

Interaction with the Local Censor: Moffett's *Storm in the Mountains*

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Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict and Consciousness. James Moffett. Southern Illinois UP, 1988, 304pp., \$24.95. ISBN 0-080931-424-X

In a time when proposals for school reform are finally focusing on issues of what and how we teach, James Moffett has provided us with a way of seeing that pedagogies we often think of as ideologically neutral—like having children read real books rather than basal readers, encouraging stu-

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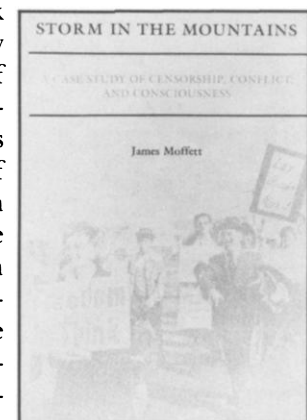
dents to write papers which express their personal meanings, or helping students critique the texts they read and the world they live in—do indeed express an ideology, one not necessarily shared by all our fellow citizens. *Storm in the Mountains* goes to the heart of the wider issues confronting those of us who have been attempting to implement what I have come to call uncommonsense language education.

Moffett describes the censorship conflict which engulfed his *Interaction* series and many other texts in Kanawha County, West Virginia, in 1974—but he has not tried to attack his censors so much as he has tried to understand them and their concerns. In doing so he reveals the dilemmas facing anyone who attempts to bring children into contact with ideas and beliefs which challenge those held in their homes. And he raises the crucial issue of censorship in contemporary America which, he points out, “comes not from a govern-

ment suppressing ideas, but from a corporate industry making money” (ix). In a time when many Americans have been newly made aware of the issues raised by controversial texts in the wake of the ordeal of Salman Rushdie, Moffett's example of the fact that it can, and has, and will continue to happen here could not be a more timely warning.

He deliberately waited more than a decade after the events he describes in order to try to put them in a broader perspective and try to understand as fully as possible what had caused the storm to break out. Although he does not share all the values of the book protesters and is clearly opposed to the tactics of censorship they employed, he recognizes and respects many of the impulses on which they acted. And above all, he empathizes with the feelings of oppression felt by many of the “mountaineer fundamentalists” who opposed the books: “The book protesters put me in a bind. What do you do when those who you would stand up for denounce you as the enemy and act in ways you can't approve?” (xi).

What he has done, in part, is to let them speak for themselves. The bulk of the text is a historical and ethnographic account of the controversy and the culture out of which it sprang. His extensive interviews with protest leaders are printed at length so that readers can hear their voices and



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through them come to see their world vision. Similarly, the criticisms raised over particular passages in the challenged texts are fully presented as well as analyzed. Also useful are interviews with those who supported the books and his analysis of the role played by both conservative and liberal outsiders in the controversy. I can't imagine that the conservatives will approve of Moffett's conclusions; nor, for that matter, will some civil libertarians, but they cannot say that their voices have not been heard.

For Moffett the primary underlying cause of the conflict was an attitude of "not-wanting-to-know" which he calls "agnosis" (187). The practitioners of agnosis, particularly when they feel a deep sense of group cultural identity, do not want their children exposed to any other message than the one they've heard at home. While Moffett is sympathetic to the parental desire not to have their children be *required* to read things that conflict with their values, his solution is not separate schools for each group of believers but a truly pluralistic and individualized curriculum. He points out that the potential conflicts among various elements of our pluralistic society focus on schools because

[p]ublic schools not only mirror society but provide a theater for enacting society's conflicts. In the school district come together all the factions of a community that otherwise might not have to deal with each other. For business, religion, recreation, and social life a populace can go different ways, but unless families opt out of public schools at their own expense, education remains the exception. As the central meeting place where differences are smoked out, the classroom becomes an arena for contending over divergent ways of life and modes of thought. Trying to educate a pluralistic populace by a single curriculum neatly focuses the dilemma implied in our national motto. "Out of many, one," we read on American coins. (209)

His solution to this dilemma is to change the curriculum selection process in American schools away from buying a standardized curriculum from textbook publishers. In fact, *Interaction* represented just such a change since it was not a conventional text series but a set of apparatus-free mini-anthologies (no questions! no exercises! no drills!) along with small sets of individual titles. This program was Moffett's attempt to move "away from a group rule of thought toward a kind of social unity that acknowledges individual differences as variations of a basic human likeness."

