



## Challenged Materials!



### WITCHES, PUMPKINS, AND GRINNING GHOSTS

Author: Edna Barth  
Case Study: Challenge in  
Gilbert Arizona

# Challenged Materials Assignment

## By: William P. Breitsprecher

### Description

*Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition  
1972, Edna Barth, Clarion Books – a Houghton Mifflin Company

### Incident

In January, 1992, a parent in Gilbert, Arizona objected to *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* and other books relating to Halloween in the elementary school library. She claimed the books promoted Satanism and the occult. While this parent was offered the option of having her child's elementary school library card indicate which books the child could read, the parent insisted the books should be removed from the library so that no child would have access to them. This incident resulted in a great deal of aggressive media pressure on the school to ban the book. A school-level review committee recommended that this (and other) Halloween books be retained. The decision was appealed to the Superintendent of Schools, who upheld the initial decision (Karolides, 1999).

The information I have uncovered about this event indicates that this situation was handled with a great deal of professionalism and consistent with sound library policy. When the media gets involved advocating that a book be banned, inflaming public sentiment, library policies and professionalism are especially important. By keeping the discussion focused on how books are selected to fulfill the school's mission, defending that selection process, and maintaining a professional decorum throughout the proceedings – a school can use these challenges to engage community leaders and promote fuller discussions of a school's commitment to students' education.

Perhaps even more important – a thorough and orderly reconsideration process will lay a foundation in case the initial decision appealed (which will likely be the case when a great deal of public interest or controversy is present). In this case, the Superintendent's decision was made easier because of the solid groundwork that was done by the committee. The appeal can focus on the issues that the committee reviewed, the appropriateness of that review given school policies, and whether or not the decision accurately reflects the letter and spirit of selection policies.

If any of these elements were missing when an appeal is made, the entire process would need to be reviewed and the fact that the lower decision was not able to clearly articulate and apply the philosophy and policies of the district might adversely affect the decision process at the next level. In this case, when the Superintendent was asked to review the lower committee's decision, the likelihood that the Superintendent was going to ignore the informed judgments of the district professionals that first heard the case and overturn their diligent hard work was significantly reduced. In professionally conducted reconsideration reviews, both the original committee and the decision makers in the appeals process are reinforcing and supporting each other.

According to The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's, *Dealing with Selection and Censorship* handbook, it is critical in these situations to prepare a committee appointed to deal with a complaint and provide them with appropriate background information to make a decision. This would include the school's selection policy, reviews of the item in questions, and ample opportunity for all parties concerned to assess the item under reconsideration. If a school district establishes its philosophy of intellectual freedom, translates this philosophy into workable policies, and maintains a positive presence in the community – these problems will be easier to handle because discussions of the appropriateness of a given resource can now be focused on whether or not the item in question can reasonably be deemed to move the district towards its objectives. This prevents a challenge from becoming dragged down in extraneous issues such as the personalities involved or conflicting attitudes, values, and beliefs among members of the community (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1999). While this particular case occurred in Texas, it does appear to be an excellent example of how the process should work and reaffirms the validity of DPI's School District Policies and Procedures: *Selection and Reconsideration*.

In general, the discussions and readings that we did in class agree with the basic issues that DPI's handbook on *Dealing with Selection and Censorship*. It is clear to this writer that these types of problems are best dealt with BEFORE the actual challenge. A clear and concise statement of intellectual freedom should be part of selection policy if materials are to stand up to these types of challenges. These policies need to be in written form, clearly approved by the school board, and available to the public. From there, professional library staff can apply these policies to the best of their ability with the satisfaction that if a problem arises, the main issues that will need to be addressed have already been outlined and that review committees have the authority of the school board behind them.

This allows the process to play out so that relevant information can be gathered, policies can be reviewed to ascertain if they have been followed, relevant decision makers become involved, and the process continues without prejudging the entire procedure by prematurely removing the resource in question or taking any other action that will taint the proceedings by creating the impression that the resource in question is presumed to be inappropriate unless the reconsideration process can prove otherwise. According to DPI's handbook, class readings, and class discussion, this type of prejudging can severely undermine the reconsideration review and ultimately the selection process itself.

