

HOME

By DANIEL STURM

Mary Pollock said that at the age of 14 she'd been very curious about sex. But it was difficult for her to gain access to interesting books on the subject, such as D. H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover."

Bishop T.D. Turner Sr. of the Jesus Non-Denominational Church adds a video to a fire full of Harry Potter books and "other witchcraft items" in Greenville, Mich., last August, Greenville is about 75 miles northwest of Lansing.

As late as 1960, Lawrence's novel was the object of several obscenity trials due to its explicit treatment of sexuality. The story revolved around an adulterous affair between a sexually unfulfilled upper-class married woman and the gamekeeper working on her estate.

Pollock, who is today the vice president of the American Civil Liberties Union in Lansing, said her parents wouldn't give her permission to read the novel, though she'd spotted it on their bookshelf. This made her all the more curious. "Why is it the adults don't want me to read it?" she wondered.

Looking older than her years, Pollock was eventually able to check the novel out from the adult section of the library, and still remembers: "It had thrilling content."

On Friday, Sept. 26, the ACLU vice president will join about 30 other local community members and writers to read from their favorite banned books at Way Station Books and Stuff, in downtown Lansing. Pollock's choice will be "Lady Chatterley's Lover," of course. The event was inspired by the American Library Association's Banned Books Week, an annual celebration of the freedom to read, which reminds Americans not to take this precious democratic freedom for granted.

Banned Books Week

Community leaders, including journalists, elected officials and civil rights lawyers, will read from books as varied as "Lord of the Flies" and "Lady Chatterly's Lover." Local folk singer Medicine Crow (Michael Iott) will perform selections of banned songs and at 12:30 p.m. there will be a group performance of "Louie Louie" using the original words. 11:30 to 1:30 p.m., Way Station Books, 223 S. Washington Sq., Lansing. (517) 853-1336.

Ironically, novels that are renowned for their masterful writing style and lyricism, have been at top of the U.S. banned books list.

James Joyce's "Ulysses," which was selected by Modern Library as the best novel of the 20th century, was seized by U.S. postal authorities from 1918 until 1933 and barred from the country as obscene literature for 15 years. The ban's removal in 1933 came only after Joyce's advocates fought a legal battle for the right to publish the book.

Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," Boccaccio's "Decameron," Defoe's "Moll Flanders" and several editions of "The Arabian Nights" were all banned for decades from delivery to the United States under the Comstock Law of 1873. Officially known as the Federal Anti-Obscenity Act, the law banned the delivery of "lewd," "indecent," "filthy," and "obscene" materials through the U.S. mail.

In today's world, where even kids are used to reading about sex and seeing it in the movies, one might think the issue of banning books is no longer politically relevant.

Banned/Challenged Books in Michigan 2002-2003
Source: American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom 2003

Book title

Grounds for Challenge
2002

Finding My Voice, by Marie G. Lee

Offensive language

The Giver, by Lois Lowry

Unsuited to age group

I Had Seen Castles, by Cynthia Rylant

Unknown

Harry Potter Series, by J.K. Rowling

Occult/Satanism

Catcher in the Rye, by J.D. Salinger

Offensive language

And Then There Was Non, by Agatha Christie

Violence

Batman: The Ultimate Guide to the Dark Knight, by Scott Beatty

Sexually explicit/Unsuited to age group
Stance Magazine Unsuitable for young patrons
Sexually explicit
Wiccan Magick for Beginners, by Lady Sabrina
Religious viewpoint/Occult/satanism
Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck
Offensive language/Racism
The Drug Awareness Library, by Ruth Chier
Drugs
2003

Harry Potter Series, by J.K. Rowling
Religious viewpoint/Unsuited to age group
Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut Insensitivity/sexually explicit/offensive language/political viewpoint/unsuited to age group
Guinness World Records 2002
Unsuited to age
Sexy Beast, with Ben Kingsley (Film) Homosexuality/nudity/sexually explicit/anti-family/offensive language/violence
Revolting Rhymes, by Roald Dahl
Offensive language
Pinky and Rex and the Bully, by James Howe
Homosexuality
The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Stupidity in the 21st Century, by Scott Adams
Sexually explicit

But the library association's Office for Intellectual Freedom in Chicago has records of more than 7,000 books challenged since 1990, including 515 in 2002. And the organization estimates that less than one-quarter of all attempts to remove books from school curricula or library shelves are reported. A formal "challenge" to a piece of literature is defined as a written complaint filed with a library or school regarding a book's content or appropriateness. Roughly 60 percent of all challenges are brought by parents, followed by library patrons and administrators.

