

1-1-2009

# Picture Books on Controversial Issues: The Opportunity to Guide the Children's Book Publishing Industry Forward

Jennifer Hope Lipman  
*Pace University*

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## Recommended Citation

Lipman, Jennifer Hope, "Picture Books on Controversial Issues: The Opportunity to Guide the Children's Book Publishing Industry Forward" (2009). *Master of Science in Publishing*. Paper 13.  
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**Picture Books on Controversial Issues:  
The Opportunity to Guide the Children's Book Publishing  
Industry Forward**

By Jennifer Hope Lipman

Publishing 699B, Professor Jane Kinney-Denning  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science in  
Publishing degree at Pace University  
May 5, 2009

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## Introduction

*"They have expelled Huck from their library as 'trash suitable only for the slums', that will sell 25,000 copies for us for sure." – Mark Twain*

Race, sexuality, rage and drugs are not the typical images of the children's book publishing industry and the books putting children to sleep every night. In fact, when the terms children's books or juvenile literature enters the mind, images of far away lands, magic and imagination combine to ignite the dreamer within every adult and child. One might also conjure up images of ABC's, counting and other various educational elements that can help parents to teach their children the basics of life's needs. Through these vast types of children's literature, many authors have become household names such as: Dr. Seuss, Margaret Wise Brown, Maurice Sendak, E.B. White and countless others.

There are books, however, that get overlooked due to their controversial nature that parents, librarians and reviewers are reluctant to introduce to their children. While some of these texts have overcome their problematic content and releases to become classics like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, most are flops. Such successful books as: *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *And Tango Makes Three*, and less successful titles like *It's Just a Plant: A Children's Story About Marijuana*, help to push boundaries and move the children's book publishing industry forward. These books push controversial issues into the hands of young children across America, tackling risqué issues of homosexual couples, racial tolerance and illegal drug use.

Many texts, including the ones listed above, not only help the children's book publishing industry to stay relevant and meeting the consumer's demands, but they open



the door for future texts on similar topics in hopes that they will be more widely accepted and raise awareness through their debatable nature. These books enable publishers to continually meet the demands of parents and children alike, and help them face the issues that pushed the boundaries of the contemporary culture of that time period. In addition, they provide parents with a safe haven to bring these topics up in discussion with their children, and help to educate the youth of America about the issues of today so they can become the more informed leaders of tomorrow.

With a variety of large publishers ranging from HarperCollins, Random House and Penguin Group USA, to smaller independent houses, the landscape of outlets to get a book produced and ready for sale is constantly expanding. This constantly growing landscape opens the door for controversial subjects to appear on bookshelves due to the advent of self publishing, and can help to encourage the larger houses to take risks on books that may already have a positive following in the marketplace. However, when it comes down to the basics, many of these books would be published if they failed to end up in the hands of an acquiring editor at a publishing house big or small.

When acquisition editors look for projects to publish, it is rare that issues that which are perceived as risqué are signed. The overall goal of the children's book publishing industry is to produce books for the masses that will sell, and unfortunately, many topics that create debate do not produce the sales numbers to support the costs of production. In the advent that a controversial title does get signed and published, the editor has the task of encouraging the sales and marketing teams to get on board, create buzz about the forthcoming title and sell, sell, sell.

### **A Brief History**

*"If all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody, there would be very little printed." -- Benjamin Franklin*

American children's book publishing began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Similar to the roots of America, children's book publishing began in Western Europe in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Leonard Marcus went back to the first recognized piece of literature of children in his book, *Minder's of Make Believe*. He stated, "In 1744 John Newbery, London bookseller and printer, published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, the first of the illustrated 'toy' books whose resounding success." (7)

Then in the late 1770s, America became an independent nation and there became a focus on the notion of childhood, and the newly forming publishing industry took notice. Not long after were children's book being distributed, albeit pirated versions from the other side of the pond, but these books did exist. Then in 1800, the first American written and published children's book, a biography of George Washington, was released and had outstanding success (Marcus, 10-11). Written by Mason Locke Weems and published by Mathew Carey, this book debuted as the first political biography published in American children's literature. This book was followed by a slew of biographies of political and famous figures in American history.

