

CHILD CARING

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Taking consumerism out of school book fairs

By Barbara F. Meltz, Globe Staff | November 20, 2006

For decades, Scholastic Book Fairs has been the biggest provider of school book fairs in the country. Especially in these days of tight public school budgets, school libraries have come to count on the Scholastic fund-raiser that turns back a percentage to the host school. School libraries nationwide earned \$95 million from 120,000 Scholastic book fairs last year.

A small but growing number of schools are turning their backs on Scholastic nonetheless. These parents and educators say Scholastic carries too many books and other items featuring cartoon and movie characters that are thin on literary merit. They say the novelty pencils, calendars, posters, and other paraphernalia Scholastic offers is more about turning children into consumers than it is about encouraging them to read.

"It got to the point where I didn't care how much money it made for the school; I cared that I was standing in front of those books and telling parents they're good," says Tullie Warshauer, library teacher at the Birch Meadow School in Reading. The list of "those books" she ticks off include Scooby-Doo, Dora the Explorer, and SpongeBob SquarePants.

It's the trinkets at the Scholastic book fair, from spy glasses to key chains, that particularly bugged Jeff Melnick, a parent at the Graham and Parks School in Cambridge. "Last year, my daughter and I looked through the Scholastic book flier to count how many items were actually books. It was a shockingly low percentage." Last week he and other parents organized the school's first non-Scholastic book fair. A Scholastic fair is still scheduled for the spring.

"We wanted to offer kids the chance to look at books that are distinct from the popular culture and from commercialism," Melnick says. "It's not that I have anything against popular culture — I teach it [at Babson College]! But children are immersed in popular culture every day. They need some protected space in their lives that is not penetrated by the same characters, the same companies."

Melnick turned to Porter Square Books for his stock. As he and another parent opened boxes and arranged books last week, he was pleased at how the hand-picked selections from store owner Carol Stolz reflected the school's multicultural population and included titles by Haitian-American writers. Bookfairsbybookends.com supplied books for Birch Meadow last spring and again last month. "I guess you could say I've seized the moment," says Bookfairs owner Judy Manzo. Her fledgling company, which she spun off from her bookstore, BookEnds in Winchester, grew from seven book fairs last fall to 35 this fall.

Alan Boyko, president of the book fair division of Scholastic Inc., which is a global children's publishing and media company, says it works hard to respond to a school's individual requests for books and that even the sales flier can be customized to eliminate products a school doesn't want to offer. "We have two goals: to get kids to read and to make our book fair fun," Boyko says. "It doesn't resemble a library; it resembles a fair. If 'Spider-Man' is what it takes to get a reluctant reader reading, then I'm guilty."

When Scholastic introduced book fairs in 1981, it was a way to make books affordable for all readers. Even today an average Scholastic paperback sells for only \$3.95.

But Scholastic isn't just selling books — it's selling out our children, says Rob Williams, cofounder and president of Action Coalition for Media Education, a Vermont nonprofit promoting media literacy.

When schools sell books and products that share characters with a movie or TV show — even products as seemingly innocuous as a blank journal with Dora the Explorer on the front — a child links the school to the marketplace, he says. "That's the way a child's brain processes the connection. It translates [it] to an implied endorsement by the school for the characters and products," Williams says.

He sees another problem, too. "Kids are drawn to what is familiar and to what is most visually prominent, so they gravitate to the glitzy, colorful superhero covers which Scholastic features," says Williams, a school board member in Waitsfield, Vt., where the elementary school has a commercial-free book fair. "Here's why these books aren't desirable," he adds. "They weren't created by an author with a universal story to tell. They were created by a marketer who has a product to sell and he dreams up an appealing character to sell his product to kids."

Alex Molnar, a researcher with Arizona State University, urges organizers of any book fair to think about how many commercial messages children are getting from it. "Commercially based books and their products keep children in a consumerist loop that encourages them to only think inside the box — literally, inside the fast-food carton, the cereal box, the toy box," he says.

Sarah Widhu of the Harrington School in Lexington has a literary critique. "Tie-in books have story lines that are mundane and ordinary," she says. "They lack expressive language, so they don't stretch a child's vocabulary, and the illustrations are literally replicate shots from the TV show."

One of her current favorite books is "Fletcher and the Falling Leaves" by Julia Rawlinson, with illustrations by Tiphonie Beeke. "The illustrations are very rich. The tree isn't just brown, it's many shades of brown, and there's detail to the bark. The language is so rich that to read it aloud is magical, and the story line is so original it resonates with children: Fletcher is a fox experiencing his first fall. He thinks the trees are sick and he wants to make them better. I can see the children get pulled in."

Contrast that, she says, to reading any "Dora the Explorer" book aloud, something she did not long ago with her grandniece. "It's boring, not just to the adult reader but even to the child. Every page has a similar look. There's no excitement, certainly no magic." Does that mean a child should never have a "Dora" book? No, especially as long as it's not the only reading experience a child has, Widhu says.

With the release next month of a film adaptation of a classic children's book, "Charlotte's Web," there are already a slew of spin-off books with photographs of cute pigs on the cover. "Right now, 'Charlotte's Web' [books] are our biggest sellers," says Scholastic's Boyko. "Every time we can capitalize on that kind of interest, we'll leverage it."

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