

Mary Bartlett
 Dr. Broad
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Go Ask Alice: Why Parents are Against it and Why it Should Remain in Schools

“The girl on the grass beside me is white-faced and Mona Lisa like and she’s preppers [pregnant]...I asked her for an upper and she just shook her head like a stupid, blank, and I realized that she’s completely burned out. Behind that beautiful stone face in a big dried-up bunch of ashes and she’s lying there like a stupid dumb shit who can’t do anything” (*Go Ask Alice* 97-8).

Many parents will argue that the book Go Ask Alice by an anonymous author is inappropriate for adolescents to read, perhaps citing a quote such as the one above. It is a story about drugs in white, middle-class suburbia and the alleged teen subculture surrounding them in the late 1960s. In addition, the book delves into other intense topics such as sexual promiscuity, drug selling (or “pushing”) and homosexuality. Due to the frank content within the book, parents and educators argue that the book is not suitable for adolescents to read in class, or for it to be on library shelves. This paper will offer a brief summary of the book Go Ask Alice, discuss reasons why it has been banned/challenged, citing quotations from the book, and give reasons for why the book should remain in the schools.

Go Ask Alice is classified as a fiction book even though it is supposedly based on a real girl’s diary in which she describes her experiences with drugs. The author of the diary is never named in the book and the cover simply says “by Anonymous” (It was found out later that the book *is* actually based on a girl named Alice). For simplicity’s sake, I will be referring to the protagonist (and author) as Alice in this paper. The title of the book is derived from the lyrics in a song about drugs called “White Rabbit,” performed by Jefferson Airplane (Adams 587). The first entry of the book is dated September 16 (year not stated) and the last entry is made on September 21 of the following year. There is also a point in the book, most likely over the month of March, when there are no dates recorded because the entries were written on single sheets of paper and paper bags (*Go Ask Alice*, 88). The story consists of a mixture of different emotions, and points of view that often contradict each other; even within Alice. Go Ask Alice is a very intense read, even for some adults.

The first half (103 pages) of the book is Alice’s first diary; she describes her drug experiences and expresses repeatedly that she wants to quit. She runs away from home twice; she sells drugs to junior high and elementary school children, and resorts to prostitution to make money. She gives up drugs after returning home for the second time, seemingly for good and she begins a new diary. Her classmates, and former drug buddies, tease her relentlessly about giving up drugs; they say that she will be back, and call her names like “Nancy Nice” and “Mary Pure” (*Go Ask Alice* 114). After enduring the social and psychological torment, Alice is finally getting her life back on track. This new life comes to an abrupt halt when she accidentally consumes some homemade, acid-laced candy while babysitting and ends up in a mental hospital. When she is clean she is released to go home; she vows never to take drugs again, and says that she will no longer keep a diary. The epilogue states that Alice died three weeks later of a drug overdose.

There have been many instances in which Go Ask Alice was either challenged or banned and reasons for doing so were given. One particular example was recorded as a case study and published in book form called Anatomy of a Book Controversy. The author, Wayne Homstad, tape-recorded interviews with people who were closely connected to the controversy (5-7). The

controversy revolved around a substitute teacher who had assigned Go Ask Alice to her seventh grade class as a supplemental reading assignment (15). When a student read a passage out loud to her father, he was upset that she was reading a book containing such vulgar language. At a Community Input Session a few nights later, the parent spoke of the book and read some objectionable passages out loud. After hearing the passages and seeing the reaction of the people in attendance, the superintendent said that the book would be removed immediately. The next morning, every single copy of Go Ask Alice was removed from the school and the possession of all the students in the class (16-18).

The teacher, and many other school personnel, were very upset at the way in which the books were ripped out of the hands of students without even an explanation as to why (Homstad 73). The teacher justified her use of the book by saying that she wanted her students to study the diary format of literature, she wanted to use Alice to study character change, and she wanted her students to understand the pressures of drug/substance abuse, and enable them to make sound decisions (15-16; 24). She also saw that her students were very intelligent, and that there were sufficient copies of the book (15). More will be discussed about the controversy as the topics covered in this paper warrant it.

