

“Inside” Censorship **by Sanford Berman**

*Talk given at a Minnesota Atheists meeting, April 16, 2000, in Brooklyn Center, MN
A version of this article was published in *Progressive Librarian* #18 Spring 2001 pages 48-63.

If anyone came expecting a rant on “challenges” to library materials like the *Harry Potter* series and R. L. Stine *Goosebumps* books, on attempts to remove *Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye*, or on Dr. Laura’s crusade for Internet filtering, you’re going to be disappointed.

"Challenges" happen. Frequently.

Often, but not always, the motive *is* censorious. And in such cases, the effort should be resisted, invoking the First Amendment and Library Bill of Rights.

But two things need to be observed about “challenges” or “requests for reconsideration.” First, it *should* be the staff and public’s right to question materials selection -- unless you believe that selectors are always infallible, that they just can’t make mistakes. A library user some years ago at Hennepin County (HCL) complained about a kid’s book dealing with Down Syndrome that consistently employed the obsolete and demeaning terms, “Mongoloid” and “Mongolism.” Obviously, this was something that staff had overlooked in weeding. So it was rightly, if belatedly, withdrawn.

About a year and a half ago, I asked -- at HCL -- for reconsideration of a French picture book, accurately titled *Ugh!*, that had been secured through a jobber without any reviews or other evaluation. The selection was outsourced, done sight unseen. In fact, on examination, the book peddled every imaginable stereotype concerning Native Americans, clearly violating most guidelines for bias-free writing and illustrating. They retained the title, but I think it was proper to question the choice.

Second, while individual “challenges” usually garner headlines (and ACLU or American Library Association attention), they don’t represent the true extent or depth of library censorship. This “outside” censorship is almost certainly *less* pervasive and *less* damaging to intellectual freedom than what I call “inside” censorship. To put things into rational perspective: when, for instance, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is dropped from a school reading list in Peru, Illinois, that’s not good, but neither is it a national calamity or a meaningful case of book-banning -- because the chance is that the novel is still available in the school library, in the public library, and in the local or electronic bookstore.

And to allude once more to Dr. Laura and filtering: the ostensible object is to “protect” minors from violence and especially sex on the Web. The filters, of course, are notoriously unable to differentiate between “legitimate” and “obscene” sexual matter, and if universally applied within a library would limit access by adults to Constitutionally protected speech. The American Library Association (ALA) has adopted guidelines opposing filtering as an abridgment of the First Amendment.

Librarians have also developed online kid-guides that promote “safe” sites.

The lovely irony here is that the profession seems to be suddenly defending the presence in libraries of often graphic, explicit sexual images and texts in electronic form that it just as diligently excludes from libraries in print or video formats. (To be candid, there are real, on-the-floor problems in many libraries involving patrons who not only access visual erotica on the Internet, but then deliberately attempt to impose those images upon other library users, for instance by printing copies and laying them out publicly, or leaving a terminal with possibly offensive graphics still appearing on the screen.

However, these are behavioral issues that can be best addressed by rules and protocols and particularly by remote printers, automatic turnoffs, and privacy screens, not by filtering or pulling the plug.)

Now these, I think, are the far more widespread and serious kinds of censorship -- i.e., limiting access to ideas and opinions and cultural expression, as well as throttling speech itself -- that *are* practiced within and by libraries:

- failure to select whole categories or genres of material, despite public interest and demand on the one hand or the need to reflect a broad spectrum of human belief and activity on the other,
- irresponsible, often circulation-driven weeding, consigning sometimes valuable, classic, and unique works to the dumpster,
- economic censorship in the form of fines collected solely for revenue and the imposition of fees for services that make them unavailable to poor or fixed-income people,
- inadequate, if not outright erroneous cataloging, as well as restrictive shelving practices, rendering much material inaccessible even though it *is* in the collection,
- repression in the workplace, denying staff the opportunity to express themselves without fear on professional and policy issues, and -- especially by means of electronic monitoring -- creating an atmosphere of intimidation and submissiveness.

Selection

Self-censorship is librarianship's "dirty little secret." Put another way, it's the fact of seldom-acknowledged and hard-to-justify boundaries or exclusions. As examples, most libraries don't collect comics or many graphic novels. Few get any zines whatever, even though that's arguably the hottest contemporary publishing scene. Recent surveys show that small press fiction and poetry, together with many other well-reviewed freethought, labor, and alternative press titles, are woefully underrepresented in both public and academic libraries.

