

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

June 14, 2011

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

General

On May 11, 2011, Patrick McLaughlin, principal of Henley Middle School, received a "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Learning Resources," form regarding the book A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

- A copy of the request form is attached as Appendix A. Dr. McLaughlin forwarded the complaint to Dr. Moran.
- In accordance with policy, staff reviewed the reconsideration request to see if issues raised have been covered "in principle" by previous decisions.
- Dr. Moran and staff determined that this is not the case, and Dr. Haun notified the complainant, Brette Sasser Stephenson, within 10 work days of Dr. Moran's decision that a Reconsideration Committee would be established. Dr. Haun mailed the letter on May 18, 2011.
- The Committee's report to Dr. Moran was to be made no later than June 15, 2011.

At the time the request to Dr. McLaughlin was made, the book was being used as a whole class literature study in Advanced / Honors 6th Grade Language Arts classes at Henley Middle School. It is currently on the list of resources for 6th Grade Language Arts, Appendix B.

Procedures outlined in Board Policy "Public Complaints About Curriculum of Learning Resources" (INC, INC-AP, INC-E1, IIAA, IIAA-F2) were followed in responding to the request. These policies are attached in Appendix C.

When the challenge of the use of the book was first made, the complainant's child had already completed reading the book as a course of study in her Language Arts class. This particular book has been used in Albemarle County Public Schools for the past 19 years. Upon investigating this matter, the Committee determined that it is only currently used at Henley Middle School by the 6th Grade Language Arts teachers. It was found by the Committee that in 2006, a parent challenged the use of the book. At that time, the child was given an alternative assignment. Coincidentally, there is a Learning Resource Review Criteria Form (Appendix D) completed in 2006. At that time, the book was given an extremely favorable review with no supporting documentation. This form was reviewed by the 2011 Committee in light of documentation needed to complete the review. The Committee reconsidered the assessment of the book completed in 2006 as part of the meeting process.

The Committee

On June 1, 2011, the Director of Secondary Education, Dr. Matthew Haas, convened a Committee to consider the complaint. Consistent with Policy INC, the Committee was chaired by Dr. Haas. Also on the Committee were one principal, one teacher, one media specialist, and three community members, one of whom kept minutes. Names appear in Appendix E.

Policy INC directs that community members be selected from a pool of individuals appointed by each school's PTSO. The Albemarle County Parent Council constitutes this list. Three parents were selected who have children of ages ranging across school levels. All members identified to serve on the Committee were present for the entire Committee meeting held on June 1, 2011. Materials, including policy, the complaint, and a link to an electronic copy of the book, were distributed to all Committee members on May 19, 2011, so that they could be prepared in advance of the meeting. All Committee members reported that they read the book in its entirety. Further, it was evident in our discussion, that all Committee members had conducted significant research on their own about its background and standing as a literary work. The Committee was able to make its decision in one sitting.

Charge of the Committee

At the beginning of the meeting, Dr. Haas presented the Committee with a charge to guide deliberations concerning A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The Committee was to accomplish the charge as follows:

- Review A Study in Scarlet
- Review relevant School Board Policies and Regulations
- Review the "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Learning Resources" form
- Review appraisals and other pertinent information about the book
- Receive testimony from the complainant and from a school representative concerning the book.

The Committee was to do the following...

- 1) Review the request for reconsideration and discuss it so that all areas on the form are considered.
- 2) Determine whether the book meets the criteria for selection of classroom materials for use in Albemarle County Public Schools as outlined in Policy IIAA and the subsequent form IIAA-F2.
- 3) Determine whether the book should remain as a resource for the middle school curriculum in Albemarle County Public Schools.

Further, the charge stated that the Committee should determine from the evidence specific areas of concern or other issues to which response may be made in the final report.

Procedures

At the beginning of the meeting on June 1, 2011, the chair discussed the importance of the review process and gave the charge to the Committee. He encouraged members to use the materials provided and to bring their best thinking to the process.

