

Intellectual Freedom Questioned Challenges to Library Resources and Policies in Publicly
Funded Canadian Libraries in 2012

By Alvin M. Schrader and Donna Bowman

In 2012, the number of reported challenges to DVDs exceeded the number of reported challenges to books for the first time in the seven years that the Canadian Library Association (CLA) has conducted annual surveys of challenges to materials in Canadian public libraries. A challenge is an attempt to arbitrarily remove or relocate a library resource—a book, a magazine, a DVD, a CD, a newspaper etc.—because of its content. Just over half of the targeted items were DVDs, including one movie trailer, while four in 10 were books. Challenges to adult works, in both DVD and book formats, predominated.

In 2012, a total of 148 reasons were given for the 73 reported resource and policy challenges. These challenges occurred in 14 public libraries in three provinces. *Goat Story*—a 2008 Czech computer-animated film directed by Jan Tománek and released in English in 2010—was challenged four times. It was challenged more than any other work in 2012. There were also three challenges to the 2009 film *I Love You Phillip Morris*. This film—released on DVD in 2011 and directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa—stars Jim Carrey and Ewan McGregor. Two library patrons called for the outright removal of the DVD from the library, while the third called for a higher movie rating. (The Ontario Film Review Board had rated the film 14A, but the Motion Picture Association of America had rated it R.) *I Love You Phillip Morris* also prompted two objections to library policies. One complainant objected to the unrestricted lending of movies rated 14A. Another complainant called for staff screening and rejection of all “offensive,” “disgusting,” “obscene” or sexually explicit” material accessible by children. “The public library system should contain material that upholds the values and moral strong points of our society to preserve it and improve it,” the complainant said.

In 2012, Jason D’Aquino’s *Circus ABC* was challenged three times; complainants thought the illustrated book didn’t belong in the library’s children section. And there were two challenges to the R-rated DVD *Hobo with a Shotgun*. Two complainants deemed this work—directed and edited by Jason Eisener—too violent. It was also targeted in 2011. In 2012, only one series was reported challenged: a season of six episodes of the British television comedy *Little Britain USA*. Each episode is counted as a separate challenge. A poster entitled “The Reluctant Reader’s Bill of Rights” was challenged because it might “encourage youth to go against their parents’ wishes and read books they have been instructed not to read. “The CLA’s Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee has conducted the Annual Challenges Survey since 2006. The committee wants to document and shed light on objections to library materials and policies in publicly funded libraries in Canada.

The survey informs the CLA's efforts—expressed through policy and advocacy work—to maintain intellectual freedom. Because participation in the survey is voluntary, reported challenges represent only a fraction of all challenges that occur during any calendar year. More important than statistics, however, are the ideas behind the challenges and the motivations behind the ideas. As in previous years, the reasons that complainants gave for challenging library materials and policies in 2012 were multifaceted and complex. For example, the objections to Jason D'Aquino's *Circus ABC* were racism, sexism, nudity, "creepiness," age inappropriateness and the depiction of "Africans ... as circus freaks. "In another instance, a patron expressed concern about the word "poop" in a picture book. She claimed that her family members "do not poop." In the survey, the library staff member reported: "I simply had a chat with her about other people having the right to discuss poop with their families and the need for us to have a wide variety of materials and topics available to provide access to all expressions of intellectual activity."

In 2012, four objections accounted for two-thirds of all challenges to library resources and policies: age inappropriateness, sexual explicitness, violence, and offensive language. There were 13 complaints about racism in library materials—including three that touch on Islam—nine complaints about nudity, eight about insensitivity and seven about sexism. The complaints about nudity included an objection to the cover picture of Harry Hamlin's autobiographical book, *Full Frontal Nudity: The Making of an Accidental Actor*. As in earlier surveys, three out of four challenges were initiated by patrons, and a few patrons self-identified as parents or guardians. One complainant in 2012 was a library patron in Grade 7. Library staff, also patrons, initiated more challenges than in any previous survey.

Just over half of the challengers called for the removal of materials from libraries, while the remainder wanted titles relocated to adult collections. Four requested warning labels. Not all of the concerns expressed by complainants were about new or recent titles, and not all were initiated by "conservative" critics. The romantic comedy *That Touch of Mink*—directed by Delbert Mann and starring Cary Grant and Doris Day—was released in 1962 and challenged in 2012 for misogyny. Similarly, *Woyzeck*—a movie directed by Werner Herzog about a famous murder case in 1821—was released in 1979 and challenged for misogyny in 2012. Both content and DVD cover art were challenged. More recent titles challenged in 2012 include *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire*. This drama, directed by Lee Daniels and released in 2009, was challenged for its "depiction of toddlers being abused, physically and sexually," and for its "graphically disturbing" images. Donald Capone's *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*—a war-themed children's picture book published in 2009—was challenged because it portrayed excessive violence. The complainant said that the illustrations of men holding guns and other weapons were unsuitable for preschool children. And Jackie Morris's *Luminaria*—a children's fantasy novel published in 2010—was challenged for being "littered with grammatical errors and hate-based."

For the second year in a row, a whole genre of library resources—adult DVDs, particularly horror films with “graphically violent images on their covers”—was challenged. The complainant objected to their shelf location: the DVDs were within the sightlines of children, near the library’s circulation checkout area. In the survey, whole-genre challenges are counted as library policy challenges. Eight in 10 challenges resulted in no change to the status of the library holdings or policies, but a few individual titles were reclassified and relocated to adult collections. Four challenged titles were removed from library collections. One challenge was resolved by affixing a content warning label to the resource. Another challenged work was referred to the publisher who was asked to review it for accuracy.

Nine of the 11 policy challenges were linked to previously unsuccessful attempts to persuade library staff to remove items from collections, to change age-based lending conditions for DVDs, books, or comics, to modify movie ratings (whether official or unofficial) or to affix a content warning label. “As a fundamental value to librarianship and a right in Canada’s free and democratic society, intellectual freedom continues to be a critical area of advocacy for libraries and those who support libraries,” said CLA President Pilar Martinez. “The CLA promotes the right of all people in Canada to share and explore different ideas and to have access to all beliefs and opinions without restriction. Indeed, libraries play a vital role in promoting and safe-guarding intellectual freedom.”

∞ Alvin M. Schrader and Donna Bowman sit on the Canadian Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee. Visit the CLA’s website to gain access to its database of challenged titles and policies.