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Museletter: March 2006

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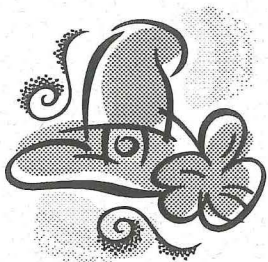
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Museletter

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Remember to sign-up for the Bridge the Gap seminar to be held on April, 21st. Read more about it on page 3.



Challenging Library Materials – Community or Individual Decisions?

Timothy Coggins

A five-year old girl was reading aloud a book from her school and read something about “bottles of deer on the wall,” outraging her mother in Richmond, Virginia recently.¹ The mother followed a formal process outlined by the Henrico County school system to challenge the book with the drinking verse.² After a panel’s review of the book, a majority of the Henrico School Board voted to leave the book on the library shelves, but remove it from a reading software program.³

Your initial question might be why this book was even in a school library. Most libraries, including the Muse Law Library, have collection development policies. The policies identify the types of collections that are appropriate for the library and outline the considerations that librarians, faculty and others make when selecting materials. For example, the Muse Law Library policy identifies three criteria that should be considered when making collection development decisions: (a) support the curriculum, clinical programs and centers of the Law School; (b) support faculty and/or student research; and (c) provide service to the local bar. Clearly, the collection development policies for public, school and other types of libraries would have different objectives and guidelines, as well as specific guidelines to be followed to challenge a book or other material held in the library.

In the Henrico County School Board case, the 12-member review committee, consisting of classroom teachers, a library media specialist, parents, a school board member as well as some administrative and supervisory staff, supported the decision to purchase the book and house it in the school library. The report concluded that, although it was unfortunate that the book uses the word “beer,” the word “beer” is just one part of a typical day-camp song and is not so offensive that the book should be removed from the library.⁴ Additionally, said the review group, the book does not endorse drinking among young people. Moreover, the report continued, it is a parent’s responsibility to discuss alcohol use with children, and the book provides a perfect opportunity to initiate this discussion.⁵

Many libraries and library boards base their collection development decisions on a wider community of users, rather than focusing the decisions on one specific user. Librarians and boards believe that parents must accept the responsibility for guiding their children to what they believe is appropriate reading material, just as the review committee in the Henrico case did. Pat Scales, library services director for the Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities in South Carolina, says that parents clearly have the responsibility and the right to raise their children as they see fit.⁶ If a parent reads something objectionable in a book, then that parent has to decide whether or not it is appropriate for his or her child. But, Ms. Scales, says, it is “worrisome” to remove books entirely from libraries as it deprives others from reading the book.⁷ According to Scales, family values differ. For example, some parents are very concerned about what they see in the Harry Potter series -- occult/Satanic themes, religious viewpoint, anti-family approach and violence.

Other parents believe that the Potter books are the perfect “portal to enthusiastic reading” and do not object to the content.⁸ Although Scales recognizes that parents must guide their children to what they believe is appropriate, she also cautions parents to read a book entirely and not to impose their own views on what children should read. “The greatest gift they could give their child is to give them the freedom to think, and the only way they can do that is to give them the freedom to read.”⁹

There are other groups that take opposing positions. Parents Against Bad Books In Schools (PABBIS) believes that the ALA, some teachers and many librarians push the “anything-goes-at-any-age” philosophy, ignoring the obvious differences between children and adults. PABBIS argues that ALA is trying to be the ultimate decision making group about the books that children should read and suggests that ALA actually pushes “smut” in both public and school libraries. “Future librarians and English teachers are trained to promote, select, acquire, use and defend smutty books by their college professors.... While public school teachers and public and school librarians formerly acted as public servants, that is no longer the case,” says PABBIS.¹⁰ PABBIS believes that librarians, teachers and groups like the ALA have become “public masters,” who are “deluded in their knowledge to believe that they know what is best for all of society.”¹¹

