

The tension between providing intellectual freedom to a community and protecting that community from corruption is a long-simmering one. The issue of banning books for the safety or moral protection of patrons has existed since the first public library opened its doors.

Intellectual freedom is the right “to seek out information of any kind and enjoy the free expression of ideas and information” (Fletcher-Spear, 2014). The American Library Association clearly states its position of free access of all materials to all patrons with The Library Bill of Rights, which was adopted in 1939. Articles I and II read:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Material should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

The ALA’s viewpoint is firmly underlined by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, specifically, freedoms of speech and the press. The ALA goes further to explain its reasoning behind this advocacy in one of its core values:

A democracy presupposes an informed citizenry. The First Amendment mandates the right of all persons to free expression, and the corollary right to receive the constitutionally protected expression of others. The publicly supported library provides free and equal access to information for all people of the community the library serves.

Indeed, librarians have codified their commitment to selecting, preserving and disseminating information and have an obligation to “ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations” (ALA, 2019).

However, every year, books are threatened with bans. Books are banned for a multitude of reasons, but all seem to be based on the concept of protecting the innocent reader from being tainted with toxic ideas or imagery. Those in favor of censorship take the stance that they are using their authority for the greater good. The prevailing belief is that,

without certain protections in place, crime and indecency (or “sin” if religion-based) would run rampant and threaten the stability of our society.

Churches and conservative religious groups attempt to ban books from their community and school libraries if they consider the books blasphemous or heretical, against the code of the church or against the morals that the church upholds. Federal and local governments have banned books which espouse critical viewpoints of the prevailing political climate, such as books that discuss the unfair treatment of Native Americans, or those that criticize the nation’s shameful history of slavery. Books and films that featured favorable depictions of Germans and the Japanese were heavily censored during World War II, as they were thought to undermine the US efforts in the war by humanizing the enemy. Books get banned for social reasons as well - for vulgar or obscene language or the depiction of socially unacceptable behavior. Throughout the years, many books have been banned for sexual content, in the fear that they will contribute to the delinquency of children and contaminate the minds of young adults. The treatment (or even mention) of pregnancy, masturbation or menstruation, has at times been deemed too offensive for the general public, and children in particular.

Books have been challenged since the invention of printing and, for almost as long, libraries have been under pressure to censor their offerings. Fundamentalism (whether political, social or religious) goes to war against progressivism and liberalism. Challenges are continually made that would essentially re-write history, glossing over the inconvenient facts of our country’s past and its founding fathers. That Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin themselves owned slaves, that Japanese American citizens were unfairly subjected to internment during World War II, and the late-nineteenth century pseudoscience of eugenics are all examples of ugly history, but are nonetheless important to learn about. None of these uphold the idealized picture of America but, they happened. Banning the books that deal with them would only allow history to repeat itself if we’re not careful.

Ultimately, the censoring of books is a subjective choice, made by a few who see themselves in a position of authority over the many. There is always a question of which person or group should decide what is best for everyone else. Should not the individual have the right to choose what is best for her or himself? Shouldn’t parents be the ultimate judge of what their children should read and at what age? Societal norms can be fickle things. What was unacceptable a few short years ago, such as discussing romantic relationships between people of the same gender, or awareness and fair treatment of transgender identities, is practically mainstream today. Late last month, a pastor at the St. Edward Catholic School in Nashville, Tennessee, decided to ban the very popular Harry Potter book series from the school library. He asserted that the spells and curses depicted in the (fiction) books are real and risk “conjuring evil spirits” (Washington Post, 2019.)

Book challenges are the product of a moment in time, and don’t tend to consider the larger scheme of history, nor the progress of society toward the future. What is outrageous today will be passé tomorrow. Meeting every patron’s educational needs as they seek

information is one of the library's foundations partly because it assumes the individual has control over himself and should be free to make his own determinations.

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