Then in 1804, Samuel Wood set his roots in lower Manhattan, and by 1806 had published *The Young Child's ABC, or First Book* (Marcus, 13). It was not long after that the business of publishing began to spread and companies were appearing in Boston, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and other northeastern states. The next big book debut

came in 1825 when Boston located Munroe and Francis published *Mother Goose's Quarto*, the first American appearance of the now classic nursery rhymes (Marcus, 17). As more companies opened, the span of books being published naturally did as well. The marketplace now featured nursery rhymes for the very young, biographies for educational purposes, and books on moral and proper behavior to help parents teach their children common etiquette that was expected during that time period.

It was not long until the majority of businessmen in the children's book publishing industry began to notice the effect these books were capable of having over consumers. "Writing in the December 1865 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel Osgood, a Unitarian clergyman and scholar and member of the Transcendental Club, argued that juvenile literature had the power to foster the intellectual development and to preserve the spiritual well-being of the nation's younger generation." (Marcus, 32) In the years following, classic American children's literature such as: *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, took their place on the map as fictional texts that helped to develop the literacy of the youth of America and foster the young imaginations to dream bigger than they ever had before. Then the American Civil War took hold of the country, and it was several years later that America was on the brink of a new cultural identity, and the children's publishing industry was ready to meet these demands.

### **Facing Race Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

*"Books and ideas are the most effective weapons against intolerance and ignorance." -  
Lyndon Baines Johnson (Gaulin)*

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the wake of a civil war, America was settling down into its new role as a nation with equality between races and reinvent what it meant to be an American. With this, came a demand for more children's books on a variety of topics, including main characters of different races; and so the industry responded. In *The Minders of Make Believe*, Marcus explains that in 1919, 433 new books made their way into bookstores and children's hearts everywhere. A decade later, the number of books skyrocketed to 931 in a single year. Marcus expanded:

The dramatic expansion of the field appeared even more impressive when measured in terms of the total number of books printed. Viewed that way, growth had been nearly threefold, from 12 million books in 1919 to more than 31 million less than a decade later.<sup>103</sup> (Marcus, 104)

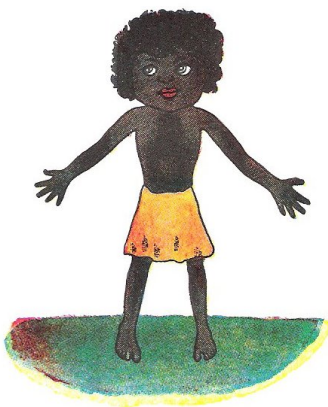
This phenomenon was partly due to a new attitude towards childhood and the growing interest in the education and care of America's youth during the turn of the century. The astounding increase in titles that Marcus discussed, also allowed for a growth in the number of the subjects picture books featured, and the range of titles became more varied to suit the expanding audiences. These subjects included race, controversial series fiction and puzzle activity books. Thus the industry went through a rapid growth spurt.

With this publish surge, in 1923 *The Story of Little Black Sambo* made its American debut. After circulating in Europe for over twenty years, this classic story became a means of debate and controversy and has since outlasted several bannings, re-

illustrations and publications. Originally, this four inch by five inch book meant no harm, and for some time, sold world-wide without much concern. However, not too long after its release, race suddenly became an issue with the drawings two main characters and Black Sambo's name. The word "sambo" is defined as, "stereotypical name for male black person (now only derogatory), 1818, [...] Used without conscious racism or contempt until circa World War II. When the word fell from polite usage..."

(Dictionary.com). The name, paired with images of "exotic" characters cause *The Story of Little Black Sambo* to leave a bad taste in the mouth of a growing population in America. Pictured below are the two controversial and introductory images of Black Sambo (p. 2), and his mother, Black Mumob (p. 4):

Black Sambo



Black Mumbo



A review for *Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (1996), from Publisher's Weekly best describes what many found offensive about these images and names:

Troubled by the racist trappings—the characters’ names and the stereotypical illustrations—of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, but drawn nonetheless to its hero and its humor, Lester and Pinkney set out to reinvent the tale. [...] the setting is the land of Sam-sam-sa-mara, where everyone is named Sam—a touch that not only defuses any echoes of the original hero’s derogatory name, but allows for many wonderfully absurd exchanges. (Publisher’s Weekly “The Story of Little Black Sambo”)

Ironically, the author of *Sam and the Tigers* had burned the original story to demonstrate his distaste for the book during his days as a political activist in the 1960s (Marcus). In an interview, Marcus commented on the two main revised editions of Sambo’s tale, “it was also interesting that the value of the story was recognized. It is a good story.” Once the controversy from the Civil Rights Movement settled, people began to look past the outward appearances of books, and they could appreciate a classic despite the controversy it originally caused. Seth Lerer sums this notion up claiming, “This episode represents two ways of reading literature. On the one hand, we may look for what it seems to us; on the other, we may look for what its author meant it to be” (3).

