Random Ramblings - Does The Focus On Banned Books Subtly Undermine Intellectual Freedom?

Robert P. Holley
Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu
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Column Editor: Bob Holley (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 248-547-0306; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

I write this column with trepidation because I am a hardcore advocate for intellectual freedom. Ever since I was appointed Chair of the ACRL Intellectual Freedom Committee in 2002, intellectual freedom has been my focus within ALA. I’ve served on the Intellectual Freedom Roundtable (IFRT) Executive Committee, chaired the group, and will now represent IFRT for the next three years on ALA Council. I attend as many meetings as possible of the Freedom to Read Foundation (I also regularly send a check) and the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee. I write on intellectual freedom. The hundreds of students who have taken my collection development course get a rousing unit on intellectual freedom.

I am not questioning the exceptional success of the efforts to publicize Banned Books Week. ALA and all its units involved with intellectual freedom garner attention and much public support with this event. During Banned Books Week, libraries have exhibits of banned books, sponsor readings from them, and generally increase awareness of intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom also gets great publicity from the press and widespread discussion in blogs, wikis, and other Internet Web 2.0 tools. Nonetheless, I have four concerns about this focus on banned books.

1. Many of These Books Aren’t Really Banned. I’m including this criticism only because I’ve heard several times from conservative librarians that many books are “challenged” rather than “banned” because they ultimately remain in the collection. I don’t believe that this observation has real importance. “Banned” carries much more weight than “challenged.” While the wording may stretch the truth a bit, I expect that most people don’t find this to be objectionable in today’s hyper-marketing environment. Each challenge is an attack on intellectual freedom even if book isn’t banned.

2. Most Books Are Banned over Concerns about Their Being Read by Children and Young Adults. In reading the many articles about book challenges in the multiple intellectual freedom discussion lists to which I subscribe, I remember very few that concerned adult access to reading materials. To confirm this impression, I accessed the list of “Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009” on the ALA Website. (http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengedbydecade/2000_2009) Of the top twenty-five, only seven are adult titles. Furthermore, from my readings, I am willing to bet a large sum that most, if not all, of the challenges concerning these “adult” books dealt with their being read by teenagers. I will, however, point out one exception — 50 Shades of Grey, which was either pulled from the shelves or not purchased at all by some public libraries, despite its status as a bestseller.

The reason for the focus on children and young adults is simple. Potential censors and concerned parents can make a much more sympathetic case for protecting “innocent” children than they can for shielding “consenting adults.” For younger children, some believe that examples of bad behavior such as can be found in the Captain Underpants series can infect their children with disrespect for authority. For teenagers, the realistic themes of some of the best young adult books and adult novels worry those who believe that the teenage years are a time of happiness and a time for prolonging innocence. Youth should be sheltered from the unpleasant aspects of life. My final comment is that many parents wish to deny that their children have become sexual beings and don’t want to encounter any evidence to the contrary. While I don’t have the citation, I remember a study that asked parents whether their teenage children were sexually active. Only 10% said yes while the actual figure is closer to 50%.

As I’ll discuss in more detail below, my point is that the emphasis upon “banning” books for children and young adults detracts from the serious concerns with intellectual freedom for adults.

3. The Library Must Have Purchased the Book for It to be Banned. An obvious requirement for a book to be challenged or banned is that the library purchased it. The focus on banned books puts the onus on the general public. Librarians are the heroes for their decision to make controversial materials freely available. Thus, Banned Book Week makes librarians look good as crusaders for intellectual freedom. What the focus on banned books overlooks is the tendencies of many librarians to avoid any materials that might cause controversy. The book not purchased can’t be challenged. Mainstream book reviews are good at indicating items that might cause controversy to alert librarians who don’t want to face a possible challenge. Instead of materials selection, some librarians practice materials evasion.

I have done research in this area and drawn some narrow conclusions. Each semester, I give students in my collection development course an anonymous survey where I ask them to indicate their purchasing decisions for thirty-two controversial adult books. I selected these items from the Loompanics Unlimited catalog. (Loompanics” was an American book seller and publisher specializing in nonfiction on generally unconventional or controversial topics, with a philosophy considered tending to a mixture of libertarian and left wing ideals.”) The company went out of business in 2006 because “Amazon.com, eBay, and Google refused to allow Loompanics to advertise on their sites.” (source: Wikipedia) Some of the items are extremely controversial including how to be a hit man and ways to steal food, but others meet valid information needs of public library patrons. The homeless would profit from the title on how to live on the street. My particular favorite as a challenge for intellectual freedom is a specialized career guidance book for the sex industry, 'Turning Pro', by Magdalene Meriwether. Librarians probably don’t worry that sex industry are as legal as being a church secretary; but this book, according to WorldCat, is held by only one American public library system, the Washoe County Library System in Nevada. The book includes practical information such as “continuing education” and “planning for the future.” While the statistic may be unreliable, the consensus estimate is that at least one million people work or have worked in the sex industry in the United States compared with the reliable statistic of 156,100 librarians. My point is that this book could be useful to large numbers of public library patrons but hasn’t been purchased because of its controversial subject. I expect the same is true for books on marijuana cultivation (now permitted in some parts of the country), begging, and other unsavory though legal activities. These potentially useful books won’t ever be challenged because few if any libraries will buy them. Most librarians probably don’t worry that such materials aren’t in their collections though they would meet valid information needs for some members of their user community. I won’t even broach the issue of legal pornography.

4. The Focus on Banned Books Makes Intellectual Freedom Look Easy. I’ve always thought that one of the reasons for the popularity of the movie, ET, was that it created no obligation for the viewers. They could leave the movie promising to be extra nice to the first extraterrestrial they encountered without worrying about ever meeting one. The heart rending dog movie might at least make some feel guilty about not paying enough attention to their pets. I submit that the focus on banned books has the same effect upon intellectual freedom.

If banned books are all there is to intellectual freedom, librarians have the right to be smug. What reasonable librarian wouldn’t support the Harry Potter series? How ridiculous to ban a book because two male penguins parent an egg? Will a few pictures of a young boy prancing nude really corrupt our delicate youth? (Sendak's ‘In the Night Kitchen’) Most books on the banned books lists are easy to defend. Even the more difficult cases such as Tawin’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird

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Sings have enough literary merit to make the decision to keep them in the library collection easily justifiable. In fact, many of the most frequently banned books are on required reading lists in schools where the exposure creates the controversy. The books most often banned don’t usually raise difficult issues like practical guides for LGBT lifestyles and health, sex education, birth control, evolution, sex before marriage, positive views of non-traditional adult sexual activities such as adultery and swinging, and the topics already mentioned above. I would suspect that some librarians have problems with representing both sides of issues such as gun control and abortion when these issues would offend a large proportion of their library users.

In conclusion, do I think that this brief article will have any effect upon the celebration of Banned Books Week and other similar efforts throughout the year? Of course not. The publicity that libraries and intellectual freedom get from the media is too important to overlook. What I want is some recognition that support for banned books is the easy part. Banned books are only a portion of the spectrum of issues concerned with intellectual freedom. Librarians have an obligation to support the information needs of their users — even on highly controversial topics. A commitment to intellectual freedom should look beyond the easy part — banned books — to support these difficult decisions.