



## Three Bombs, Two Lips, and a Martini Glass

*We are pleased to present this special installment of Pat Scales' Weighing In column, which normally appears in Book Links magazine, a quarterly supplement to Booklist.* —Ed.

If you had asked me a year ago what bombs, lips, and martini glasses have in common, I would have answered, “A fraternity party.” Now I have a different answer. It’s called Common Sense Media. This

not-for-profit Web-based organization is in the business of using a “rating” system to review all types of media that target children, but their “ratings” of books are especially disingenuous. They claim that they want to keep parents informed. Informed about what? What their children should read or what they shouldn’t read?

This isn’t the first time that an organization has used the Worldwide Web to influence parental opinions about children’s literature. Parents against Bad Books in Schools and a number of right-wing groups have been at work for years trading “forbidden” lists of children’s books. It’s never been clear who decides what titles make the lists. Now, Common Sense Media joins the long list of organizations that think they know what is best for children. The frightening part about this group is that they have a marketing strategy to convince parents and even teachers and librarians that “rating” materials is a “good” thing. But good turns to bad when reviewers aren’t really reviewers, and the focus is on what to watch out for.

On its Web site, Common Sense Media claims that it is about “media sanity, not censorship,” but after a long meeting with their editor in chief, I remain puzzled about how they define “media sanity.” As a company, it is free to do what it pleases, but the belief that “media has truly become the ‘other parent’” and its approach to media guidance display great disrespect for children and their families, not to mention the disdain it demonstrates to librarians, who are trained to provide reading guidance to families.

Children deserve to be challenged intellectually, and they deserve to be the judge of the books that suit them. Most children will reject books they aren’t ready for, and they don’t need adults to help them with that decision. Common Sense Media assumes that all parents want to police what their kids are reading, and they use the following emoticons as warnings: bombs for violence, lips for sex, #! for language, \$ for consumerism, and martini glasses for drinking, drugs, and smoking.

In addition to rating books in these five categories, the site also decides whether books have any educational value and redeeming role models. Finally, they give titles an overall “on,” “off,” or “iffy” rating. For example, *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*, by Jacqueline Kelly, a 2010 Newbery Honor Book, is rated “on” for ages 12 and up. My bet is that there are plenty of 9-year-olds waiting in line for the book. It gets one bomb for violence because of a description of a Civil War battle and reportage of a servant who is pitchforked to death; a lip because Calpurnia’s older brother is courting and animals on the farm mate; one #! because Calpurnia’s grandfather curses; and two martini glasses because her grandfather drinks whiskey and port daily. There are further warnings

under “What Parents Need to Know.” What Common Sense Media doesn’t tell you is that 11-year-old Calpurnia is a spunky kid who would rather be collecting scientific specimens with her grandfather than learning to become a housewife.

Common Sense Media clearly doesn’t know how to deal with young-adult readers. Filter the site by “iffy” books and ages 15–up, and you are left holding frowning faces, bombs, lips, “#!,” and martini glasses. *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green, winner of the 2006 Michael L. Printz Award, is rated “iffy” for ages 15–18. *Booklist* graded this book at grades 9–12, and even the “Average Rating” by kids, parents, and educators on the Common Sense site recommends Green’s book for ages 12–up. Regardless of what these readers say, the Common Sense Media reviewer warns, “Parents need to know that this book hits all the controversial pulse points: drinking, (not graphic) sex, bad language, and smoking, including marijuana smoking.”

In May 2010, the National Coalition against Censorship, American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, National Council of Teachers of English, Association of American Publishers, Pen American Center, International Reading Association, American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, Authors Guild, and Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators sent a joint letter to the editor in chief and the CEO of Common Sense Media that outlined the following concerns with the company’s rating system: (1) the implication that certain kinds of content are inherently problematic; (2) the negative attitude toward books; and (3) the potential that the ratings will be used to remove valuable literature from schools and libraries. A meeting was held with the editor in chief, and questions were raised about why books such as Markus Zusak’s *Book Thief* and Annika Thor’s *Faraway Island*, both set during the Holocaust, and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Chains*, set during the American Revolution, weren’t given any “educational value.” The editor in chief had no clear answers, but those books have now been awarded “educational value” on Common Sense Media’s Web site. It is clear to the nine organizations that are working hard to protect children and young adult’s freedom to read that Common Sense Media is a moving target, and their piecemeal response to such questions won’t fix what is at heart a misguided and dangerous concept.

While Common Sense Media isn’t censoring anything, it is providing a tool for censors. There is already a documented case in the Midwest where a book was removed from a school library based solely on a Common Sense review. Common Sense Media allows users to filter books by “on,” “off,” and “iffy” ratings. And reviewers are instructed to point out anything “controversial.” Such warnings encourage site browsers to take things out of context instead of looking at books as a whole.

Bombs, lips, and martini glasses! Indeed, let them be a warning. We must be proactive in helping parents understand that rating books is dangerous. Otherwise, more censorship bombs are sure to explode.

A former school librarian, *Pat Scales* is a member of the National Coalition against Censorship Council of Advisors.