And then there's sex, particularly if it's in the form of photos or film or deals with beyond-the-pale topics like anal intercourse or S&M. Ordinarily, libraries would have bought multiple copies of anything by Madonna. But her graphic *Sex* book, which featured a number of S&M pics, was barely bought at all -- or treated like a communicable disease: One copy sequestered (as at Minneapolis Public Library) behind the reference desk, only to be glimpsed in-house after giving up your driver's license as collateral.

(As an ironic contrast, libraries like Hennepin County -- serving suburban Minneapolis -- that didn't get Madonna's tome at all, *did* buy *Madonnarama* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1993), a collection of essays and criticism *about* her book. So there's abundant commentary available regarding a work that deliberately *isn't* available!)

In "Really Banned Books" (April 1998 *Counterpoise*), librarian/author Earl Lee focuses on the two largest supporters and holders of books: libraries and bookstores. He writes, "Few, if any books are banned outright in this country. But many books *are* overlooked, ignored, sidelined and squeezed out of the market place. Many small press books are unable to find a place in bookstores or libraries." Of the numerous books that aren't "popular" or that are overlooked, especially by libraries, those with sexual content topped his survey-based list. Concluded Lee: "The books found in the fewest number of libraries tended to be those that dealt with sex in a graphic 'how to' manner... Evidently masturbation is not a popular topic in libraries." These are a few examples of works that libraries true to the Library Bill of Rights should buy, but don't:

Erotic by Nature: A Celebration of Life, of Love, and of Our Wonderful Bodies (Santa Cruz, CA: Red Alder Books/Down There Press, 1991). Edited by David Steinberg, this is a tasteful, high-quality melange of prose, poetry, drawings, and explicit photos. A volume of the same size and caliber dealing, say, with flowering plants, would probably be chosen for many library collections. This attractive, sensitive, 212-page tome is effectively banned from libraries.

Men Loving Themselves: Images of Male Self-Sexuality, by Jack Morin (Burlingame, CA: Down There Press, 1980]. Twelve personal statements concerning male masturbation, accompanied by generous photos and Morin's wrap-up essay on "The psychology of male self-sexuality."

I Am My Lover: Women Pleasure Themselves (San Francisco, CA: Down There Press, 1997). Edited by Joani Blank -- a feminist sex educator and therapist, as well as founder of Good Vibrations and Down There Press -- this consists largely of over 100 black-and-white photographs, by Phyllis Christopher, Annie Sprinkle, and three others, together with testimonials by the twelve pictured women.

Anal Pleasure and Health, by Jack Morin (San Francisco, CA: Down There Press, 1998). "A guide for men and women," illustrated with only a few line drawings. Includes whole chapters on the "anal taboo," rectal stimulation, and health problems. Of the two or three works now available on the topic, this -- now in its third edition -- is doubtless the most extensive.

Femalia (San Francisco, CA: Down There Press, 1993). Edited by Joani Blank, this is a portfolio of "32 full-color photographs of women's genitals...The vulvas belong to a group of women diverse in age, race, and ethnicity." A detailed, artistic picture of a seashell adorns the cover. Were the contents strictly shell photos, the book might make it into at least some libraries. Shells, yes. Vulvas, no. Even though the sex-positive purpose is to extol female diversity and promote a better self-image among women.

Good Vibrations Guide: Adult Videos, by Cathy Winks (San Francisco, CA: Down There Press, 1998). Some libraries may actually have this overview and evaluation of erotic videos, which spans gay, lesbian, feminist, bisexual, amateur, informational, and "hardcore" films and contains a useful resource directory. However, almost no libraries actually hold any of the mentioned works. Indeed, I'll pay \$10 to anyone who can prove that a public or academic library in fact owns even one of the listed titles. A catalog record will do. And don't worry about me going broke. I won't.

Joy of Solo Sex by Harold Litten (Mobile, AL: Factor Press, 1993). A pictureless guide to male masturbation and orgasm, including material on "toys and other self-love objects," fantasies, and multiple ejaculations. From its unlikely deep-South locale, the same publisher has also issued *Litten's More Joy: An Advanced Guide to Solo Sex* (1996), supplementing his earlier tome, and - since 1993, but shortly to cease -- the bimonthly *Celebrate the Self: The Magazine of Solo Sex*, typically offering letters, jokes, editorials, essays, and both book and video reviews, each number illustrated with cartoons and photos, the pics usually derived from reviewed items. CTS annually bestows a Golden Phallus Award upon persons who have notably contributed to "celebrating the body spirit and sexuality of every human being."

