

Challenge Survey Report

2006

Introduction

In 2007 the Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee of the Canadian Library Association began a survey of Canadian libraries, asking for information about challenges to materials in their collections or services and policies. In general, the point of the challenge was to remove the material from the library or to keep it out of sight, usually from minors. In this first iteration of the survey, the Committee received thirty responses. Stripped of information identifying the library involved, the data from that survey can be found [here](#).¹ Fourteen of the responses came from libraries in Ontario, ten from Alberta and six from British Columbia. Three challenges involved school libraries and twenty-seven involved public libraries.

Six of the challenges were to movies distributed on DVDs, one was to a CD of songs and stories, and twenty-three were books. A list of the titles can be found [here](#).²

At this point, a distinction must be made. In twenty-nine of the thirty cases reported, the library was dealing with objections to its collecting decisions by individual users. This is the beginning of a conversation that is described in more detail when we turn to materials for young adults and children.

In the remaining case, the library was instructed to remove the title by an organizationally superior official. This is an instance of censorship in which institutional power is used to override the usual decision-making process and deprive the entire user community of access to the work.

Survey Results

Four of the six DVDs were challenged based on sex/nudity, offensive language, and/or violent content. One, a travel guide to Western Canada for RV enthusiasts written from an American perspective, was challenged because of perceived inaccuracy, and a Mel Brooks comedy (*Spaceballs*) was apparently found in a part of the collection designated for younger readers.

In all six cases, the work challenged was retained, although *Spaceballs* was moved to the adult collection and a rating label was affixed to *Closer*.

As a rule, public libraries have set aside specific areas for children's books and library programming that is appropriate for pre-teens. The definition of "children" will vary from library to library, and it is not unusual for libraries to place the responsibility for guiding the reading habits of younger readers on their parents, rather than on library staff. The treatment of materials created with young adults (another flexible term) in mind also varies. In some cases,

¹ This links to the page, but not to the file. Can this be improved?

² Link to title listing to be supplied when listing is mounted.

such materials are housed with materials for younger readers, in some cases in separate YA collections. No doubt architectural factors are at play.

So, when *Spaceballs* was moved to the adult collection, the original collection was not clearly stated although the DVD carries a PG rating. In another instance, when a patron complained that a child might check out an R-rated movie (*Betty Blue*) presumably from the main collection, the library cited parental responsibility. There is no indication that the complainant was a parent. These instances point out the variability of library practice. One public library in Ontario does refuse to lend R-rated movies to minors.³

Rating and labeling of movies, and, to a lesser extent, graphic novels, is a murky process. In some provinces, Ontario for instance, there is a provincial rating body. There are also industry guidelines that the publishers of movies in DVD format apply. These vary; Canadian ratings being more conservative (Restricted ratings more likely) than American ratings. In the graphic novel genre, Japanese indications of appropriate ages tend in the opposite direction. While not mentioned in the complaints, not all DVDs are rated, leaving the judgement to libraries if ratings are a standard part of DVD packaging. Beyond ratings that indicate age-appropriate status, there are a variety of labels that are meant for viewers that are not necessarily young. Warning labels indicating offensive language, or nudity were added to three of the titles at the request of patrons.

The CD of Shel Silverstein's songs and stories contains a cross-section of his work and was moved to the adult collection.

The twenty-three books fall into three categories: adult fiction and non-fiction (nine titles), young adult fiction and non-fiction (five titles) and children's books (nine titles). Two of the instances report the library taking the matter to the library's Board and in one instance of a school library the library took the matter to the superintendent. Otherwise, the library managed the matter itself, apparently.

In five of the six adult fiction titles, the complainants raised the issue of depictions of sex and/or violence, and/or offensive language. In the remaining case, a joke book originating with YukYuks, the complainant was concerned about jokes at the expense of identifiable groups.

The three adult non-fiction titles drew a mixture of responses. *The New Dare to Discipline*, a book on child rearing published by Tyndale House, was criticized for allowing spanking. The library shelving *Written in the Flesh, a history of desire*, published by the University of Toronto Press, was criticized for its policy of allowing children (age unspecified) access to the main collection. Both titles were retained in their respective collections. In the case of *Street Art, the spray files*, the complainant alleged that the work would encourage vandalism in the neighborhood. The work was withdrawn from that branch and placed in another. It is not clear

³ See the response to Challenge no. 14

that the neighborhood of the second branch needed decoration. In any case, inter-branch lending was available to patrons of the first branch.