A second instance of censorship in which Go Ask Alice was challenged—though it was not the main target—was the case of Board of Education v. Pico, in 1982. This was a court case in which the school board of District 26 in New York found certain books to be “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy” (Hurwitz 22; Nilsen and Donelson 419-20). A committee of parents and school staff were asked to read a selection of books and make recommendations about whether they should remain in the junior and senior high school libraries or not. When the school board ignored the recommendations of the committee, the students at the school fought the decision, saying that removing the books would be a violation of their First Amendment Rights.

The decision was brought to trial and the students won the case: “[T]he First Amendment rights of students may be directly and sharply implicated by the removal of books from the shelves of a school library; and local school boards may not remove the books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books” (Hurwitz 23; Nilsen and Donelson 420). The passages from the books that were deemed as having “objectionable” language were listed on the court record. In addition to Go Ask Alice, passages from books such as The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers, edited by Langston Hughes, A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich, by Alice Childress, and Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., were also listed.

A textbook about children’s literature that discusses censorship asks, “What do the censors censor?...Books, films, magazines, anything that might be enjoyed by someone is likely to feel some censor’s scorn and moral wrath” (Nilsen and Donelson 408). This textbook listed Go Ask Alice numerous times saying that it has been frequently challenged and banned, and that it occasionally threatened Catcher in the Rye as being the number one most censored book (409). Go Ask Alice has been challenged and/or banned in at least 23 cities in 15 states, between 1974 and 1999 (Lesesne 30-31).

But who makes the decision to ban books? Who has the right to make that decision? Dorothy Massie, author of the article “Censorship in the Schools: Something Old and Something New,” says that anyone has the potential to be a censor as long as they have the authority to do so (56). She goes on to list people/groups that have been given this authority: school boards and administrators; teachers and librarians; state education agencies; textbook publishers; state

legislatures; and potentially the U.S. Congress (56-58). A survey conducted in 1977 by the National Council of Teachers of English found that “teachers accounted for nearly 7.5 percent and librarians for nearly 3 percent of censorship in public schools” (57).

Go Ask Alice has been described in many ways by those who object to and censor it. It has been taken off of reading lists because of its “profanity and indecent situations” and its “gross and vulgar language and graphic description of drug use and sexual content.” It has been removed from libraries and classrooms because it contains “numerous obscenities,” “inappropriate language” and because it “borders on pornography.” It has also been called “profane and sexually questionable” and some people find it “personally offensive.” In the Central Gwinnett High School in Georgia the book was challenged in 1987 because “it encourages students to steal and to take drugs” (Lesesne 30; Doyle 12; Sova 130). The recurring themes for why the book has been challenged and banned are its blatant drug content, “objectionable language,” and references to sexual situations (Lesesne 30-31; Doyle 12; Sova 130-131).

The main topic of Go Ask Alice is drug use and how it affects a young girl’s life. Alice has her first drug experience with LSD at a party while playing “Button, button, who’s got the button?” (*Go Ask Alice* 26-30). After that night, she is both excited and ashamed that she has had her first drug experience. She then begins to experiment with other drugs such as acid, speed and pot; she even has her first sexual experience while high on acid. It seems as though the more drugs she tries, the more drugs she wants to try. There is an early entry in which she describes how she has become dependent on drugs just to get through the day: “I have to take Dexies to stay high at school and at work and on dates and to do my homework, then I have to take tranquilizers to bear up at home” (*Go Ask Alice* 48). She also has a difficult time living without drugs, as is stated in her January 24th entry: “After you’ve had it, there isn’t even a life without drugs. It’s a prodding, colorless, dissonant bare existence” (*Go Ask Alice* 83). Alice is happy when she is on drugs, even though she knows better; she is happy when she is off drugs, even though this eventually wears off and she needs drugs again.