Naked Libido (Chicago, IL: LIBIDO, Inc., 1999). Consists chiefly of photographs, some in color, representing the unique sexual perspectives of Eugene Zakusilo, Trevor Watson, and Ralph Steinmeier. Including a preface by editor Marianna Beck and introduction by Larry Tritten, this is the first book-venture by the quarterly *LIBIDO: The Journal of Sex and Sensibility* (P.O. BOX 146721, Chicago, IL 60614; \$30/year), described by an *EIDOS* reviewer as "informative, intelligent, engaging, and beautiful...eroticism at its best." Having referred to the underrepresentation of freethought -- that is, atheist,

humanist, and agnostic - materials in libraries, these are three outstanding “ungodly” magazines, at least one of which ought to be in every library system (about 11% of Americans, some 24 million adults, profess no belief in religion or the supernatural):

Humanist (American Humanist Association, 7 Harwood Drive, P.O. Box 1188, Amherst NY 14226-7188; bimonthly; \$24.95/year). The oldest and most attractive of the three, this features essays, editorials, letters, and news on a host of social, economic, philosophical, and political issues. Because of its age, breadth, and being covered by online indexes, *The Humanist* has surely been the one freethought periodical most favored by libraries.

Freethought Today (Freedom From Religion Foundation, P.O. Box 750, Madison, WI 53701; bimonthly; \$20/year). A 20-page tabloid, consisting of reports, correspondence, and articles, that accents church-state separation, religious bigotry, and clerical misdeeds. Although not as broad in scope as *The Humanist*, *Freethought Today* and *Secular Nation* are unquestionably feistier and more robust.

Secular Nation (Atheist Alliance, 5146 Newton Avenue North, Minneapolis, MN 55430; quarterly; \$20/year). Letters, book reviews, analyses, essays, and news - punctuated with cartoons and poems - passionately and often wittily express the atheist worldview and lifestyle.

A related journal that belongs in *all* libraries:

Skeptical Inquirer (Committee For The Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, 3965 Rensch Road, Amherst, NY 14228-2743; bimonthly; \$32.50/year). CSICOP’s “magazine for science and reason” examines occultism, parapsychology, and pseudoscience from a critical perspective. Highly readable, it’s a painless, frequently exhilarating primer on gullibility and scientific method.

Libraries deficient in freethought books can remedy that lack by checking the reviews and ads in relevant periodicals, as well as scanning the nearly 100 page-long trade catalog from Prometheus Books (59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, NY 14228-2197; 716-691-0133; orders: 1-800-421-0351; Fax: 716-691-0137; PBooks6205@aol.com; www.prometheusbooks.com), whose secular-oriented wares cover such categories as “Alternative Medicine,” “Atheism,” “Biblical Criticism,” “Christian Science,” “Church & State,” “Creation vs. Evolution,” “Critical Thinking,” “Gay and Lesbian,” “Human Sexuality,” “Humanism,” “Mormonism,” “Popular Science,” “Self-help,” “Sexual Autobiography,” and “Women’s Issues,” plus a whole section devoted to literature for young readers. Says an *EIDOS* reviewer: “This beautiful catalog has it all!”

Finally, and perhaps somewhat quirkily, I confess to conducting a personal crusade to lighten up both our libraries and our lives by encouraging subscriptions to: *The Onion* (33 University Square, Suite 270, Madison, WI 53715; weekly; \$50/year).

By turns irreverent, scathingly satirical, and undeniably sophomoric, *The Onion* is also unfailingly funny. Indeed, it's easily the most humorous publication in the cosmos. I'm so confident of that claim, that I readily make a second challenge to doubters: I will remit \$5 cash to anyone who can honestly state that they read through the first four pages of any *Onion* without once grinning, smirking, chuckling, or chortling. No need to notarize. (Incidentally, what the 44 page tabloid *looks* like is a newspaper, visually resembling *USA Today*. What it really does is *parody* the familiar, usually chain-controlled daily rag, whether local or national.)

Increasingly dominant within librarianship is what might be termed the Techno-Blockbuster Philosophy, which views digital technology as the overriding fact of the future, rendering traditional formats like books, magazines, CDs and videos ultimately superfluous -- with a corollary emphasis, for the time being, on conglomerate-published, Madison-Avenue-hyped "bestsellers," which may be bought in massive quantities to satisfy artificially-created demand.