Works intended for young adults and children pose a question for which there is no definitive answer: What topics, or perhaps what detail about those topics, should be broached at what age? The span of ages, and therefore stages of development, encompassed is daunting for both librarians and parents. At the upper end of the age range, the reader is only a few months away from entering university, if not already there in the form of advance placement (AP) courses. At the lower end, the child is hardly reading, rather being read to. Of course, a parent reading to a child can control what the child hears, a degree of control that the parent gradually loses as children become increasingly capable of reading for themselves.

Apart from *The Importance of Mohammad*, all the challenges to YA and children's books came from parents, as did the challenges to the DVD *Spaceballs* and the Shel Silverstein CD. The logic is something like this: my child, at its present age, should not be exposed to this work, therefore no child of any age should be exposed to it.

The library, on the other hand assumes that, by acquiring a wide variety of titles for a wide variety of ages and stages of development, all young readers will find something of interest in the collection; something that will encourage reading and further exploration.

The same principle applies to materials in the main collection but has a particular resonance when dealing with works intended for younger readers.

The group of three challenged young adult fiction titles is remarkable for its quality. Both *Julie of the Wolves* and *Bridge to Terabithia* received Newberry Awards in the year of their publication. In the latter case, the language was found offensive ("Lordy", "pervert", "see-through blouse") and in the former, the story of a thirteen-year-old Inuit girl who runs away and lives with a wolf pack in the Alaskan tundra for some years before returning home, was held to be inappropriate for young adults due to portrayals of sex and violence. The third, a graphic novel featuring the DC Comics character Green Arrow, was judged to have an overly graphic and violent ending involving a Satanic ritual and the abuse of children.

While the two Newberry Award winners were retained in their previous location, *Green Arrow: Quiver* was moved to adult fiction.

Two young adult non-fiction titles were challenged. *The Importance of Mohammad*, a biography in a series of *The Importance of ...* which includes works on Bruce Lee and Tecumseh, was challenged because the included depictions of Mohammad were held to be offensive. The second, *The Little Black Book for Girlz; a book on healthy sexuality*, was described as too graphic for children by the parent of a toddler. Written by teenagers and fact-checked by physicians, the work may be more offensive to adults than to the target audience (and the young authors). Published in 2006, the Alberta public library reporting the challenge could not have had it in the collection long. It was retained.

Among the nine titles for younger readers, only one, *And Tango Makes Three*, can accurately be called non-fiction. The story is of two male penguins at the New York Central Park Zoo who engage in penguin courtship rituals and eventually succeed in hatching an abandoned egg and create a family. Objected to by an Alberta parent, the book was reviewed by "Central Office Religious Education Dept." and removed from the school library collection. It is notable that this is the only reported challenge that resulted in the outright removal of the title complained of and that the circumstances warrant the label "censorship."

In three cases (*Snow White in New York*, *Ziggy Piggy and the Three Little Pigs*, and *Matthew and the Midnight Flood*) the protagonists deviate from the usual paths and succeed. Snow White becomes a singer with a group of seven black jazz musicians and chokes on a poison cherry in her cocktail, to be revived by a cub reporter. Ziggy Piggy, the hitherto unknown fourth little pig, takes house building less seriously than his three brothers, but when the wolf blows down all their houses, Ziggy Piggy uses his wits to outsmart the wolf. Matthew, true to the series created by Allen Morgan and illustrated by Michael Martchenko, wakes up in the middle of the night to find adventure beckoning just the other side of his window in the company of one of a series of odd men, in this case the Midnight Plumber.

In all three cases, the unconventional behaviour is rewarded, and this fact seems to have upset library patrons more comfortable with the conservative ethos exemplified by the traditional rendering of the Three Little Pigs and numerous fables ascribed to Aesop. *Snow White in New York* received a Kate Greenaway Medal.

In both *Catch that Cat!* 'a sophisticated alternative to the popular "Waldo" books and *The Beast of Monsieur Racine* illustrations play a significant role in the complaints against them. In the first case, the complainant found evidence of the occult and in the second, a visual leitmotif often described as "gruesome" accompanies the text and primary illustrations.

In *The Waiting Dog*, the story of a dog who waits inside a house for the mail carrier to put letters through the slot, the animal's fantasy about pulling the letter carrier through the slot and eating him was found to be too graphic, age inappropriate, gruesome, and vile, rather than humorous.

Finally, there are three books for which the nature of the complaint is subject to conjecture. In *The Cat on the Hill*, the story of an abandoned cat who is rescued at Christmas time, the complaint was that the language was offensive and that it was age inappropriate. The cause appears to be the cat's remark to itself, "That damned dog!"

In *Little Birds ABC*, judged age inappropriate, various fanciful birds act out the letters of the alphabet. The letter "F" is represented by a bird eating beans and subsequently making a "Ffft" sound as it passes gas.

In all three cases the work was retained in its existing classification.