In Michigan, 18 books have been challenged since 2002, according to the Office for Intellectual Freedom. These include John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" as well as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. The top three reasons for challenging material include "sexually explicit" content, "offensive language" or being "unsuited to age group."

Beverly Becker, the assistant director of the Office for Intellectual Freedom, said that challenges reported by individuals are kept confidential. "That's why we can't disclose how many challenges there were in Lansing," she said.

After discussing the issue with a sample of passionate readers, librarians and bookstore owners, I came to the conclusion that many people believe Lansing's tolerance of literature is less restrictive than other places in Michigan.

Sue Hill, the chief librarian at the Capital Area District Library in Lansing, says the only book ever challenged during her tenure was Madonna's "Sex." Hill said even though this challenge was in 1992, before she took office, librarians still talk about how the book outraged the community. "There were quite a few hearings, but the library board supported having the book in the collection."

Ironically today Madonna's "Sex" is no longer on their shelves - it was removed after being read so many times that the pages became worn out.

Hill said she intends to read from Shel Silverstein's "A Light in the Attic" at Way Station. The novel was challenged in 1997 because it allegedly encouraged children to do forbidden things. "For example, instead of washing dishes after supper, they would throw them on the floor and break them," said Hill. "But it's just a book with a sense of humor, it's not to be taken seriously."

Sylvia Marabate, who heads the East Lansing Public Library since 1993, said there hasn't been a single incident where a book was target for a ban. "I believe the community is very highly educated. I think they value libraries, literature, reading and diverse viewpoints."

Two of the best-known examples of banned literature are Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," both books having been accused of racism, insensitivity and offensive language. In Twain's lifetime Huckleberry Finn was excluded from the juvenile sections of the Brooklyn Public library and banned from libraries in Concord, Mass.. And as recent as 1998, a parent's lawsuit attempting to remove Huckleberry Finn from a high school required reading list in Tempe, Ariz., went as far as a federal appeals court. The court's decision affirmed Tempe High's right to teach the book.

Members of the Jesus Non-Denominational Church set fire to books and posters, compact discs and movies to take a stand against the devil. The items burned included Shania Twain's "The Woman in Me" as well as movie hits "Coneheads" and "Speechless" plus an issue of Time magazine

Twain's Huckleberry Finn is the first banned book that comes to the mind of the owner of Way Station Books and Stuff, Randy Glumm. Since opening his store in 2002, Glumm recalls only one incident where a customer expressed concerns. "The Tin House Quarterly Magazine did a special literary issue devoted to sensuality and sex, and it was even a little abrasive to me." Glumm said he didn't remove the magazine, nor did he lose a customer. "I told him that I support freedom of speech, which includes

publishing works. It's a diverse country we live in. Everyone has the freedom to voice his or her distaste for certain piece of literature. And we want to defend that right."

Most public libraries and school systems require that book challenges be formalized in writing and will not consider verbal complaints. In 2000, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas filed a freedom of information act request, asking all 1,184 Texas school districts to provide information on books that had been removed from the curriculum.

Interestingly, several districts observed that after people were told their challenges needed to be in writing, many complaints "went away." Of the 153 pieces of literature formally challenged in Texas that year 65 were then banned, restricted or removed from the curriculum.

The following Lansing-area residents will read from banned books 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 26, at Way Station Books, 223 S. Washington Sq., Lansing.