And they aren't just acquired. They're prominently displayed and promoted by libraries as though there were some special, intrinsic, compelling worth to them. They are deliberately "pushed" in ways that most mid-list or small and alternative press materials are not, reflecting a distinct bias in favor of bigness and big money. Just two years ago, in a talk at the University of Illinois library school, I said:

The shibboleth is that libraries are supposed to oppose censorship and provide the widest possible spectrum of perspectives and information -- cultural, social, economic, political, religious, sexual. At the national and state policy levels, something curious has happened. ALA and state associations rightly battle legislation like the Communications Decency Act, and support school and public libraries facing "challenges" to particular books or films or magazines. However, the time and energy spent on these matters is so overwhelming that as a profession we don't seem to have noticed, much less done anything about, the growing actuality that the very channels and producers of intellectual and cultural goods are shrinking in breadth and vitality and diversity. It's what Herbert Schiller, Ben Bagdikian, Michael Parenti, Norman Solomon, Noam Chomsky, and Robert McChesney have tried to warn us about for years, and what *The Nation* stunningly documented with respect to publishing alone in two recent issues. It's the rapid concentration of media ownership; the expansion of conglomerate publishing; the death of independent bookstores (and the variety they promoted) under the onslaught of Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores, as well as K-Mart discount operations; the giveaway of public airwaves to the Big Boys; and the not surprising dictation by superstores, K-mart, Blockbuster Video, and Baker & Taylor (through its "best" lists) of what gets published, what gets pushed, and even what gets expurgated (e.g., sanitized rap). The "bottom line" militates against producing or distributing novel, experimental, or critical material that may have limited markets.

To be a little melodramatic, while we're agonizing over *Of Mice and Men* being dropped from that school reading list in Peru, Illinois, Ted Turner, Disney, Viacom, and Bertelsmann are walking away with the whole damn store. These giants decide what's okay, what's fit to be read, or seen, or heard. And like well-bred sheep, we buy right into it. Our library orders hundreds of copies of books that in some instances haven't been published yet -- and in others haven't even been *written*. Why? Because Random House announced it will spend \$50,000 on hyping the new Grisham or Mary Higgins Clark novel or Marcia Clark memoir. Quality, relevance, accuracy, style -- none of that's as important as sales and hype. We become willing accomplices in the homogenization and commodification of culture and thought.

The antidote to this bleakness is for librarians to consciously and energetically identify, secure, and publicize much more non-conglomerate, diverse, and lively material, and for library users themselves to demand this: by letter, email, or in person.

Among several helpful guides and resources concerning alternative and ethnic materials, there are two essential tools:

Counterpoise: For Social Responsibilities, Liberty and Dissent (17 16 SW Williston Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; quarterly; \$35/year institutions, \$25 individuals.) Commented *Library Journal*: "It packs 65 pages with bibliographic essays and nearly 120 reviews of books, reference sources, pamphlets, magazines, videos, and CD-ROMs, primarily drawing from the output of independent U.S. publishers and occasionally works from overseas." And *College & Research Libraries News* declared: "The books, pamphlets, zines and non-print materials included.. .are often overlooked by schools, universities, and libraries. *Counterpoise* attempts to correct this imbalance by provoking essays and original reviews of small and alternative press publications, as well as reviews reprinted from out-of-the-mainstream newsletters."

Multicultural Review (Greenwood Publishing Group, 88 Post Road W., P.O. Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881-5007; quarterly; \$65/year institutions.) Easily the premier review-source for both adult and children's books, AV materials, periodicals, and electronic media concerning ethnic groups, women, and lesbians. Although not limited to small and alternative press output, they are well represented, as are academic publishers, activist organizations, and research institutes. Most issues also contain four or five major, resource-laden features, several columns, and a publisher directory.

Not likely (because of its "hot" graphics) to be received by libraries, but still a valuable guide for individual librarians and lay people interested in new sexuality publications is:

EIDOS: Sexual Freedom & Erotic Entertainment for Consenting Adults (P.O. Box 96, Boston, MA 02137-0096; quarterly; \$25/year). An acronym for "Everyone is doing outrageous sex," and published by Golden Phallus winner Brenda Loew, *EIDOS* mixes articles, letters, and editorials with erotic poetry, art, photos, and ads. But the core content is reviews, mostly of magazines, books, and catalogs, sometimes of music and videos.