It is difficult to explain the intensity of the constant battle within Alice about how the drugs make her feel and why she should give them up. On July 10th (her first LSD experience) she writes, “I don’t know whether I should be ashamed or elated” (*Go Ask Alice* 26). November 23rd: “It has happened again and I don’t know whether to weep or rejoice” (64). January 24th: “Oh damn, damn, damn, it’s happened again. I don’t know whether to scream with glory or cover myself with ashes and sackcloth, whatever that means” (82). The more times Alice tries to quit the more upset she is when she gets back into drugs. One reason for this is that she was raised in a conservative family; this is obvious when her hair gets long and her parents say that she looks like a hippie (46). The reader may get the impression that Alice was raised to know the difference between right and wrong and perhaps, because of this, she is angry for opposing her moral principles.

When Go Ask Alice is condemned for its blatant drug content, some readers may not see that it contains both *positive* and *negative* views of drug use. Contrary to what the censors discuss, Alice describes a lot of her drug experiences (especially her early ones) as positive and fun, such as her very first LSD experience: “Bill pulled me down and my head rested in his lap as I watched the pattern change to swirling colors, great fields of reds, blues and yellows. I tried to share the beauty with the others, but my words came out soggy, wet and dripping or tasting of color...I wanted to tell Bill, but all I could do was laugh” (28). In other passages such as this, Alice describes the elation she feels while on drugs.

On the other hand, Alice also has many negative experiences while on drugs. Situations such as these arise, for example, after she has run away from home (both times). She realizes that drugs are not the way to be living her life; her life is at home and that is where she belongs. There are times, though, when drugs are really ruining her life and she encounters experiences that she is not quite prepared for:

Last night was the worst night of my shitty, rotten, stinky, dreary fucked-up life...I saw Sheila and that cocksucker she goes with lighting up and setting out Speed...it wasn't until later I realized that the dirty sonsofbitches had taken turns raping us and treating us sadistically and brutally...We've had it! The garbage that goes with drugs makes the price too goddamned high for anyone to pay (*Go Ask Alice* 67-68).

It may seem as if things could not get any worse for Alice after reading this passage, but the end of the story is one that will really get the reader's attention; the epilogue of the book states:

The subject of this book died three weeks after her decision not to keep another diary...Was it an accidental overdose? A premeditated overdose? No one knows, and in some ways that question isn't important. What must be of concern is that she died, and that she was only one of thousands of drug deaths that year (*Go Ask Alice* 185).

This passage puts a horrifying image in the readers mind and leaves the powerful message that "Alice took drugs; Alice died from drugs" (Adams 588). There were many descriptions of Alice's drug use in the book but, surprisingly, most of the justifications for banning/challenging the book were because of its vulgar language and sexuality, rather than for its drug content.

The objectionable language that is displayed throughout the book occurs in nearly every diary entry. The best way to give an example of the objectionable language in the story is to offer a passage deemed offensive in the court case of Board of Education v. Pico: "shitty, goddamned, pissing, ass, goddamned beJesus, screwing life's, ass, shit." (Hurwitz 23; Sova 130). In Anatomy of a Book Controversy, the parent who objected to *Go Ask Alice* posed the question, "How do you explain that to your class when they ask you, what is [a blow job]?...What do you tell them?...you may not [focus on that], but what do the kids think when they are reading that?" (Homstad 45). At the Community Input Session, he quoted passages that included such words as "cocksucker" and "fucker" (Homstad 58). The negative reaction of the audience and other board members resulted in the superintendent pulling the book at once. Obviously, these are words that any parent would not want their children to read, and learn, but they add to the overall honesty of the text. In fact, one student in the class wrote a letter of protest saying that she had heard the words before reading the book and she knew not to use the words; she continued to say that "the language made the characters more believable" (Homstad 19).

The book has been challenged, banned and pulled from libraries and classrooms at least 10 times since 1980, specifically for its "objectionable" language (Lesesne 30-31). It was removed from the school library in North Bergen, New Jersey (1980); challenged in Pagosa Springs, Colorado (1983), Osseo School District in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota (1983), and Rankin County School District in Mississippi (1984); removed from library shelves in Kalkaska, Michigan (1986), and Wall Township Intermediate School library in New Jersey (1993); removed from an English class in Buckhannon-Upshur High School in West Virginia (1993); banned from reading lists in Dudley, Massachusetts (1994), and Warm Springs, Virginia (1995); and removed from Aledo Middle School library in Texas (1999) (Lesesne 30-31).