How prevalent is censorship in American libraries? The ALA regularly solicits statistics and reports about book challenges and reported a total of 547 challenges in 2004 to books.¹² A challenge, different from a banning, is defined by the ALA as a formal, written complaint that is filed with a library or school and requests that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness.¹³ According to Judith F. Krug, director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, the number of challenges reflects only reported incidents. Ms. Krug believes that there are as many as four or five unreported challenges for every challenge that is reported. Between 1990 and 2000, there were 6,364 challenges reported to the Office of Intellectual Freedom. A breakdown of the reasons for the challenges follows:

- 1607 challenged for “sexually explicit” material
- 1427 challenged for “offensive language”
- 1256 challenged as “unsuited to age group”
- 842 challenged for “occult theme or promoting the occult or Satanism”
- 737 challenged as “too violent”
- 515 challenged for “homosexual theme” or “promoting homosexuality”
- 419 challenged for “promoting a religious viewpoint”

Others were challenged for nudity (317), racism (267), sex education (224) and anti-family themes (202).¹⁴

In 2004, three of the ten books on the “Ten Most Challenged Books of 2004” list were cited for homosexual themes, the highest number of challenges based on homosexual themes in ten years. Sexual content and offensive language remain the most frequent reasons for seeking removal of books from schools and public libraries.¹⁵

The “top ten” books challenged in 2004 are listed below in order by most frequently challenged (with reasons for the challenges in parenthesis).

- ▶ The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier (sexual content, offensive language, religious viewpoint, unsuited for group, violence)
- ▶ Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers (racism, offensive language, violence)
- ▶ Arming America: the Origins of a National Gun Culture by Michael Bellesiles (inaccuracy, political viewpoint)
- ▶ Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey (offensive language, modeling bad behavior)
- ▶ The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (homosexuality, sexual content, offensive language)
- ▶ What My Mother Doesn’t Know by Sonya Sones (sexual content, offensive language)
- ▶ In the Night Kitchen by Maurice Sendak (nudity, offensive language)
- ▶ King and King by Linda de Haan & Stern Nijland (homosexuality)
- ▶ I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou (racism, homosexuality, sexual content, offensive language, unsuited for age group)
- ▶ Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck (racism, offensive language, violence)

Books that went off the list in 2004, but titles that have been on the ten most challenged list for many years, include the Alice series of books by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Go Ask Alice* (anonymous author), *It's Perfectly Normal* (by Robie Harris) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (by Mark Twain).¹⁶

Want to learn more about censorship and challenges to library materials? Visit the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom pages at the ALA website (<http://www.ala.org>) or visit another group's website, such as the PABBIS group (<http://www.pabbis.com>).

There are many strongly felt views and opinions about how to deal with materials that some believe are inappropriate in libraries, including differing views about who should be making decisions about what is housed in our libraries. What's yours?

¹Olympia Meola, *How To Challenge a Book: Area Parents Able to Question a School's Reading Material*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 7, 2006, at B1. ²James Ziefert, *Harry Goes to Day Camp* (NY: Puffin Books, 1994). ³Meola, *supra* note 1, at B1. ⁴*Id.* at B5. ⁵*Id.* ⁶*Id.* ⁷*Id.* ⁸*Id.* ⁹*Id.* ¹⁰*The American Library Association (ALA) Successfully Pushes Smut On Your Children: Why Do They Do It? How Do They Do It?*, <http://www.pabbis.com/news.htm> (news release dated Feb. 20, 2006). ¹¹*Id.* ¹²*The Chocolate War Tops 2004 Most Challenged Book List*, <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=presscenter&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=86967> (press release date Feb. 11, 2005). ¹³*What's the Difference Between a Challenge and a Banning?*, <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/challengedbanned/challenged/banned.htm>. ¹⁴*The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1999-2000*, <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm>. ¹⁵*The Chocolate War Tops 2004 Most Challenged Book List*, *supra* note 12. See Meola, *supra* note 1, at B5, for the list of the ten most challenged books of 2004. ¹⁶*Id.*

