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# Misguided Censorship: Book Reviews

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# Misguided Censorship: Book Reviews

the perks of being a wallflower

*Stephen Chbosky*

Warriors Don't Cry

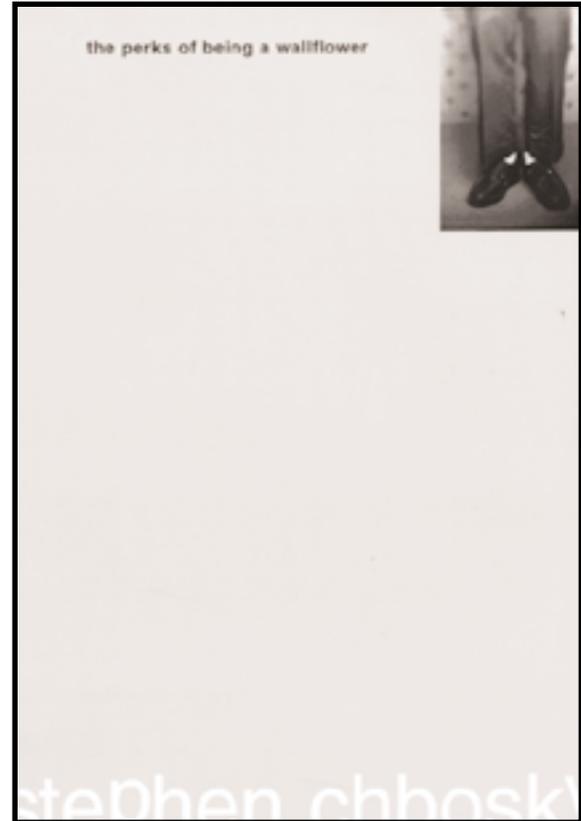
*Melba Pattilo Beals*

Not in Front of the Children:  
'Indecency,' Censorship and  
the Innocence of Youth

*Marjorie Heins*

by Charles F. Angell

This review originated from news reports I recently heard that some Massachusetts school districts, bowing to parental complaints, had removed books from their reading lists. Last summer, after a complaint from one parent that *the perks of being a wallflower* contained "absolutely gross" language and subject matter, the Newton North principal removed the novel from the school's summer reading list. Just this past December the Grafton school superintendent suspended use of Melba Pattilo Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* because it included an account of the then twelve year old Beals' pursuit and near sexual assault by a white male. As a literature and writing teacher, I had over the years heard of pressures brought to bear on schools by parents, religious groups, and various guardians of public morality to remove reading matter from school curricula that for whatever reasons the groups deemed inappropriate for the nation's classrooms. Usually novels like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* provided the favorite targets. Massachusetts has in the past proved relatively immune from these forays, though a few years ago a local teacher ran afoul of school authorities for showing high schoolers the film version of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* which admittedly contains a pretty explicit sex scene. Some while back Randolph parents protested including on a summer reading list Joyce Carol Oates' *Foxfire*, one parent going so far as to say, according to the *Boston Globe* report, that the book had



so upset her daughter that she transferred to the South Shore Christian Academy. (That's upset.) These parental complaints sufficiently piqued my curiosity to decide for myself whether I, as a teacher, would have reservations about assigning middle and high school students the controversial books. (A caveat: I have never taught in the public schools and am privy only through conversation with teachers to the difficulties they face when assigning reading material to their students.)

Chbosky's *the perks of being a wallflower*, an epistolary novel, finds the letter writer Charlie disclosing his numerous problems to an unnamed 'friend,' presumably the reader. Charlie's reclusiveness and stand-offishness owes, the reader is led initially to believe, to his position as the youngest child in a household where his older brother attends Penn State on a football scholarship and his older sister maintains her intimate relationship with an abusive boyfriend. Mom is loving but not a presence; Dad is loving but not articulate. (He starts to cry during the final episode of *Mash*, goes to the kitchen with Charlie, and makes him promise not to tell anyone.) The novel opens with Charlie distraught about a classmate's suicide. We learn also that Charlie had a favorite Aunt Helen who lived with the family "the last few years of her life because something

