

Report on the Committee's Decision Regarding *A Study in Scarlet* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

August 11, 2011



Timeline

- May 11, 2011: Henley Principal received *Request for Reconsideration* and forwarded it to Superintendent.
- Central Office staff determined that the complaint had not been covered “in principle.”
- May 18, 2011: Notified complainant that Committee was being formed to consider the request and would report to Dr. Moran no later than June 15, 2011.

General

- At the time of the *Request for Reconsideration*, the book was being used for whole class instruction by the 6th grade Language Arts teachers at Henley Middle School.
- The book was published in 1887. It is the first of four novels and 56 short stories published by Doyle that feature Sherlock Holmes.
- It has been used at Henley Middle School for the past 19 years.
 - One official complaint about the book was lodged in 2006, but it did not reach the Superintendent's office because the parents accepted the offer of the child reading an alternate book.



The Committee

- The committee convened on June 1, 2011.
- Committee members received a copy of School Board Policy INC, an electronic link to the book, and a copy of the complaint two weeks in advance.
- The committee consisted of a middle school principal, a middle school Language Arts teacher, a high school media specialist, and three community members.
 - All reported having read the full book (all 126 pages).
 - All brought research about the book with them.

The Committee

- The committee's charge was to...
 - Review and discuss the *Request for Reconsideration*.
 - Determine whether the book meets the criteria for selection of classroom materials outlined in Policy IIAA and form IIAA-F2.
 - Determine whether the book should remain on the 6th grade book list for Language Arts.
 - It is not considered a curriculum resource.



Procedures

- The complainant presented at the meeting, as well as did a representative from Henley Middle School.
- In addition to hearing from both addressees, the committee engaged in general discussion about the book around the selection criteria for resources.



The Addresses

- Henley's representative presented the novel as a fascinating work, the first in which we meet Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.
- The complainant's presentation centered on the "baggage" the book brings with it, and questioned whether the value of the book outweighs the considerable religious bias it contains.



Deliberation

- The Committee's deliberation was deep and centered on both the form used to review resources and the *Request for Reconsideration*.
 - The Board has a summary of this deliberation for further details.



The Key Questions

- The committee decided the two key questions are...
 - “While the book has some merits, do they outweigh the cultural and religious bias toward Mormons?”
 - “Further, is it possible to adequately address this bias in the context of studying this book with 6th graders?”

The Key Questions

- “While the book has some merits, do they outweigh the cultural and religious bias toward Mormons?”
 - When the representative from Henley was asked how this concern was addressed, she explained that students were told at the outset that the book is a work of fiction.
 - Further, students who challenge the book’s veracity are given the opportunity to rebut the information in the book by giving an oral report to the class.
 - This procedure was complained about in some of the letters we reviewed that were mailed in to support the initial complaint.

The Key Questions

- “Is it possible to adequately address this bias in the context of studying this book with 6th graders?”
 - The committee decided that neither of these responses/plans given by the Henley representative are adequate or age-appropriate to address the cultural and religious bias presented in the book.
 - The committee also decided that given the time constraints and maturity level of the students, it would not be possible to adequately address this concern.
 - It is not a part of the curriculum to do so, which may explain why this book is not tied to the curriculum.

Further Deliberations

Interest and Literary Merit

- The committee felt that the quality of writing and the creativity applied to the story and characters involved in a mystery make for an appealing read.

Life-long Learner Standards

- The committee concurred with the Henley representative in that the book illustrates examples of inductive and deductive reasoning.

Deliberations

Insensitivity toward Cultural Diversity

- The committee decided that the insensitivity of the author toward cultural diversity provides a negative example for students that is difficult for them to contextualize at their age and grade level.

Example from 1 of the 9 Letters of Complaint received by Dr. Moran

- One letter of support for the complainant illustrates a situation when students questioned her child on the bus, asking him “how many moms” he had, because it had come up in class that he is a Mormon while the class was reading this book.



Deliberation on the Complaint

- The committee agrees that the book portrays Mormon historical figures and community members as encouraging and performing forced conversion, kidnapping, stalking, threatening criminal and murderous acts. It portrays Mormon culture and religion in a similar light.



Deliberation on the Complaint

- The committee agrees that a result of using this material with 6th graders could be negative and false judgments and prejudices formed against members of the Mormon faith, including their classmates.
- The committee agrees that the book should be recommended for a significantly older grade level (10th or above).



Deliberation on the Complaint

- The committee agrees with the complainant and the school representative in stating that a positive aspect of studying this book is the introduction of Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes, and their relationship.
- The committee all stated that they had read the book in its entirety. The complainant stated that she has read the book at least twice.

Deliberation on the Complaint

- The complainant and committee provided ample judgment by reviewers.
 - The reading level for the book is determined to be 7th grade or above, and the interest level for the book is determined at grades 9th-12th.
- They could find only one from dozens of mystery book lists where this book ranked within the top 100: *Lehman's Recommended Detective Novels and Stories*.
 - On this list it is below 4 other works by Doyle.



Deliberation on the Complaint

- The committee concurred with the complainant and school representative regarding the themes of the book.
 - Both focused on the theme of inductive and deductive reasoning.
 - The book was not intended to advance a theme of “anti-Mormon” thinking.
 - Doyle was seeking a sensational topic and setting for the murders to heighten interests in readers. Like many initial works, it was rejected many times before being published.

Deliberation of the Committee

The complainant requested only that the book be removed from the 6th grade list.

- The committee concurs.

The complainant recommended another work in its place.

- *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Committee Summary

- Often a whole book is more valuable than its controversial parts. That is not the case with this book.
 - The entire second half of the novel is a third person omniscient narrative depicting Mormons as a network of hostile and depraved culture.

Committee Summary

- The committee unanimously agreed...
 - While the book may have a time and place in popular culture and literature study, it does not have a place as a **required** read for 6th graders in Albemarle's public schools.
 - This is not to cast the teachers using this work in a negative light.
 - *It is part of our process, however, as defined by School Board Policy, to critically review a work in light of the present day by an impartial committee of community members and educators.*



The Committee's Recommendation to Dr. Moran

- The Committee unanimously agreed that *A Study in Scarlet* should be removed from the 6th grade Language Arts reading list.
- The Committee unanimously agreed that the book should remain available in our media centers as a book of choice for ACPS students.