Weeding

Discarding damaged or truly obsolete library materials is a practical necessity. But lately, in part flowing from that Techno-Blockbuster approach that de-emphasizes print and AV in favor of purely digital resources, there's been an epidemic of trashing, hiding, or selling arguably historic and valuable items without proper review or consultation. At San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), for example, an expensive new downtown building was constructed with ample accommodation for computer terminals but hugely insufficient shelf space for books, resulting in thousands of volumes -- some estimates suggest half-a-million -- being unceremoniously and often secretly pulped or remotely stored. Variations of this are now so common that Clark Dissmeyer -- a Midwest library user -- was prompted to write this poem for the *Anderson Valley Advertiser*:

Public Library, R.I.P.

Thieves are in the treasure house
Ravaging, plundering, laying waste
To everything beyond their taste
And in the throes of mad carouse

This ugly new breed of alleged librarians
Stupid, incompetent, computer-obsessed
Techno-yuppies, by ignorance possessed,
Prove themselves the new barbarians.

Where's "The Fox Woman" by Merritt and Bok?
Discarded and dumped and sold
For a pittance, because, they told
Us, why should we stock

A book not lately checked out?
And so among the shelves they blunder,
"Weeding," they call it, "discarding." No wonder
the Battle for Culture ends in a rout.

When boors like these are in power!
By the time they are done
No books will be left. Not one.
Above the ruins, computers will tower,

Buzzing in triumph, until they too,
Perhaps in 2 years, themselves are outdated.
To be replaced by others, created
To offer still less, nothing old, nothing new.

Novelist Nicholson Baker has described and denounced the SFPL scandal in the *New Yorker*. And both Fred Whitehead and Fred Woodworth have addressed the overall problem with righteous anger in publications like *People's Culture*, *The Match!*, and *Mystery and Adventure Series Review*. Because the two Freds' pieces are almost fugitive, they're reprinted in the most recent (1996/97) and also forthcoming (1998/99) editions of the biennial anthology, *Alternative Library Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland).

Economic Censorship

It may shock the innocent and idealistic among you to learn that fines for overdue materials are no longer collected to get the materials back or to promote responsibility among borrowers. They're levied to make money, to generate revenue. Indeed, if everyone returned materials on time, a library like Hennepin County would suddenly lose over \$800,000 a year.

What does all this have to do with censorship? Simply this: Fines demonstrably keep some low- and fixed-income people from using the library.

When it's a question of putting milk on the table or paying an overdue fine (or paying for transportation to return the material on time), milk wins. As it should. The result is often that folks then stay away from the library or keep their kids out. In short, fines are discriminatory. So are fees for core services - like Internet use or video borrowing.

Three or more ALA policy statements unequivocally proscribe fees, yet libraries continue to assess them, in effect censoring certain resources and services for people without the ability to pay. (Bestseller rental programs are another example of a service denied to persons strictly on an economic or classist basis.)

Bibliocide by Cataloging and Shelving

Libraries tend to trumpet how easily and helpfully their wares can be accessed. Some really seem to think that just because they have online catalogs with keyword searching, everything is findable. As I've argued in a number of writings (see for instance "Jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers: the sham of 'standard' cataloging," in the June 1998 *Librarians at Liberty*), basic, national cataloging records -- whether created at the Library of Congress (LC) or in the LC manner -- provide too few subject and other access points, seldom include searchable and clarifying notes, and continue to employ abbreviations and other bibliographic conventions - e.g., slashes, dashes, brackets, and equal signs -- that most people don't understand.

What's more, many topics are still not recognized by LC.

Try Searching for CORPORATE WELFARE, WORKING POOR PEOPLE, PSEUDOSCIENCE, SECULAR HUMANISM, CYBERCULTURE, MANAGEMENT FADS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, CULTURE WARS, ANTIRACISM, CLASSISM, NATIVE AMERICAN HOLOCAUST (1492-1900), MIDDLE PASSAGE (ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE), BUTCH AND FEMME (LESBIANISM), or MULTILATERAL AGREEMENT ON INVESTMENT!

Some subjects are rendered in such an arcane, unfamiliar form that almost no one would search for them that way (and many libraries don't make necessary cross-references): ABNORMALITIES, HUMAN instead of BIRTH DEFECTS; CESTODA rather than TAPEWORMS; INTERVERTEBRAL DISK DISPLACEMENT for SLIPPED DISC; and -- no kidding! -- CANADA. TREATIES, ETC. 1992. OCT. 7 instead of NAFTA or NORTH AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT.

