

[2017 Freedom to Read Week Review re-titled: Everybody's a Critic: Results from the 2015 Annual Challenges Survey]

Censorship Challenges Across the Political Spectrum – There's Something in My Library to Offend Everybody!

Results from the 2015 Annual Challenges Survey

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The *Annual Challenges Survey*, conducted for the 10th consecutive year on a voluntary reporting basis by the Canadian Library Association (CLA), creates a national snapshot of complaints about expressive content in library materials and to library policies related to intellectual freedom and collection management principles.

The 2015 *Challenges Survey* shows that objections to expressive content in publicly funded libraries across Canada came from both the left and the right on the traditional political and cultural spectrum, echoing the catchphrase, *There's Something in My Library to Offend Everybody!*, which appeared many years ago on a sweatshirt produced by the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the British Columbia Library Association.

A challenge to the British documentary *Exposed*, directed by Beth B., for example, was motivated by concerns about library material depicting violence, explicit sexuality, and sexism for a scene portraying "the soul of a sexually tormented man who is willing to mutilate his own body and to demean women as well."

Another DVD, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson, was challenged for explicit sexuality and violence, and the complainant suggested it be given to a pornography shop.

Several challenges were reported to works originally published more than 50 years ago, one to *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss (1950), on the grounds of sensitivity and ethnic stereotyping. *Tintin in America*, the third volume of a children's graphic novel series *The Adventures of Tintin* by Hergé (Georges Remi) published serially in 1931-32, was challenged for anti-ethnicity, inaccuracy, insensitivity, offensive language, and racism. In another library, half way across the continent from the first, a second complainant objected to the novel's insensitivity and "blatant racism, portraying Native Americans as extremely violent and incredibly stupid people without mercy, without compassion, without brains, and apparently without women."

Altogether, 38 challenges to materials and policies were reported by library staff in the 2015 *Challenges Survey* by 13 libraries in six provinces. Two-thirds of complainants wanted materials removed altogether from the library – in a sense, banned. Others asked for relocations, re-ratings (of DVDs), or labellings.

The reasons given for such actions ranged from explicit sexuality, violence, and age inappropriateness, accounting for half of all reasons mentioned, to insensitivity, inaccuracy, homosexuality, anti-ethnicity and stereotyping, racism, offensiveness, offensive language, religious viewpoint, political viewpoint, sexism, nudity, and “inappropriate for any age.” Most challenges were multi-layered, involving on average two reasons per title, though four or five reasons were given for a few.

Individual titles were the most frequently targeted, including two titles challenged twice each, *Tintin in America*, already mentioned, and *The Magic of Facial Exercise*, by Cynthia Rowland, which was targeted for inaccuracy.

But there were also five challenges involving library collection management policies and principles. Removing single titles from library collections denies easy public access for unknown thousands or tens of thousands of Canadians, but the potential harm is magnified when a whole collection grouping – a genre, a series, or all works by an author – are targeted for banning. The creators of such works are also more severely injured, and for them the injury is to both creativity and earnings, as in the case of Meljean Brook, all of whose works were claimed to be “inappropriate for any age” on the grounds of homosexuality and explicit sexuality.

Other collection policy challenges targeted children’s series and genres. One was to the *Star Wars DK Readers* series of easy reader children’s graphic novels and “all children’s easy reader fiction containing graphics and other content deemed age inappropriate.” The other was to the children’s graphic novel series *Legends from China: Three Kingdoms*, because of “suggestive sexual and visual scenes and the possibility of violence.”

Another complainant targeted all of a library’s collection of physical and e-magazine subscriptions through a particular magazine distribution service, Zinio, for reasons of insensitivity, inaccuracy, sexism, and “the depiction of bodies that are being negatively objectified.” This broad sweep would ban, at minimum, 17 magazines that the complainant identified by name, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Details*, *Esquire*, *Glamour*, *GQ*, *Health*, *Men's Fitness*, *Men's Health*, *Redbook*, *Rolling Stone*, *SE9F*, *Seventeen*, *Shape*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Teen Vogue*, *US Weekly*, and *Women's Health*. The complainant also objected to face-out displays of these magazines on library shelves “where patrons and young people can see them.”

Adult titles were equally challenged as works for children and young adults. Overall, there were three times more objections to books than to DVDs. Among challenges to children's materials, graphic novels predominated. Looking at all publication formats, fiction was targeted twice as often as non-fiction, and among materials intended for adults, many more objections were to non-fiction rather than to fiction. The opposite was true for children's materials: all of the challenges were to fiction.