## **Policies**

The [Groton Board of Education](#) has outlined 10 criteria for selection. Eight of which appear to directly apply to this decisions. The specifics of how each criterion applies to this selection (and the reconsideration process) will be covered in detail later in this discussion (section **Reasons for Selection**). First, let's identify the relevant criterion; discuss the content of *Witches, Pumpkins and Grinning Ghosts*, and then review the application of the following 8 criteria as they apply to the selection of this work.

This write will argue that the following selection criteria from the [Groton Board of Education \(2002\)](#) will apply to this case.

1. Materials should support and be consistent with the district's general educational goals and the educational goals and objectives of our individual schools and specific courses.
2. Materials should be selected to support and enrich both the curriculum and the personal needs of our students and faculty, taking into consideration diverse interests, abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, maturity levels, and students' extracurricular interests. Materials selected should encourage an appreciation for both informational and recreational reading, viewing, or listening.
3. Care will be taken to select materials meeting standards of high quality including
  - a. educational significance
  - b. physical format
  - c. presentation, including special features, such as indexes, table of contents, illustrations, photographs, maps, charts, graphs
  - d. readability
  - e. authenticity/accuracy in factual content
  - f. artistic quality or literary style
  - g. technical production/construction that is well-crafted, durable, manageable, and attractive.
4. Materials should be considered relating to their overall purpose and their direct relationship to instructional objectives and/or the curriculum. Selected materials should support needs in the content areas and be appropriate to the variety of ages, developmental stages, ability levels, and learning styles represented by the particular facility for which they are chosen.
5. Materials should be selected representing opposing points of view on controversial issues, encouraging individual analysis.
6. The literary style of a work should be appropriate and effective for the subject matter and its intended readers or viewers.
7. The value of any work must be examined as a whole. The impact of an entire work will be considered, transcending individual words, phrases, and incidents.
8. Resource sharing will be considered in purchasing decisions. Materials may be purchased or not purchased based on networking and collaborative relationships with other area collections and depending upon extent of need.

The [Groton Board of Education's Procedure for Challenged Materials](#) (2002) outlines a process that would certainly help the process by encouraging dialog (Step 1) so that the concerns of those that object to the material can be more fully understood before taking any action. Step 2 outlines a formal procedure and identifies the specific form that the complaint should be written on before it is given to the building principal. This will discourage “nuisance” complaints and more fully ensure that all parties take the time to more clearly articulate their positions before any action is taken. Perhaps most important of all, documenting the specifics of a complaint at this time will prevent the entire process from becoming a “fishing expedition” to see what can be uncovered about the school, the person that made the selection, or anything else about the book that anyone might disagree with. If any of these situations were allowed to happen – the emphasis would shift from the needs of children in a community as decided by that school board to any number of other factors including personalities; individuals in that school; and personal, religious, and philosophical opinions.

Step 3, formation of a committee, specifies the parties that will be present on the committee. This is helpful because it guarantees that a number of viewpoints will be considered when reviewing the appropriateness of this book given the district's selection process and procedures. It also will result in a committee that has the credentials and professional background necessary to complete this review so that the educational needs of students is a salient feature of the process.

Step 4 ensures that a reconsideration review will be conducted quickly and will prevent anyone from complaining that the proceedings are being held up to avoid dealing with an issue or to influence the committee's final decision.

In terms of the actual decision, Step 5 may be one of the most important because it specifies that the reconsideration review will be based on conformance with the criteria for selection listed in the selection policy. This prevents the committee from being dragged down with extraneous matters and focuses the discussion on the needs of all students as identified by the board.

Step 7 is important because it gets the Superintendent and Board of Education involved in the release of the decision (though not the actual decision itself). This will tend to enhance the credibility committee's findings and more fully ensures that each of these parties is fully aware of the decision and its reasons before they are asked to address specifics about how the decision was determined.

Step 8 tries to keep a work from being prejudged before a full review has been completed, however, it seems to be weak because it only says that the material *may* remain in circulation until the process is complete. I would be concerned that the wording of this policy may tend to put pressure on a librarian to remove a book before the policy is complete (and therefore prejudice the process). This wording of this step might be interpreted by the complainants to indicate that they can get the book removed before the process is complete. This “guilty until proven innocent” approach could tend to prejudice the committee if a librarian was persuaded or

ordered to remove the book from circulation while the process played out. This might be construed as “prima-facie” evidence that the book is inappropriate.