Other topics are constructed in an indisputably biased or inaccurate fashion that may misinform or prejudice catalog-searchers against either the materials or the subjects: e.g., MANPOWER, CRO-MAGNON MAN, and SWORDSMEN instead of the more inclusive HUMAN RESOURCES, CROMAGNONS, and SWORDFIGHTERS; GYPSIES rather than the self-preferred ROMA; UNTOUCHABLES rather than DALITS; the misleading and degrading SIAMESE TWINS for the now common, medically-employed CONJOINED TWINS; the stigmatizing LEPERS and LEPROSY instead of the U.S. Public Health Service-approved and patient-desired HANSEN'S DISEASE PATIENTS and HANSEN'S DISEASE; and a distinct preference for Christianity in scores of religion-related forms.

LC could mandate much more helpful cross-references (like "Columbia. See Colombia" and "Prostrate. See Prostate"), but the sorry truth, already intimated, is that even when such cross-references *are* sanctioned, many local libraries don't put them in their catalogs. I've tried to find LATINOS in catalogs at UCLA, Albuquerque Public, and Los Angeles Public, coming up empty each time. Because LATINOS did not appear as a "see" reference pointing to where the considerable material was actually listed -- under HISPANIC AMERICANS -- it mistakenly seems that the material isn't there, that the library has no such holdings.

And then there are frequent errors, which, if undetected and uncorrected locally, can effectively murder a work. For instance, *Life lessons from Xena, warrior princess: a guide to happiness, success, and body armor* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 1998), clearly labeled a "a parody" on the cover, was soberly classed by LC in "Self-help psychology" and harmoniously subject cataloged under SUCCESS - PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS!

A tome entitled *El Dorado*, dealing with *South American* gold mining and working, got classified in the number for "El Dorado County, California." And a juvenile novel was assigned the subject heading, ESKIMOS - FICTION, although no "Eskimos" (i.e., Inuit) appeared in it.

Right now, as still another manifestation of that Techno-Blockbuster mentality, the Librarian of Congress James Billington, hopes to one day save space by shelving books in LC's Capitol Hill collections *by height* -- effectively eliminating useful browsing by reference librarians and scholars. He apparently believes that everything will ultimately be digitized and available on the tube, so why bother about shelving the physical volumes in any classified order?

He also seems to suffer from the delusion that standard, LC-type cataloging is so adequate, so functional, that relevant, wanted materials can be easily and confidently identified through the catalog. Every LC professional organization has openly opposed this potentially precedent-setting, wrong-headed idea, but Billington still seems wedded to it.

There's another shelving problem or obstacle that may be even more widespread, exemplified by the situation at Minneapolis Public Library (MPL), which has long needed a new central building and now seems likely to get it. This is what I recently wrote to a community newspaper about their shelving plans:

Dear Neighbors,

Your editorial exults about the possibility of "a new Central Library that could actually put most of its books out on the shelves." An accompanying news report indicates that "more than half the collection could go on open shelves, compared to 15 percent currently."

Again, the tone is celebratory.

One glory of American librarianship - and a revolutionary model for much of the world - is the idea of "open stacks": making books and other materials easily accessible to public and staff by arranging them in a sensible, consistent way on open shelves. No cages. No barriers. No asking permission to browse. That's the self-reliant, free-spirited American Way. Apparently, however, it's not the Minneapolis Public Library Way.

For decades, only a fraction of MPL's downtown circulating collection has been "open." Building a new facility presumably would have been an ideal opportunity for truly and finally liberating that sequestered and no doubt greatly-underused bulk of the library's resources. The Library Board's plans to more than triple the percentage of the circulating collection on public shelves would still leave 50% of that collection in closed stacks.

What possible excuse is there for continuing to hide so much of the library's riches? Do the Board and administrators genuinely believe that users can readily and confidently identify the out-of-sight 50% through the online catalog and then simply request that desired materials be paged? If so, they are deluded, since "standard" cataloging practice is woefully deficient in search-points and clarifying notes, and also burdens patrons with frequently incomprehensible and alienating abbreviations and punctuation. In short, it's essential to be able to shelf-browse for yourself, and to do so effectively, *all* the library's wares - with the exception of rare and fragile works - must be arranged on open, unrestricted shelves in a manner that collocates similar and related items. Fifty percent is not good enough. Eighty percent would also be too little.

Were Walt Whitman, the bard of American democracy, aware of this restrictive MPL plan, he'd probably roar:

CUT THE WIRES! TEAR DOWN THE WALLS!

LET NOTHING KEEP WE, THE PEOPLE, FROM

THE BOOKS WE SEEK! NO NEW CENTRAL LIBRARY

WITHOUT FULLY OPEN STACKS!

