

# “How We Came to Love Books”: Not With Labels and Not With Emoticons!

By Barbara M. Jones and Pat Scales

*What is the impact of the closing down of the Wilderness on the development of children's imaginations? This is what I worry about the most. I grew up with freedom, a liberty that now seems breathtaking and almost impossible . . . Art is a form of exploration, of sailing off into the unknown alone, heading for those unmarked places on the map. If children are not permitted—not taught—to be adventurers and explorers as children, what will become of the world of adventure, of stories, of literature itself?*

-Michael Chabon, “The Wilderness of Childhood,” in *Manhood for Amateurs* (2009)

## Introduction

Before the advent of today's newest book rating and labeling systems, a classic book was published *Voices of Readers: How We Come to Love Books* (Carlsen & Sherrill). Some of the answers won't surprise you, availability of libraries and librarians; social interaction; role models who value reading; family members who read aloud. But the one that might surprise you is—“freedom of choice in reading material.” Researchers of reading have not changed their mind since that book was published in 1988.

This article is by two women who grew up with that freedom of choice and went on to become librarians. They were allowed to read what they chose. Neither grew up in an ultra-liberal community. They discussed their reading regularly with family and friends. They continue to share their love of reading with new generations of children and want them to grow up as unfettered as they were. They helped the library profession support the freedom to read by being writers of, and practitioners of, the principles of the *Library Bill of Rights*. They know that these principles have stood the test of time and that practical experience with libraries and families bears out those principles.

Critics argue that the literature is so much darker now. What about the violence in *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, the first novel in a dark trilogy about a dystopian world? Could books with teen suicide like *Orchards* by Holly Thompson and *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher cause “copycat” suicides? Schools have similar questions about novels that deal with drug and alcohol use and abuse. Yet, teen readers say that books like *Burnout* by Adrienne Maria Vrettos

and *Gone* by Lisa McMann cause them to think about the ill effects of the drug culture. Hopefully this article will show that times haven't changed all that much. Parents, librarians, teachers, and other community members still need to take responsibility for children's reading—not to create barriers, but to instill enthusiasm. Reading should not be viewed as an “unsafe” activity in the way taking drugs is. Reading is a way to learn and talk about uncomfortable issues. Labels like “violence,” “suicide,” and “drug and alcohol abuse” on books take away that “wilderness” experience so eloquently described by Michael Chabon. Why read the book if you already know the ending? If you already know that Dad drinks two martinis or that a girl isn't allowed to grieve for a friend who has killed herself? And the research does not show a causal relationship between reading about those things and acting upon them.

The two authors' article is not a “point/counterpoint.” Both are unabashed supporters of the freedom to read—for children as well as adults. Both believe that librarians should be trained to help children select books that they want to read, and that are age appropriate. Whether you agree or not, it is important that you engage in this conversation over a trend that is a threat to the library profession and a barrier to nourishing a generation of new readers.

## What Do You Mean by Labels and Rating Systems?

Labeling and rating systems in libraries range from a call number range on a bookshelf to an online ranking of a book, which uses 1-5 martini glasses to designate how much drinking occurs in the book. The former label is directional and makes no value judgment about the contents; the latter does. Directional labels are essential in helping readers find what they want; the other kind of label takes topics completely out of context and assigns a subjective ranking. It is the latter that concerns ALA and these two authors.

Students in K-12 schools are labeled the first day they enter the schoolhouse door. They know the minute the teacher administers that first aptitude test where they are likely to fall, and for various reasons, most are stuck with the label assigned them for the duration of their school years. At one time, the school library was a place where students felt equal. They could expect free access to information and they were encouraged to read whatever interested them

regardless of their reading ability. The librarian didn't care if a girl was reading "Harlequin" romance novels, or whether she was poring over *Emma* by Jane Austen. A student could leave the library with a backpack filled with books on the Bermuda Triangle and come back for more the next day. The scenario is different in many school libraries today. Students aren't free to move through the book stacks and search for that one novel that will turn them on to reading, or explore books on a subject that they heard about on television.

The political focus on student achievement has found a path to school libraries and dimmed the lights for free and open access to materials for all students. Reader guidance has been taken over by computerized reading programs like Accelerated Reader (AR), an assessment program developed by Renaissance Learning that measures reading comprehension. This program assigns "reading levels" to books, and many schools use much of their library budget to purchase "spine labels" that designate such levels. Students are required to take out books only on their "reading level." A point value is assigned to each book, and students are expected, based on their reading ability, to achieve a certain goal. In some schools, prizes are awarded to those who reach their goal. The program has become so popular in many schools that public libraries are now reporting that they are under pressure by parents and board members to place "reading level" labels on books in the children's collection and on MARC records. And Accelerated Reader now offers an App for the i-Phone and i-Pad so that students can actually take a reading quiz from the comfort of their home.

