

The Battle of Amendments, books, and boards!

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Of all the things the Coronavirus brought in, who knew it would include the fight over 'banned books?' 2020 was an awful year that was drenched in tragedy, from families separated and relationships lost, to death and despair for many. What worked for one family wasn't going to work for another, but that didn't matter, all of a sudden it became clear that we really weren't allowed to live the way we saw fit for ourselves. Everyone became judges, jury, and executioner. At the top of the list was 'talk like me, walk like me, and read like me or you're doing it wrong.' How did we get to such a place where others feel it their responsibility to limit the availability of books they disagree with.

To be clear, book banning is nothing new. It started centuries ago with such dynasties as the Chinese Emperor Shih Huang Ti, who in 212 B.C. was not only said to have buried 460 Confucian scholars alive but went on to burn all the books in his kingdom. Roman emperors did it, religious institutions had their form of book banning by creating lists of books members were forbidden to read. Queen Elizabeth had a scene from Shakespeare's original Richard II taken out, French police, the Pope, Nazi's, all the way to now! Local groups of parents and school boards are pulling books from the shelves of libraries with the saying, 'we aren't banning books, we are simply making them less readily available to young impressionable children'. Children, mind you who watch hours of YouTube and graphic video games like Fortnite and carry around an information speedway in their pocket.

The American Library Association has a bill of rights, its first 2 statements read: "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library

serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because partisan or doctrinal disapproval" (American Library Association. Library Bill of Rights).

The United States Constitution has the first amendment that states, "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" (US Constitution). People have a right to speak what they would like and to read what they like and no one can take that from them.

The American Library Association has been under attack about the availability of certain books in libraires. While there are books that are inappropriate for certain ages, they stand by their notion that parents have the sole responsibility to decide what their children can and cannot access. One issue I ran across in my study was a court case from 1984, *The people of the state of Illinois v. Paul Heinrich*. Paul got mad at an acquaintance and did what any angry man does, spread untruth and hate. He distributed pamphlets around their neighborhood telling others she was promiscuous, drug-using social deviate, and that she was an unfit mother who should have her child taken away from her. He also wrote this woman's mother a letter and called her the "mother of a whore, grandmother of a bastard, and white trash. Just to make things perfectly clear, he added, 'I hope to God you take me to court for distributing the

enclosed newsletter” (Swan. 1988. p. 1). What transpired was just that, a court case where the woman took Paul to court over defamation. Paul argued that due to the first and fourteenth amendments, this was a violation of his rights. The local court dismissed it only to have it picked up by the Illinois Supreme Court. (Although the US supreme court did not pick it up, which means it continues to circle back to local county court) Who came to Paul’s defense? The Freedom to read foundation (Librarians) who prides itself on the free flow of information. They don’t say truth isn’t important, in fact they say, “Truth MUST be an absolute defense in such cases for a number of vital first amendment reasons” (Swan. 1988. P. 2). The author goes on to say, “The commitment of librarians to the truth as an absolute legal defense should never be confused with our basic professional commitment to the flow of all kinds of information without regard to its truth or falsehood” (Swan. 1998. P. 2). This again, is a fact I never considered, that while libraries and librarians are under attack for being a free institution of endless knowledge, they will be the first to support your right to speak and read what you would like even if they do not themselves agree with the material. Such happened in another case in 1984 when the California Library Association dealt with a man named David McCalden who through his organization called Truth Missions, proclaimed the Holocaust was a hoax. He set up a table and handed out pamphlets at the local library and with a lot of push back from the Jewish community, had his contract retracted for a time before it was reinstated. Again, no matter how bad the information may be, we have to individually be the ones to decide how and what we filter.

There will be plenty of people, somewhere, that may not like or agree with a lot of things, but that doesn’t mean they have the right to take away the ability for others to hear or

read about it. Trust me, people say really mean things about me online and as awful as it is, and as hurt as it makes me, they have every right to say it.

Sources:

American Library Association. 1996-2023. *Library Bill of rights*.
<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/>

Peattie, N and Swan, J. 1988. *The Freedom to Lie: A debate about Democracy*. McFarland & Company, Inc.