Workplace Repression

My tentative conclusion about workplace speech in libraries is that it's generally not free or legally protected, and that the only staff who may enjoy some measure of personal liberty are those either covered by academic freedom guarantees in university settings or represented by a union. Like it or not, I guess I'm the poster boy for library free speech. And while it would be wrong to totally generalize my own experience, I suspect that it does -- in essence -- reflect the atmosphere within much of the field. Here are a few cases in point:

A bimonthly *HCL Cataloging Bulletin* began publication in 1973. Some time before 1979, under my editorship, the *Bulletin* won a national award as the best library periodical of the year. It typically contained essays, letters, reviews, and reports of HCL innovations. Early on, it was illustrated with drawings and cartoons by two successive and enormously gifted HCL staff artists. In '79, I was summoned before the Library Director and Deputy Director and informed that they didn't like the cartoons, that the illustrations would have to stop, and that all future copy would have to be approved by higher-ups before publication.

This was not discussible, I learned, so -- regarding the edicts as unacceptable interference, as censorship -- I resigned as editor. The May/June issue contained no pictures, but did conclude with a "Publisher's Note: S. Berman's editorship ceases with this issue. The contents of succeeding issues ... will be new or altered cross-references, DDC-numbers, and subject descriptors.. ." Anyone curious about what censorship actually *looks* like can compare the March/April 1979 issue (No. 39) with the July/August product (No. 41). The contrast is stark.

In the summer of 1996, I was accused in the Director's office, with only my immediate boss present, of being disruptive and undermining. It was manifest that I would be disciplined in some way. And what terrible act had I committed? I publicly opposed the first proposal to emerge from a Revenue Generation Team assembled by the director: a plan to raise \$100,000 a year by doubling the juvenile fine rate. The purpose was not to get books back on time or to instill greater responsibility in youthful borrowers. It was single-mindedly to impress the Board of Commissioners downtown with how tough and effective the Library could be in reducing reliance on property taxes, on public money. It happens that neither the Board nor County Administrator had ever made a formal, written request or demand to raise non-tax funds.

It was just something that our administration thought they *should* do. And realizing that much of the staff, not to mention public, might question such a kid -- and also poor -- bashing policy, the Team deliberately did not consult with the system's two dozen children's librarians or anyone else who might have objected. Instead, the plan was railroaded through the Management Team and Library Board with great haste and minimum opportunity to criticize or debate.

I and the Children's Services Coordinator testified at a board meeting where we were rudely received. The day before, there had been a brief discussion among the Management Team, concluding with a 10-10 split vote on the proposal -- a vote that was never even intended (I had to ask for it). Half the senior managers opposed it, but the Administrative Committee that afternoon approved it anyway and the appointed Library Board did likewise the next day, with only one member dissenting.

Given the appalling lack of staff and public input, I talked to someone at an alternative news weekly who ran a short story on the issue, captioned "Library Pinches Nickels, Kids" and I initiated a simple petition, finally signed by nearly 140 staff, which asked that the fine policy be withdrawn. As it happens, the policy did get revoked, but probably because of a call from one county commissioner, who had been alerted to the library's plan and surely recognized it to be both unfair and a probable PR disaster. I wasn't the person who contacted the commissioner, but I know who was: someone I had merely spoken to, a citizen and library activist who realized that this was bad news for kids and poor people. Anyway, for testifying publicly, talking to the press, and starting a petition, I was about to be reprimanded. And I would have been -- except that I could afford \$500 to hire labor lawyers who phoned, faxed, and mailed the administration, advising that free speech rights might be involved and that they intended to represent me at any hearing or trial. That did it. They backed off. But how many librarians can afford the \$500 to buy their First Amendment rights? How many have their mortgages paid off already? I did. But I was lucky.

Only a few years ago, a cataloging staff member jokingly posted a *New Yorker* cartoon related to the Bobbitt case on his cube wall. It showed two fully clothed men at a bar or diner. The caption included the word "penis." Someone filed an anonymous complaint. Instead of realizing the inoffensiveness of the cartoon and the inherent contradiction of a free speech library banning or removing a *New Yorker* cartoon, a cartoon incidentally available upstairs on the periodical shelves of the same building, the Administration ordered it taken down. The staffer and I sought aid and solace from the state and national library intellectual freedom offices and also the ACLU, but got none. No help at all. In fact, we also asked for support from the *New Yorker*, but the magazine itself was supremely uninterested in its own content being banned.