### **Description of Work**

Edna Barth’s *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts – The Story of the Halloween Symbols* represents 95 pages of reading that many youths ages approximately 8 and up would probably enjoy reading when a touch of frost hits the ground and the days begin to grow longer. It is illustrated by Ursula Arndt with black and white line drawings that fill the margins on most pages. While the drawings are fairly simple – in this writer’s opinion, they are effective because they cast a mood that is consistent with the topic – a holiday tradition that is based on eeriness and the annual harvest when many plants die or revert to a different state to weather out the winter. The drawings engage the reader’s imagination, which enhances the entertainment value of the book.

Ms. Barth starts with a brief history, starting with the Celtic people, of the celebrations and cultural traditions that she claims are the roots of Halloween. The book contains no citations or indications as to what the sources of this information are. This could be viewed as a drawback because the author does not allow the reader to refer to her sources nor provide direction for additional readings to continue learning about the topics discussed. This does not appear to be a problem with a book targeted for this age group that was probably written to entertain readers just as much as it was written to inform them. A couple of book reviews, however, were critical of the validity of Ms. Barth’s assertions, lack of citations, and styles of presentation.

If the main purpose of this work were to be an informative and definitive work on the subject – these would be a major issue. After reading this book, this writer believes Ms. Barth’s intention was to primarily entertain readers and provide some background on the roots of Halloween symbols. This work might have benefited from some type reference or work’s sited page, but given the controversies this book has created in communities such as Gilbert, Arizona, perhaps the inclusion of sources would have further inflamed the controversy.

If people objected to this direct, concise, and straightforward book that was clearly written for children; Ms. Barth’s sources for this information would likely have inflamed the controversy if readers of this book were directed to more detailed, perhaps scholarly accounts of the information presented here as fact. This writer was unable to uncover information about whether Ms. Barth considered any of these issues as she wrote the book.

After a brief introduction to antecedents to Halloween, the book has short chapters on each of the following: goblins; witches; Halloween cats; owls; bats; toads; Halloween ghosts; bones; Jack-O-Lanterns; the colors black and orange; predicting the future with nuts, apples, and cabbages; Halloween foods; and the Halloween masquerade. Each section represents an interesting read as Ms. Barth traces their origins because, in the process, she is also introducing readers to elements of ancient history through the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this respect, the book offers an interesting context for many aspects of history that students might see in classes as they continue their education.

This writer is sure that Ms. Barth's work is popular in the fall and that her presentation encourages students to talk to their friends, parents, and educators about what they have read. If Ms. Barth's intention was to provide a scholarly work – this book suffers from its organization, which is build around the topics outlined in this review. This results in a presentation that is constantly jumping between historical periods. The book could have been written in a more linear, chronological, and focused manner. While some might cite this as a major disadvantage, this writer does not. If the purpose of the book is to entertain readers while discussing the origins of Halloween symbolism, then the book is organized in a manner that is engaging and easy to read because it is constantly presenting new ideas.

Each topic area is addressed in a tasteful way that leaves room for readers to reach their own conclusions. Where appropriate, the author presents alternative views and ideas. Since the work has no citations or sources, it is not possible for the reader to pass judgment on much that is presented in the book. From a scholarly point of view, this is a major disadvantage. From an entertainment point of view, this is not a problem and might even enhance the enjoyment of the reader because it gives the author more latitude in developing her points without getting so bogged down in detail that the book becomes a more demanding read.

This writer would have to agree with the thousands of librarians that have selected this book over the years. Children will probably love this book and the information that is presented. The conversational style of writing, inclusion of diverse and alternative perspectives, and non-judgmental approach encourages readers to think for themselves. After reading this book, it is likely that children might want to share what they have read and what they learned as a result of their reading. This, in turn, would provide an excellent opportunity for parents and teachers to start an intelligent discussion about material presented in the book. Because of this, this writer would agree that *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* is an appropriate addition to a school library given the selection guidelines outlined in [Groton Board Of Education's Material Selection Policy](#).

