

## Selection and Censorship

Bonnie Osif

*We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people.*

—John F. Kennedy

*If your library is not “unsafe,” it probably isn’t doing its job.*

—John Berry

Whatever an individual’s political views, it was hard to avoid the controversy surrounding the Michael Moore movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*. ALA had a special showing at the Annual Conference, and it seemed as if the large auditorium was packed with an enthusiastic group of librarians and friends. Ironically, the movie was screened in Orlando, home of Disney World, whose parent company refused to distribute the movie. Censorship? Well, it probably depends on which side of the controversy you support, but it sure did favor irony that so many of us saw the movie in Orlando.

Moore’s ties to librarians go deeper than a special screening of his movie. In 2001, when it looked as if his book, *Stupid White Men and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation*, would not be released or would need to be revised before release, it was librarians who campaigned for its release. When he said “that’s one group you don’t want to mess with,” he was referring to librarians, not some rough, tough gang. Faced with a blatant case of censorship, librarians went into action, and the publisher backed down. The book became a best-seller.

Selection and censorship are important issues. Selection pressures begin with tight budgets, increasing costs, crowded shelves, and ever-changing patron needs and continue with pressure from outside the library walls. Everyone has an opinion and if theirs isn’t represented or represented to the proper degree, the cry goes out that the collection is biased. It doesn’t represent the community.



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People are being exposed to *that* kind of material and with public dollars. Take it out or lock it up!

The tension between selection and censorship is a long and difficult one. There are always going to be a range of opinion, but it is possible to shed light on the situation rather than heat. A number of writers have provided that guidance, and we’ll review some, selecting a small sample from the wealth of resources.

### ***To choose a good book, look in an inquisitor’s prohibited list.—John Aikin***

How do librarians find the books to “give deeper meaning and interest,” “inexhaustible sources of pleasure,” companionship, “deepened sensitiveness to ideals, to beauty”?<sup>1</sup> Before looking at censorship, it is important to look at selection, the process that is often questioned by the censor. An excellent start is Alabaster’s recent book that “was written to train working librarians and library students in the methodology for deciding which books to choose as core titles.”<sup>2</sup> Policy statements, selection aids, budgets, core resources, and sample lists make *Developing an Outstanding Core Collection: A Guide for Libraries* a good primer to understand selection basics. Many librarians and most with a focus on collection development will find this a beginner’s text, but it is well done and provides a good description of the process, an important issue if confronted with accusations of bias. Understanding the basics of selection provides clear talking points in a censorship debate. Worth reading and keeping as a resource.

While Alabaster focuses on a core collection, Johnson looks at the topic in a broader context and with a process approach.<sup>3</sup> In *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management*, each of the chapter topics, organization and staff, policy, planning and budgets, developing and managing collections, outreach, electronic resources, and cooperative collection development, are clearly written, useful, and well-referenced. The last chapter on evaluation and assessment is extremely useful, especially within the context of collection development and censorship. Definitely worthwhile reading.

Taken from papers given at the 1991 Charleston Conference and updated for publication in 1995, *Issues in*

*Collection Management* is worth a look.<sup>4</sup> Some of the information might be dated but still interesting and largely useful. The book contains papers from some of the key names in the field, and the topics range from philosophy in collection development to vendors and faculty. Especially interesting is the section on faculty and the library and the opening paper “Information Does Not a Library Make” by Richard Abel. His “three outrageous propositions” will give you something to think about. He also succinctly makes a case for the importance of our profession: “But it is equally clear that librarians are located at one of the critical interfaces of the information/knowledge dissemination process, a point of great leverage.”<sup>5</sup> Interesting point to consider. Take a look for specific papers that are of interest or pertinent to your situation.

***To hear one voice clearly, we must have freedom to hear them all.—Kerry Brock***

There are so many titles on censorship that an effort was made to limit resources to the last dozen years. However, Asheim is referenced frequently, and his classic article, “Not Censorship but Selection” should be read by all.<sup>6</sup> In five pages he reviews the differences between selection and censorship, best summed up in his own words.

Selection, then, begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control. Selection’s approach to the book is positive, seeking its values in the book as a book and in the book as a whole. Censorship’s approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found. . . . Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect—not the right—but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading. The selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own.<sup>7</sup>

He reviews some of the issues, financial and physical considerations as well as subjective ones such as intent and literary excellence that are considered in selection. A selector looks for reasons to keep a book. A censor looks for reasons to reject a book. Succinctly written, thought-provoking, and an excellent way to begin an investigation of the differences in selection and censorship.

