

Chapter 2

Strong Opposition

When I wrote the first six “Another Sommer-Time Story™” books and published the “Another Great Achiever” series, two full-color junior biographies from other authors, I submitted them in the proper fashion to the major reviewers. One of our main goals was to reach school librarians. The major reviewer for school libraries is the *School Library Journal*. Was I ever disappointed—*School Library Journal* gave the books they reviewed an extremely low rating.

That was a serious blow for us to enter the school market. I have no complaint over negative ratings; that’s what review journals should do with books that don’t meet proper literary standards. However, when I read this statement in *Children’s Writer* in “A Reviewer’s Eye View” concerning Trevelyn Jones, children’s editor of *School Library Journal*, I was outraged. The article stated: “Jones says, however, that didacticism can hurt a book. ‘Many very small new publishers think a children’s book must have a moral. Those get creamed immediately.’”¹ My books were “creamed” or censored because they were didactic and taught moral lessons!

I wrote twelve more children’s books, but I didn’t send them to *School Library Journal* because main reviewers often get their reviews published on major booksellers’ websites such as Barnes & Noble and

Amazon. However, I did send these books to other reviewers.

We sent some books to Publishers Manufacturing Association (PMA), an organization with over 3,500 independent publishers. Each year PMA sponsors the Benjamin Franklin Awards, and their “judges come from various relevant disciplines and are considered experts in their field.” For first place in the “Children’s Picture Book” category, they chose the book, *The Ugly Caterpillar*. We sent the same book to *The Horn Book Guide*. Along with this book, they reviewed *I Am a Lion*. This is their review:

Another Sommer-Time Story series. A lion cub who bears a strong resemblance to a certain Disney character learns to accept his heritage. A caterpillar is teased for being ugly until she transforms into a butterfly. Both familiar stories are poorly written and gaudily illustrated. With dust jackets that list each story’s specific moral qualities—such as self-esteem and respect for others—these cloying books are little more than didactic tracts in smiling animals’ clothing.

The Horn Book Guide gave these two books, including the award-winning *The Ugly Caterpillar*, the lowest possible rating!² (This book can be viewed free on our website.)

A sales representative from the *School Library*

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Journal told us that the journal was writing an article about books that taught values. I thought that they may have had a change of mind, so we submitted my next two children's books: *It's Not Fair!* and *Noise! Noise! Noise!* Here's their review:

The first book is a heavy-handed, flatly illustrated treatise on the need to have and follow a leader. When Buzzie declares it unfair that worker bees have to do all the work and convinces other bees to start a new hive with her, chaos reigns. Finally, she understands what Wizbee has been trying to tell her—that 'working with a leader brings happiness' and that 'it's important to let the leader tell the other bees what kind of work they should do.' The text is didactic to say the least and Budwine's illustrations are sophomoric and amateurish. No self-respecting child would be moved by this preachy lesson.³

However, *It's Not Fair!* won the prestigious Children's Choice Award sponsored by International Reading Association and The Children's Book Council where 10,000 children from different regions of the United States read and vote on their favorite recently published books. The *School Library Journal* review stated categorically: "No self-respecting child would be moved by this preachy lesson"; yet children choose this didactic book as one of their favorites!

Didacticism

Both *The Horn Book Guide* and *School Library Journal* criticized my books because they were didactic. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines didactic as: "a: designed or intended to teach; b: intended to convey instruction and information as well as pleasure and entertainment." You may be puzzled as to why books should be rejected because they intend "to convey instruction and information as well as pleasure and entertainment." You may ask, "Isn't this one of the purposes of education?"

Unfortunately, there's a strong bias against didactic books. *Writer's Digest* states that Simon & Schuster "Books for Young Readers" gives this advice to those wanting to submit books, "Please avoid problem novels, rhyming verse and didactic stories with morals."⁴ Elaine Marie Alphin writing in *Children's Writer* about realistic fantasy says, "But this sort of realistic fantasy should never become a didactic exercise."⁵ In fact, an admonition authors repeatedly hear when submitting material to publishers is that books shouldn't moralize.

I realize one can be heavy-handed and "hit them over the head" with a moral, but I'm speaking about books that convey instruction and information as well as pleasure and entertainment. To some this would be the ideal instrument for education—informative and interesting reading material that at the same time imparts constructive values. We received repeated

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comments from librarians that they can't keep our books on the shelves. One of the recurring comments we receive from children on why they enjoy our character-building books is that they teach a "lesson," they are didactic. Children want to learn. They want interesting books that teach them how to become successful.

It's rather amazing, if one wants to become a doctor, engineer, chemist, lawyer, or whatever occupation requiring a degree, one needs to take courses that are heavily didactic. Yet when providing children at the beginning stages of learning to read, one should not provide books that convey information and pleasure.

This is a major problem in education today, schools are not providing students with proper instruction and information. Many wonder how can students spend 10-to-12 years in school and still be unable to read and do basic math.