### **Reasons for Selection**

Assuming this item was purchased under [Groton Board Of Education's Material Selection Policy](#) – this writer would argue that this book would be an appropriate selection, based on the following criteria:

**Criterion 1.** Reading is a fundamental skill and encouraging children to read at an early age is important. Reading must be an important part of any public school's general educational goals. Students probably learn to read best when reading materials that engage their interests. Halloween is major holiday – retailers report that expenditures for this holiday are only exceeded by Christmas. Clearly, children are interested in Halloween, a national holiday with a long tradition in this country. The book is also addressing issues about our culture, celebrations, and the beliefs of others. In a small way, it would not be unreasonable to argue that this book is helping prepare students for cultural diversity. In fact, it is this writers opinion that banning books about the history and facts of our annual fall celebration would send the wrong message about

cultural diversity -- that the annual traditions that many celebrate are too controversial or “evil” for students to read about and that a group of people have the right to suppress that aspect of our culture and the diversity that it represents.

**Criterion 2.** This book exactly hits this selection criterion. Most students participate in Halloween celebrations – all others are aware that the celebration is taking place. Children are likely to be curious about various aspects of the celebration, are likely to enjoy reading about it, and reading this book might enhance the entertainment value of that celebration. A discussion of the symbols and traditions of Halloween represents an examination of diverse interests. *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts*, in this writer’s opinion, is an excellent choice under this criterion because it combines the 2 stated objectives of informational and recreational reading.

**Criterion 3.** Halloween is a major children’s holiday and this book provides both informative and recreational reading in a colorful, graphic, and structured manner that is presented in a highly readable form for elementary students. According to some reviews, the information is authentic, factually accurate, and the artistic quality or literary style is at least on par with many other books that would be considered children’s “classics.” The editions of this book in the Hedberg Library collection are well constructed and appear to be able to withstand the type of use/abuse that is likely to occur when children have books.

**Criterion 4.** This one is harder to comment on without specific information about the instructional objectives and/or curriculum in place at that time. If one accepts that the overall purpose of this book is to engage students with both informative and recreational reading, this book clearly is appropriate. It is hard for this writer to imagine how an open discussion about a major holiday that is geared towards children cannot be consistent with a school’s mission and curricular objects to prepare students to read and function in a multi-cultural society.

**Criterion 5.** This book fulfills this criterion well. Some people in the community in question clearly object to the material. Rather than ban the book, the philosophical disagreements over this book’s contents could represent an outstanding opportunity to look at different interpretations about our annual fall celebration of Halloween. Because of the way this holiday (and this book) are likely to engage children, the material presented in this book allows children an opportunity to analyze information in a larger context and decide for themselves how it applies to the traditions of Halloween. Sheltering children from the factual roots of Halloween’s symbols is not promoting analysis of those symbols. In this writer’s opinion, if this book is banned, an outstanding opportunity to cultivate reading and critical thinking skills for a variety of learners will be lost.

**Criterion 6.** According to reviews, the literary style of this work is appropriate and effective for the subject matter and its intended audience. This writer



believes that *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* is well written and likely to be an exciting read for many children. Perhaps even more importantly, children that read this book are likely to talk about what they have read with their friends, parents, and teachers. This type of intellectual dialog is critical, in this writer's opinion, to developing the type of skills needed to be successful in school and life's other endeavors.

**Criterion 7.** Because this criterion requires considering a book “as a whole” and it really addresses teaching students critical thinking and analysis skills. Yes, some of the symbols of Halloween may have origins that run counter to the religious beliefs that some parents want to instill in their children, but this is not the same thing as promoting those ideas. Taken as a whole, this book presents information without passing judgment or advocating those ideas. The style of presentation is factual, to the point, and void of the author's personal comments. Few of the symbols discussed actually have origins that can be construed as Satanism and/or “the occult,” most come from other traditions. It is a serious mistake to focus on small parts of Ms. Barth's work and assume the entire book is about Satanism and the occult.

**Criterion 8.** It is difficult to comment on this criterion without more information about the access children would have to this book via other channels, including resource sharing. It might be that local conditions would make this book appropriate or inappropriate given its availability elsewhere. In a general way, an argument could be made that student interest in this popular children's holiday will mean that this book will widely circulate. Perhaps actual data from the Gilbert, Arizona, school will show that this book does widely circulate for the few weeks around Halloween. This, in turn, could be construed as a book that will not be available via normal resource sharing channels when students want to read it. Consideration of this criterion would tend to support the selection of this book if the book is highly popular for only a few weeks of the year and therefore unlikely to be available on a shared basis.