Paul S. Boyer is a historian at the University of Wisconsin. He reminds us that censorship is nothing new in *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the vice-society movement of the 1800s, the guardians of civic morality, he moves to court cases involving different media and to modern Internet issues. Many of his examples may be new to the reader, especially the first nine or ten chapters. Examples such as the children’s book *Madeline*, a

book about a former prostitute, the blacklist of the War Department during World War I, and the “clean book” crusade might not be well known as we deal with the attempted banning of Harry Potter or Michael Moore. However, they provide much needed background to the subject and perspective to this critical topic. In addition to discussing particular cases, Boyer puts the cases in historical context, making the issues both more interesting and understandable. He states, “I felt that the story of book censorship could best be understood if embedded within the larger cultural and social history of the decades I had chosen to focus on.”<sup>9</sup>

It is recommended that the book be read cover to cover. It is that important to a clear understand of the topic, and it is that interesting. The book is long (360 pages, plus extensive notes), but it is interesting. If time is a factor, use the index to read areas of interest (libraries, for example) and read the last chapters covering the last fifty years. Both the American Library Association and the library profession merit index entries. Excellent resource that tells a story worth reading.

***The only valid censorship of ideas is the right of people not to listen.—Tommy Smothers***

For a one-book overview of the issue of censorship, an excellent choice is Riley’s *Censorship*.<sup>10</sup> Beginning with a short history of censorship, including the note that after building the Great Wall of China, emperor Shi Huang Ti practiced an extreme form of censorship when he ordered all books except those on practical matters to be destroyed so China’s history would begin with his rule, the book reviews censorship laws, major events, organizations, and people important in subject of censorship, terminology, and an extensive bibliography. With the exception of the chapter on history, this is not meant for cover-to-cover reading but as an excellent reference on the topic. Fascinating book and recommended for those with an interest in the topic.

Written for and invaluable in assisting students with topics for speech class, the Current Controversy series entry on *Censorship* presents twenty-three arguments, pro and con, on censorship in art, popular culture, pornography, educational materials, and speech.<sup>11</sup> Comprised of reprints from a variety of sources, the authors make good cases for their points of view. While most likely beyond the common use of the books in this series by students, it is very helpful for the librarian to read both points of view on censorship. Often, we only listen to those who agree with us. Better understanding and actions arise from better knowledge. A fast and easy read that could be limited to a particular medium or topic of special interest. Worthwhile and useful for discussion groups.

Oboler, an outspoken proponent of intellectual freedom, edited his book of essays that may have taken on

renewed significance in recent years.<sup>12</sup> In his preface dated August 1979, he states, "There is a great deal of evidence that intellectual freedom in America these last thirty years has been in constant danger of diminution, if not extinction."<sup>13</sup> Librarians and ALA have worked against this problem. The collection of his essays document this fight and include reprints from *Library Journal*, book chapters, and a series of editorials, as well as some unpublished works. For both the history and for a still-timely insightful view, this book is an important look at the subject.

For the serious student of censorship and the librarian's response, Robbins provides an insightful look at the evolution in the role of the librarian in *Censorship and the American Library*.<sup>14</sup> From "no bite" to watchdog of intellectual freedom, the evolution plays out almost like an adventure story. Names of people and titles of books are placed in historical context to trace the growing concerns and eventual strong actions of librarians and the role of ALA in protecting the right to information, no matter how unpopular. Excellent book for those interested in the foundations of the issue. It is more limited in dates and focus than Boyer's book and not necessary reading but worthwhile nonetheless.

### **You can cage the singer but not the song.—Harry Belafonte**

Based on her dissertation, Curry details the results of her interviews with sixty public library directors. She begins *The Limits of Tolerance* by stating, "We must again ask whether in the name of intellectual freedom, our public libraries should promote and defend materials that perpetuate paranoia and attitudes that will start the intellectual and political growth of individuals and communities."<sup>15</sup> Since the answer guides the library and librarians, this is an important question. She addressed a number of points to the directors in her survey. The questions were both open-ended and structured on a six-point Likert scale. The chapters cover the topics of intellectual freedom definitions and interpretations, selection, types of materials such as gender, racism, pornography, and matters of "questionable truth" or revisionist history, the governing bodies and the public. The book could well have been a dry statistical treatise, but the topic is interesting and the presentation both informative and engaging. Some of the quotes are very thought-provoking. Definitely worthwhile reading. Consider how you might have answered some of her questions!

