'Impressions' readers have violent occult themes for teaching children

by Deborah Mendenhall
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This fall thousands of public and private school children—first through sixth grade—will be taught how to cast spells. They will be told about hungry creatures that attach themselves to children's bodies or lust for flesh. They will be asked which horrible death they would prefer.

And there's more.

Themes of despair, mutilation, occultism and witchcraft weave their way through a series called *Impressions*, which is designed to teach language arts from reading to vocabulary. This curriculum's dark lessons are repeated and amplified in the children's project books and anthologies, and in the teachers' resource books, anthologies, transparencies and audio cassette tapes.

Impressions is published by Holt Rinehart and Winston of Canada, and is marketed in all 50 states by its parent company, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich of Orlando, Florida. And parents are protesting.

But *Impressions* is an elusive target. Four distinct versions of the curriculum can be found in schools across the United States. Not everything in the textbooks is offensive; some textbooks include works by C.S. Lewis and Laura Ingalls Wilder. And the children's readers are not as graphic as some of the teachers' anthologies and resource books.

Impressions also has powerful allies among educational leaders in California and elsewhere, who have launched a counterattack against protesting parents.

"What concerns us is that this is a well-orchestrated attempt by right-wing radicals to preach censorship, impose their religious beliefs and undermine the public school system in the process," said Ed Foglia, president of the California Teachers Association, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in June.

THE IMPRESSIONS LINE-UP

Impressions is a comprehensive language skills curriculum series for first through sixth grades, distributed by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in Orlando, Florida.

The first- through third-grade series includes student readers and idea books and teacher resource books and literature anthology. The fourth- through sixth-grade series also includes a student project book.

The first-grade curriculum is divided into five series: *How I Wonder, Catch a Rainbow, When the Wind Blows, Good Morning Sunshine*, and *Fly Away Home*.

Curriculum for second through sixth grades is divided into halves.

For second grade, the series are *East of the Sun* and *West of the Moon*.

For third grade, *Over the Mountain* and *Under the Sea*.

For fourth grade, *Cross the Golden River* and *Run Forever*.

For fifth grade, *Thread the Needle* and *Knock at the Door*.

And for sixth grade, *Wherever You Are* and *All Over the World*.

In a single school with just one classroom for each grade, first through sixth, and with 30 students per classroom, the total cost of Impressions is $11,093.

The cost of purchasing the curriculum for all the elementary schools in a district, most of which have multiple classrooms at each grade level, is even higher. A district with 10 schools, each with two classrooms per grade, would pay $221,860.

Who's overreacting?

Is *Impressions* harmful, or are some parents intolerant?

Consider these *Impressions* excerpts:

* First graders are asked whether they would rather be "crushed by a snake, swallowed by a fish, eaten by a crocodile, or sat on by a rhinoceros?"

* Second graders see a drawing of a green creature whose long, sharp claws are gripping the head of a small child. In the accompanying poem, the child begs someone to tell him if the creature has been fed.

* A third-grade reader, *Under the Sea*, features an innocent-looking illustration entitled, "Shut the Windows, Bolt the Doors." The illustration shows floating objects: a refrigerator, stove, teddy bear, a slice of pie. Parents looking at the illustration wouldn't know that the teacher's manual directs the teacher to assign the children to compose a spell. "Write and chant a magic spell" to make things in the room float, the teacher's manual says, and "write and chant a magic spell" to return the room to normal.

* Fourth graders will read this passage in "The Pocket" by sean o huigin, (who uses no capital letters in his name):

I reached into my pocket and much to my surprise, something in there grabbed me and pulled me right inside.

I felt its clammy fingers all bony cold and thin I tried to keep my head out, no use it all went in.

And that was not the end of it, the pocket seemed so deep and dark and strange and scary I felt I had to weep.

"Shut up you silly creature," a voice yelled in my ear. And then my feet were pulled inside and I had disappeared.

(This poem is found in the Canadian and in the U .S.-Canadian versions of *Impressions*' fourth-grade textbook, *Cross the Golden River*, which is used in a number of school districts and is still for sale.)

On the page opposite "The Pocket" is "Welcome," also by o huigin:

this is a poem for those who are brave
it starts at the mouth of a very old cave
a goblin will greet you as you walk in
his hair long and greasy and his green teeth agrin
his eyes red and tiny his face gray and mean
he'll grab at your hand and let out a scream
he'll lead you down tunnels much darker than night
he'll take you past monsters that will try to bite
the toes off your footsies the ears off your head
you soon will start wishing you'd stayed home in bed
worms wet and slimy will crawl up your back
and as you go further it really gets black
you can't see a thing and all you can hear
is a creaky old voice that says "come my dear
let's see if you're chunky let's feel if you're fat
I'm hungry today NO STOP DON'T GO BACK"
But if you are clever you'll get out of there or
you'll end in some stomach no one knows where

The student workbook that accompanies the *Cross the Golden River* reader includes an exercise entitled, "Three Spells." One of the spells it teaches is "Zap":

...This spell creates a blast of lightning that shoots from the caster's hand...It is effective against virtually all living creatures that have no magical defenses.

* A fifth-grade book includes the poem, "The Lake" by Roger McGough:

For years there have been no fish in the lake...People hurrying through the park avoid it like the plague...But there is life there. There is life...