This recognition of both similarity and difference among human beings is one of the striking features of Moffett's argument. He recognizes that we who have based our case against censorship on freedom of expression have not sufficiently recognized the ideological framework that underlies our position. Not everyone shares a commitment to the marketplace of ideas, and we must learn to acknowledge both the legitimacy and the limits of the protester's position. Moffett calls for deliberate efforts to understand what we have in common—including, most centrally for him, our sense of spirituality—as a basis for unity in a pluralistic society and a pluralistic world.

Interaction was never intended to be a series in which every book would be read by every student. There was lots of room for individual choice by students and parents. As Moffett points out,

the best way to avoid conflict over reading matter is also the best way to teach reading—break up the standardization and get students reading around in a rich variety of material not produced especially for schools, which simply must quit buying curriculum in commercial packages. But parental attitudes and teacher training will have to change also. Solutions that are resolutions are revolutions. (214)

But the commonsense approach that standardizes the curriculum was not abandoned in Kanawha County, even though some uncommon-sense teachers and supervisors did buy *Interaction*. The kind of uncommon-sense individualized curriculum and the teaching it demanded were not developed, and the appropriate use of these materials was never sufficiently articulated to either teachers or parents, who saw only another set of required books which they—some of them at least—did not want their children to read. There was, therefore, neither revolution nor solution, and the problem was "resolved" only through confrontation and conflict, which led to the abandonment not only of *Interaction* but also of other moderately innovative texts that had been chosen.

The next stage for censorship controversies, Moffett warns, is likely to be what students write rather than what they read. If students begin to write meaningfully in schools, with a sense of their own voices and purposes, they will inevitably produce texts which will be the potential targets of censorship. This has already happened in some schools, but that could be only the beginning if the kind of student writing many of us have been advocating becomes a reality in more schools.

Moffett is not urging us to retreat from our advocacy of a meaning-driven, student-centered curriculum, but he is warning us of the consequences of not recognizing that to advocate a pluralistic, democratic education is to take a stand which is not universally subscribed to. Groups who believe they have a corner on truth are only too ready to impose their vision on the education of all children and to censor books and ideas which challenge that vision. But while such groups do not have a right to limit the range of curricula available, similarly a pluralistic respect for differences demands that the points of view of all parents and children be respected by the school. The *unum* which the schools should help promote, in Moffett's view, is not the oneness of a single point of view, but the oneness of recognizing that part of our common humanity is the understanding that people spring from different cultures and traditions and that each has an equal right to dignity and respect. And this, in turn, derives from a

shared understanding of human spirituality, which is not to be confused with any specific religion or any particular dogma but, instead, is that basis out of which all faith springs.

Interaction was done in not only by fundamentalists who objected to some of its content but also by the fact that an uncommonsense text series was implemented in the schools in a strictly traditional commonsense way. Until we come to understand the contradictions involved in such commonsense domestication of innovative ideas, nothing fundamental will change in language education, and the goal of developing citizens who can prosper in a pluralistic, democratic society will remain as elusive as ever. We should all be grateful to James Moffett for providing us a lens through which we can better understand the sociopolitical implications of educational reform.

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EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Literature, Life, and Practical Persons

In spite of the fact that the appeal of literature is broader than the appeal of almost any other subject and is capable of being approached from more points of view, we have laid all our emphasis upon the one relation and the one view, viz., that literature is an art and that its only appeal is aesthetic.

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To reach modern men it is necessary to project the thing that is to reach them into the circle of their intellectual interest. Literature taught as a "thing of beauty and a joy forever" will not reach the practical man, whether student or man of the world. Neither is he interested in the mute *e* in Chaucer, nor in Shakespere's relation to Aeschylus, nor in the prose style of Addison, nor in the metrical forms of Shelley.

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Literature must do for them what Tolstoi declared was its aim and mission, make plain what in the form of argument and statement is not readily understood. I believe that if we are to save the older literature and make it a force in the life of the present, we must reverse our method of teaching the oldest first, and, using modern literature as a stepping-stone, lead the student to appreciate the literature of his own life and through that the literature of the life of other times.

F. C. Tilden. February 1915. "Literature as an Interpretation of Life," *EJ* 4.2: 90-98.