

Banned Books Week at Biscayne Bay Library

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“Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us.”—Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas

Biscayne Bay Library held its first-ever Banned Books Week Readout September 21 – 24, 2003. Readings from works ranged from the scientific—Galileo to Darwin’s *Origin of Species*—to the supernatural, *Harry Potter & the Chamber of Secrets*.

Why have some texts been forbidden? Mostly because organizations and institutions almost always political or religious in origin, take it upon themselves to decide what is acceptable or allowable for you to read.

Unfortunately, attempts to restrict access to materials of choice are not a thing of the past. Through the ages only the direction of censorship has changed: during one period concern was with religious heresy; during another, with incitement to rebellion; and today, obscenity. The earliest report of book burning in England was that of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament (1525-26). In the next century William Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix*, a criticism of the immorality of the English stage, was burned by the common hangman in 1633. For criticizing the queen, Prynne was imprisoned, pilloried, and shorn of his ears. In America in 1650, authorities found William Pynchon's theological work, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, to be "erronyous and hereticale" and ordered it burned in the Boston marketplace. In 1690 the first American newspaper, *Publick Occurrances*, was suppressed after the first issue. And on it goes. The history of censorship has a long tradition, and sadly it is one that continues to this day. In any city, state, or nation, restriction from the freedom to choose or to express one’s opinion is under challenge.

The BBC’s aim was two-fold. One, to bring about awareness that over the centuries, a vast number of notable author’s writing have been challenged, censored, banned, or in some cases, burned. Two, to advance an understanding of the essential meaning of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment of our Constitution provides our nation’s blueprint for both personal freedom and an open society, containing broad recognition of the fundamental liberties we hold dear. But despite this, attempts to censor words, thoughts and opinions remain constant. Our recognition and celebration of these rights is essential to maintaining them. Appropriately, the last reading of the last day of Banned Books Week

was that of The Bill of Rights.

Under the wood gazebo in front of the library, the pleasant shade from the trees and occasional delightful breeze from the not-so-distant bay provided a relaxed atmosphere in which to read and discuss select passages from the books. Passersby, on their way to the library or to class would stop first at the pictorial Banned Book Display. Still curious, they would walk up to the gazebo and hear live the written words from *Candide*, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, *Lolita*, Molly Bloom's soliloquy from *Ulysses*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Animal Farm*, poetry by Walt Whitman, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and many other distinguished works of literature being read by students, librarians, and professors. From eleven to one every day, the informal venue of the Readout invited and allowed visitors the convenience of staying for as long as they preferred. Many stayed for the duration, others just for a reading or two. Moreover, several times during the week, entire classes visited the gazebo with a few students even volunteering to read spontaneously.

The faculty readings were thoughtfully prepared. Whether an historical or contemporary reading, the background information on the chosen text was framed, allowing for a finer appreciation of the passages selected. For example, the gravity of the Vietnam War was brought to light as it pertained to the reading of *The Pentagon Papers*. Illustrating the secrecy and attempted suppression of documents written by the U.S. government regarding Vietnam, these papers were published by the New York Times only because of a direct U.S. Supreme Court Order freeing them for publication. Even a fictional work, such as Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in 1932, produced the realization that one author's idea of science fiction - test tube fertilization - has become reality. The perennial conflict of theologies and ideologies—from the fifteenth century through the twenty-first century was shared in the gazebo.

According to the American Library Association, "A strong intellectual freedom perspective is critical to the development of academic library collections and services that dispassionately meet the education and research needs of a college or university community." At Florida International University, the support of the faculty, students, and librarians in their support of The Banned Books Week Readout demonstrates that intellectual freedom is flourishing. The display of The History of Banned Books along with many of the challenged or banned books will remain in the Biscayne Bay Library lobby through October 10, 2003.

Banned Books Week is sponsored by the American Booksellers Association, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the American Library Association, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Association of American Publishers and the National Association of College Stores. It is also endorsed by the Library of Congress' Center for the Book.