To find the author’s original intentions, one only needs to open up a copy of the book, and read the brief preface. According to the excerpt in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, Helen Bannerman was inventing stories for her two daughters when they were on a train ride. This story was formed to amuse her children with their experiences living in India (Bannerman, iii). Through this, one sees that Bannerman had no deliberate

intentions of making this book racist. It was simply meant to be a tale of entertainment, featuring whimsical characters in an exotic location.

Despite the relief expressed in this review, and the classic nature of the text, the original edition, *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, trumps the various newer picture books in sales. According to HarperCollins sales reports the 1923 version has sold over 351,000 copies since its publication. The remake, *Sam and the Tigers* unfortunately flopped, and sales rank in at just over 10,000 copies; obviously unable to out-do to the classic tale it attempted to improve and to compete with the wide variety of books featuring multi-cultural characters (Book scan).

While *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is considered a classic tale and has achieved great success, it never received a literary award, any honors or recognition. Neither did the new versions. It was unheard of for librarians to offer a picture book the distinction of being honor-worthy literature. That is until 1929 when the Newbery Honor went to a picture book for the first time. The first title chosen was *Millions of Cats* (Marcus, 106). Written and illustrated by Wanda Gag, this book takes readers on a journey of limiting millions of adorable cats down to that special one that an old couple will call their own. While groundbreaking, the subject matter was far from the controversial nature of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, but it opened doors for later authors, such as Maurice Sendak to claim a Caldecott Medal as his own in 1964.

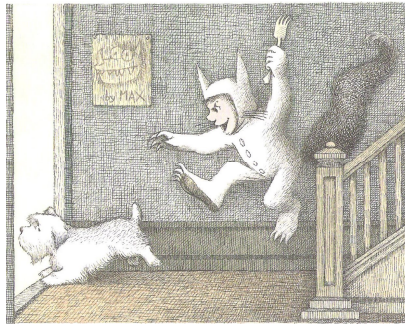
### **Anger and Sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s**

*"The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame." --Oscar Wilde (Gaulin)*

The 1930s brought on the Great Depression and the majority of America came to a screeching halt, including the publishing industry. During this time the number of books published was down from 873 new books in 1931 to only 466 new titles in 1934 (Marcus, "Minders" 110). The titles published during this challenging time were *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper, which resonated with the hope for better days, *The First Picture Book* by Mary Steichen Martin, and *The ABC Bunny* by Wanda Gag, who would later publish one of the most challenged books of the 1990s (Marcus, 115). One would be hard-pressed to find a title that was controversial during this period due to the national and global state of the economy and companies learning how to play it safe to insure sales.

It was not until 1963, 30 years later and during the midst of another catastrophic war and upheaval of the American culture, that Maurice Sendak came to the table with a tale of a boy named Max who pranced around in a wolf costume and terrorized his home. When *Where the Wild Things Are* was released, Ursula Nordstrom knew the book was destined for greatness and controversy when the display ad of *Wild Things* for the October issue of *The Horn Book* was left out of the life of forthcoming titles. (Marcus 230). The book's opening pages feature Max dressed as a beast and wreaking havoc within his house. Max is depicted chasing his dog with a fork on page 3:

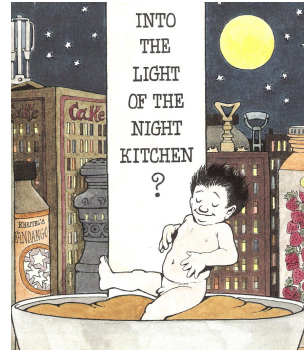




And on page 4 he shouts at his mother, “and Max said ‘I’LL EAT YOU UP!’ ” Max is then sent to his room without supper to deal with his anger and *tame* himself. Wendy Mass touches on the caution parents had towards *Where the Wild Things Are*. In *Children’s Literature*, Mass states, “Not only did Max’s sassiness to his mother disturb adults who read *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), but so did the Wild Things themselves. They were and, to some adults, still are too frightening, too unsettling, too potentially violent for young children” (160). The book exposes the inner anger that a child expresses both in imagination and through their outward actions. Parents found this troubling. Sendak’s ability to expose the inner workings of a challenged young boy and show the anger a child can possess, forced parents to take a look at their own child’s behavior which made this book all the more controversial and risqué. However, despite all of this controversy *Where the Wild Things Are* won the 1964 Caldecott Medal award, boasts well over one million copies sold, and almost 50 years after its initial publication, in October of 2009, this classic children’s tale will make its debut on movie screens across America and will expose the anger of a nine-year-old boy to a new generation of children and parents alike (BookScan).