In this writer's opinion, reasonable arguments can be made that *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* meets 8 of the district's 10 selection criteria. The only two it does not directly meet (criteria 9 and 10) do not really apply (at least given the information uncovered about this case). This book doesn't “fail” to meet those two criteria – they just may not be directly applicable. The [Groton Board of Education's Material Selection Policy](#) does specify in its procedures that reputable, unbiased, professionally prepared selection aids will be used. Reviews tend to support that this book meets 8 or 10 selection criteria – some of them very strongly. Nothing in the selection procedures or policies seems to indicate that this book would be inappropriate.

## Reviews and Justification

Using the list of review sources presented with this assignment, the [Groton Board of Education's Material Selection Policy](#), and additional resources – 4 professionally prepared reviews were located.

1. The journal *Childhood Education* indicates that this book explains the origin of Halloween symbols in an attractive, informative, and readable book. Children are likely to enjoy this work and gain a better understanding of our Halloween traditions as a result. There is no indication that any of the material present will be problematic or offensive. In fact, this book review goes so far as to recommend Ms. Barth's work as a "worthy read for next year's celebration" (Tompkin, 1972). This writer wholeheartedly agrees. It is easy to imagine youths of various reading levels becoming fascinated with the presentation and becoming absorbed with actually finishing this book. This review seems to indicate that *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* would be consistent with the following criteria for selection:

**Criterion 1.** The district's educational goal

**Criterion 2.** Supports and enriches the curriculum and personal needs of its students

**Criterion 3.** Meets the district's qualification for a high standards of quality

**Criterion 4.** Supports overall instructional objectives in a manner that is appropriate for a variety of ages, developmental stages and abilities

**Criterion 6.** Literary style is appropriate and effective for the subject matter and audience

**Criterion 7.** The impact of the entire work makes the book a worthwhile read

2. *Library Journal* identifies the book as being appropriate for 3-6<sup>th</sup> graders. This review applauds the factual based discussion the book presents on Halloween and its symbols. The inclusion of information about celebrations around the world is noted positively. The book looks at other cultures and subcultures (diversity). The review points out that the book "touches on the incorporation of pagan beliefs into Christianity and the review describes this book as "well-written, concise, and details the history more completely than most other such books" (Schmidt, 1973).

This writer agrees and appreciates that the review mentions that the book discusses the absorption of pagan traditions into Christianity. It is possible that some schools may have selection policies that would express concerns about material that might be interpreted as religious or spiritual in nature. Groton's policy clearly does not. The reader of this review has the opportunity to consider the impact of this type of material on the selection process – it does not apply in the Groton case. In fact, because of selection criterion 5, the inclusion of this material actually enhances the case for selecting this book.

Like the review above, this one seems to indicate that the book meets selection criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7. If one anticipates that the inclusion of past pagan celebrations and "days of the dead" might cause controversy in a school district, this review seems to at least imply that the book meets criterion 5 – representing opposing points of view on controversial issues. This writer

appreciates the fact that Library Journal’s review discusses the inclusion of pagan antecedents to Halloween.

3. Publishers Weekly also concurs that the origins of Halloween and its symbols are discussed on a “factual basis.” The review notes that the author writes about the celebrations of Halloween “around the world and in history that have influenced our Halloween traditions and symbolism.” This review identifies that the book will contain information about the festival of Samhain, Lord of the Dead (Celtic Druid) Feralia, the Roman festival for the dead, the Christian All Hallows’ Eve, and other early fall celebrations. According to Publishers Weekly, “illustrations are pertinent and an added interest” (Schmidt, 1973).

In many ways, this writer believes that Publishers Weekly has provided the most useful review because it addresses the pagan traditions that will be discussed and the “day of the dead” celebrations that have evolved into our “Halloween.” Like the Library Journal review, this allows librarians to more fully assess the suitability of such material as it applies to the selection criteria that a given school district has deemed appropriate. Like the Library Journal review, this review seems to indicate that the book meets selection criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

4. New York Times Book Review notes, “Much information is presented on the Roman and Celtic sources of the Holiday.” The organization of the book by topic is questioned because the reviewer seems to believe that this approach serves to arouse curiosity and interest at the expense of an understanding of the material’s historical context. The review claims that the author “presents as proven fact a theory that ‘The Little People’ or ‘faery folk of legend’ recall a prehistoric race of pygmies who once inhabited northern Europe.” The review does note that the writing is of high quality and is appropriate for children ages 7 and up. The illustrations are reviewed as “no more than adequate” (New York Times Book Review, 1973).

