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CULTURE WARS**CAUGHT IN THE CROSS-FIRE****A young star teacher finds herself in a losing racial battle with parents**

THE KIDS IN RUTH SHERMAN'S third-grade class loved the books she read to them. They liked the story about the Haitian child who made a doll from a broom and the one about the Vietnamese girl who was teased because of her pajamalike clothes. But their favorite story was "Nappy Hair," about a black girl named Brenda with "the kinkiest, the nappiest, the fuzziest, the most screwed up, squeezed up, knotted up, tangled up, twisted up" hair. They liked the musical rhythm of the story, which was written to promote ethnic pride, and the funny Southern accent that Miss Sherman used when she read it. But most of all, the children in the all-black and -Hispanic class liked that little Brenda looked like them. They loved the book so much that they begged the teacher for copies. Eager to encourage her students, Sherman obliged--with photocopies.

Not all the parents found the story so charming. When one mother stumbled onto a few photocopied pages of the book among her child's school papers last month, she organized a protest in the neighborhood. Suddenly Ruth Sherman, who is white, was caught in the cross hairs of political correctness. Some parents thought a white teacher had no business raising such a culturally sensitive subject. "Nappy," a colloquialism for curly African hair, is sometimes used as a put-down. Others say they would have objected to any teacher--white or black--talking to children about the topic, which they consider offensive. Ironically, only one of the 50 who protested had a child in Sherman's class. Most hadn't even read the book. But

tempers ran so hot that a few parents physically threatened Sherman to her face. Fearing for her safety, the 27-year-old first-year teacher resigned last week without so much as a goodbye to her students. "It makes me sick to my stomach to leave like this," she told NEWSWEEK. "But I'm afraid to go back there." Everyone--Sherman, administrators and parents--now admits the situation was handled badly. But the damage has been done. PS 75 is searching for a new teacher. And all sides are trying to figure out how a book about hair could tear a school apart.

The real losers are the kids. Sherman first came to the school, in the rough Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood of Bushwick, as a volunteer reading assistant two years ago. The school was under review by the State Education Department for poor performance, and the newly appointed principal, Felicita Santiago, was desperate for enthusiastic teachers with the talent to boost scores. Sherman, a Queens native and graduate student at St. John's University, was eager to put her new skills to work in the classroom. She was an instant hit. The students she tutored showed such improvement that Santiago aggressively recruited her to join the teaching staff this year. Sherman accepted without hesitation. "I knew I could make a difference," she says. Working with the principal, Sherman helped double the number of third graders reading at or above state proficiency levels.

But nothing prepared her for the storm that erupted around the book. She started using "Nappy Hair" in September. It was one in a series of multicultural books intended to get kids interested in reading. The principal had encouraged teachers to be creative--so Sherman didn't think twice about bringing in books from her own collection. But on the Monday before Thanksgiving the rookie teacher--in the middle of a math lesson--got an urgent call from the principal, ordering her to come to the auditorium. Some parents, she was told, were upset about "Nappy Hair." Sherman told her kids she'd be back in 10 minutes. That was the last time they saw her. Hearing the commotion from the hall as she approached the auditorium, Sherman ducked into the principal's office and called her fiancE. "I think something bad is happening," she whispered. "Please come get me." The minute she walked into the auditorium, all hell broke loose. "It was an ambush," says Santiago. "They turned into a lynch mob."

People yelled out racial epithets like "cracker" and shouted threats. "You'd better watch out," one warned. Anxious, Sherman smiled, a nervous habit. Her grin fueled the crowd's anger. When she rolled her eyes at the gathering, a woman in the front row lunged toward the stage. The principal and the school security guard intervened, and Sherman was rushed out of the hall. By the time it was all over, television crews were outside (parents had alerted the local media before the meeting started) and Sherman was in hysterics, waiting for someone to escort her out of the neighborhood.

How did things get so out of hand so fast? In trying to embrace cultural diversity, Ruth Sherman unwittingly wandered onto an intraracial minefield. There is a dated, but still accepted, code among some blacks that certain subjects should not be discussed by or around white folks. Author Carolivia Herron's loving characterization of little Brenda touches on an insecurity that some blacks would rather not acknowledge. The photocopies just made matters worse. Reduced to flat black-and-white images, the book's illustrations of a girl with a wiry shock of hair became caricatures easy to misconstrue. "Children understand right away that this book is about acceptance and celebration," says Herron, who wrote the book about her childhood experience. "It pains me that some adults have not gotten there."

But there was more at play in Bushwick than racial tension. "Nappy Hair," which has sold more than 30,000 copies, has been widely acclaimed by educators and critics (including NEWSWEEK). Recommended by institutions like the Teachers College of Columbia University, it is on reading lists in schools and libraries around the country. When a white teacher used the book last year at PS 198 in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, it received raves. But many of the parents at Sherman's PS 75 weren't active in their kids' education. Only four had turned out in October for a meeting on test scores. The photocopies that set off the protest had been in the child's homework folder for more than two months. Even after all the commotion, some parents admitted they still hadn't read the book.

Last week school administrators begged Sherman to return. She refused and has since been reassigned to another school. Family and friends, she said, urged her to put her safety first. But the book will stay. The school's principal has vowed to make "Nappy Hair" required reading for grades three through five. She has invited the author to the school to discuss the book with students and parents early next year. Sherman is sticking with the book, too. She's teaming up with the author to write a study guide for "Nappy Hair" and other multicultural children's books. In the meantime, reminders of the third-grade teacher still dot the walls of room 3-210, like the poster in the back of the room that lists the steps to stay cool: STOP! STAY CALM, LET'S WORK IT OUT, the pinup reads. The grown-ups might take a minute to think about it, too.

PHOTO (COLOR): Photocopies and political correctness: Facing threats and taunts, Sherman chose to leave her post

PHOTO (COLOR): At issue: An illustration from Herron's 'Nappy Hair,' drawn by Joe Cepeda

ILLUSTRATION

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By LYNETTE CLEMETSON

With EVAN HALPER in New York

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