The Committee members were given the charge for the meeting as indicated in the previous section. Each section was discussed thoroughly with all members stating that they understood the task and their role in the process. They understood that they would deliberate on the two questions posed to them, and they would attempt to reach consensus but could submit both

majority and minority reports. They understood that the Committee's report would be forwarded to the Board but no public defense to the Board by Committee members would be required.

Prior to the meeting, the complainant was notified by telephone of the date, time and place of the meeting. Ms. Stephenson asked to speak directly to the Committee. She also asked if she could attend the part of the meeting when the school representative would address the Committee so that she could more fully understand the school's position on the book. She was allowed to do so with direction that only Committee members could ask questions of the school representative.

Ms. Stephenson also asked if she could have a friend attend with her for support. This was also agreed. During the time when the school representative addressed the Committee, the friend, Bret Crane asked a question of the school representative. He asked if any other works were considered by the 6th grade Language Arts teachers at Henley that could be used to accomplish the same goals. The chair let the question stand, as it was a question of merit, but reminded Ms. Stephenson and Mr. Crane that only Committee members may ask questions.

Dr. McLaughlin was advised that Henley's school representative could attend the complainant's presentation. The school staff did not avail themselves of this offer.

Ms. Webb, 6th grade Language Arts teacher for Honors / Advanced classes, attended the meeting as the school representative to address the Committee regarding the 6th grade Language Arts team's use of the book.

Deliberations

In addition to hearing presentations from the complainant and school representative, there was a period of general discussion about the book. Points outlined here were derived from the meeting minutes.

Ms. Webb presented the novel as a fascinating work that addresses the *Life Long Learner Standards* for Albemarle County Public Schools. It is the first book in the Sherlock Holmes series where we meet Dr. Watson and Holmes and get to know their characters and their motivations. Her presentation did not address what amounts to one half of the book: a third-person omniscient narrative of a father and daughter's struggle to escape murder from a "Mormon" militia under the direction of Brigham Young.

Ms. Stephenson's presentation centered on the "baggage" that the book brings with it and asked the Committee to consider whether the value of the book for instruction outweighed the considerable baggage that comes with it in terms of its portrayal of "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." Her address repeated what was in the "Request for Reconsideration" form and her letter to Dr. McLaughlin.

The Committee reviewed the charge and answered the two questions in the charge. The members agreed to submit one report to the Board. It was decided that the Committee would receive copies of the final report by mail but felt no need for the Committee to reconvene.

When there is a final report, the Superintendent will notify the complainant and the principal of the decision. She will forward the report to the Board.

As Policy indicates, the complainant may appeal the Committee's decision to the School Board. If there is no appeal, the Board may vote to reconsider the Committee's decision. The decision of the School Board will be final.

Policy INC requires that the Superintendent clearly indicate her agreement or disagreement with the Committee's decision.

Decision of the Committee

On the first question:

Does the book A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle meet the criteria for selection of Learning Resources Selection and Adoption for the Albemarle County Schools? (Policy IIAA)

The Committee unanimously agreed that it does not meet the selection criteria.

On the second question:

Should the book A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle remain on the 6th Grade Booklist for Language Arts for Albemarle County Public Schools?

The Committee reached unanimous agreement that it should not remain on the 6th grade book list.

Rationale

Appendix A includes the completed form from the Ms. Stephenson. The objective of the complainant centers on the following issue:

- "The book is anti-Mormon. It portrays Mormon historical figures and others that actually lived encouraging and performing forced conversion, kidnapping, stalking, threatening criminal and murderous acts. It portrays Mormon culture and religion in a similar light."

In addition to the completed complaint form, we received a letter from Ms. Stephenson elaborating in more detail, her concerns about the book. Her letter was followed by 8 letters from other citizens echoing the central issue stated above. These letters are attached as Appendix F.