This writer appreciates the details that this review presents on some of the specific information *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* uses in tracing the sources of our Halloween traditions. Some school board approved selection criteria might address these issues. The Groton policies do not have any problems with this type of material and Criterion 5 actually seeks to “...encourage the selection of opposing viewpoints on controversial issues, encouraging individual analysis.”

This writer strongly disagrees with characterizing Ms. Barth’s work as misrepresenting theories as fact in the incident described in this review. The book clearly states that these fairy folk may have been made up and then actually says, “Some scholars think they were real (page 14).” This section closes with a paragraph that begins with the sentence (referring to what happened to this tribe of little people): “Whether they really were absorbed, died out, or never existed at all, stories about the Little People were handed down.” This reviewer has misstated the contents of the book. This misstatement does not greatly affect the overall review of this book – it is identified as a book children will enjoy. While these things happen, it is unfortunate that a source like the New York Times Book Review can get this so wrong. Such a misstatement could adversely affect the selection of this book if a librarian interpreted that as meaning the book was no longer a suitable source of factual information. As a whole, the information of this review can also be used to support Groton’s selection policies 1-7, though a given librarian might

have concerns (which appear unfounded) about the suitability of this book in supporting historical events, especially as they might relate to the existence of fairies and “little people.”

## Other Reviews

This writer also conducted a general Internet search to locate reviews and found four other reviews that were written by booksellers or individuals that had read the book. As discussed in class, the content of these reviews must be carefully analyzed to make sure that they are written in a manner that reflects the needs of librarians making purchasing decisions.

Amazon.com calls this “A great book for kids who want to dig a little deeper into our mysterious, spooky past!” This writer agrees with this assessment. Amazon does have an interest in promoting the purchases of books. Some might call the review self-serving, but the review essentially agrees with the main points of at least 3 of the professional reviews located. This writer especially appreciated Amazon’s statement that “Barth’s approach is straightforward and simple, and she doesn’t gloss over (or dramatize) the darker aspects of Halloween’s antecedents...” (Amazon.com, 1999). Even considering the fact that Amazon might stand to benefit from providing overly positive reviews, this writer sees a great deal of validity in this particular review. It also seems to indicate that *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* would meet Groton’s selection Criterion 1-7.

Three of Amazon’s customers have provided anonymous reviews. The first of three readers titled theirs *Witches Get Respect*. This positive review talks about the book in glowing terms and commends the author for providing factual information about the origins of our Halloween symbols and celebration. As the title expresses, this writer was most impressed with the tasteful and respectful way many of these topics, including witches, was handled and gives the book a 5 star rating (highest possible). This writer agrees with the ideas presented in this review, but would rather not comment on how many “stars” the book should earn. From a librarian’s point of view – such a simplified approach probably does not help in ascertaining whether a particular book meets a set of selection criterion. In general, the comments in this review tend to support Groton’s selection policies 1-7.

The other two reviews were highly critical of the book and assigned only 1 star. In both instances – the reviewers are highly critical of the factual basis on which this book claims to be based. The first of these two anonymous reviewers identifies her/himself as a “major Halloweenophile” and challenges most of the material presented in the book with a strong fixation on the parts addressing witches and witchcrafts. Like the New York Times Book Review, this individual questions the organization of the book and complains that the book needs to decide whether it wants to be a historical work or just a collection of Halloween stories.

While this review does raise some interesting points – the challenges it presents are not possible to verify because the author is not identified and the review provides no information to allow readers to ascertain if the reviewer does indeed have more meaningful credentials and a deeper understanding of the topic than Ms. Barth. This review specifically states that teachers should not use this book. This writer disagrees with that assessment – teaching children to read involves getting them to read for enjoyment AND information. Just because a book is not written like a

history text, does not mean it is without educational value – especially when dealing with young children that are just learning to read for enjoyment and information.