Underwater pigs glide between reefs of coral debris...They live on dead fish and rotting things, drowned pets, plastic and assorted excreta...

...on certain evenings after dark shoals of pigs surface and look out at...houses near the park. Where, in bathrooms, children feed stale bread to plastic ducks, and in attics, toy yachts have long since run aground. Where, in living rooms, anglers dangle their lines on patterned carpets, and bemoan the fate of the ones that got away.

Down on the lake, piggy eyes glisten. They have acquired a taste for flesh. They are licking their lips. Listen...

(This poem is found in the Canadian and the U.S.-Canadian version of *Impressions*' fifth-grade reader *Thread the Needle*, which is used in a number of school districts. Harcourt still sells the reader.)

The same reader includes another composition from McGough, entitled, "He's Behind Yer":

"HE'S BEHIND YER!" chorused the children but the warning came too late. The monster leaped forward and fastening its teeth into his neck, tore off the head. The body fell to the floor "More" cried the children "MORE MORE MORE."

* Sixth graders will read about an abandoned infant who was found by "three black-robed hags." One hag wonders what to do with him; the second croaks: "A sweet morsel, A tender lamb, I know what I should do."

Harcourt says David Booth, a senior author of the series, is working on a version for grades seven and eight. Harcourt refused to discuss substantial issues.

The states that have approved *Impressions* are California, Nevada, Florida, Oregon, Utah and Idaho. States considering *Impressions* include New Mexico and North Carolina. The curriculum is also up for renewal in Utah and Idaho.

In most other states, local school districts have the authority to decide on their own curriculum independent of state review. Harcourt sold *Impressions* to all states in 1989, according to two Harcourt officials—Jan Spalding, director of sales support services for the school department, and C. Cary Lindsay, Western regional manager.

Nightmares and Terror

"This is damaging material," said Candy Bishop of Stockton, California, whose children were taught from *Impressions* books last year.

Bishop's first grader will not sleep alone; something is bothering him, but he can't explain what. Her third grader has the same problem, but the child knows why. She remembers vividly the story, "Zini and and Witches," that her teacher read from the *Impressions*' third-grade teacher anthology.

It reads:

Zini lifted a curtain to look in a third dark place, and he saw — it isn't easy to say what he saw. There were bodies and bones, and all sorts of horrors. So then Zini knew his wife was a witch.

When discovered, the chief witch told Zini:

You deserve to die for this, but I will spare your life on one condition. Bring me the hearts of your mother and sister and you shall live. Not only shall you live, but you shall become one of us. We will turn you into a mighty witch, and you shall help your wife to work evil.

"This curriculum comes extremely close to molestation of the tender innocence of a child's mind," said Jeffrey E. Klippenes, a marriage, family and child counselor in Castro Valley, California.

Teachers have said that *Impressions* challenges a child's imagination, and allows him to stretch to his potential. But Klippenes disagrees.

"Some of these stories are just too much for children to handle.

TO CAST A SPELL

"Three Spells," from some versions of the *Cross the Golden River* student project workbook, teaches three spells, each with distinct spiritual powers:

Here are some spells that a sorcerer might need to get out of difficulties or overcome opponents.

"Three Spells" by Steve Jackson

ZAP: An extremely powerful weapon, this spell creates a blast of lightning that shoots from the caster's hand, which must be pointed in the desired direction. It is effective against virtually all living creatures that have no magical defenses, but it takes great strength and concentration to use.

ROK: Special Stone Dust is required for this spell. The Dust must be thrown at a creature while the spell is being cast. Within seconds, the victim will start to petrify. As its movements become slower and eventually cease, it will start to turn grey. Some moments later, it will solidify into a grey statue.

YAZ: This spell will not work unless the caster is wearing a fine Pearl Ring. The spell renders the caster's body invisible to any reasonably intelligent creature. It may be used to give considerable advantage in battle or to escape from a dangerous situation. Any creature with ears will be able to hear the caster moving about the room. Less intelligent creatures will only be partially convinced, as this is a form of illusion spell.

* Can you think of a situation in which a sorcerer might have to cast one of these spells?
* What special materials or equipment might the sorcerer need?
* How do you think the sorcerer would say the spell?
* What position would the sorcerer take up when casting the spell?
* Would the sorcerer write the spell down or learn it by heart?

Imagine that you are a sorcerer who is about to cast one of these spells. Decide under what circumstances you are working. For example:

* You could be reaching and explaining the spell to an apprentice.
* You could be at a sorcerers' convention where the sorcerers are trading spells.
* You could be in a cave casting the spell because some evil power has come into your territory.
* Your life might be in danger if you don't cast this spell.
* You could have forgotten which spell to use and be trying several different ones.

Choose one of these ideas or think of a situation of your own where you and other sorcerers will be casting spells.

Invent some new spells of your own. Will you keep these for your own private use or write them down in a group spell book for all the sorcerers? Will you have some type of secret code within your spells? Will drawings or diagrams accompany them?

A spell could appear in the form of:

* a poem of two or four lines (Will they rhyme?)
* a list of words (Will they make sense to outsiders?)
* a recipe (What ingredients, quantities, cooking methods?)
* invented words or sentences (Will you mix languages? Invent your own language?)