The Committee members discussed this central concern and others in considering the book. A great deal of scrutiny was placed on the Learning Resources Review Criteria Form completed in 2006 (Appendix D). The Committee took time to read and consider this evaluation of the book. It is notable that the book received the highest grade of four (4) for all criteria for consideration. While this grade is debatable for this work for all criteria, it is particularly questionable for the following:

- Educational suitability and age appropriateness
- Favorable reviews found in standard selection sources

In terms of the suitability of the book for 6th graders, the key item on the form is "Does the material avoid religious, sexual, racial, or other cultural biases?" The Committee could not fathom how anyone who read the book with a critical eye could not see the overwhelming religious bias presented. The entire second half of the novel contains a narrative that relies solely on the cultural and religious bias toward the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as the premise for brutal murder and subsequent revenge. Ms. Stephenson provided excerpts from the book. They are included as Appendix H.

The work is reviewed and recommended as a must read for Sherlock Holmes fans at various sites on the internet because it is the first novel in the Sherlock Holmes series by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It is difficult to assign a four (4) to this criterion in light of the fact that one of the questions asks about favorable reviews of the book. There are several lists of the top crime novels of all time published. This book apparently is in the top 100 on only one of the lists researched (Appendix I). The Hound of the Baskervilles, another work by Doyle, is prominent on these lists. This work was recommended as a suitable replacement by the complainant. The Committee discussed this option and felt that the book is a suitable replacement as well.

Attached in Appendix I are several critical reviews of the book. These were provided by the complainant and supplemented by Committee members when they attended the meeting. In reviewing the criteria on the Learning Resources Review Form, it is difficult to understand how a four (4) could be assigned to an item that reads, "Has the material been favorably reviewed by experts in the field?" or "Does the material appear on one or more reputable book lists or selection aids?"

The key question that the Committee discussed is this: While the book has some merits, do they outweigh the cultural and religious bias toward Mormons? Further, is it possible to adequately address the bias in the context of studying this book with 6th graders? The complainant's case is based on negative answers to both of these items. When the representative from the school was asked how they address these concerns, the response was to say that students were told at the outset that this is a work of fiction and that a technique that Doyle used to create conflict was to include racial, religious, and cultural prejudice. Further, students have the opportunity to rebut information in the book in the terms of making a presentation to classmates.

The Committee felt that neither of these responses or plans is adequate to address the cultural and religious bias presented in the book. The Committee went as far as to decide that given the time constraints and maturity level of the students, it would not be possible to adequately address this concern.

The Committee felt that the quality of writing, the creativity applied to the story and characters involved in the mystery make for an appealing read. Further, the Committee concurred with the teacher that the book illustrates examples of inductive and deductive reasoning as la the *Framework for Quality Learning* and the *ACPS Life Long Learning Standards*. In spite of this,

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.

To illustrate, 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.

In regard to the issues raised by the complainant, the Committee responded in the following manner:

1. The Committee agrees that the book portrays Mormon historical figures and others that actually lived encouraging and performing forced conversion, kidnapping, stalking, threatening criminal and murderous acts. It portrays Mormon culture and religion in a similar light.
2. The Committee agrees that a result of using this material could be negative and false judgments and prejudices formed against members of the Mormon faith. This is especially troubling for students.
3. The Committee agrees that the book should be recommended for a significantly older age group (10th grade or above).
4. 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.
5. The Committee all stated that they had read the book in its entirety. The complainant stated that she read the book an additional time before addressing the Committee.
6. The complainant provided ample evidence of judgments by reviewers.
7. The Committee concurred with the complainant and the school representative regarding the themes of the book. Both focused on the theme of inductive and deductive reasoning. The sense of the Committee was that the book was not intended to advance a theme of "anti-Mormon" thinking. The author was seeking a sensational topic and backdrop for the murders, revenge, and ensuing mystery to heighten the interest of readers of his time.
8. The Committee concurs with the request of the complainant that the book be withdrawn from the 6th grade reading list.
9. In its place, any number of mystery novels could be used. The complainant recommended The Hound of the Baskervilles.