Assuming that most of you saw the online or hardcopy *City Pages* article early last summer on my forced retirement ("Sandy Berman's last stand," volume 20, no. 971, July 14, 1999), or the special double issue of *Librarians at Liberty* ("Sandy Berman's forced retirement from the Hennepin County Library: a series of documents, followed by letters of support and a petition on the Internet," volume 7, nos. 1/2, December 1999). I won't rehash those details, but it is worth emphasizing that my initial reprimand and later mandatory reassignment stemmed originally from simply having expressed my opinion on certain cataloging rules and practices to two colleagues at the University of Minnesota in a short letter.

This had been done in the context of a team-based decision-making process having been summarily scuttled by management. Not mentioned in *City Pages* or the mainstream library press was this event: One a spring Wednesday (last year) I received a fax from *the OCLC Newsletter* in Ohio, asking me to correct and emend the text of an article announcing Hennepin's new membership in that bibliographic network. I had been told nothing earlier of such an article. As it happens, at least two paragraphs dealt directly with me and HCL cataloging policy. Of two photos in the article, one was of me as Head Cataloger. I faxed several corrections and revisions to Ohio the next day.

On Friday, following a hunch, I phoned OCLC, asking if my fax arrived safely, only to be told that it had, but that my immediate boss had in the meantime instructed them to ignore all my suggested changes. Needless to she had never told *me* that. I accordingly requested that if my input were not accepted -- after being invited -- they should drop my name and photo. I made the same request of my boss, also asking why she had unilaterally and secretly censored my words. Despite follow-up requests, I'm still waiting for answers. And apologies.

The most recent event in this sorry saga erupted in late January. A homebound friend of mine asked HCL's Outreach Service to mail her a copy of the 1995 Festschrift about me coedited by Jan DeSirey and Chris Dodge. The Outreach Librarian reported back that she couldn't find the work in the catalog, so it apparently wasn't in the system and couldn't be supplied. On hearing that from my friend, I became suspicious, since the book she wanted wasn't an old title -- and I knew there had been at least three copies in the system. Accordingly, I had a former workmate check the catalog under my name as author. And what emerged was that not only was the Festschrift missing, but so were five other books either written or edited by me, including the award-winning Prejudices and Antipathies.

In sum, six titles either by or about me had disappeared from the HCL catalog, and perhaps also from the collection. After I blew the whistle, some copies of one work were somehow found and a catalog-record recreated for that title, and all the wayward books were reordered, although not all would likely be replaced since a few are out-of-print. The official management line is that anyone, anywhere in the system, could have deleted the catalog records and that there was no formal recall of these books. Well, that explanation won't wash. This was a conscious, deliberate act of bibliocide, of censorship.

And it was directed at me, my words, and my ideas.

While anyone at HCL *could* have destroyed the bib-records, I personally know of no one -- outside of several people in top management -- who had a plausible motive for doing so. I think it probable and logical that the very persons who last year expelled me from the library would later expel my name and influence from the catalog and the shelves.

I've asked for a full accounting of which copies of what titles were removed, and how many remain. I have also demanded that HCL condemn the catalog wipeout and possible book removal as a despicable act of censorship, that they energetically seek to identify and discipline the perpetrators, and that they institute measures to prevent the recurrence of such an intellectual freedom travesty. To date, none of these things has been done.

And, just as with the reprimand and forced retirement, I got no assistance from ALA leaders, from ALA's intellectual freedom establishment, or from the ACLU.

If this weren't enough to make one despair, it seems that some libraries are considering installation of "Little Brother" software to monitor staff Internet use. During one initial experiment, an employee was rebuked by his supervisor for having spent 29 seconds at a Web site deemed not job-related.

Of course, staff shouldn't be wasting time and money on purely personal or recreational net-surfing, but this sort of covert surveillance -- wherever practiced - - is almost sure to create an atmosphere of intimidation and repression. At the very least, it hardly conduces to loyalty, trust, and openness. (Another such software package is called "Message Inspector." Both apparently monitor internet use and email.)

Additional Addresses

Down There Press, 938 Howard Street, No. 101, San Francisco, CA 94103-4 114; 415-974-8985, x205; goodvibe@well.com; fax: 415-974-8989.

Factor Press, P.O. Box 8888, Mobile, AL 36689; orders: 1-800-304-0077; factor-press@ zebra.net.

Librarians At Liberty, CRISES Press, 1716 SW Williston Road, Gainesville, FL 32608-4049; 352-335-2200; willett@gnv.fdt.net; www.LibLib.com; semiannual; \$15 year.

McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640-0611; 336-246-4460; fax: 336-246-5018; orders: 1-800-253-2187

|