Ann Curry also studied gay and lesbian newspapers in Canada and the United Kingdom and their availability in public libraries.<sup>16</sup> Most of these publications are free, and the libraries had a number of titles in various subjects displayed. A national law passed in the United Kingdom, Section 28, that prohibited "intentionally promoting homosexuality." The library association's reaction was to protect access to the material. In contrast, Canada's response to

issues of access was decentralized, and there was no strong right-wing presence pushing for a ban on materials. An interesting study of two countries' reactions to materials deemed controversial. Fast, worthwhile reading.

For another title for the serious student of censorship, read Soley's *Censorship, Inc.*<sup>17</sup> The book looks at the role of corporations and the chilly environment they can create concerning free speech up to and including threats and law suits. He states, "A major purpose of the book is to challenge conventional thinking about the nature of censorship,"<sup>18</sup> and he does this in both a frightening and fascinating way. Corporations that produce products can also own and control magazines that promote said products in text, threaten other media to stop unfavorable coverage, and even control some discourse at academic institutions by providing lucrative contracts to the institutions. He uses a large number of examples to make his point, and the book has copious endnotes. This book does not directly apply to libraries. The index term "mall" had almost three inches of references, but the term "libraries" is missing from the index. Yet the library buys media and the role of corporations in affecting media has a direct implication for the library. While not necessary professional reading, this is so interesting and such an eye-opener that it should be on everyone's must-read list.

*Libraries, Access, and Intellectual Freedom* provides practical, crucial advice on the need for and ways to create good policies so librarians can efficiently fulfill their mission.<sup>19</sup> While not a legal resource it will "provide historical context and practical guidance for writing good intellectual freedom policies."<sup>20</sup> Strongly recommended for review by anyone considering creating or updating policies.

### **The test of democracy is freedom of criticism.—David Ben-Gurion**

*Library Journal's* Back Talk column presents different points of view on an issue. Considering the topic of non-censorship, Pratt states, "I'll believe that the librarian really holds these views when I see the library's collection of books by the Holocaust deniers. . . ." He states that the reasons usually used are that no one wants these materials or the library can't afford them. He says this does not convince him since materials of this nature are often donated and there are groups that want them. Concerning this paradox, "librarians assert two contradictory things every day. The first of these is their fervent opposition to censorship in any form. But simultaneously, they proclaim that 'Reading is FUNdamental,' based on the underlying belief that reading can make a difference. . . . But nobody can seriously contend that books have the power to alter people *only* for the better. It is time for librarians to be responsible, take a stand and make their collection reflect this stand."<sup>21</sup> This is an opinion piece that pulls no punches and provides more than enough for an animated discussion.

Recommended for a brown-bag lunch discussion group or individual reading with some careful thought.

A month earlier *Library Journal* had a “How Do You Manage?” section on collection development.<sup>22</sup> In this scenario a request arrives for books about Holocaust deniers and a faculty member on the library committee says “no way” the book will be bought. Two librarians discuss the issue. One states that the books should be bought but someone needs to talk to the faculty member with the strong opinion. The second states “libraries and librarians do not certify the truth of the materials they acquire.”<sup>23</sup> Interesting and fast reading that provides a chance to see other points of view and possibly provide a challenge to your own.

Schweinsburg looks at censorship from the ethical point of view in “Professional Awareness of the Ethics of Selection.”<sup>24</sup> She states “although the modern meaning of ‘censorship’ connotes suppression and bias and has negative implications, one purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that any selection will reflect human choices and will always be based on some value system, acknowledged or not.”<sup>25</sup> She states that judgment drives selection and “ethics’ at work in making every one of those judgments.”<sup>26</sup> Recognizing this is important to our work. A long article but the perspective and clarity of the logic make this important reading.