Committee Summary

In general, the Committee understood that a book as a whole may be more valuable than its parts. Often, a work may contain controversial aspects that are outweighed when the work is considered as a whole. The Committee came to a consensus that this is not the case with A Study in Scarlet because an entire half of the novel narrates a depiction of Mormons as a network of hostile and depraved culture. The Committee unanimously agreed that while the book may have had a time and a place in literature study, it does not have a place as a required read for 6th graders in Albemarle County Public Schools. This is not to cast the teachers who have used it in a negative light, rather it is a part of our process to critically review a work in light of the present day by an impartial committee of community members and educators.

The Committee reconsidered the book A Study in Scarlet and unanimously agreed that the book should be removed from the 6th Grade Language Arts Reading List, but it should remain available in our media centers as a book of choice for Albemarle County Public Schools students.

Superintendent's Recommendation

I want to begin by thanking the Committee for the time and effort they put into this reconsideration process. I understand from working with Dr. Haas that all committee members read the book and brought their own research to the table when they met. Further, their approach to this serious work has been thoughtful and deliberate. They did not take their decision lightly.

I also must acknowledge the 6th grade Language Arts team at Henley Middle School. I appreciate the work that they do to support our students. Their intent in using A Study in Scarlet as a learning resource was not to demonstrate cultural or religious bias. This book is a book of two parts. After reading the committee's report, I concur that the first half of the book has had a time and a place in our curriculum as a work that introduces Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, two classic characters from crime and detective literature. Further, it illustrates their methodology for investigating crimes, using tenets from the first four of our Lifelong-Learner Standards.

Having said this, the work itself – unlike its protagonists – is not a classic in terms of its literary value to an extent that outweighs the extreme bias and negative stereotyping it presents in the entire second half. This part of the book is written from a third-person omniscient point of view that denotes historical accuracy to an immature reader. It casts a religious group in a terrible depiction that is not presented with any of the irony or self-deprecation found in Dr. Watson's narrative. It is presented as fact from a reliable, invisible narrator.

Our students read works that are controversial. A great deal can be learned from doing so. In such cases, the whole value of the work outweighs a controversial word, phrase, or subject. Often, an author contextualizes biases to create conflict. This is not the case with A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Mormons are simply presented as evil as a matter of fact, and their murderer is held up as having done good work when he dies from natural causes at the end of the novel.

"On the very night after his capture the aneurism burst, and he was found in the morning stretched upon the floor of the cell, with a placid smile upon his face, as though he had been able in his dying moments to look back upon a useful life, and on work well done."

If the value of the work is as has been indicated, to introduce Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, then this introduction does not warrant its use. Students could engage in the same research Holmes would advocate in order to learn about these characters and their historic partnership prior to reading another of Doyle's stories. Students who discover A Study in Scarlet through this investigation may choose to read it on their own without requiring all to do so.

I affirm the committee's recommendation that the book A Study in Scarlet by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle should be removed from the 6th grade book list for Language Arts and that it may remain available in our media centers as a book of choice.

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A

Citizen's Request for Reconsideration Form

Appendix B

Instructional Resource List for 6th Grade Language Arts

Appendix C

INC – Public Complaints about the Curriculum or Learning Resources
INC – AP – Public Complaints about the Curriculum or Learning Resources
INC – E1 – Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Learning Resources
IAA – Learning Resources Selection and Adoption
IAA – F2 – Learning Resources / Textbook Review Criteria Form

Appendix D

Learning Resource Review Criteria Form (2006)

Appendix E

Signature Page for Committee Decision

Appendix F

Letter from the complainant and other citizens

Appendix G

Letter from Dr. Haun to Ms. Stephenson

Appendix H

Excerpts from the book provided by Complainant

Appendix I

Critical Reviews of the book provided by Complainant and Committee