

# Outrage over banning of New Zealand novel *Into the River*

Tom Peters  
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On September 7 New Zealand's Film and Literature Board of Review announced a temporary ban on the sale and distribution of the young adult novel *Into the River* by Ted Dawe. The board will make a final decision on the book's classification next month. Until then anyone who sells, lends or displays it can be fined between \$3,000 and \$10,000. It has been withdrawn from book stores and libraries.

Board president Don Mathieson QC imposed the "interim restriction" in response to an appeal by the fundamentalist Christian group Family First against the unrestricted rating given to the book by the government's Classification Office. The Board of Review is a government-appointed body with the power to change classification decisions.

Family First has campaigned against *Into the River* since it won the top prize at the NZ Post Children's Book Awards in 2013. The organisation has called for the book to be restricted to people over 18 years old, a position that Mathieson has said he supports. Family First leader Bob McCoskrie told the *New Zealand Herald*: "It has sexually explicit material and it's ... got the c-word nine times, the f-word 17 times and s-h-i-t 16 times." He also objected to the depiction of drug use.

The banning is a blatant attack on artistic freedom. It is the latest indication that the ruling elite is responding to growing social inequality and class tensions with increasingly anti-democratic methods.

Mathieson, a conservative Christian known for his opposition to same-sex marriage, has set a dangerous new precedent and demonstrated that he has the power to remove any book from circulation at the stroke of a pen.

The book ban also illustrates the increasing influence of Family First, which is being politically promoted as a means to foster ignorance and bigotry.

Dawe's novel is the first to be banned in New Zealand in more than two decades. Previously suppressed books

include Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* in 1958 and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, in 1960 (both bans were lifted a few years later). Numerous films have been banned, including recently the horror films *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) and *Maniac* (2013).

The ban has met with shock and outrage from ordinary people. Out of 220 comments on the *Herald* web site, 185 opposed the ban, with many expressing alarm at the power of the religious right.

One asked: "Have I been transported to 1984? Do we live in a free country or not?"

Another comment declared: "How on earth does a conservative Christian lobby group manage to get books temporarily banned in NZ? Have we gone back into a 1950s time warp and no one has told me?"

A reader on the news web site *Stuff.co.nz* asked: "Since when does Bob McCoskrie or other religious zealots such as Don Mathieson dictate to the rest of the populace as to what's good for us based on their own narrow-minded religious views of the world?"

Groups of people protested the ban in Dunedin and Wellington on September 10 by silently reading *Into the River* in public. Writers have denounced the ban, including Booker Prize winner Eleanor Catton, New Zealand's poet laureate C.K. Stead, Elizabeth Knox, Patrick Ness, and John Marsden, to name just a few.

Following the backlash, the National Party government has attempted to distance itself from Mathieson's decision, despite the fact that it appointed him to the Board of Review in June 2010. Internal Affairs Minister Nathan Guy said at the time that Mathieson was "well qualified for this role."

In the lead-up to the 2014 election Prime Minister John Key and New Zealand First Party leader Winston Peters both appeared at Family First gatherings and gave interviews to Bob McCoskrie.

The corporate media has largely criticised Mathieson's

decision, yet it presents McCoskrie as a legitimate commentator. McCoskrie is a frequent guest on TV and radio, where he rails against gay rights, sex education, abortion rights, books, films and TV shows.

On June 30, 2013, the *Herald* joined Family First in denouncing the decision to award Best Book to *Into the River*. “It contains obscenities and shock references that worthwhile literature does not need,” the editorial declared.

Pointing to the authoritarian character of the ban and the influence of Family First, John Boyne, Irish author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, wrote on *Stuff.co.nz*: “In 1933, when Joseph Goebbels listed the books that should not be read by the German people, the fires were built and the works of Hemingway, Freud, Jack London and others went up in smoke. This, the Propaganda Minister declared, would lead to ‘a cleansing of the German spirit...’

“[S]omehow this rag-tag group of angry, ill-informed and frightened conservatives has been allowed to follow in the footsteps of Nazis and the Irish Catholic Church.”

This analogy is entirely appropriate. The world is experiencing the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In every country the ruling class is responding with an assault on living standards at home and preparations for war abroad. To impose this agenda the governments are carrying out sweeping attacks on civil liberties.

Dawe’s novel has been suppressed amid a campaign by the entire political establishment to glorify militarism and nationalism. This includes the grotesque celebrations surrounding the centenary of World War I and attempts by the opposition Labour, NZ First and the Mana Parties to promote anti-Chinese xenophobia.

Access to socially critical works of art is incompatible with the reactionary climate the ruling class is seeking to create. *Into the River* has evidently been targeted because it addresses issues facing working class youth in a realistic way that has struck a chord with thousands of people.

Writer Bernard Beckett, who was on the judging panel that awarded Dawe’s novel, described it on the blog the *Spinoff* as “an important work on a great many levels. Deeply moral, extremely well-written and respectful of its audience ...

“The protagonist is a young Maori boy on the East Coast, sharp as pin and filled to the brim with potential. He wins a scholarship to a boarding school in Auckland, and from the moment he arrives, understands that this is

not his place. Despite his learning and his aptitude, the school won’t be able to welcome him. It’s a story of alienation and bullying, and a story of the way those not offered a place to stand will attempt to carve out their own.”

Another judge, novelist Barbara Else, told Fairfax Media: “The novel’s a tragedy of a talented Maori youth ripped from his whanau [family] and subjected to snobbery and racism. It’s bleak. It’s hard-hitting. The sex scenes are realistic and saddening.”

Even though Dawe’s first novel, *Thunder Road*, won Young Adult Book of the Year, he struggled to find a publisher for *Into the River* and eventually had to self-publish. After that novel also won an award, Family First lobbied the Board of Review, which imposed an R14 rating in December 2013, the first time a book had received such a rating.

Dawe wrote in the *Guardian*: “Prior to this judgement, *Into the River* was the most-borrowed NZ-written YA novel in the country. After the ruling, it was removed from libraries’ shelves and either placed behind the desk or in the basement stacks ... Borrowing dropped to virtually nil.”

After receiving several complaints from teachers and librarians, the Classification Office removed the R14 rating last month, making the book unrestricted until the Board of Review withdrew it from circulation this month.

Dawe, who is a high school teacher, explained that he was inspired by British novelists Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse, whose works “carried the sharp stink of authenticity.” He set out to write books that would appeal to the sort of boys he taught, “from working class backgrounds, immigrant boys in Brixton in 1970s London; ‘new Australian’ migrants in Marrickville, Sydney; and M?ori and Pasifika boys in Auckland.”

The attacks on *Into the River* are motivated by the ruling elite’s fear of these young people, who it wants to prevent from reading books that might encourage a class understanding of the brutality of capitalist society.



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