Not too long after came a larger wave of controversy for Maurice Sendak with the publication of *In the Night Kitchen*. Published in 1970, Sendak explored sexuality in a time when sexuality, homosexuality, acceptance and drugs were once again, redefining American culture. The book features a young boy, Mickey, who travels to the night kitchen completely naked. The three cooks attempt to mix Mickey into the batter, but just before he bakes, Mickey pops out declaring his independence from the milk, and finds the cooks real milk to put in their batter. The entire book spans the course of Mickey declaring his manhood from that of his mother's milk, a side of sexuality that America was not ready to face, much like the issue of anger in Sendak's previous Caldecott winner.

In a review featured in *The Horn Book*, Paul Heins avoided mentioning sexuality altogether. "Paul Heins, [...] had sheepishly avoided all mention of Mickey's nudity even as he hailed the book as a 'work of art' replete with 'subconscious elements' that complicated and deepened the 'storytelling and pictorialization.'<sup>18</sup>" (Marcus, 253). Going an entire review without mentioning Mickey, the main character's nakedness shows America's resistance to sexuality in children's books. Mickey spends almost twenty-five percent of the book without clothing on beginning on page 3, and only two short pages later, he is featured naked and content in a bowl full of dough:

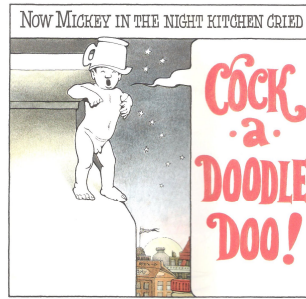


(Sendak, *In the Night Kitchen*, 5)

While his original intention was to display the wonder in a child's imagination and how sensory it is, Sendak felt that critics were missing this point (Mass, Great American Authors, 80-81).

Unlike his earlier title *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen* did not encourage future authors to imitate the notion of sexuality depicted in this book. Since this book came out there have been only a handful of picture books featuring a naked child (Marcus). Marcus continued, "The world wasn't ready for it yet and it still isn't." This has been proven throughout the years by lists on controversial texts put together by the American Library Association. In the 1990s, *In the Night Kitchen* ranked in at number twenty-one on the "Top 100 Most Frequently Challenge Books of 1990-1999. Nearly thirty years after its original publication, Sendak's book is still ranking high on the list, clocking in at number twenty-eight for being one of the top challenged book during 2000-2007.

The image of Mickey standing on a milk jug, shouting "Cock-a-doodle doo" while naked, could be seen as his declaration of sexuality, which many children are coming to learn and understand during the picture book ages from four to eight.



(Sendak, *In the Night Kitchen*, 31)

In *Great Authors of Children's Literature*, Wendy Mass explains that regardless of the nudity and blatant sexuality displayed in this book, Maurice Sendak became the first American to win the world-renowned Hans Christian Andersen Medal for illustration in 1970 (Mass, *Great Authors*, 80). Despite the praise and publicity the Andersen Medal provided for *In the Night Kitchen*, the blatant sexuality continued to make the general public blush. Mass later explained, "No matter how Sendak argued for his book, or how many awards it won, or how much kids love it, some librarians insisted on drawing shorts on little Mickey before putting it on their shelves." (Mass, 81) To this day, the book remains under debate and still on library shelves with or without shorts drawn over Mickey's naked figure. But like its predecessor *Where the Wild Things Are*, this controversial book has become listed among the American classics of children's literature with sales over 70,000 (BookScan).

### **Homosexuality in the New Millennium**

*"If your library is not 'unsafe', it probably isn't doing its job." -- John Berry III*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century began with an event that not only shook the roots of American, but was felt in the hearts of many throughout the world. In the years following that horrific September day, America temporarily entered a state of cultural and national unity and temporarily set aside individual agendas in order to heal. In children, however, events like this result in questions, and if you are or have been a parent, a baby-sitter, counselor, etc. you know the exact ones they are. Every child loves to ask how and why to things they do not understand.

