



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“If there is a demand for these books in your community, that is a valid reason to order them for your library.”

-Posting on the PUBYAC
listserv

On my desk is an abridged copy of Mark Twain’s “Tom Sawyer.” It is attractive – the kind of small hardback book you might reach for if you saw it on a shelf. And if you picked it up and flipped through it, the largish dark font and lots of white space would look approachable. You might even consider taking it home to your third or fourth grade child – or maybe even a younger child. But the question is: Would this be a good idea? In fact, is the book itself a good idea?

This topic was recently discussed on the listserv I subscribe to, PUBYAC (Public Libraries, Young Adults and Children). One librarian posted the question: Does your library buy abridged classics? The answers – from librarians all over the United States and Canada – were as varied as, well, as the libraries and the communities they serve. This is, of course, what makes librarianship such an interesting profession: It is a

field full of thoughtful people with strong opinions and a commitment to the public they serve. And, as with many professions, what that service means can be interpreted in different ways.

As I read through the responses, I realized there were basically two sides to the abridged classics issue. First, there was the more traditional approach: With such a wonderful collection of excellent children’s literature in the world, why not encourage children to read age-appropriate books? Why have them read a watered-down version of something when they can read the best? And won’t reading an abridged version give the wrong impression of that author’s writings, so later some of these young readers may not be interested in reading any books by that author?

The second approach is more focused on a librarian’s responsibility to provide those

items that are requested. These librarians would say: If there is a demand for particular books and my library is committed to providing popular literature, then why not? One librarian also mentioned a large Spanish-speaking population who found the easier text more accessible, while another said that the kids reading below their level particularly loved the books.

I have to admit I find it ironic that after emphatically (in a previous column) supporting the idea that any reading is better than no reading, I should find myself leaning toward the purist anti-abridgement view. If you questioned me, I would say that good literature isn't only about the plot, it is about the writing itself. So, when you produce a book that is an altered version of that writing, you have taken away from the richness and value of it. It isn't really "Tom Sawyer" or another classic – it is just based on it. On

the other hand, though, I have to ask myself: What if a child – or an adult, for that matter – reads the shortened book and loves it and then goes on to read the real one? Wouldn't that be good?

You could summarize this debate by posing the question: Should librarians give people whatever they ask for, because the money we use to pay ourselves and to provide information comes out of their pockets? Or do we try to provide guidance and education, drawing on our own expertise? Or maybe, to put it even more simply: Do our opinions matter?

As you can see, I have no answer to this particular dilemma. But I do believe that these discussions – among librarians and library users – are an essential part of each community's effort to make the public library relevant now and into the future.