

“Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty”

(Attributed to Thomas Jefferson)

by Bill Roberts

At a time when government employees are under attack in Oklahoma City and Washington and Raleigh, when the NRA can issue a statement that “government officials” are “jack-booted terrorists” the librarian at least knows that his role in the defense of Intellectual Freedom is not only legitimate but also imperative as a defense for democracy. To turn our backs on fifty years of the progressive realization by the library world that every citizen deserves access to the world of knowledge and that each individual should have his or her right to make up his own mind as to what he wants to read, see, or hear, would be to turn our backs on the gains of an entire generation of Americans. The librarian stands at the doorway of the house of knowledge, preaching free access to every form of material and expression!

It was not always so. Early librarians tended to be censors — they wanted only the best books in the library. As a young director in Iowa in 1965, I threw out so many Arcadia and Avalon and Hardy Boy books that the Library Board of Trustees questioned the shrinking of the collection by the Director. Today the Forsyth County Public Library buys all of these books for their patrons without any questions.

If a librarian in 1970 lost his job defending Intellectual Freedom, he could go down the street and get another job, usually at no loss of salary. Losing your job and/or causing your library to lose its popular standing in the community are results that most library directors want to avoid. Second, a librarian has to decide how far he will go defending an unpopular topic. Most people will defend a librarian wanting to keep *Catcher in the Rye* in the library. Fewer people will defend Mapplethorpe and his photographs. Fewer still will defend a Ku Klux Klan exhibit in the local library; in fact, the defense of the Klan or the American Nazi Party can cost the support of other community liberals who would usually back Intellectual Freedom.

What should be the position of the librarian as we approach the year 2000? Most public and school librarians are members of a county or school bureaucracy that has a procedure for handling complaints or grievances. This procedure should be set out and known by all involved. In order for librarians to protect themselves, they need to make sure that their input is part of the total process, and that they do not stand out. They definitely must not be seen as opposing the School Board, the Library Board or the County Commissioners. Librarians make the points that need to be made, and should involve the Board Attorney or County Attorney for a legal opinion as well. Then they should accept the decision as made by the board, commission, or court.

Librarians basically are liberal. Librarians basically are fair people who want to provide a balanced view in every library, and most librarians came into librarianship because they wanted to help other individuals better themselves and prepare themselves for a place in our society.

We serve like the vestal virgins of Rome under a set of rules decreed by the American Library Association that are generally accepted by all. Librarians are expected to defend Intellectual Freedom, but they are no longer expected to lose their jobs over it.

Is Intellectual Freedom a legitimate issue for library professionals today? As libraries enter the world of the Information Highway, the World Wide Web, and the shrinking of the Planet Earth, the librarian stands in a place of honor: the guarantor of the Democratic way of life through the provision of all knowledge to all people. Yes, it is a legitimate issue!



Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

It's nice to know that the survival of democracy comes down to sex! After all, it seems that everything else in today's world does. In fact, librarians can sleep easy tonight knowing that their stalwart defense of the 616.85835's and that special project in beefing up the 616.96's will aid us not only in the pursuits of the flesh, but in the much loftier pursuit of intellectual freedom.

Don't misunderstand, I like sex — and I think you have the right to like it, not like it, or tell me that it's none of my business what you like or don't like. But what does any of this have to do with libraries and intellectual freedom? Can somebody please tell me how Doeena Renshaw's *Seven Weeks To Better Sex* contributes anything to the body politic? — Obviously, the body politic ain't what it used to be!

The pursuit of one's sexual pleasure has been called many things in the past, from perverse to liberating, but I've never heard it called an intellectual pursuit and quite frankly, I resent it! Intellectual pursuits may have changed somewhat over the years, but not that much. Titillating pictures, graphic descriptions of intimate acts, and other published works meant solely to arouse may have their place in bookstores and on nightstands, but not necessarily in the public library.

That doesn't mean there isn't a market for this material, nor does it mean that publishers should be prevented from selling or distributing such filth. Buying sexually explicit material, or even a good old "how to manual" on the finer points of lovemaking, may be perfectly appropriate purchases for individuals in need of advice, assistance, or just plain fun, but it's an inappropriate purchase for a publicly supported institution. Librarians can and should support "access to every form of material and expression," but it doesn't have to be free and available in the library.

In fact, try finding any good smut, pornography, or even a current sex manual in the library — you can't! Libraries don't buy these things very often, and why should they? Aside from the very practical reason that these books rarely, if ever, stay in your collection very long — in fact, you might as well just give them away — they just don't warrant the spending of precious dollars on inappropriate materials.

Librarians make purchasing decisions all the time, and rarely, if ever, do they decide to purchase this stuff. Is that censorship, or common sense? And if we are not buying it, then why are we always making such a loud noise about keeping it in the library? Isn't it hypocritical to argue that we stand firm against censorship when we quietly censor, by choice, materials we deem "inappropriate, too expensive, or of poor quality" according to one reviewer's opinion?

Intellectual freedom is not about the right to publish and display perverse and vile photos of a deeply personal act. It is, and has always been about the right to say and argue a point of view, about the right to take a courageous stand on issues of public meaning and importance, without fear of censorship and retribution. Perverts who hide behind this banner do the principles of intellectual freedom and librarians a disservice.

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