

# Banned Books Week: Celebrating Your (and Your Teens!) Freedom to Read

By Ken Petrilli

Each year for a week in September, the eyes and ears of the library world turn toward one of the more prevalent issues that face libraries and librarians every day—the issue of intellectual freedom. This week is Banned Books Week, observed this year September 26 to October 3.

For those not familiar with this event, here's a bit of background. Banned Books Week is observed the last week of September each year, and has been observed every year since 1982, after many inside the profession noticed a great surge in the number of book challenges in the United States. The event is jointly sponsored by the

American Booksellers Association, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the American Library Association (ALA), the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Association of American Publishers, and the National Association of College Stores.

Why take the time to celebrate Banned Books Week? As teen and young adult librarians, we are on the front lines of intellectual freedom issues more than anyone else in our profession. Don't believe me? Let's take a look at the list of the ten most challenged books of 2007, according to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF):

1. *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson/Peter Parnell
2. *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier
3. *Olive's Ocean* by Kevin Henkes
4. *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman
5. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
6. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
7. *TTYL* by Lauren Myracle
8. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
9. *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris
10. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

Any of these titles look familiar? I would think so; it is safe to say that at least seven of these books are in many YA collections across the country.

For the most part, challenges to these (and many other) books are issued by parents concerned about what their children are reading. This, in and of itself, is not necessarily a bad thing; we want to see parents who are concerned! What we don't want is that concern turning to outright fear. As Judy Blume so eloquently pointed out,

"I believe that censorship grows out of fear, and because fear is contagious, some parents are easily swayed. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children's lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don't read about it, their children won't know about it. And if they don't know about it, it won't happen."<sup>1</sup>

I think it is important for us to remember not to overtly demonize most potential challengers. They are, after all, people just like us, and being concerned for our children's well-being is never wrong. Lauren Myracle, an author whose books

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are frequently challenged, spoke beautifully about this very notion when she spoke in Denver this past January at the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF)'s author event. She responds to every angry and outraged e-mail she gets from parents, and many times finds that they are not quite as angry at her as it might, at first, seem (see link under "Resources" for the entire speech). At the same time, never forget that potential challengers are out there, and some are motivated by fervent religious or political beliefs. They are often highly organized and have the time and resources to back their agenda. Remember that having a clear and well-written collection development policy goes a long way towards deflecting most challenges.

## How to Celebrate Banned Books Week?

- Make a display, or two or three! Create booklists to go with them, or order the ones available from ALA (along with posters and other materials). Place them strategically and they'll spark discussions. And try to step away from the traditional banned books week oldies and goldies (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Huck Finn*, and the like) and display newer items like *TTYL*, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or *Looking for Alaska*.
- Don't forget to promote Banned Books Week on your blog, MySpace, or Facebook (Banned Books Week is on both social networking sites so be sure and friend them). Tweet about it if you're on Twitter. Link to some of

the many resources listed elsewhere in this article.

- Hold a banned books discussion, or a banned books reading. There are tons of lists available on the OIF's Web site.
- Don't forget your comic readers! The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is the industry's watchdog and the site has many examples of comics that have been challenged or banned.
- Take some time to look at your library's collection development policy. Is it up to date? Are you prepared if a challenge is issued? YALSA has resources available if you need help.

Banned Books Week was created in large part to remind us and our patrons that books and libraries are an important part of our democratic society. We provide equal access for anyone to whatever it is they are looking to read; and that includes the teens we work with every day. I like to think that the last week of September is an opportunity to remember that what I do is important, and that fighting for our collections and our teen patrons is a worthy battle. I hope you all feel the same.

Happy Banned Books Week! YALS

## References

1. Smith, P. "Judy Blume - 1938," [www.ncteamericancollection.org/litmap/blume\\_judy\\_nj.htm](http://www.ncteamericancollection.org/litmap/blume_judy_nj.htm) (March 29, 2009).

## Banned Books Week Resources

For ideas, materials, and more, check out the official Banned Books Week sites:

- ALA. "Banned Books Week: Celebrating the Freedom to Read," [www.ala.org/bbooks](http://www.ala.org/bbooks) (April 2, 2009).
- BannedBooksWeek.org. "Banned Books Week," [www.bannedbooksweek.org](http://www.bannedbooksweek.org) (April 2, 2009).

ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom has lots of resources not only for Banned Books Week, but all facets of intellectual freedom:

- ALA. "OIF," [www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif](http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif) (April 2, 2009).
- The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. "Welcome to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund!" [www.cbldf.org](http://www.cbldf.org) (April 2, 2009).
- This link will take you to Lauren Myracle's excellent presentation from Midwinter last January.
- OIF Blog. "Lauren Myracle's Presentation at FTRF Midwinter Event," [www.oif.ala.org/oif/?P=198](http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?P=198) (April 2, 2009).
- YALSA's resources on dealing with challenges.
- YALSA. "Dealing with Challenges to Young Adult Materials," [www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/profdev/yachallenges.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/profdev/yachallenges.cfm) (April 2, 2009).
- YALSA's IFC.
- YALSA Wiki. "Censorship and Challenges," [http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Censorship\\_%26\\_Challenges](http://wikis.ala.org/yalsa/index.php/Censorship_%26_Challenges) (April 2, 2009).