Bridging the Gap at the University of Richmond

Joyce Manna Janto

Whenever law librarians get together one subject is bound to arise. No, not the outrageous prices charged by legal publisher. The topic sure to raise voices is the lack of research skills on the part of law students entering the job market. "Why?" ask the law firm and court librarians, "Don't you academics teach these kids how to research? They show up and they don't know anything." "It's not our fault," protest the academics, "We try to teach research skills, but research classes are not given the respect they deserve. Students resist spending time on a class that may be worth only 1 or 2 credits."

The fact of the matter is that both sides of the argument are correct. Firm and court librarians are noticing a trend that has alarmed both undergraduate and law academic librarians. A psychologist at Carnegie-Mellon University studying the research habits of college students confirmed what we have all long suspected. Student's first recourse for any kind of assignment is the internet. This has caused concerns among educators. Students who use the web tend to value information gathering over deliberation. They do not discriminate in selecting sources of information. This leads to real problems when students enter the legal arena. Legal writing demands not breath, but depth. Sources must be authoritative, not just easily accessible.

So, what are we doing at the University of Richmond to combat these problems? Our solution is a program that we call "Bridge the Gap Between Law School and Employment." The program is offered late Friday afternoon on April 21st. We began offering the Gap program in the spring of 2000 in order to give our students an edge in the ever challenging legal job market. The program is now offered every year in the late spring.

The program begins with a presentation by the recruitment coordinator for a local law firm. This year we are fortunate to have Andrea McClellan of the firm Williams Mullen. Ms. McClellan will address those issues that students may be unsure of and feel foolish asking the attorney about. What to wear to the office? How to behave at a firm picnic? Is it OK to let my tattoo show? While some may laugh at these questions, Ms. McClellan will let you know that answering any of them incorrectly may mean that either you won't get an offer of employment at the end of the summer or you days as an associate may be numbered.

Our next step is getting the vendors on board. This year, instead of the usual training sessions, both the Lexis and Westlaw representatives will participate in a round table discussion with Gail Zwirner and Caroline Osborne about the use of online searching in the law firm environment. Ms. Osborne will bring to the table her 10 years of experience as a practicing attorney while Ms. Zwirner will relate the attitudes she encountered in her years as a reference librarian at the firm of Hunton & Williams.

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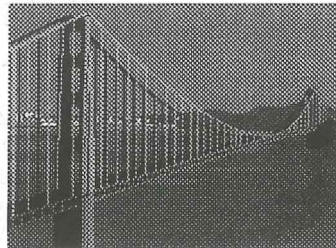
Lexis and Westlaw also provide an important part of the program - the food. Aside from providing "goodies" for a break, the program will conclude with a mini DownUnder for the participants with pizza, beer, wine, and soda.

This year the program is expanding to address the needs of students who will be going to a judicial clerkship after graduation. Being a clerk is very different from being a law student or an associate in a law firm. Justice Donald Lemons of the Supreme Court of Virginia will offer what we call the view from the bench. Justice Lemons will explain what he expects of his clerks.

Two recent graduates of the law school will also provide their insights into the world of the court and the law firm. Cassie Craze (class of 2005) and Brent Timberlake (class of 2004) will share their experiences as a clerk and a new associate. They will let you know what they wish they had known before showing up for that first day at the office.

Finally the program will be rounded out with a session designed to refresh your research skills. John Barden will present a program that reminds you where to find legal and business information either in print or on the web. Students will also be presented with a bibliography of sources that are considered by lawyers to be the "bible" in various subjects.

While we have never done a formal evaluation of the program, the feedback we receive is generally positive. I will always treasure an e-mail I received from one of my students. In it he wrote, "Thanks for making me sign up for your program. I would have been in trouble this summer without it."



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