The irony of the Accelerated Reader program is that its stated mission on the Renaissance Learning website is to "build a lifelong love of reading in every student." We submit that students won't develop the love of reading when they must bear the brand of their reading level each time they make a book selection. What happens when the competition is over? Do students become injured athletes and never play the game again?

Labeling and rating systems have been a concern since the 1950's, when during the McCarthy era, some libraries wanted to label books as "communist." The American Library Association addressed that relationship between content labeling and rating systems in its first 1951 version of *Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, declaring such labels as a violation of the *Library Bill of Rights*. The latest version adopted in 2009 reaffirms the same core beliefs about such systems:

- "When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor's tool."
- "Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the material, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the material, render it inappropriate or offensive

for all or certain groups of users."

- "Many organizations use rating systems as a means of advising either their members or the general public regarding the organizations' opinions of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books, films, recordings, Web sites, games, or other materials. The adoption, enforcement, or endorsement of any of these rating systems by a library violates the *Library Bill of Rights*."

This interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* applies to library materials and information for minors. In fact, in 1967 the ALA clarified that library intellectual freedom policies and professional best practices extend to children and young adults—in *Free Access to Libraries for Minors*. The 8th edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* documents that decision as well as subsequent related policies and best practices: *Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program; Minors and Internet Interactivity; Access for Children and Young Adults to Nonprint Materials; and Importance of Education to Intellectual Freedom*.

## Labeling and Rating Systems in the Twenty-First Century

The twenty-first century has brought new versions of labeling/rating systems to the marketplace. **Common Sense Media**, **Story Snoops**, and **Facts on Fiction**, are three web-based organizations that rate books by content in an effort to "help parents become more informed about what their children are reading." Common Sense Media<sup>1</sup> uses the following emoticons as warnings: bombs for violence, lips for sex, #1-5 for language, \$ for consumerism, and martini glasses for drinking, drugs, and smoking. This site also states whether the book has any educational value and redeeming role models. The reviewer assigns a title an overall "On," "Off," or "Pause" rating. For example, *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead, the 2010 Newbery Medal winner, is rated "on" for ages 9 and up. It gets three bombs for violence because the main character is afraid to walk home alone past a group of bullies; one lip because a boy and a girl kiss several times, and "the mother has a boyfriend but he does not have a key to the apartment;" one #1 for mild language like "idiot," "shut up," and "that's bull;" and one \$ because a few companies and name brands like McDonalds and Blow Pops are mentioned. The reviewer does give the novel a three for positive role models.

The focus of Story Snoops is fiction for ages 9 and up. The four moms from the San Francisco Bay area that run the website are well read and better writers than the reviewers at Common Sense Media. They don't use emoticons to rate books, but they have crafted a list of keywords that flag the controversies in novels. Such keywords for *When You Reach Me* are "breaking and entering," "disturbing imagery," "homelessness," "juvenile fist fighting," "kissing," and "minor character death." There is also a section called "The Scoop:

(spoiler alert)” where they issue mild warnings. *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson, is a story set during the American Revolution and is recommended for ages 9 and up by the publisher. “The Scoop (Spoiler Alert)” states, “People die in battle and by lynching, and a cannon decapitates a boy. Isabel is badly beaten and her face branded. That said, historical accuracy serves the reader well, depicting the flaws in both parties and ultimately delivering a happy ending.” They feel that the book is better suited for a young adult audience, but 10-year-olds could handle it if used in the classroom.

Facts on Fiction uses graphs to rate books on a scale of # 1-6 in the following categories: Positive Elements, Mature Subject Matter, Profanity/Language, Sexual Content, Violence/Illegal Activity, Tobacco/Alcohol/Drugs, and Disrespect/anti-Social Elements. For example, *The Graveyard Book*, the 2009 Newbery Medal novel by Neil Gaiman, receives an “As a Whole” #6 rating for Mature Subject Matter because it deals with death and witchcraft; #3 for Profanity/Language because the characters make degrading comments like “fiddle-pated old dunderheads,” “stupid,” and “little snot,” and uses Religious Exclamations like “Good Lord.” It also gets an “As a Whole” #3 rating for Sex because “courting couples had used the grass of the graveyard as a place to cuddle and snuggle and kiss and roll about.” The ratings for Violence include: # 4 for violent actions of fantasy nature; #3 because a character commits a misdemeanor and a felony; #3 for non-life threatening injuries; #5 because there are scenes involving aggressive conflict; # 3 for gore; #2 because there is intense violence. This all adds up to a # 5 “As a whole” rating for violence. Specific examples from the novel, referenced by the page number, explain the ratings.