Abood, Joseph E., Attorney
Levin, Matthew, Author
Spiegel, Sam, Co-owner, Vice President, Partners Book Distributors
Bunting, Jane Briggs, Director, MSU School of Journalism
Butler, Kate, Professor, Cooley Law School
Clark, Anetra, Poet, Actress
Friedlis, Andre, Administrative Law Judge, State of Michigan
Glumm, Randy, Proprietor, Way Station Books
Hamrick, Cherry, Chief Librarian, Delta Township Library
Hill, Sue, Chief Librarian, Capital Area District Library
Holland, Meegan, Booth Newspapers
Iott, Michael, Folk Singer
Jefferson, Marcus, Publisher, The Chronicle Newspaper
Marabate, Sylvia, Chief Librarian, East Lansing Public Library
Meyer, Larry, Lansing City Council Member
Nixon, Mark, Editorial Page Editor, Lansing State Journal
Pohl, Scott, WKAR
Pollock, Mary, Vice President, ACLU
Potter, Jeff, President, out your back door zine magazines
Preston, Dennis, Illustrator
Ramoff, Rich, Editor, Noise
Randville, Mike, Author, Lobbyist
Risner, Rina, Publisher, The New Citizen Press
Schwartz, Berl, Publisher, City Pulse
Scott, Lynne Orilla, Author
Silverman, Henry, Professor Emeritus MSU, President, Lansing ACLU
Sosios, Alysia, News Anchor, Channel 47 TV News
Steinberg, Mike, Author-Editor, MSU Press
Watters, Tim, Librarian, Library of Michigan
Wiener, David, City of Lansing

Wilkins, Matt, Arts and Entertainment Editor, The Lookout
Wilson, Stuart, President, Capital Area District Library Board
Most of the time, people haven't read the literature they are objecting to, notes Cherry Hamrick, director of the Delta Township District Library.

"People usually say they've heard about a book through other parents, or in church, where their pastor has told them to complain about it at the local library."

Hamrick, who was head librarian at Haslett Library for 13 years, before recently taking her new post, said people challenge books perhaps once a year. For instance, when a new Harry Potter is published, "somebody wants to talk to me about whether it's appropriate," Hamrick said. She responds by doing "the standard librarian thing. I say, 'Parents need to be the monitors, and not librarians. Talk with your child.'"

In fact, the best-selling Harry Potter series tops the list of books most frequently challenged in 2002, including two recent challenges in Michigan, according to the Office of Intellectual Freedom.

Early in August, The Associated Press reported that a church in Greenville, Mich., held an old-fashioned book burning. The church's minister told the congregation to gather up and burn "Harry Potter books and other witchcraft items, to let the world know that there are true followers of Jesus Christ who will not call evil good."

And in 1999, the superintendent of public schools of Zeeland, a town near Holland, Mich., ordered all Harry Potter books off library shelves in elementary and middle schools. A 14-member panel of parents and teachers later recommended a reversal of the superintendent's orders, leaving in place only his ban on reading the books aloud in the classroom.

In contrast to such restrictive examples, Lansing librarians believe they deal with a more enlightened patronage. "I haven't heard any horror stories from librarians in the area," Hamrick said. The Delta Township library director plans to read from Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology." Hamrick said that the book written in 1916 was challenged because it was the first time that American literature dealt with issues such as sex, depression and suicide. "People didn't like the idea that not everybody in America was happy all the time."

Resources

American Library Association, www.ala.org
20,000 free books on the web,
<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/search.html>
List of challenged books in Michigan,
<http://plymouthlibrary.org/bbw.htm>

American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, www.aclutx.org
Bill Castanier of Castanier Public Relations, a co-organizer of the Banned Books Week in Lansing, pointed to the additional influence of subtle censorship — or those books which never made it to the shelves. “It’s all about how you select books. It’s pre-censorship.”

George Orwell, whose novel “Animal Farm” is 17th on the Radcliffe Publishing Course’s Top 100 Novels of the 20th Century banned books list, wrote in his preface: “The sinister fact about literary censorship in England is that it is largely voluntary. Unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without any need for official ban.” The outcome is in part ensured by the control of the press by “wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain important topics.”

To give a contemporary example, in early September 2003, CNN’s top war correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, admitted on CNBC that the press muzzled itself during the Iraq invasion. Amanpour said CNN “was intimidated” by the Bush administration and Fox News, which “put a climate of fear and self-censorship.”

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