With One Word, Children’s Book Sets Off Uproar

By JULIE BOSMAN

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The word “scrotum” does not often appear in polite conversation.

Or children’s literature, for that matter.

Yet there it is on the first page of “The Higher Power of Lucky”, by Susan Patron, this year’s winner of the Newbery Medal, the most prestigious award in children’s literature.

The book’s heroine, a scrappy 10-year-old orphan named Lucky Trimble, hears the word through a hole in a wall when another character says he saw a rattlesnake bite his dog, Roy, on the scrotum.
“Scrotum sounded to Lucky like something green that comes up when you have the flu and cough too much,” the book continues. “It sounded medical and secret, but also important.”

The inclusion of the word has shocked some school librarians, who have pledged to ban the book from elementary schools, and reopened the debate over what constitutes acceptable content in children’s books. The controversy was first reported by Publishers Weekly, a trade magazine.

On electronic mailing lists like Librarian.net, dozens of literary blogs and pages on the social-networking site LiveJournal, teachers, authors and school librarians took sides over the book. Librarians from all over the country, including Missoula, Mont.; upstate New York; Central Pennsylvania; and Portland, Ore., weighed in, questioning the role of the librarian when selecting — or censoring, some argued — literature for children.

“This book included what I call a Howard Stern-type shock treatment just to see how far they could push the envelope, but they didn't have the children in mind,” Dana Nilsson, a teacher and librarian in Durango, Colo., wrote on LM_Net, a mailing list that reaches more than 16,000 school librarians. “How very sad.”

The book has already been banned from school libraries in a handful of states in the South, the West and the Northeast, and librarians in other schools have indicated in the online debate that they may well follow suit. Indeed, the topic has dominated the discussion among librarians since the book was shipped to schools.

Pat Scales, a former chairwoman of the Newbery Award committee, said that declining to stock the book in libraries was nothing short of censorship.

“The people who are reacting to that word are not reading the book as a whole,” she said. “That’s what censors do — they pick out words and don't look at the total merit of the book.”

If it were any other novel, it probably would have gone unnoticed, unordered and unread. But in the world of children’s books, winning a Newbery is the rough equivalent of being selected as an Oprah’s Book Club title. Libraries and
bookstores routinely order two or more copies of each year’s winners, with the
books read aloud to children and taught in classrooms.

“The Higher Power of Lucky” was first published in November by
Atheneum/Richard Jackson Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, accompanied
by a modest print run of 10,000. After the announcement of the Newbery on Jan.
22, the publisher quickly ordered another 100,000 copies, which arrived in
bookstores, schools and libraries around Feb. 5.

Reached at her home in Los Angeles, Ms. Patron said she was stunned by the
objections. The story of the rattlesnake bite, she said, was based on a true
incident involving a friend’s dog.

And one of the themes of the book is that Lucky is preparing herself to be a
grown-up, Ms. Patron said. Learning about language and body parts, then, is very
important to her.

“The word is just so delicious,” Ms. Patron said. “The sound of the word to Lucky is
so evocative. It’s one of those words that’s so interesting because of the sound of
the word.”

Ms. Patron, who is a public librarian in Los Angeles, said the book was written for
children 9 to 12 years old. But some librarians countered that since the heroine of
“The Higher Power of Lucky” is 10, children older than that would not be
interested in reading it.

“I think it’s a good case of an author not realizing her audience,” said Frederick
Muller, a librarian at Halsted Middle School in Newton, N.J. “If I were a third- or
fourth-grade teacher, I wouldn’t want to have to explain that.”

Authors of children’s books sometimes sneak in a single touchy word or paragraph,
leaving librarians to choose whether to ban an entire book over one offending
phrase.

In the case of “Lucky”, some of them take no chances. Wendy Stoll, a librarian at
Smyrna Elementary in Louisville, Ky., wrote on the LM_Net mailing list that she
would not stock the book. Andrea Koch, the librarian at French Road Elementary
School in Brighton, N.Y., said she anticipated angry calls from parents if she
ordered it. “I don’t think our teachers, or myself, want to do that vocabulary
lesson,” she said in an interview. One librarian who responded to Ms. Nilsson’s
posting on LM_Net said only: “Sad to say, I didn’t order it for either of my
schools, based on 'the word.' “

Booksellers, too, are watchful for racy content in books they endorse to customers. Carol Chittenden, the owner of Eight Cousins, a bookstore in Falmouth, Mass., said she once horrified a customer with "The Adventures of Blue Avenger" by Norma Howe, a novel aimed at junior high school students. “I remember one time showing the book to a grandmother and enthusing about it,” she said. "There’s a chapter in there that’s very funny and the word 'condom' comes up. And of course, she opens the book right to the page that said 'condom.' “

It is not the first time school librarians have squirmed at a book’s content, of course. Some school officials have tried to ban Harry Potter books from schools, saying that they implicitly endorse witchcraft and Satanism. Young adult books by Judy Blume, though decades old, are routinely kept out of school libraries.

Ms. Nilsson, reached at Sunnyside Elementary School in Durango, Colo., said she had heard from dozens of librarians who agreed with her stance. “I don’t want to start an issue about censorship,” she said. “But you won’t find men’s genitalia in quality literature.”

"At least not for children," she added.
She can track down a lost child in a forest or an injured victim under a fallen building. She finds people. She saves them. A little girl and her canine assistant set out to make the most magnificent thing. But after much hard work, the end result is not what the girl had in mind. Frustrated, she quits. Follow along with the word-for-word narration in this early reader to get to know all these Palace Pets! 2.

$3.99. At St. Charles Borromeo Seminary near Philadelphia on Sunday, Pope Francis condemned child abuse and promised to take action against perpetrators in the Roman Catholic Church. Credit Tony Gentile/Reuters. One of the victims, Juan Carlos Cruz, contends that Bishop Barros was frequently present in Father Karadima’s bedroom when he and others were abused; threatened seminarians who dared denounce them; and destroyed letters reporting the abuses to the archbishop of Santiago at the time, Juan Francisco Fresno, when Bishop Barros was the archbishop’s personal secretary in the 1980s. Bishop Barro’s personal secretary in the 1980s.

There was an uproar in the audience while everyone tried to scream louder than the person next to him or her. Noun. A public expression of protest or outrage. The city that pioneered free public libraries is facing uproar over plans to close one of its reading rooms. Noun. A state of wildly excited activity or emotion.