The Common Sense Media website states that they “rely on developmental criteria from some of the nation’s leading authorities to determine what content is appropriate for which ages.” However, they never identify the authorities. Story Snoops is more honest about their approach. They simply state that they offer reading suggestions from “a mom’s perspective” for teens and tweens. There is no statement on the Facts on Fiction website regarding their book selection criteria, or how they determine age recommendation. All three sites claim that they are NOT about CENSORSHIP, but instead they are providing a tool for parents to know what is appropriate reading material for their child. Facts on Fiction attempts to convince critics in this way:

We are NOT

- An Attempt to Censor Books
- An Attempt to Remove Books from Libraries
- An Attempt to Recommend or Not Recommend Books

Yet the information on the website about the founder and president of Facts on Fiction states, “she founded the

organization after finding her eight-year-old child’s school-recommended a book peppered with expletives, a man fondling a woman’s breasts, children looking at pornographic magazines and references of gore and child abuse.” She doesn’t state the title of the book.

We have at least one documented case of a book that was removed from a library based on a Common Sense Media review. There is another case of a teenage girl who walked into a public library and asked the teen librarian to help her find a good book to read. As the librarian began telling the girl about specific books, the father keyed the titles into his i-Phone. When the librarian asked if he was checking reviews on Amazon, he informed her that he was checking the ratings on Common Sense Media. This unnerved the librarian because she felt that the girl wanted her help, and that the father didn’t trust her knowledge of the literature or what appeals to teenage girls.

It is so easy to take the path of least resistance and use these tools to help pick books for youth. Here’s why you should take a more professional approach to book selection:

- These rating/labeling systems bypass the professional expertise of a librarian, who is trained in collection development, reader services and information literacy. All these specific professional tasks are ignored, jeopardizing professional library jobs and depriving library users of that expertise.
- They deprive parents, librarians, and youth from exposure to a vast array of materials that are rejected by a non-library organization with a prejudicial viewpoint.
- Such labeling systems can easily be written into law, as has happened in some countries. In the United States they would be a clear violation of the First Amendment, and thus a concern for libraries.
- Many labeling systems are based on assumption of a causal relationship between violence, sexuality considered immoral by some, or illicit drug use and information content. Scientific research has produced decidedly mixed conclusions, but nonetheless has been used to pressure library collection development decisions.
- All organizations, including ALA, have professional philosophies and missions. Using the labels of other organizations with different philosophies and missions, to make library decisions, substantially weakens the impact of the American Library Association in an arena it knows best.
- In short, these Web-based labeling systems serve exactly the same functions as older systems and are just as much a violation of the *Library Bill of Rights*. In reading its history and interpretations, it is hard to come to any other conclusion.

For almost two years, a group of publishers, authors, researchers, and librarians have been developing strategies for addressing the increased use of labeling/rating systems, and the growing power of the organizations promoting them. We are contemplating some of the following:

- Create awareness among library and information science educators, practicing librarians, and the general public about these online tools and show them how they stifle the love of unfettered reading and exploration and lead to professional ethical compromises.
- Create awareness of how these tools jeopardize the profession of librarianship.
- Produce publications and selection tools, like more accessible book reviews, that consider the book as a whole and that can serve as substitutes for the current online tools.
- Work with parent groups like the PTA to advocate the value of parents reading to their children and letting children select books they want to read — by browsing the shelves rather than by filtering with an emoticon system.

We ask you to join us with your ideas on how to preserve the “wilderness” so that children can once again explore the world of reading for themselves.

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## Authors:

Barbara Jones is currently Director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom. Barbara has held positions in several academic libraries, most recently as director of the Wesleyan University Library, Mass. [bjones@ala.org](mailto:bjones@ala.org)

Pat Scales is a retired school librarian but active Intellectual Freedom author and advocate. She is past president of the American Library Association and currently chairs its Intellectual Freedom Committee. [pscales@bellsouth.net](mailto:pscales@bellsouth.net)