
An Interview with Canadian Librarians

*H*ow do you deal with challenges to books in your library's collection? We talked to three librarians working with young adults in different parts of Canada and asked them the following questions:

Q: Have you ever faced a challenge?

KF: No real challenge. That is, no mass, well-organized "full frontal" attempt to have something removed.

GH: I haven't heard of too many really formal challenges in our library system.

KE: Not at a public library.

Q: How was it resolved?

KF: I tell them it's entirely up to the parent to check ...or not check... what their children read. This is our policy for children's material. Books I have actually discarded from the collection...well mostly old clunkers that are not representative of our current PC ideas.

GH: If a parent makes a formal complaint, this is often how it's handled, with a letter explaining the selection policy and showing that the book was chosen using professional review sources, etc.

KE: I did [face a challenge] when I was a librarian at a private school, where the principal of the school responded by having me pull the book off the shelf with no hesitation.

Q: What is your library's policy when dealing with challenges?

KF: We have a policy in keeping with the CLA and ALA intellectual policies, have had for years. It's a good standard to uphold your position. We have a form letter for such concerns that patrons can fill out with any title they may wish to complain about. It's quite specific, and asks for subject, page references etc. I answer all these very carefully with a stock reply! In essence: We are a public library offering material on the widest range of tastes and interests. I will send them a copy of our purchasing policy. I will often attach quotations from reviews, sometimes even rant a line or two about literature! It's a good idea to save a few good articles about intellectual freedom and quote from them, too.

GH: Our collection development policy really emphasizes intellectual freedom. There's not much in it about challenging an item, but it does include "Some patrons may take issue with the selection of any specific item. Patrons' opinions on Library materials are welcome and a process for review is provided for this purpose. An item will be reviewed in terms of its compliance with the Library's selection policy."

KE: We have a form that complainants fill out to make the challenge "official". I find it's especially important to know if the complaint is a personal complaint or if the person is part of a group. After the form is filled out, we make sure the book is consistent with our collections policy. If it is, we might move it from Junior Fiction to Young Adult, for example, or leave it where it is. We have never taken anything off the shelves entirely.

Q: What types of materials are most frequently challenged?

KF: Occasionally there is confusion with what I call an "older picture book." The subject matter may be mature, but they are done in an illustrated...manner.

GH: From my experience, picture books.

KE: Picture books.

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Q: What are your views on censorship and book banning of YA materials?

KF: I have no tolerance for intolerance! If a topic needs intolerance represented, there are several great non-fiction series books like the *Opposing Viewpoints* ones. I have had people complain that a book trying to show a bigoted point of view contains bigotry, or a book espousing non-violence depicts some violence! Well, if there is no conflict I am not sure you have a story!

GH: I'm against both of them. I believe that if you're that concerned about what your child might read in a book, then it's your responsibility to monitor what they read, not the library's. I certainly think that there are certain books that aren't appropriate for certain ages, but it's a parent's job to know what their child is doing/reading/watching and to control that as much as they feel is appropriate. I much prefer the parenting technique of one our staff members, who doesn't restrict anything her teen daughter reads, she just asks that her daughter discuss with her anything that she doesn't understand or that makes her uncomfortable. It sounds like they have some excellent discussions this way, rather than there being a whole bunch of things that it's not okay to talk about. I also think it's laughable that people complain about books when kids are exposed to all manner of mindless, incredibly negative images (violence, language, sex) in movies, TV, and music daily. I'd much rather my teen was using their brain and reading a book, even if it did have a few curse words in it. I can see not wanting to have books with certain themes used in classrooms where you have a group of students with a wide variety of backgrounds all discussing the same thing (assigned books seem to be the basis for a lot of bannings, from what I've read and seen), but to ban the book entirely is ridiculous. Just because one person doesn't want their child to read it doesn't mean that no child in the community should read it.

Q: Are there YA materials that you would not purchase for your collection?

KF: I buy books that cover that broad spectrum I referred to earlier. I try to represent all sides of an issue.

GH: If a title seems like it will be super-controversial or is more suited to older teens (I'd say that the majority of our YA readers are preteens to not older than 17, rather than 18, 19, 20-year olds), I might only purchase a few copies for our larger branches and see whether there's enough interest in it to justify purchasing more. *Doing It* by Melvin Burgess is an example of this - I originally only ordered 2 copies, but now we need more because they're making a TV show based on it and people are placing holds on our 2 copies. But in fact, I'm far more likely to not select a book because it sounds really boring (novel #10,345 about the American Civil War, for example) than if it sounds controversial.

Thank you to the librarians who agreed to be interviewed for this article:

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