A third aspect of the book that has been frequently mentioned when challenged is the issue of sexuality. A wide range of subtopics in this area that are discussed within the book include: sexual promiscuity, prostitution (briefly) and homosexuality (both male and female). There are many entries in which Alice has engaged in sexual intercourse, while on drugs; she even loses her virginity while on acid. She is often worried about whether or not she is pregnant, and repeatedly states that she wants to be on the pill, and have sex without being on drugs. She never goes into specific detail about her sexual encounters which is why it may be difficult to initially see what the censors mean by “descriptions of sex” (Lesesne 30). There are times when she is retelling stories of other people and they involve sex in some way. One quote in particular was listed in *Board of Education v. Pico*: “Doris was ten and had humped with who knows how many men in between...” (*Go Ask Alice* 93; Hurwitz 23). I feel inclined to mention that this passage was taken out of context and is not talking about Doris humping (at ten years old) but rather, it is talking about her mother’s many marriages and extramarital affairs. It doesn’t divert from the fact that the language is inappropriate, but it somewhat softens the idea of a ten-year-old being sexually active.

Prostitution is also briefly mentioned in the book. While Alice is in Denver (the second time she runs away from home), her life hits rock bottom. She doesn’t have anything but twenty dollars and the clothes on her back. She runs out of drugs fast and must resort to prostitution to get her fix: “Another day, another blow job...If I don’t give Big Ass a blow he’ll cut off my supply...What a bastard world without drugs!...I’m almost ready to take on the Fat Cats, the Rich Philistines, or even the whole public for one good shot” (*Go Ask Alice* 84). This passage speaks for itself and clearly exemplifies the low point of Alice’s life on drugs. This is the only time in the book when a scenario such as this is described, and no instances were found for when the book was banned for this specific reason.

Homosexuality is also discussed in this book and in some detail. The first time it is mentioned is in relation to Alice selling drugs. Alice and her friend, Chris (female) have started dating two older guys, named Richie and Ted. Alice considers herself “Richie’s chick” and does everything she can to help him out, including selling drugs (45). In her October 18th entry she writes, “Chris and I walked into Richie and Ted’s apartment to find the bastards stoned and making love to each other. No wonder Richie Bitchie wanted so little to do with me” (47). Alice also mentions homosexuality frequently in reference to herself; she often doubts her own sexuality: “[N]ow when I face a girl it’s like facing a boy. I get all excited and turned on. I want to screw with the girl...I feel goddamned good in a way and goddamned bad in a way. I want to get married and have a family, but I’m afraid...I feel guilty and it makes me sick” (83-84). Parts of this passage were also cited in the *Board of Education v. Pico* case (Hurwitz 23).

A final reason why the book has met with opposition—even though it has not necessarily resulted in it being banned—is its overall “lack of literary quality” (Lesesne 31; Doyle 12; Sova 130). Lauren Adams wrote the article “A Second Look: *Go Ask Alice*” in 1998 (587-92). After rereading the book as an adult Adams discusses how “unenthralling” the book was and that “[p]oor Alice sounds ridiculously melodramatic and immature compared to today’s more worldly teens” (588). She continually mentions Beatrice Sparks, later found out to be the editor/author of *Go Ask Alice*, as well as other “Anonymous” novels (589). Adams argues that maybe *Go Ask Alice* is not as true of a story as readers may have originally believed.

Adams is very skeptical of the story being a “true” diary of a real teen. She argues that though the entries are very similar to the style in which a teen would write, it is very hard to believe that Beatrice Sparks simply put the book together without any editing or additions made

(588-9). A book review from a 1972 edition of Publishers Weekly argues, “Whether or not this is authentic...it does seem awfully well written, and in any case brilliantly edited...” (“Nonfiction Reprints” 80). And Helbig and Perkins confidently state that parts of the book have been written by an adult trying to sound like a teenager. They go on to say, “The sudden change from the hopeful ending to the epilogue seems manipulated for shock effect...” (245).