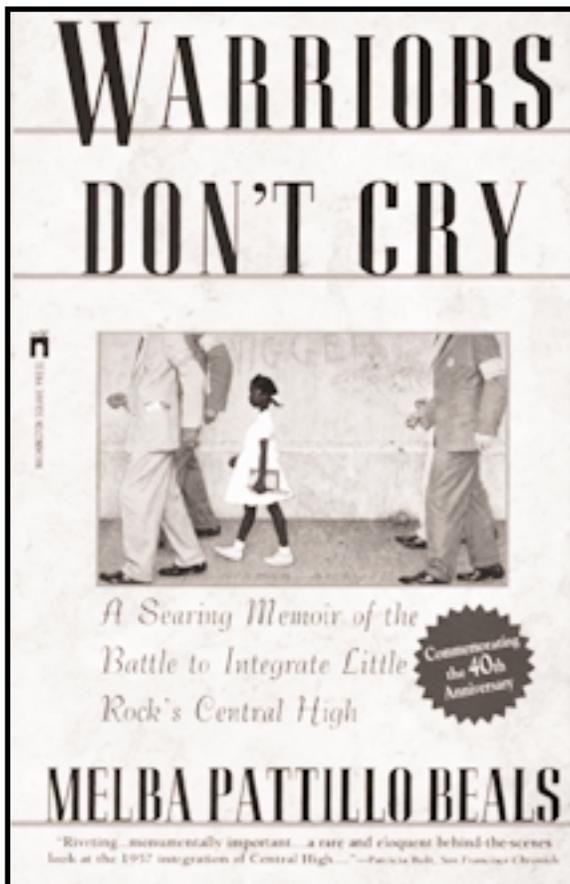
very bad happened to her.” The aunt had perished in an automobile accident, traumatizing Charlie, who’s too young to understand her loss. Charlie moves through his freshman year of high school, makes friends with older adolescents whom he admires, learns about alcohol and drugs, finds out that some friends are gay, discovers masturbation, receives adulation for his poetry, and generally encounters the confusions and conflicts common to adolescence. However, after pulling away from an admired older girlfriend (Sam) who desires intimacy with him, Charlie has a dream in which he realizes his beloved Aunt Helen had molested him some years before. He goes catatonic and must be hospitalized. The novel concludes with Charlie recovering and promising to begin his sophomore year unafraid and ready to participate.

Charlie’s confusions and perplexities will resonate with young readers. While I wouldn’t elevate Chbosky’s novel to the level of Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, as the cover hype does (I’d reserve that honor for Russell Banks’ *Rule of the Bone*), I would argue that *the perks of being a wallflower* contains no material that adolescents

haven’t on their own encountered in films, TV shows, the internet, or recordings. Despite the edgy subject matter and the profane language, more accessible but less blatant than Shakespeare’s sexual *double entendres*, I can’t see myself forbidding late middle and high school students reading the novel. Discussing the novel’s subject matter in a classroom environment seems preferable to more haphazard and informal encounters with the novel’s topics. Indeed, innovative teachers would certainly seize upon the novel’s epistolary form to ask their students to compose responses to Charlie’s letters and, through written articulation, to interact with the novel. Like Charlie, contemporary American students are immersed in what one critic has labeled ‘trash culture.’ Like most American teenagers, Charlie attempts— with a favorite English teacher’s guidance—to sort through the trash and use essay writing to discover some meaning in it. Had I been the Newton school administrator, whatever personal reservations about the novel’s appropriateness I might harbor, I would have defended assigning Chbosky’s *the perks of being a wallflower* and relied upon my instructor’s good judgment to use the novel as a model for student encounters with their cultural litter.

I have no reservation about students reading Melba Pattillo Beals’ *Warriors Don’t Cry*. Her memoir should be required reading along with Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of a Slave* and Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” both standards in the language arts curriculum. Beals narrates the events surrounding the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. Her account of the sexual assault which so upset the complaining parent (her son didn’t “have any place to put this [material] emotionally”) occupies less than two pages of a 312 page memoir that contains prejudice, racism, hatred, and violence so virulent that every decent reader should be not only upset but ashamed and outraged that any American, let alone children, could have suffered such treatment.