One such topic that children constantly ask about is that of marriage, divorce and alternative couples. It has been over 30 years since the Gay Rights Movement began, and there is still opposition to the homosexual lifestyle appearing in children's literature. In 1989 Alyson Books launched *Heather Has Two Mommies* as the first picture book to challenge the notion of a heterosexual set of parents depicted in most children's literature. The book is about a little girl, Heather, who has two mothers. Her family life is discussed on a playground in a positive manner to help teach awareness of alternative family lifestyles.

In a personal interview with Leonard Marcus, he explained, "it caused a real firestorm in the United States Senate. It was denounced and an attempt to ban certain funding in support of books like that, but none of that worked completely." Another book that came out around the same time is *Daddy's Roommate*, which featured a gay family and divorced parents. Both of these books appear on list of "The 100 Most

Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000” put together by the American Library Association. *Daddy’s New Roommate* ranks high at number two, and *Heather Has Two Mommies* follows close behind at number eleven.

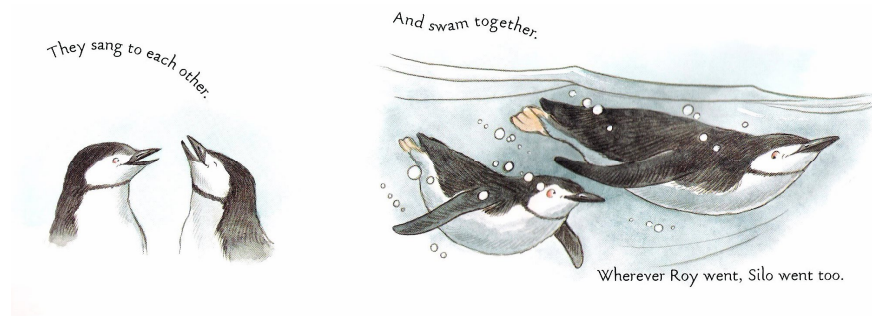
Leonard Marcus also commented on how attempts to ban books can backfire and create new interest in a book and ignite new demand. Such was proven with another book on same-sex families that came out in 2005 published by Simon & Schuster. *And Tango Makes Three* is a unique story originating at the Central Park Zoo. Two male penguins fell in love, and a zoo keeper helped them to build a family and welcome a penguin chick named Tango into the world. What’s more interesting is that this is a true story.

While the public was falling in love with the real-life story, reviewers began to show affection and not distaste for Tango and her two fathers. Publisher’s Weekly featured *And Tango Makes Three*, giving it a starred review:

Cole’s endearing watercolors follow the twosome as they frolic affectionately in several vignettes and then try tirelessly to start a family—first they build a stone nest and then they comically attempt to hatch a rock. [...] This tender story can also serve as a gentle jumping-off point for discussion about same-sex partnerships in human society. (Publisher’s Weekly, “And Tango Makes Three”)

The images from the story show the two male penguins performing mating rituals specific to penguin couples. This helps to outline dating rituals, providing a basis for

parents to answer those whys and hows that children love to ask. Below is a sample from page five:



As expected, there has been some resistance to these images as well. *And Tango Makes Three* followed in *Heather's* and *Daddy's Roommate's* footsteps when it made number nine on the American Library Association's list for the "Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books in 2000-2007." In addition, *The Washington Post* has featured several articles regarding school disputes on attempts to ban the book from the school's libraries, two of which occurred in 2008, three years after *Tango's* initial publication. Interestingly, despite steady arguments and appeals on the original decisions to keep the book in the libraries or to move them, one can find *And Tango Makes Three* in the children's section of Barnes and Noble with all the classic picture books Americans have come to know and love.

The argument is made to move the book from the children's section in the public library to the area labeled "alternative or non-traditional family" (Goodman, 1). Later in the article Goodman discusses that it was a unanimous decision to keep the book as is in the children's section. Similarly, at Sugarland Elementary School there were attempts to completely remove the book from the school's library. Sherrie Sawyer, a teaching

assistant at Sugarland is featured in the article “Children’s Book May Return to Shelves.” The article quotes Sawyer, “‘I object to the homosexual theme of this book,’ she wrote in her initial complaint. ‘The two male penguins are described as acting like a male and female penguin’” (Chandler, 2). Despite many objections similar to Sawyer’s, *And Tango Makes Three* remains on the school’s bookshelves for every child to read.

