WHAT’S NEW IN LIBRARIES
Banned Books Week:
a celebration of intellectual freedom
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Abstract
Purpose – To provide background on annual Banned Books Week’s event that promotes intellectual freedom issues in the USA.
Design/methodology/approach – Historical and philosophical overview, including current celebration activities.
Findings – This year the American Library Association was notified of 547 challenges, up from 459 last year. Three of the ten most challenged books were cited for homosexual themes, the highest in a decade. Most of the books featured during Banned Books Week were challenged, but not actually banned. This is due to the efforts of librarians, teachers and booksellers to maintain them in collections.
Originality/value – Banned Books Week draws attention to the danger that exists when restraints are imposed on the availability of information in a free society.
Keywords Librarians, Freedom, Homosexuals, United States of America, Censorship
Paper type Research paper

When you think about it, it is only natural that books should be controversial. After all, a book is a collection of ideas, and ideas always have the potential to be wonderful to some and, abhorrent to others.

Here in the USA, our founding fathers recognized the importance of the freedom to examine all ideas. They framed it in the First Amendment of the US Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

For almost 25 years, US librarians have been celebrating the First Amendment every year as Banned Books Week during the last week of September. Sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA), American Booksellers Association, Association of American Publishers and others, the annual event reminds Americans not to take this precious democratic freedom for granted.

Banned Books Week (BBW) celebrates the freedom to choose or the freedom to express one’s opinion even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular. BBW stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints to all who wish to read them. After all, intellectual freedom can exist only where these two essential conditions are met. As the ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual (7th edition, publication pending) states:
Intellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate; and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication medium used, the content of the work, and the viewpoints of both the author and receiver of information. Freedom to express oneself through a chosen mode of communication, including the Internet, becomes virtually meaningless if access to that information is not protected. Intellectual freedom implies a circle, and that circle is broken if either freedom of expression or access to ideas is stifled.

During BBW, thousands of libraries and bookstores across the country set up displays of books that have been challenged or banned. They also schedule a variety of special events. For example, this year an Alabama library brought in author Chris Crutcher, whose book *Whale Talk* was banned in Limestone County schools. Crutcher discussed his books as well as his experiences with censorship. South Dakota State University library hosted petitions calling for the release of imprisoned writers. And in the state of Nebraska, the first-ever Downtown Omaha Lit Fest saluted Banned Books Week with readings and an art exhibit.

The American Library Association supports and encourages BBW activities with a BBW kit that includes posters, bookmarks, a button and a Resource Guide that contains suggested activities and ideas for a BBW celebration. The Guide also contains an annotated list of challenged or banned books and is an excellent reference for those conducting research on censorship. This list and other information can also be found on the ALA web site at www.ala.org/bbooks.

The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom asks its members to keep them informed of books that are challenged. A challenge is defined as a formal, written complaint, filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed from the library because of content or appropriateness. According to Judith F. Krug, director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom, the number of challenges reflects only the incidents reported; for each reported challenge, four or five remain unreported. Surveys indicate, however, approximately 85 percent of the challenges to library materials receive no media attention and remain unreported.

ALA is often asked why the week is called “Banned Books Week” instead of “Challenged Books Week,” since the majority of the books featured during the week are not banned, but “merely” challenged. There are two reasons. One, ALA does not “own” the name Banned Books Week, but is just one of several co-sponsors of BBW; therefore, ALA cannot change the name without all the co-sponsors agreeing to a change. Two, none want to do so, primarily because a challenge is an attempt to ban or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A successful challenge would result in materials being banned or restricted.

Sex, profanity, racism and witchcraft are the primary categories for objection. In 2002, the books most challenged or banned were those in the Harry Potter series because of complaints about witchcraft depicted in the books. Some parents also objected to depiction of dull-witted adults who were easily out maneuvered by children who sometimes did not show “proper” respect to their parents and other adults. This year the Office of Intellectual Freedom received a total of 547 challenges up from 459 last year. Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* topped the list drawing complaints from parents and others concerned about the book’s sexual content, offensive language,
religious viewpoint and violence. Three of the ten books on the “Ten Most Challenged Books of 2004” list were cited for homosexual themes, the highest number in a decade. These titles included: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *King and King* by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

In the past year, several state legislatures dealt with proposed legislation to restrict or prohibit access to materials related to sexual orientation. The ALA Council, its governing body, passed a resolution in June, 2005 affirming the inclusion of materials reflecting the diversity of our society and encouraging libraries to acquire and make available materials representative of all people.

Although they were the targets of attempted bannings, most of the books featured during BBW were not banned, thanks to the efforts of librarians to maintain them in their collections. Many more books might be challenged – and possibly banned or restricted - if librarians, teachers, and booksellers across the USA did not use Banned Books Week each year to teach the importance of our First Amendment rights and the power of literature, and to draw attention to the danger that exists when restraints are imposed on the availability of information in a free society.

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