom.
> 2. The classroom is not a "sensitivity training" laboratory.
> 3. Teachers are not trained to deal with abnormal situations. Who is dictating that this type material be used in the classroom and why?
>
> (The implication in all such type material in the *Man* series indicates, to me, that those who dictate are saying that America, its people, are lost. And they are to instill a sense of equilibrium in them; perhaps, even to control them.)
>
> 4. Why don't the educators eliminate the problems? Why don't they do some positive research to help the student. They are failures—as well as the parents.

Perhaps the astonishing defense of parents launched in the objections goes a long way toward explaining the equally astonishing misunderstanding of the story revealed in the plot summary.

Presumably, the story is abnormal because it treats a boy who "felt nothing, not any grief" after shooting his brother, as the objector interprets. This reaction of the objector is precisely that of the characters in the story. They can understand that the young boy might have shot his older brother accidentally—the two were both stooping to pass through a wire fence—but they can't understand why he went on and picked peas an hour before telling his parents and why he shows no emotion. The sheriff says sardonically that this kid is too "reasonable" to be upset over

it and, when the father asks, "You don't want him?" replies "Not now. Maybe in a few years." The stoniness of the boy becomes of course the main point of the story. The reader has to try to understand what the characters cannot. We are given, after all, more information.

This is the opening.

> Arnold drew his overalls and raveling gray sweater over his naked body. In the other narrow bed his brother Eugene went on sleeping, undisturbed by the alarm clock's rusty ring. Arnold, watching his brother sleeping, felt a peculiar dismay; he was nine, six years younger than Eugie, and in their waking hours it was he who was subordinate. To dispel emphatically his uneasy advantage over his sleeping brother, he threw himself on the hump of Eugie's body.
>
> "Get up! Get up!" he cried.[6]

Arnold feels very ambivalent about his brother, as many siblings do about each other. He naturally loves Eugie, and admires him, but is envious too and squirms at Eugie's derision of him. Just before the gun caught on the fence and Arnold jerked it to free it, Eugie had made a scornful remark about Arnold's puny legs. We have no right to think that, even at a very unconscious level, Arnold meant to kill him, but the fact that the shooting could express the resentful and envious part of Arnold's feeling seems to join the usual shock to make him try to deny the death happened by going ahead with what they had planned to do—pick peas. The adults don't have access to indications of these and other feelings, and in their laconic country way they simply size up the situation as a case of a "stone boy," unfeeling, and turn from this abnormality the way animals do, by instinct.

The author explicitly alerts us that their assumption is not the truth. When the sheriff asked Arnold if he and his brother were good friends, Arnold didn't know how to reply.

> What did he mean—good friends? Eugie was his brother. That was different from a friend, Arnold thought. A best friend was your own age, but Eugie was almost a man. Eugie had had a way of looking at him, slyly and mockingly and yet confidentially, that had summed up how they both felt about being brothers. Arnold had wanted to be with Eugie more than with anybody else but he couldn't say they had been good friends.[7]

The objection says that the "rest of the story relates his feelings about his mother, etc." By blanketing father, sister, neighbors, farm, and farm animals under that "etc." and by quoting the phrase "pommel her breasts with his head" the objector creates a sexual innuendo that is totally uncalled for. Since the first numbered objection immediately afterward

reads "The story is abnormal," one might well get the completely false impression that the story deals with incestuous feelings. Let's look at the whole paragraph ending with the quoted sentence. Arnold approaches his parents' door that evening.

> "Mother?" he asked insistently. He had expected her to realize that he wanted to go down on his knees by her bed and tell her that Eugie was dead. She did not know it yet, nobody knew it, and yet she was sitting up in bed, waiting to be told, waiting for him to confirm her dread. He had expected her to tell him to come in, to allow him to dig his head into her blankets and tell her about the terror he had felt when he had knelt beside Eugie. He had come to clasp her in his arms and, in his terror, to pommel her breasts with his head. He put his hand upon the knob.
>
> "Go back to bed, Arnold," she called sharply.[8]

By directly stating the boy's feelings, the author has tried to make very apparent to the reader what the other characters cannot see—that this nine-year-old, far from being a stone boy, felt such terror on killing his brother that he could not let himself believe the truth. He is not unfeeling, he is *petrified.* Not only is the context of that sentence far different from what the objection might lead one to conclude, but the objector omitted from the quoted sentence, without even indicating a deletion, the critical phrase "in his terror," which repeats the key word "terror" that explains the boy's behavior and, incidentally, would make it pretty hard for even the most prurient reader to sexualize the passage. What this reviewer did was pluck out a physical detail from this key moment and suppress—or repress—the main point of the passage, the revelation of the boy's true state, the inner life. Please reread now the sentence as misquoted in the objection extracted at the beginning of the discussion of this story and compare it with the original sentence, especially as part of the whole scene.

It is a story of double jeopardy. The mother does not let Arnold come to her. By the time, the next morning, that she and the father make overtures to him, he really has *become* a stone boy, for a secondary reason. "He called upon his pride to protect him from them." The story ends this way.

> "Was you knocking at my door last night?"
>
> He looked over his shoulder at her, his eyes narrow and dry.
>
> "What'd you want?" she asked humbly.
>
> "I didn't want nothing," he said flatly.
>
> Then he went out the door and down the back steps, his legs trembling from the fright his answer gave him.[9]

Instead of losing one son, the family has lost two. Because the people around him could not understand his behavior, they turned away from him and *made* him a stone boy. The original problems come from the boy's stunned reaction of denial, but the tragedy is compounded by the adults' insensitive reaction. Not just from the adults; even Arnold's sister refuses to pass the milk to him at breakfast. So we have a story about misinterpretation being misinterpreted. The reviewer blocked out the boy's terror from the text as the characters did from *their* field of perception.