So what did really happen to “Alice”? Did she die of an overdose? Is there a real Alice at all? Beatrice Sparks said “yes” in a 1979 interview with School Library Journal (Nilsen 110). When Go Ask Alice was first published in 1971, the author was simply “Anonymous”; but when another “Anonymous” book called Voices came out in 1978, the cover revealed “From Beatrice Sparks, the author who brought you *Go Ask Alice*” (109). Sparks had gotten much of her experience with young people from her jobs in drug abuse clinics, youth counseling and social work (110). She often spoke at youth conventions and it was at one of these where she met the real life Alice. Alice wanted to talk to Sparks about her drug problem and the two became close friends; Alice’s family had hoped that their friendship would give Alice the help she needed (110-11). Alice gave Sparks two diaries and other scraps of paper; Sparks said, “It was at her worst times that she wrote on whatever happened to be handy rather than in either of the regular diaries” (111), exactly like in the book. Six months after giving her diaries to Sparks, Alice died. Not of a drug overdose, as Go Ask Alice would suggest, but rather something else that could have possibly been related to drugs, or she may have committed suicide.

Even after reading the interview, it is hard to say how much of Go Ask Alice was in fact made up by Beatrice Sparks, and how much was actually Alice. Alice never wanted her parents to see her diaries so when Sparks obtained a release from Alice’s parents, she said that certain things would be added from other case studies that she knew of to protect her anonymity. To this day, the real diaries of Alice are locked up at Prentice-Hall (Nilsen 111). The hardest part of writing the book, Sparks said, was the language that would be eventually used in it. She first tried to write the story without the “swear words and vulgarisms” but she felt that “it didn’t ring true” (Nilsen 111). She goes on to say, “Introducing kids to four-letter words (which they probably already knew anyway) was a minus, but helping them understand the dangers of drugs was a bigger plus” (111). Based on the number of copies sold and the staying power of the book, it is obvious that Go Ask Alice is loved by adolescents and adults alike.

Alleen Pace Nilsen’s article touts “Any list of the 10 most popular young adult books of the 1970s would have to include *Go Ask Alice*...[it] might well lead the list” (109). The same book review that questioned the book’s authenticity says that “it is a book which should be read, and once started is almost impossible to turn away from...[it] is an eloquent look at what it must be like in the vortex” (“Nonfiction Reprints” 80). It is a very popular book among young people; an article written to discuss audio books for immigrants learning English says that Go Ask Alice is one of the most popular books for the students to listen to (“Now Hear This” 52). Laurie Halse Anderson, author of Speak, told Booklist in 2004 that Go Ask Alice really inspired her when she was young: “Not only was it a gripping read, it also convinced me that there was somebody out there whose life sucked worse than mine” (“A Century of Books” 398). Not everyone objects to Go Ask Alice; in fact, many adolescents have enjoyed reading this book.

Many people may find Go Ask Alice to be offensive, but I feel that it should be read by young people and I hope that it will have an impact on them. When reading Go Ask Alice, parents and other adults tend to focus too much on the obscenities rather than the overall message. This message is that drugs can ruin your life and this message gets through very clearly. I don’t necessarily feel that the book should be taught as a class read, but I think that it

should remain on recommended reading lists and in classrooms and libraries. Go Ask Alice gets across a strong message about drug use to young people, it delves into other serious issues, and I feel that parents should read the book as well.

When I read the book for the first time about seven years ago, it really got to me. I remembered more of that book than some of the other books I loved and read about four years ago! I am hoping that this is the impact that it will have on other young people when they read it. It shows young people the detrimental effect that drugs can have on your life, while illustrating their true appeal. Helbig and Perkins say, “Unlike many novels dealing with drugs...the story has the honesty to describe their real attraction and to treat the parents as intelligent and supportive” (245); more will be said about parental involvement later. The fact that the book is in diary form, and that most people believe that it is based on a real diary, gives it a lot of credibility and believability. Young people will read it and feel that it could happen to them; “No reader will forget this young addict’s torment” (“Book Marks” 147), and I think that is very important.

