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# Life after *Wifey*:

## The Long-term Effects of an Attempt at Censorship in a Public Library

by Amanda R. Bible

**E**ven after ten years, it is not possible to discuss the attempt at censorship at the Columbus County Public Library without an increasing heartbeat and without vivid memories of the fears brought on by anonymous phone calls and grilling by the county commissioners, implying that my job was at risk. I also remember the high emotional stress of dealing with well-meaning crusaders, county commissioners whose re-election was threatened, and a supportive library board of trustees that was searching for a solution to the censorship threat that would allow them to uphold the "Library Bill of Rights," as well as appease the furor caused by *Wifey, An Adult Novel* by Judy Blume.

The *Wifey* controversy began on February 15, 1980, and raged for nearly six months before subsiding, but articles about the case kept appearing in the news media for almost a year. In summary, the case began when Elaine Cumbee strongly objected to the "pornography and filth" in *Wifey*, which her seventh-grade daughter borrowed on her first trip to the library. Unknown to her mother, the daughter, who had been reading a friend's paperback copy of *Wifey* at school, was told to borrow it from the public library. Mrs. Cumbee returned the book the following day demanding that it be removed from the library. Several weeks later, she filed a formal complaint, but she would not attend library board meetings to discuss the complaint. The library board refused to remove the book from the collection. Mrs. Cumbee, whose father-in-law was a preacher, vowed to see that something was done. She distributed thousands of copies of pages 98-99 of *Wifey* (which she considered the most offensive); attended Community Watch meetings and church meetings; and mailed an anonymous letter that complained about this use of tax money and asked for support. Ironically, pages 98-99 in the hardback edition did not correspond to the same page numbers in the paperback edition, the only one available after the complaint. People who only saw the paperback edition, and not a copy of the pages, could not understand what was so offensive.

Three commissioners who were running for re-election were threatened with comments such as, "If you can't do something about that filth, we'll elect someone who will;" and "If you can't get rid of the book, get rid of the one who put it there." The commissioners ordered the book removed and instructed the county attorney to contact the state attorney general for a ruling. The attorney general cited school censorship cases and suggested that the book might be placed in an adult section of the library and access to the section be limited to those over age eighteen. The library board refused and contended that it was the parents' responsibility to monitor what their children read. The library

board had decided to take the case to court, if necessary.

After many discussions and two public meetings, the library board changed the policy relating to obtaining a library card. The registration card now includes the statement, "My child (may or may not) borrow from the adult section of the library." The statement must be completed and the registration signed by a parent/guardian if the child is under age eighteen. Children may take the registration card home for the signature, but the parent must come to the library to remove the restriction. If "may not" is indicated, the plastic library card is embossed "Restricted-J," to alert the circulation staff. There is no restriction on use of material in the library.

Cards were sent to over three thousand parents explaining the change. The previous policy required a parent's signature only if the child were under age thirteen. No one came in to request a restriction, but with the new registrations cards, parents of primary age children often indicate "may not." This solution was acceptable to everyone because it did not restrict use of material in the library, and it restricted borrowing only if a parent requested it.

In terms of national publicity, the solution was worse than the problem. A *Fayetteville Times* reporter asked if the Bible were classified adult or juvenile and noted that a child with a restricted card would not be able to borrow the Bible from the adult section, which was correct. He failed to mention that the adult or juvenile designation was based on the degree of reading difficulty and that there were children's versions of the Bible available. The front page article came out with the headline, "Bible Among Restricted Books," accompanied by a picture of the Bible opened to The Song of Solomon. The

article was immediately picked up by the national wire services and was edited, revised, and sensationalized by papers all across America, including the armed services publication, *Stars and Stripes*. It was also mentioned in articles on censorship in two news magazines and on radio and television programs. Outraged people from all over the nation sent letters, copies of the articles, and many gifts of Bibles for the children's section.

The case was fairly accurately reported in the September 1980 issue of *American Libraries*. A representative sample of the many North Carolina editorials supporting the library board's stand against censorship was included in the Summer 1980 issue of *North Carolina Libraries*. In addition, there was positive and continual support from the NCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee, the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, and from many librarians.

For years following the case, there were comments from parents every time a registration card was completed, generally opposing the restriction but occasionally stating, "I don't want my child to get hold of those dirty books." Parents quickly learned that upper elementary and junior high school students could not

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borrow books needed for school assignments if their card were restricted, and just as quickly removed the restriction.

At the present time the library has 14,778 registered borrowers. Sixty-eight percent are adult and thirty-two percent are children under age eighteen. Of the 4,660 juvenile borrowers, 30 percent (1,406) have restricted cards. This represents 9.5 percent of the total borrowers.

The case and the resulting publicity have not instigated additional objections to material in the library. Instead, it has had the opposite effect. In the two cases since *Wifey* when someone mentioned an objection, it was carefully stated that the objection was a personal viewpoint, and there was no desire to file a request for reconsideration. The censorship case and the statement on the registration card have made parents extremely conscious of their responsibility for monitoring their children's reading material. The circulation staff frequently hear parents who do not restrict say to the child, "I want to see what you are borrowing." They also frequently hear the child asking the parent not to restrict the card.

Each year since 1980, there has been at least one, but usually three or four, college and high school papers written about censorship that specifically include the *Wifey* case. Each year since 1981, when the American Library Association began promoting intellectual freedom through "Banned Books Week," the library has planned special displays calling attention to censorship, and has, at this time, (through newspaper articles, editorials, and radio announcements) publicized the need to defend continually our right to intellectual freedom.

Rather than avoiding the issue of censorship, the library board feels that it is better to keep the public aware of the danger. In 1986, a new preacher in Whiteville came to the library with a paperback copy of *The Book of Lists # 3*, which had an entry under "Banned Books" that stated "In North Carolina, the Columbus County Library forbade children to check out the Bible unless they had

obtained parental permission to bring home "adult books." He questioned this statement, and the librarian explained that the Bible was classified as "adult" not because it was considered racy, but because it was thought to be too difficult for children to read easily. After the case was explained he said he had no problem with it, but he still wanted to see what was available in the children's section. He was satisfied that the Bible and Bible stories were well represented in the collection.

In December 1989, *The News Reporter*, the local semi-weekly newspaper, picked the top ten stories of the 1980s and the *Wifey* case, with a picture, was featured as number six. In December 1990, the case was referred to again in an editorial about the new school board as "the most astounding blunder we have seen in Columbus since the board of commissioners ordered *Wifey* off the public library shelves years ago."

The outcome of the *Wifey* case has been positive, making many people aware of the dangers of censorship, helping to create support for the library and to increase library use. In the ten years since *Wifey*, the library has had three highly successful fund drives to build two new branches and to buy and renovate an existing building for the headquarters library. A strong, unified, well-informed library board, a good selection policy, excellent coverage and support from our local newspaper, and a vocal supportive public were the keys to the successful outcome of what could have been the end of a progressive library system in Columbus County.

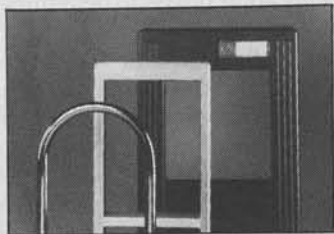
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