It is a compassionate story. No one is blamed. These are good simple people doing their best. The fact is that they are all inclined to be terse and undemonstrative, that is, to treat feeling as stoically as possible. It's part of the hard and primitive country life. "He felt nothing, not any grief" is actually a line from the story but was included in the objection without quotation marks, juxtaposed with another quotation, about the peas, that occurred somewhere else. To straighten this out and at the same time indicate the author's perspective on this fighting back of feeling, here is Arnold going to bed for the first time alone: "He felt nothing, not any grief. There was only the same immense silence and crawling inside of him; it was the way the houses and fields felt under a merciless sun." We can understand why the characters do not know what is happening in the boy. But what excuse does the reader have after getting all this privileged information about the inner life, which includes more than I have quoted?

Let's suppose that everyone resists *some* knowledge. Some things we don't *want* to know. Arnold did not want to know that he had killed the person he most wanted to be with. Such negative capability would seem to cut life off at its very roots. His family and neighbors do not want to know the underside of their apparently sturdy simplicity. They are willing to believe that Arnold lacks feeling but not that he has *mixed* feelings and extreme feelings, which are what create the problem of his strange behavior. They don't want to think that they're implicated in the death by letting a nine-year-old make so free with a gun that he carries it casually pea-picking and scoffs at hunting seasons; survival on a family farm depends on children shouldering responsibility as early as possible. They don't want to complicate their inner life by tracing and connecting everything to get a full explanation.

They feel they must resist descending into the self to understand others through understanding oneself, because they need to keep attention focused on things outside—minute details and shifts of weather, animals, plants, and the outward behavior of each other. They already have enough to cope with without having also to deal with feelings that they are afraid of. Ah, but there's the rub: if they do not go inward enough, they do not know what to make of what they see in each other. Even the

mother turns away Arnold at the critical moment of emotional aftermath. The survival strategy of sticking to the physical, of curtailing knowledge, turns out to defeat itself. By not knowing what they needed to know, the family and community lost another member; maybe the sheriff *will* be wanting him later. Maybe even the first son was lost through this same suppression of knowledge: if you can acknowledge that the baby brother resents and envies his big brother at the same time that he admires and adores him—if you can harmonize apparently contradictory information—then just maybe you can head off "accidents." But in some measure we all resist this degree of consciousness.

I dwell on this story because it is a parable of not wanting to know, and not wanting to know lies very much at the heart of this study, which concerns in one arena the banning of books and in a broader theater the restriction of mind that creates conflict among humans and disconnects them from the rest of creation. Literature, on the other hand, expands consciousness and creates connections.

A popular song says, "There ain't no instant replay in the football game of life." Caught up as participants, we seldom understand well enough in the moment, which is when we need insight. Even from a simple, unedited, uninterpreted rerun we may understand more than the first time around. Literature serves much better than a rerun, because it illuminates the kinds of actions and situations we might encounter in real life. We know more about what is going on in and around the people than we do when we live such events. It is a function of literature to prepare us thus for new events as well as to purge us of bad feeling left from previous events. Almost all literature treats problems, even the stories with happy endings, precisely because storying serves to induce understanding, to raise consciousness.

But there is a serious catch: if you are resisting knowledge so severely that you miss the illumination, misread, and want to throw out stories because they are "depressing," "negative," and "morbid," then the remedy so badly needed cannot help. If receptive to the illumination, a reader can separate himself or herself from the characters while identifying with them and feel uplifted by even a story filled with the most awful characters and happenings, because illumination connects with celebration.

Becoming more conscious is a very positive experience, a "high." Besides knowing more than before, one feels better because literature is *triumphant*. It makes no difference if, in the story, everyone gets killed off or no hope exists for the *characters;* for the reader life not only goes on but goes on better because it is more illuminated. There but for the grace of God go I, but I *don't* go that way, and I feel very good about it. The author triumphs by achieving this illumination that we miss ordinarily and by converting bad news to good news. This, he or she says, is

what happened or might happen but doesn't have to happen, or if it has to happen, we can make this use of it, see this truth or beauty in it.

Literature is artful, a kind of game, a construction to sport in. Somebody made something! No matter what it's about, a creation is good news, something new to play with. Artfulness delights. A well told, well worded story celebrates by its very creativity the power of consciousness, the source of triumph in life. I have never been depressed by a well wrought piece of literature. This is far from an art-for-art's sake attitude. A skillful, perceptive story like "The Stone Boy" arouses me to more compassion for people, makes me both see and feel more. For me this stirring of spirit, coming along with the enlarged understanding and the pleasure in the creative verbal contraption make a good story positive no matter what horrors it relates. What depresses me are stories that don't illuminate or celebrate—stories that flinch from either the depths or the heights and stonewall a self-belying cheeriness or feign a fashionable malady. Being undepressable by good literature makes it especially a challenge for me to try to understand the sort of objections about negativism that the books drew on themselves.

But I know that all of us ward off things we don't want to know, like the people surrounding the stone boy, things we feel will undo us if we *acknowledge* them. Some of these things are peculiar to us as individuals, some are ignored in common. ("Ignorance" contains the idea of "not paying attention to.") So whole groups may screen out certain kinds of knowledge. This avoidance of knowing I will henceforth call *agnosis*, a term I have coined to imply a self-limitation of the natural human faculties of understanding. Now, it is true that survival itself requires selective attention and hence the temporary ignoring of some things as we give priority to others. But if this process is inflexible and involuntary—beyond control—it can hurt us as readily as save us. Witness the stony people of Berriault's story. A petrified person will have a monolithic mind. That is why it is important to try to get to the bottom of the case before us.