Another example of the homosexual behavior the two male penguins engage in during the story is when after observing the other penguin couples hatching babies, Silo and Roy try to have one of their own. However, due to the lack of proper sexual organs necessary for mating, the couple fails. When the zoo keeper notices their attempts to hatch a rock, he took a second egg from one of the other penguin nests and gave it to Silo and Roy. On page 21, their dreams come true and the two male penguins get the baby chick they’ve always wanted:



Rather than these images working against sales of the book, it would seem that because of them *And Tango Makes Three* boasts sales of over 36,000 copies in only three years (BookScan). For a controversial book on a topic that is still being debated and in an industry that is facing harsh economic times, it is selling very well. Perhaps society is finally ready to face this topic as *Heather Has Two Mommies* is also still available for



purchase with a tenth anniversary edition that was published in 2000. As the number of countries and states that recognize and provide services for homosexual marital unions increases, so does the need for books that can help parents education their children on the tolerance and understanding of such families.

Perhaps the reasons behind the lower sales for *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's New Roommate*, is that America still may not be ready for human families to be depicted this way. However, in *And Tango Makes Three*, these adorable and loveable penguins can help bring about discussion between heterosexual parents and their children whose friends may have same-sex parents without bringing the topic too close to home and offending personal or religious beliefs on the subject. The trick to create successful books on homosexual couples relies on catering to the audience the book is directed towards, and as of 2009, publishers must remain cognizant of the strong and sensitive religious beliefs and personal attitudes many adults have on this subject.

### **Marijuana Education in 2005**

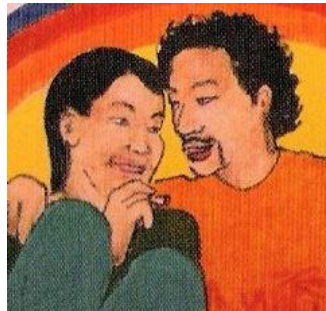
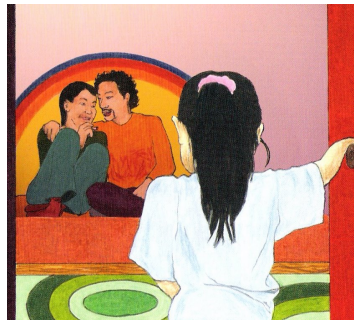
*"We live in oppressive times. We have, as a nation, become our own thought police; but instead of calling the process by which we limit our expression of dissent and wonder "censorship," we call it "concern for commercial viability."  
-- David Mamet (Hollister)*

In 2005, another issue from the past was tackled, that American has chosen not to latch on to just yet: marijuana. Since the 1960s and 70s, groups across the country have been fighting for the legalization of marijuana. However, until the new millennium, no one had written a book explaining this very common, still illegal drug to children for understandable reasons. Ricardo Cortes, a retired D.A.R.E. officer, decided it was time to take the plunge.

*It's Just a Plant: A Children's Story About Marijuana*, published by Magic Propaganda Press, is exactly what the title implies: an educational guide to marijuana for younger generations. The book is an instructional guide for children, teaching them the basics about marijuana, where it grows, who uses it and why it is used, and laws against the drug and how these laws came to be. Cortes sent his manuscript to a variety of publishers, most of which flat out declined publication. In an interview with *New York Magazine* for the article "Junior High: A New Pot-Friendly Book—For Kids" he stated, "The rest like the idea but thought children's bookstores might not" (Avery). The fact that some publishers were considering a book like this idea suggests an open-mindedness that is essential for controversial books to succeed. However, his answer was still "no." So, like any author does with a vision they want to see in print, he self-published and found success. According to "Parenting Through the Haze," Cortes' book has sold over

6,000 copies in two years and Cortes is working on translating the book into various other languages (Garfolio).

Cortes begins the book with the main character, Jackie, waking up and “smelling something funny in the air” (3). She opens her parents door to discover them smoking marijuana.



(Cortes, 5)

Despite this controversial opener, a book review featured in *Associated Content* entitled “My First Marijuana Book” gave a positive review. George Meluch state, “This lively, colorful book is both well informed and wonderfully innocent. The author, Ricardo Cortes, created this work as a tool to help parents establish an early dialogue with their children about marijuana” (Meluch). Jackie’s parents take advantage of this situation, and the following day her mother takes her on a journey to learn about marijuana in a positive way without encouraging her daughter to use the drug. Like the review states, this book encourages parents to talk to their children about drugs, proper usage and to help them distinguish between what is illegal and what is not.

