

A Century of Censorship Challenges in BC: Presented by Dr. Ann Curry

By Deb Thomas.

In this informative and interesting session at the 2011 B.C. Library Conference, Dr. Curry built on her decades of research into intellectual freedom to present examples and trends in censorship over the last century in British Columbia.

Her first example was Balzac's *Droll Stories*, one of several French novels banned by Vancouver Public Library in 1905. This same book was banned by Canada Customs in 1914 and is now available for free online through the Gutenberg Project.

Among the other titles banned in British Columbia in the early part of the century were two frequently censored titles – *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (not cleared by Canada Customs until 1960) and *Ulysses* (cleared by Canada Customs in 1949).

Ripe for censorship during the first half of the 20th century were books with information on sexually transmitted diseases, sex education and birth control.

In recent years, the Surrey School Board banned three books that depicted families headed by gays or lesbians in 1997 - a decision that took 6 years to overturn. And in 2010, BC Ferries declined to carry Annabel Lyons' award-winning *The Golden Mean* in its gift store because of the nude man on its cover.

Dr. Curry divided the reasons for censorship into 4 categories: Pushing the boundaries, Blasphemy, Sedition, and Libel. Examples of each follow:

Pushing the boundaries

- The Fraser Book Bin – was hauled into court for carrying obscene books and comics.
- Little Sisters Bookstore – has fought a long and sometimes successful battle to allow books and magazines destined for the store to cross the border without being held up for months or denied entry.
- *Georgia Strait* – has fought many battles since it began in 1967 to be distributed in municipalities that felt it included “unappreciated satire.”

- *Xtra West* – continues to fight to be carried as one of the free materials in public libraries. Has been removed and reinstated in several libraries including the Fraser Valley Regional Library.

Blasphemy

(Profanity, insulting religions, witchcraft)

- *Who has seen the wind* – W.O. Mitchell's classic was challenged in Keremeos in 1975 for “for swearing.”
- *Satanic Verses* – Canada Customs blocked the entry of Salman Rushdie's controversial novel from Canada for 48 hours in 1988. Libraries were pressured to label it as “offensive to Muslims.” Coles Books chose to pull it from its shelves.
- A reading of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Robin Muller at the New Westminster Library in 1987 was protested because it included witchcraft.
- *No place for me* by Barthe Declements – One of three Wiccan books pulled from a school library in Surrey in 1994. Eventually all were retained after a struggle.

Sedition

(Incitement of resistance to lawful authority)

- *Das Kapital* – the American edition of Karl Marx's book was banned by Canada Customs in 1919 along with other Communist texts.
- Crime Comics – MP Davie Fulton proposed an anti-comic bill that was passed in 1949. Comics that depict the commission of a crime, even if the comic was about defeating the criminals, are still illegal as this law remains on the books.
- Counter culture – Jerry Rubin, Abby Hoffman, and Theodore Roszak. During the period when these three were most famous (early

1970s), SFU retained the books on their reading lists and VPL retained the books on their shelves.

Libel

(An ancient crime that dates back to the 800s in England)

- Scientology – In October 1973, libel notices for four books that criticized the Church of Scientology were sent to about 50 libraries. Municipal lawyers advised pulling the books. Victoria, Prince Rupert and Vancouver public libraries retained the books but many libraries, especially in the east, did not. The Church withdrew the charges in November 1974 but asked that libraries carry pro-Scientology books as well.
- Richard Warman – A lawyer asked the Thompson Nicola Regional District Library to remove the book *Children of the Matrix* because it libelled him. Many libraries removed it. Warman threatened BCLA with a libel suit and monetary damages because

the IFC had listed his actions as censorship. The case was eventually settled by the IFC inserting a sentence that noted Mr. Warman's definition of censorship on the Censorship in BC: A History website. The most important result was an amendment to the BC Libel and Slander Act in 2004 that prevents libraries and educational institutions from being sued for libel.

Dr. Curry ended by talking about some future threats: a trend toward consortium buying which may push selection to the "lowest common denominator"; subscription services like Bibliocommons where the decisions about approach and content are made by the vendor and not the individual library. In the latter case, Bibliocommons includes a "notices" feature that allows library members to label items using a few preset labels (course language, graphic violence, sexual content) – without any accompanying explanations.

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