

With One Word, Children's Book Sets Off Uproar

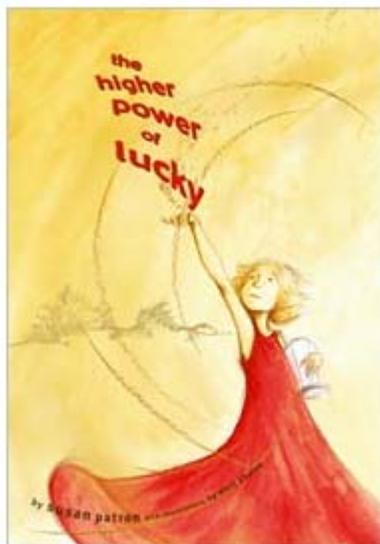
By [JULIE BOSMAN](#)

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The word "scrotum" does not often appear in polite conversation.

Or children's literature, for that matter.

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



A Newbery-winning book has been banned from some school libraries around the country.



Alex Koester for The New York Times
Susan Patron, the author of the book and a librarian, said the controversial word was just part of the character's learning about body parts.

The book's heroine, a scrappy 10-year-old orphan named **Lucky Trimble**, hears the word through a hole in a wall when another character says he saw a rattlesnake bite his dog, Roy, on the scrotum.

"Scrotum sounded to **Lucky** like something green that comes up when you have the flu and cough too much," the book continues. "It sounded medical and secret, but also important."

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

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

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

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

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

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

If it were any other novel, it probably would have gone unnoticed, unordered and unread. But in the world of children's books, winning a **Newbery** is the rough equivalent of being selected as an **Oprah's Book Club** title. Libraries and

bookstores routinely order two or more copies of each year's winners, with the books read aloud to children and taught in classrooms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

schools, based on 'the word.' "

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

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

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

"At least not for children," she added.

Despite the book's title - and its listing on Amazon under children's educational books on government - Lowenthal insisted that MIT Press is not a children's book publisher. "We categorized this book as politics, not as children's literature," he said. A steady seller despite the uproar. In an interview with "Publisher's Weekly," MIT Press director Amy Brand acknowledged that while she had "expected a range of feedback" about the book's publication, the publisher "did not anticipate the extent and tone of the response." "The book's publication has proven 'a revealing experience,'" writes "Publisher's Weekly." The uproar has also led to words of support from around the publishing industry as well as jokes.