

SC Library Has Procedures Set Up On Censorship Issue

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In olden days it was ideas, concepts - not sex - that precipitated massive censorship efforts in many nations of the world. The writings of scientists, doctors, teachers, philosophers, politicians and even the religious were banned, often burned, simply because their ideas or discoveries did not accord with some appointed or self-appointed authority's beliefs.

But down through the ages humanity has struggled determinedly for the right to learn, the right to know. Most intelligent adults today would agree that many books in the library are not worth the paper they are printed on. Most would even agree that possibly, in some way, even an explicit sexual passage in a book, could affect a minor undesirably.

But most adults would call it a heinous crime to burn or otherwise destroy a book simply to prevent someone else from reading it. It is generally conceded by most adults that the risks of censorship are greater than the risks posed by trashy books. They argue that the world is really better off, in the long run, if people are given every opportunity to become informed.

But Charles Atkins, Santa Cruz librarian, deems it unreasonable for a public library system to ignore the concerns of an individual or a group about a particular book or other piece of material offered the area's some 70,000 patrons.

"We very much recognize the right of people to question our selections," Atkins said. "All inquiries or complaints are taken seriously and we have devised a procedure for considering them."

The procedure requires the complaint or inquiry to be given in writing on a form available at the library or in its branches. The complainant must identify him/herself and state whether he or she is representing an individual or an organization. The organization must be named, if the latter is the case.

Then, in writing, the complainant must state on the form the specific objection to the book, citing pages and passages. To be answered are such questions as: did you read the whole book, what do you feel might be the result of reading the book, is it suitable for some age groups, are you aware of the judgment of this book by literary critics and/or recognized authorities in the subject treated by the book, what would you like us to do about the book?

There are other questions intended to give Atkins insight into the nature of the complaint.

Atkins said that unsigned letters of complaint or telephoned complaints are not accepted, nor will the library accept complaints from non-residents of the county.

The complaint is then reviewed by the staff and Atkins against the standards of the library acquisition policy, the library Bill of Rights and other professional standards.

"Of course there could be a book that contains something that can be questioned," Atkins said. "I don't believe that every book published should be in the public library or even should be published at all. A lot of very poor books are being published. We try not to buy poorly written, inaccurate books, books that give out misinformation, material that is out of date, material that does not serve a library need. We have over 300,000 books, 475 magazines, 25 newspapers, along with much other material."

"I don't recall ever having removed a book from the shelves. We have found that more often than otherwise a complaint is a personal opinion. Something is offensive to the individual, hence the complaint."

"Most times a complaint is not based on content or sex. More likely, the complainant disagrees with the philosophy, the political viewpoint. We have complaints about books on religion, different religious denominations," Atkins said.

Atkins agrees with his colleagues nationwide, however, that the Moral Majority and others lately have begun to exert a great deal of pressure on schools and libraries and is seeking to attain its purpose through intimidation.

"We find that some of what we get here is stemming from a television personality mentioning that specific books should not be available at the library and asking his listeners to inquire if the library has certain books."

The Santa Cruz Public Library subscribes to the American Library Association's "Library Bill of Rights." That is the official policy of the Library Board, and Atkins declares:

The ALA Library Bill of Rights affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas and that the following basic policies should guide their services:

•1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.

Last in a series.

Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background or views of those contributing to their creation.

•2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

•3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

•4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

•5. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background or views."

Librarians are rallying to fight the new wave of efforts to restrict the information they present or to deny access to that information to some people.

Censorship remains censorship, they argue, whether it is fighting so-called immoral books or the publications of the Moral Majority, a political minority or whatever.

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