It must be the nature of the topic—most of the articles and the books on censorship and selection are really interesting. One of these is a study of potential bias in the selection of materials on controversial topics by Harmeyer.<sup>27</sup> He looks at library holdings on the pro-choice versus pro-life issue in “Potential Collection Development Bias.” Eight books were chosen, judged by a team of ten individuals as to their stance on the issue, and then checked in OCLC for holding locations. The study was limited to holdings in California. The results indicated academic and public libraries were more likely to own pro-choice books, religious locations were more likely to have pro-life with a “statistically significant pro-choice bias in the collection development practices of California academic and public libraries who use OCLC as their national utility.”<sup>28</sup> He also notes that the religious institutions had a “more equal distribution of the eight books.”<sup>29</sup> He points out that there is some justification for the selections in the public and academic libraries and notes that some of the reasons are the lack of traditional reviews of conservative books, policies, and so on. Following the article are three commentaries that point out some things that should be considered when reading the Harmeyer article.<sup>30</sup> For example, an equal number of books on both sides of the topic do not equal a balanced collection. Quality is also an issue. Budgets and approval plans may have an affect on whether or not a book will be received by the library. The responses are interesting and provide a useful analysis of the study and Harmeyer’s conclusions. It also may be indicative of the controversial nature of the topic

that this study necessitated commentaries, a not very common occurrence.

### ***Free speech is life itself.—Salman Rushdie***

Even if you have no students in school, do not work in a school, and have no interest in schools, *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools* is worthwhile reading for the insight and examples and may make you stop and think about this critical issue.<sup>31</sup> Reichman provides examples of challenged books and then helpful chapters on selection policies, how to handle problems, a review of laws, and appendixes that include a checklist of preparations that could be made before and response for after a censorship incident. These could be well worth spending the time to review at our own libraries. There is also a workbook and a sample selection policy. Whatever our interest, schools affect our communities and take tax dollars. What happens there is important to all, and Reichman gives us the means to understand the issues. Many of his thoughts apply far beyond the public school walls and reach our homes, our public, and our academic libraries. He states, “By suppressing materials containing ideas or themes with which they do not agree, censors produce a sterile conformity and a lack of intellectual and emotional growth in students. Freedom in public schools is central to the quality of what and how students learn.”<sup>32</sup> Since the “library is a resource that caters to varied interests; it is a place to go to find out for oneself,” and it can’t do that if it doesn’t support different points of view just because someone finds these ideas objectionable.<sup>33</sup> He sums up the issue of censorship clearly. “Although most participants in the debate over education respect the rights and sincerity of their opponents, some have sought to impose their views on the educational system, not through processes of persuasion and compromise, but by attempting to remove or restrict.”<sup>34</sup> Interesting, fast reading, and important to all, even if not directly applicable to the work environment.

“We cannot approve of those [books] which are only fit to fill the heads of children with confused notions of wonderful and supernatural events, brought about by the agency of imaginary beings.” No, this isn’t another attack on the Harry Potter series but a quote from Sarah Trimmer in 1802 when she began a magazine to review children’s books. For this quote alone Saltman’s article would be worth reading. While dated in the few years since its publication, “Censoring the Imagination” gives a list of examples of questioned books and the reasons that will anger those of us who don’t deal with children’s books on a regular basis.<sup>35</sup> All this might be old hat to some, but an interesting overview for the rest of us. It makes one shudder to think of what the world would be like if all of the wonderful fantasy of our childhood had been censored!

***A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone.—Jo Godwin***

It sometimes amazes to see what can offend or antagonize some people. We are all different and our priorities vary. And most people don't really want to offend another, to make someone uncomfortable, not in the rude or hurtful way. However, just as a pearl is the result of an irritation to a mollusk, ideas grow and are strengthened by exposure, even irritation, caused by new ideas, information, and discourse. If something offends, it might also cause deeper analysis or more research. In our information world, that cannot be seen as a negative action. By denying the right to these ideas, information, or discourse this censorship is harmful and dangerous. This is a principle that has been at the core of librarianship. Information should be available. Disagree with Michael Moore all you want, engage in debate about his movies and books, research the facts he presents—these are acceptable reactions. Deny him the right to present his thoughts or deny people the option to review them—those are unacceptable by the credo of our profession and the underpinning philosophy of our society.

A search of the Web turned up the following quote by librarian Graceanne A. DeCandido. "If librarianship is the connecting of people to ideas—and I believe that is the truest definition of what we do—it is crucial to remember that we must keep and make available, not just good ideas and noble ideas, but bad ideas, silly ideas, and yes, even dangerous and wicked ideas." A succinct and accurate thought on a controversial subject. We all have limits in what we can have in our libraries, but those limits should be based solely on solid selection principles.

*Author's note:* Section headings and DeCandido quotes were taken from [www.quotegarden.com/censorship.html](http://www.quotegarden.com/censorship.html) and <http://quotes.liberty-tree.ca/quotes.nsf/quotes/10994e593e2cdd1285256df9001c38f5>; both pages are devoted to censorship quotes.

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