However, not all reviews were as open-minded and receptive to the humorous, creative tale. The article “Junior High: A New Pot-Friendly Book—For Kids” quotes an objector to the book, “David R. Anderson of the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America responds, ‘On the one hand, it’s almost laughable, but beyond that, it’s just

irresponsible. No one would write a book called *It's Just a Drink*” (Avery). Anderson’s remark on the laughable content of the book is one to take notice of. For instance, when Jackie is being informed about marijuana from a farmer, he responds saying that lots of people use it, including doctors, lawyers and even presidents (Cortes, 15). To admit in a picture book that presidents have done things illegal flirts with adult content a little more than most parents would like.

In the *School Library Journal*, Susan Lissim, a librarian was upset by one scene in particular. Four men were caught smoking marijuana by the police, and only four pages later, were let off with just a warning despite the fact the drug is illegal. “Even more surprising is the officer who explains why the drug is illegal and that people are trying to change the laws; he then lets the young men go with a simple warning” (Lissim). Pictured below are the men Jackie and her mother encounter at a fast food restaurant when the incident occurs:



(Cortes, 26).

Lissim continues in her review, “It would be helpful to have a book explaining who uses the substance and why, possible reactions, responsibilities, and legal implications, but

this picture book is not it.” Encouraging young children to stand up for what they believe in is one thing, but to show that there are no implications for doing something illegal is another. There are too many instances in today’s society where famous role models and admirable figures do something illegal and suffer little to no consequences. It’s important to help children understand that there is a difference between standing up for a law you would like to change, and engaging in the illegal act and risking getting caught.

However, Marsha Rosenbaum, PhD and director of the Safety First Project suggests that parents in America can no longer afford to ignore these drug issues and books like this one can be the gateway to open up healthy conversations. In the epilogue of *It’s Just a Plant* she explains:

In America today, where as a society we regularly imbibe and medicate with a variety of legal and illegal substances, the door to drug use is already wide open. To deny the reality of the role of drug use in our culture, to cling to worn out doomsday messages, and deny our kids help and support when they need it, is to expose them to risk and danger far beyond marijuana use. (Cortes, 44)

Perhaps there is a niche of people who share this same view, with the 6,000 copies and counting in sales as of 2007 (Garfolio). This quote is a testament that people agree with Rosenbaum, and parents are starting to take a more active role in teaching their children about different aspects of life rather than leaving that up to teachers and guest speakers at school. When children are at the impressionable ages of four to eight, it’s important to provide them with as much information that one can in order to properly educate them

and to help the child understand their surroundings. Facing the realities of culture at earlier ages is what today's notion of childhood demands, and books like *It's Just a Plant* are helping pave the way for future authors to touch on these subjects.

### **Looking Forward to Possibility**

*"Every burned book enlightens the world."- Ralph Waldo Emerson (Gaulin)*

On the brink of a new cultural shift, as Barack Obama becomes the first African American President of the United States, gay rights are constantly in debate, and the medical legalization of marijuana is creeping its way across the 50 states, it only makes sense for the book publishing industry, including children's to expand and face these issues. It is the books that dare to push these cultural boundaries that shape the future of children's publishing and force both consumers and the industry to face the facts of life.

The children's book publishing industry is unique in that the target marketing audience is the parents, but the text needs to ignite the dreamer and desire for knowledge in young children. Books have long been a bridge for parents to discuss topics with their children, including divorce, death and friendship. Naturally, as society and cultures progress, the book publishing industry must follow in order to meet the demands of parents and satisfy the child's need for more information. Books such as: *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *It's Just a Plant* all represent a different minority group, a set of consumers and a controversial topic that had needs to be met that the children's book publishing industry attempted to fulfill.

Whether or not these books that push the boundaries become successful or fail is not of much importance. The fact that these are published at all proves that there are people in the industry that are willing to take a risk on controversial issues. In addition, these books symbolize the notion of possibility and hope for tolerance and acceptance in

future generations to help them dream about becoming first female or homosexual President of the United States, or the person who helps marijuana to become legalized for medical usage across the country and help people from suffering nationwide. If children's books have the ability to teach and guide, especially through controversial issues, then the book publishing industry should use this to their advantage to guide America's youth towards a brighter, more educated and equality driven future. Like Emerson's quote states above, "Every burned book enlightens the world," and every enlightened mind leads the world to a brighter and more promising future.



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