

# Free to Choose: Reflections on Challenged and Challenging Books

By Jen Selinsky

Imagine this. You walk into a library and pull a book from the shelf. It is a fiction book, and the title suggests that it contains some sexually explicit material. You then try to hide the book from other patrons, but someone saw you choose the title.

Though you seem to be embarrassed by your action, you walk slowly to the circulation desk. As the librarian checks you out, her friendly expression is unwavering, and you find that she does not seem to judge you in any way. After she tells you to have a nice day, you walk outside the building. Then, you take a long look at the book's title, smile, and head to your car. Even if a certain title may be known to spread controversy, you were able to check out this book because you had the right to choose. The First Amendment of the Constitution and intellectual freedom go hand in hand to defend the rights of Americans to read whatever they choose.

Intellectual freedom, as defined by the ALA is: "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question cause or movement may be explored. Intellectual freedom encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas (Fitzsimmons, 1998)." Intellectual freedom as affirmed in the First Amendment gives people not only the right to have and express ideas, but to spread and share their ideas with others.

The "bible" for intellectual freedom advocates is the American Library Association's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. It succinctly explains the function of intellectual freedom and why it is important. "A democratic society operates best when information flows freely and is freely available, and it is the library's unique responsibility to provide open and unfettered access to that information (American, 2006)." The text then goes on to describe the challenges that the library faces when it comes to intellectual freedom: "Unfortunately, libraries must frequently confront and deal with objections to library materials, most often by those who believe that unlimited access and information and ideas causes harm to the individual and society, and sometimes both (American, 2006)."

I am going to discuss four very different examples of works of fiction that have been challenged in the United States. Let's start with a classic novel by James Joyce, *Ulysses*. John Ockerbloom, editor of *Banned Books Online* in the section called "Books Suppressed or Censored by Legal Authorities," indicates that the novel, and even though it is acclaimed as one of the best books of the 20th century, was not allowed into the

United States many years after its publication because it was deemed profane. "*Ulysses* by James Joyce was selected by the Modern Library as the best novel of the 20th century, and has received wide praise from other literature scholars, including those who have defended online censorship... *Ulysses* was barred from the United States as obscene for 15 years, and was seized by U.S. Postal Authorities in 1918 and 1930. The lifting of the ban in 1933 came only after advocates fought for the right to publish the book" ("Banned Books Online," 2003). Some readers of today may not find the material in the novel objectionable, but one has to consider the time period during which *Ulysses* was written. This is evidenced today by authors such as Stephen King and Anne Rice. Their novels may offend a potential audience of current readers, but years into the future, some people may not look upon these works as controversial. Times changed and so do people's attitudes regarding objectionable materials.

The next book, *Blubber*, by Judy Blume, I remember reading in junior high. Although I did not know it at the time, this book stirred up considerable controversy. On her CNN webpage, Jamie Allen notes that "Judy Blume's 'Blubber,' a book about a school girl who's teased for being overweight ... Blume, who has also written books on blossoming sexuality, says she has the distinction of being one of the most censored authors within America" (Allen, 1999). Blume responds that "'One of my concerns is that writers will begin to feel the censor on their backs, and we won't get their very best,' Blume says. 'Instead their fear, or the fear imposed by the publisher, will limit them. When I lock myself up to write, I cannot allow myself to think about the censor, or the reviewer, or anyone but my characters and their story'" (Allen, 1999). "Blume says she doesn't even censor what her children read. 'Not even when my daughter took 'Portnoy's Complaint' off the shelf'" (Allen, 1999). This is a wonderful example of an author who is not afraid to fight the big challenge of censorship that faces many writers.

Next the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling has stirred up a lot of controversy. The author talks about the release of the final book in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. "A number of Christian groups, including the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and the Vatican's chief exorcist, have condemned the Harry Potter books as a seductive appeal to witchcraft" (Real, 2007). The next sentence, however, talks about how others feel about the book, especially the parents of children who can distinguish between truth and make believe: "One does feel one is on the other side

of the looking glass, when our society's children appreciate the difference between make believe and reality better than some adults" (Real, 2007). The statement I find most convincing in favor of the books, however, is the underlying theme of self-sacrificing love: "Moreover, they have proposed again and again that the most powerful magic in the universe, one capable of saving the whole world, is a self-sacrificing love" (Real, 2007). If that isn't a good value, then I don't know what is. After all, most major religions teach about the importance of love.

One of the most common examples of banned books is probably Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Though some of his other books have been banned from school libraries and public libraries, Huck Finn seems to be the most controversial. "In March 1885, the Library Committee in Concord, Massachusetts, reached a decision: Mark Twain's new book—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—would be banned from the town's public library. The Committee was appalled by the author's use of bad grammar and rough language" (Bilyeu, 2010). The article then went on to describe how the advertisement of the ban, according to Twain, would sell more copies of the book: "The Library's ban made headlines, but Twain was pleased with the uproar. 'After all, it was free advertising... That will sell us 25,000 copies for sure'" (Bilyeu, 2010). While the book has always been a big seller and is one of Twain's most highly popular novels, it still generates controversy -- today because of its use of the "n" word rather than its bad grammar.

One of the best fictional defenses of intellectual freedom is *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* by Nat Hentoff. The basic plotline consists of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being placed under arrest and trial. The end of Hentoff's novel, however: "The other four members of the school board voted to free Huck Finn from any and all restrictions in the classrooms and the library of George Mason High School" (Hentoff, 1982).

A classic defense of intellectual freedom is Eli Oboler's *Defending Intellectual Freedom*. Oboler states that humans, as a whole, are free thinkers, and that they are going to do whatever it takes to fight for their freedom: "...so far as freedom of his mind is concerned ... the individual is paramount in fighting for freedom" (Oboler, 1980).

These examples of the defense of intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship, highlight their importance in public, school and academic libraries nationwide. As Americans, it is our constitutional right to choose what we would want to read. Since there will always be people who challenge the right of other people to choose for themselves what they would read, the battle is never done.

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