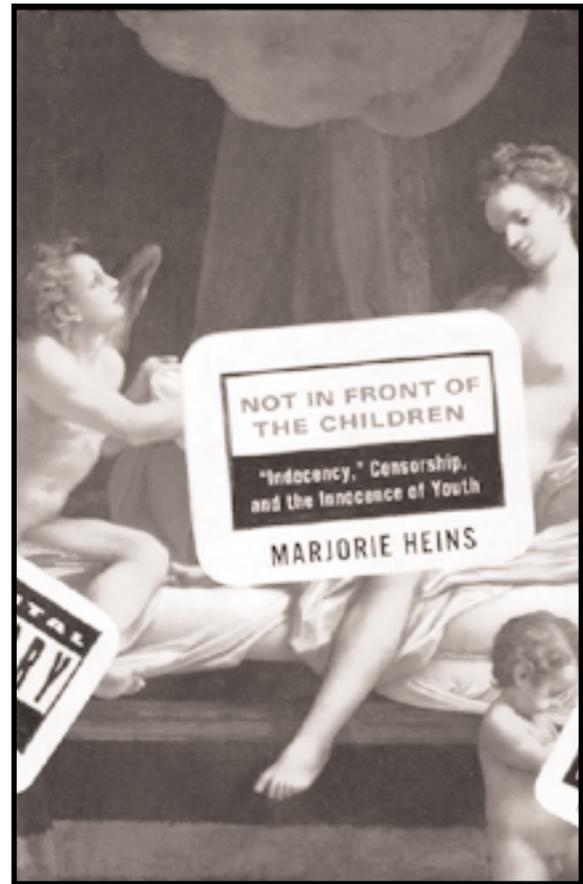
The media in our ‘trash culture’ manufactures the hero of the moment; *Warriors Don’t Cry* demonstrates what courage and a large measure of heroism are truly made of. Beals and her eight student companions face an entire city’s anger and hatred when they make the walk up the steps of Central High. Physical and emotional assault awaits them. The intensity of the hatred shocks even Beals who, despite growing up in Jim Crow Little Rock, had never imagined the people she lived among



could turn so hideously against their black neighbors. Once enrolled in and attending Central High, Beals and her friends must endure harassment, insult, indifference, taunting, epithets, the full spectrum of abuse that white teenagers might direct at black. "I arrived one day to find a doll that resembled me," Beals writes, "with a rope around her neck, hanging from the [homeroom] door frame. Another time, someone had provided genuine urine to spray in my seat and on my clothing." Yet in the course of this turmoil, she finds sympathetic responses among the many reporters sent to cover the school integration and resolves that one day she will become a journalist, a goal she eventually achieves. Reflecting on her integration experience, Beals comments that "when I watch news footage of the day we entered school guarded by the 101<sup>st</sup> soldiers, I am moved by the enormity of that experience. I believe that was a moment when the whole nation took one giant step forward. Once President Eisenhower made that kind of commitment to uphold the law, there was no turning back."

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has virtually since its publication in 1960 been featured in public school curricula. While the novel confronts southern small town prejudice and racism, Lee's story about an altruistic white lawyer defending a black man unjustly accused of rape ultimately presents a picture of basically decent, though perhaps misguided, people trying to do the right thing. Beals' memoir compels us to acknowledge that too many people had no desire or intention to do the right thing. An altruistic white attorney ignoring ostracism and defending a black man, atoning perhaps for the ghost of Emmet Till, assuages us; brutish white men threatening black girls with sexual assault disconcerts us. Our classrooms need more, not less, discomfort of the kind *Warriors Don't Cry* embodies.

How decency groups, legislatures, the law, and sometimes the courts have endeavored to keep controversy and discomfort from young minds forms the core of Marjorie Heins' *Not in Front of the Children: 'Indecency,' Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth*, a study that Heins' sister and *Bridgewater Review* editor Barbara Apstein serendipitously called to my attention. In her book, Heins addresses the conviction that youth must be protected from the intellectual and emotional harm exposure to 'indecent' and 'patently offensive' material might cause. As she observes, the history of censorship is "essentially a legal history"; *Not in Front of the Children* thoroughly documents the legal history of censorship in the United States from colonial times to present internet times, relates this history to its English common law antecedents, and compares how other societies treat matters considered indecent or offensive here. Heins argues that using censorship to safeguard young minds in effect lowers all debate, discussion,



and understanding to juvenile, even puerile, levels. In her concluding chapter, Heins observes that "censorship is an avoidance technique that addresses adult anxieties and satisfies symbolic concerns, but ultimately does nothing to resolve social problems or affirmatively help adolescents cope with their environments and impulses or navigate the dense and insistent media barrage that surrounds them." My point is that our classrooms provide an appropriate forum for responsible engagement with controversial materials and issues. I, of course, concede to individual parents the right to ask school officials that their child not be required to read or view a work they deem inappropriate. However, for school committees and administrators or teachers to concede to demands that no student be allowed the opportunity to read or view material an individual parent or particular community group deems inappropriate and to remove the material from the curriculum ought never to become the policy or stance of schools at any level devoted to academic inquiry. Whatever her hesitations and misgivings about the historical events that enmeshed her, Melba Pattilo Beals conceded nothing, knowing instinctively (in the words of Edmund Burke) that "the concessions of the weak are the concessions of fear."

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