The opinions of different reviewers deserve respect, but not all opinions are based on an understanding of education, academics, or the mission of a given school. Even though this review specifically says that it is inappropriate “for a teacher to give this book to a child who wants to learn about Halloween,” nothing in this review can be used actually provide documentation as to why the book does not meet the needs of the Groton schools based on their mission statement and selection policies.

The other highly negative review is written in a manner that makes it hard to read (no capitalization and many grammatical problems). This person provides no information about why they are more of an authority than Ms. Barth – but does proceed to correct her on many issues. A valid criticism of Ms. Barth’s book, if it were meant as a definitive, historical work, is that there are no sources for the facts as presented. This review suffers from the same problem. One might assume that this review was written by someone with a background in witchcraft because of the authority with which they speak for that community and the inclusion statements like “the holiday means a lot to modern witches who celebrate samhain...). Again, while this opinion deserves respect – it does not address many of the issues that educators use when analyzing the appropriateness books. Moreover – this review seem to take exception to the idea that a book that informs may be written in a manner that engages youths to enjoy reading – implying that a book needs to be either a serious, academic analysis or a collection of entertaining stories.

### **Recommendations.**

This writer agrees with the initial selection of the book because all reviews seem to indicate that children will be interested in and will read this book. The professional reviews all indicate that the material is presented in an appropriate manner and is factual. Concerns about the organization of the book are valid – but do not undermine the fact that children will likely read and enjoy this book. Given the controversy this book created in Gilbert, Arizona, and many other communities (*Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* did make the list of 100 most banned books in America) a more historical approach that directed children to additional sources would have probably made this book even more offensive to those that oppose its inclusion in a school library.

The Gilbert, Arizona, challenge to this book appears to have been a major controversy in that community. The [Groton School Board’s Policies for Selection and Reconsideration](#) would provide an effective framework to allow a reasonably satisfactory outcome of what was, by all account, a divisive situation. This is especially important when the media gets involved inflaming passion in the community as happened in Gilbert. Groton’s selection/reconsideration policies would help keep discussion focused on a school district’s mission and goals, the role that library resources play in meeting those objectives, and the criteria used to find material that will represent appropriate acquisitions given the Board’s stated policy.

As identified earlier – this writer believes the book meets 8 of 10 selection criterion (please refer to the section: **Reasons for Selection**). This alone would make Ms. Barth’s work a strong

candidate for selection. Children are going to enjoy reading this book and if *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* is confused between being a definitive history of Halloween or a fun reading – it does not matter. The book will engage young readers and presents a variety of viewpoints on the elements of Halloween celebrations and when more than one alternative for an idea is presented – the author does not favor one over the other.

The book could be a wonderful tool for generating discussions about topics that, evidently, are controversial in some communities. The book, however, does not promote those ideas – it merely is presenting what the author sees as possible explanations for Halloween traditions and symbols. If we are to cultivate critical thinking in today's youth – we need to give them an opportunity to look at some opposing viewpoints and teach them the process of analyzing those ideas so that they can decide for themselves. When dealing with young children – perhaps the history of Halloween is an ideal topic. It certainly engages students actively.

In the opinion of this writer, if the symbolism and traditions of Halloween are offensive to some – perhaps that disagreement would be better focused on the purveyors of these traditions (i.e. the media and the companies that market Halloween) instead of the author or librarian that is trying to provide a interesting reading material about this annual celebration. Marketing companies have been increasing the commercial importance to of this holiday for years – it is now surpassed only by Christmas in annual sales.

While this writer respects the right of people to challenge material that is included in a school's library, in this case, they appear to be trying to hold this book and schools that purchase it responsible for a social phenomenon that has been centuries in the making. That is not appropriate. If children will want to read this book and it meets the criteria for selection of a given school (as has been shown in a previous section of this report), it is an appropriate acquisition. Hopefully, those that disagree with any of this book's content can accept that it is not an evil thing when children read *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts*. It provides a foundation to teach critical thinking skills and reinforces the idea reading for information can be fun.

In the end, readers of this book may come to agree with many of the concerns that those that would ban this book have, or they may not agree with those concerns. This writer finds it hard to accept that most people that read this book would agree that it should be banned given the annual widespread acceptance and use of Halloween symbols. By giving students an opportunity to read a book that by all professional accounts is engaging and well written, it becomes possible to at least expand the discussion and in the process perhaps all parties concerned can learn something about multiculturalism, diversity, and pluralism in our society.

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