Along the same lines, I feel that the diary format makes the book a lot more personal for the reader. In Anatomy of a Book Controversy, the director of instructional services at the school commented on the use of the book: “[T]here are better media for the...purpose [of] providing opportunities to investigate drug use and abuse...Recent news reports of the deaths of youths from drug abuse would be factual and have the same potential emotional impact” (Homstad 88). I disagree with the director’s ideas about drug statistics. Statistics only work insofar as students are willing to listen to them. Furthermore, it is difficult to get through to young people simply with numbers; it doesn’t personalize it for them. Students are more affected by efforts to get serious messages across if they feel that it *can happen to them*. Statistics don’t portray that kind of idea; personal accounts such as Go Ask Alice do. As Bosmajian says, a book such as this may “haunt the reader” and it has the ability to “scare straight” anyone who reads it (91-92).

In addition to topics such as drug use and sexuality there are other topics dealt with in this book that some readers may overlook. Those of which are the challenges of adolescent life including: peer pressure, becoming an adult and, more specifically, becoming a woman (Rumsey 264). Alice experiences peer pressure when she has her first drug experience; later when she starts selling drugs; and even when she gives them up she is pressured by her peers to get back into drugs. What’s more, Alice has just moved to a new town and she has a hard time fitting in. This is one of the reasons that she does drugs in the first place.

A second issue that comes up is becoming an adult, which is displayed when Alice talks about becoming a child psychologist (Rumsey 264). After her experiences with drugs she realizes that she can, and wants to, help young people. She hopes that she can steer young people away from drugs, or help to counsel those who weren’t so lucky to avoid them. She feels that she can better relate to them because she has been through it herself. One last issue that comes up in the book is directed toward women, specifically. Alice started to sell drugs to help out Richie, her boyfriend, as was mentioned above. She soon finds out that he is homosexual and feels ashamed for loving him. Rumsey said, “What happened in that relationship is surely adequate to make the traditional feminine ideal of self-sacrifice less attractive” (264). It is easy to see how any adolescent could relate to this book, even if they have never tried drugs before; there are other issues in this book beyond what adults see on the surface when they read it.

One last issue that I would like to briefly mention is the involvement of parents, and family in general; this is a recurring theme throughout the book. When Alice runs away she becomes homesick, especially when she is at her lowest point while in Denver. She talked to many people that she met there and most of them said that they wanted to go home (Rumsey

266). When she does get home to her family, they are very happy that she is back. The issue is, though, that they never really understand what she is going through because they don't know about her drug problem. They don't even know that she has tried drugs until toward the end of the book when she ends up in the mental hospital for her relapse.

This is why I feel that parents should read this book, as well as young people. There is a strong undercurrent in this book of parental involvement and communication. Though Alice was raised in a conservative, middle-class family, we see that there is not good communication between members. It is obvious in her journal entries that there is a lack of communication between her and her mother especially; her January 15th entry begins with "Dear unknowing Mother!" and many of Alice's entries discuss her mother as being unknowing of her situation (*Go Ask Alice* 82). Alice also mentions repeatedly, "I wish I had someone to talk to!" which could potentially be her parents (*Go Ask Alice* 43). The message here is that parents need to keep communication lines open with their children or their children could end up going down the wrong path.

There are many things in *Go Ask Alice* that a parent might object to, including the drug content, vulgar language and sexuality, but there are still many positive messages that readers can get out of it. We can learn a lot about a culture by just reading *Go Ask Alice* that maybe we normally would not have. Reading *Go Ask Alice* is a way to wake young people up to the world of drugs that reaches them on a personal level. The book also deals with more common problems related to adolescents such as peer pressure and fitting in. Children and adults should be reading this book in the hopes that they can learn from Alice's mistakes (Rumsey 266). This is not a children's book written for sheer enjoyment; it is a real girl's diary used to educate its readers about drugs and what they can do to someone. It shows how drugs not only affect a person physically but also mentally, emotionally and even socially. A story this emotionally driven is not something that can be made up; it needs to be lived, experienced and recorded as it happens.

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