

Ms. Gapp's Statement on *Sold*

Request for Reconsideration Committee: Wednesday, March 4, 2009

Sold tackles the practice of human trafficking and sexual slavery. Students learn about the concept of slavery as early as fifth grade and review it again throughout their schooling. Eighth grade English classes at Cascade do an extensive unit on the Holocaust during World War Two. Students in the sixth grade begin to learn about sexuality. *Sold* examines the dark side of sexuality, but in such a way that earned it a National Book Award nomination and starred reviews on multiple reviewing agency lists from *School Library Journal* to ALA/YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. Written as a poetry novel, Lakshmi offers us a first hand account of living in an Indian brothel. While the setting is seedy the writing never is. In "Mathematics" (p 147) Lakshmi relates learning numbers in her Nepalese village school to the real world math she faces in the brothel as she tries to save enough rupees to purchase her freedom. Modern students can relate to the concept even if they can't relate to the specific situation. Likewise they can relate to feeling trapped by their own adolescence and being on the verge of increasing freedoms, but not quite able to walk through that door.

A note about the term Young Adult: originally defined as people between the ages of 14 and 21, the term has evolved with the advent of publishers and libraries marketing literature to teens. That being said each student matures at a different rate. As a professional educator and school librarian I uphold every student's choice in reading—including the choice about what not to read. I develop my collection in such a way that sometimes books are purchased with sixth grade boys in mind, and sometimes eighth grade girls. The challenge of any library is to have something for everyone; this also means that not everything in the library is meant for everyone. Parental involvement, the ubiquitous teachable moment, and a student's ability to self censor are vital to negotiating the gaps. I take a great deal of pride in knowing my students and advising them on what title might be the best fit for them. My typical day is filled with students asking me for recommendations and troubleshooting reluctant readers who aren't sure where to start—or if they even want to. Unfortunately, in this situation I did not have the opportunity to advise the student of his particular reading choice because it was *not even* checked out to him. My records *do not* show that the student ever checked this book out, in fact no one had for the 08-09 school year, although it had been read by seven people during the previous school year. (Note: for reasons of confidentiality I *can* release the circulation log of the student in question to the parent, but not to the committee. I do have a circulation log for *the title* in question that replaces patron names with numbers so you can compare the patrons that have checked out the book versus the patron number of the student in question.) Of those seven people I can say that one reader was an eighth grade boy, one was a seventh grade girl and five were eighth grade girls. I think you can determine from the numbers that the book was reaching the hands of the students it was intended for. Young Adult as a genre of fiction in *my* library tends to mean it is composed of realistic or historical fiction. Main characters of the Young Adult genre may be between the ages 10 to 18, all dealing with real problems relevant to the age and time in history—including the present.

As stated in the School Library Bill of Rights (ALA 2000) *Sold* provides "information which will enable pupils to make intelligent judgments in their daily life," in this case by striving to encourage empathy and compassion. The author is acutely aware of the mature content of her book, but also recognizes the "varied interests, [and] abilities" of students that the book is marketed to and which the Library serves.

In response to “labeling:” My profession *has* discussed the possibility of negotiating challenges such as these by labeling books for content much as the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) ratings do for movies, or by removing them to a “special” shelf. The results of these professional discussions are always the same, in essence a “locked cabinet” approach only attracts readers to its contents. Furthermore, a system of labeling is not only impractical, but unfair to students who are learning to make up their own minds about what is appropriate for them; not to mention the fact that it completely circumvents the professional, in this case myself, who is *highly* trained to determine which books are appropriate to add to the collection. I routinely read reviews from the professional literature such as *School Library Journal* and *Voices of Youth Advocates* (or VOYA), and when I order from Perma-Bound, a preferred vendor, the online purchasing website features reading levels, reviews, and an interest level, which in this case was seventh through twelfth grade. Due to the maturity discrepancy I mentioned before, I can attest to the fact that school librarians take all levels and labels into account, but it comes down to knowing your audience. I know the Department of Health and Human Services would back me up in saying that sexual abuse occurs to 11 to 15 year olds just as it does to individuals of all ages. It is my impression that sexuality is a hot button topic, and that in general adults are uncomfortable discussing it amongst themselves, let alone adolescents. The wonder of books and school libraries is that students can learn about controversial topics in a safe setting, often discovering things that the adults in their lives are uncomfortable talking about, and sometimes discovering that they are not alone when it comes to topics they can directly relate to. The student in this case, recognized this was a book he was not ready to read, discussed it with his parent, and moved on. What we are deciding here today, is whether that student and that parent can also speak for the rest of the school population.

Sold acts as a catalyst for social awareness so that students might become agents of change. Patricia McCormick instructs the reader in suffering and pain, much of which is derived from interviews the author conducted with women in India and Nepal. The contested passages do not hide the gritty reality of the situation, yet when taken as a whole the triumph of hope and possibility illuminate these grim moments. In *Sold*, the young man called, “The American,” is not the only agent of change; Lakshmi herself decides to break the bonds of victimization, by literally running for the door at the end of the book. Likewise this book serves to inspire readers who struggle to break free of their own personal trials, often in the face of overwhelming odds.

I applaud parental involvement and I respect parental opinions; however, the fact that one parent does not find the subject matter appropriate does not speak for parents and guardians who may find it reasonable that during the age when their child begins to learn about sexuality they also learn about men’s historical treatment of women, abusive relationships, and rape. In the Supreme Court Case *Pico vs. Island Trees*, Justice Brennan declared, “Local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.” {Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico, 457 U.S. 853, 102 S.Ct. 2799, 73 L.Ed.2d 435 (1982)} I would consider the appropriateness of the subject matter in *Sold* for 11 to 15 year olds a matter of opinion.

I stand by my decision to maintain the book in the junior high collection and I encourage the committee to do the same. In addition, I expect that the committee will think critically about the precedent they might be setting in the case of future challenges and make an informed decision with the interests of the 21st century learner at heart.