Today the educational crisis still persists. John Gehring in *Education Week* reports that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development stated, "Poor literacy skills among high school graduates and too few opportunities for adult education put the United States in danger of losing its competitive edge in a rapidly changing global market." Gehring adds: "The United States lags or has lost ground on several important education measures when compared with 29 other countries. In literacy, for example, the United States has the highest percentage of secondary school graduates who ranked below an

international literacy standard.” The article reports that only 10 percent of Finland’s students lacked literacy skills; the United States, 59 percent!⁶

The Information Age

Today, getting a proper education is becoming increasingly important. This is particularly evident when entering the business world. Dr. Joseph H. Boyett and his wife, Jimmie T. Boyett, coauthors of *The Guru Guide*, report: “We are in the midst of a great watershed change in which we are moving from an industrial to a knowledge economy....Knowledge work is replacing manual labor. By 2010, no more than 1 in 10 workers will be engaged in making or moving things.”⁷

I can relate well to what’s happening in industry. My company, Reliable EDM, is a high-tech machining company. Our CNC (computer numerical control) machines have the capability to cut parts for hours and even days at a time unattended. I’ve witnessed firsthand the dramatic changes in the machining industry. Today we have automatic tool changers, robots, and fuzzy logic where machines are able to think and make decisions. These technologies result in a less labor-intensive industry.

America needs an educated workforce. Today we live in a global economy, and competition is fierce. One may be against automation that eliminates jobs, but if America does not remain competitive, our economy will fall further and further behind.

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Companies will go elsewhere to buy their products. *Inc. Magazine* states in “How China Will Change Your Business” this fact: “It is plainly understood that asking suppliers to lower prices is merely another way of telling them they ought to be prepared to meet the best price out of China.”⁸ This is the effect of global competition.

David Gergen, editor at large for *U.S. News & World Report* speaks about the alarming way “we are educating our young men and women. Back in 1983, a national education commission famously concluded that our schools faced a ‘rising tide of mediocrity.’ Educators, governors, and CEOs quickly swung into action, and we have been trying to improve K-12 classes ever since.”⁹ Gergen then reports what happened 22 years later:

When the nation’s governors gathered recently for a national “education summit,” their partnering organization, Achieve, presented data showing that the high school dropout rate has actually gotten worse since 1983! Of the kids who now reach ninth grade, 32 percent disappear before high school graduation. Another third finish high school but aren’t ready for college or work. This, about two thirds of our students are being left behind, many of them low-income and minority kids. Only the upper third leave high school ready for college, work, and citizenship.¹⁰

Then Gergen states what needs to be done to strengthen our nation:

We should be not only alarmed but ashamed. Our leading figures—the presidents, for example, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, and Yale, along with the CEOs of Microsoft, Intel, and IBM—must rally Washington and the country to a revolutionary overhaul of public education. In our founding years, Americans were among the most literate people on Earth, and that put us on an upward path. The education of our young has always been a key to our greatness. Will we now rescue the next generation or condemn it to second place?¹¹

We live in an information age where obtaining knowledge is vital for America's future economic success. One of the critical issues is to provide students the kind of books they need to learn the character principles of how to obtain knowledge, such as discipline, diligence, perseverance, proper work ethic, respect, self-discipline, and responsibility. Yet there are those opposing character-building didactic books—the very kind of books our students need.

But why should teaching children such character principles be attacked? These books are attacked because some educators believe children should not

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be influenced by outside forces; instead, children should be determinators of their own value system.

Children as Determinators

There is a trend in America that teachers should avoid influencing children under the premise that children themselves should be their own authority. Some advocate that children should even go against parental authority. John Leo in *U.S. News & World Report* states:

Told by schools to construct their own value system, students are often led to challenge parental values or to dismiss almost any adult objections as illegitimate. Last week, a friend here in New York saw this in action. When she asked what her young child's school was going to do about a wave of bullying, including pushing classmates down a flight of stairs, the head of the school said no action would be taken because "children at this stage in their development do not welcome adult intervention."

Dan Mack's strong new book, *The Assault on Parenthood: How Our Culture Undermines the Family*, makes the case that the crisis of the public school system is not simply the familiar one of academic failure. It's also that a new ethic, dismissive of parents and traditional values, has descended on the schools.¹²

John Leo then reports: "In the media, parental objections to all this usually come under the heading of condoms, school prayer, and the religious right. But behind the media screen, parents of all political stripes are getting the message, and pressure is building." Leo continues by directing our attention to "one of our best public intellectuals," Alan Wolfe, and his dire warning, "If social trends can be proclaimed based on my personal experience, suburban public schools are about to face the same precipitous declines in enrollment suffered by urban ones."¹³

Across the nation parents are greatly upset about what's happening in schools that encourage children to challenge their authority and to be their own determinators of their value system. Many more parents would be alarmed if they only knew what their children were being taught. When parents object to what's happening, they are accused of being bigoted and intolerant. Because of issues like these, many parents want charter schools created or to be provided with vouchers so they can choose their own schools. Others in their frustration are opting out of the school system altogether and with great sacrifice send their children to private schools; others are home schooling their children so they can teach the values they deem important. America is in the midst of a philosophical battle that has serious repercussions for our children and our nation.