Every time library staff are asked to remove, restrict, reclassify (re-rate), relocate, or label materials, they confront anew the core values of librarianship. Are such actions ever justified, or are libraries professional obligated to provide unfettered access to all constitutionally-protected expressive works, including those that some individuals or groups target as offensive or, in the words of the Canadian Library Association's newly revised 2015 *Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries*, "unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable."

Only a handful of 2015 challenges to resources and policies resulted in a change to their status. Five titles and collection groupings were reclassified as requested. But conundrums arise: One title in a school library was relocated to the teachers' collection, although for all intents and purposes it could be regarded as banned, because it was no longer available to its intended student audience; at best one could describe its status as "restricted."

While ultimately only a few changes were made, library staff never dismiss lightly the concerns of complainants, and find themselves in free speech discussions and debates on a regular basis. Every challenge to expressive content in library materials is viewed within a framework of established library mandates, professional values, and library policies related to intellectual freedom and access. Every decision requires a defensible balance be struck between consideration of a complainant's views and honouring free expression principles and the public's right to know.

In the case of the two challenges to *Tintin in America*, for example, after review, library staff in both libraries reclassified it to their adult graphic novels sections, and in one of the cases explained to the complainant that: "There are many books published in decades past that would not pass muster with 21st-century readers, were they to be presented for publication today. However, removing books from library shelves with which we may disagree makes it more difficult to discuss how our society's beliefs and attitudes have changed, and how a word or an image can be hurtful. By providing access to controversial, even offensive books, libraries play a vital role in maintaining an open dialogue about historical stereotypes and changing perceptions."

As Sandra Singh, CLA President and Chief Librarian of the Vancouver Public Library, noted last year and again this year:

"Intellectual freedom is fundamental to a free and democratic society, innovation, and human advancement. For well over 100 years, school, public, and academic libraries across Canada have worked

tirelessly to ensure that every Canadian has access to the ideas and information they need to explore our world and enrich their lives. At times, this work has involved helping community members understand why libraries build broad collections that may contain materials considered offensive to some, as well taking a stand against censorship when the need arises.”

It may surprise some people to learn that library staff are among Canada’s front-line advocates and educators for freedom of expression, access, and privacy. Every day of the year, when titles in a library’s collection are challenged, staff explain and teach the importance of protecting everyone’s right to have these materials available for the thoughts and the ideas they contain. Every day, library staff safeguard a wide diversity of viewpoints in their libraries, especially those that are considered controversial and disagreeable. Every day, they promote a love for reading, imagination, and questioning. They are word champions for democracy!

Thanks to contributors to the national story of how library staff grappled with pressures in 2015 to remove, reclassify, relocate, restrict or label materials deemed objectionable, or to curtail library access policies involving intellectual freedom issues. Survey results since 2006 are widely shared with the Canadian public. For interim access to any of the databases or official reports, please contact alvin.schrader@ualberta.ca.

** At the time of writing, Alvin M. Schrader was convenor of the Canadian Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Advisory Committee. He thanks the library staff who shared examples of how they grappled with pressures in 2015 to remove, reclassify, relocate, restrict or label materials deemed objectionable or to curtail library access policies involving intellectual freedom issues.*

List of Challenged Titles and Policies in Publicly-Funded Canadian Libraries and Schools, 2015

Challenges are listed alphabetically, categorized by number of challenges per item. Note that slightly corrected bibliographic data are recorded here from what was originally found in press reports or supplied by library officials who contributed to the 2015 CLA challenges survey. Please email typos, etc. to the Survey administrator and researcher alvin.schrader@ualberta.ca. *Thanks to administrators and other stakeholders* who participated in the 2015 survey.

Individual items – 2 challenges each:

The Magic of Facial Exercise, by Cynthia Rowland (BC, BC)

- Adult, book, Non-fiction (1,2)
- (1) Inaccuracy – Patron: Remove
- (2) Inaccuracy – Library staff: Remove
- (1) Retained
- (2) Retained.

Tintin in America, by Hergé (MN, BC)

- Children's, graphic novel, Fiction (1,2)
- (1) Anti-ethnicity, inaccuracy, insensitivity, offensive language, racism. A media report about a parent challenging *Tintin in America* in a Winnipeg Chapters Bookstore prompted a review of Winnipeg Public Library's holdings of this title. – Library staff: Reconsider.
- (2) Insensitivity, racism - Objects to "Blatant racism"; "portrays Native Americans as extremely violent and incredibly stupid people...without mercy, without compassion, without brains, and apparently without women." – Patron: Remove.
- (1) Reclassified to Adult Graphic Novels - The review of holdings by the library identified this title in the collection as a result of a series purchase. The library had intentionally not purchased this specific titles in several years.
- (2) Reclassified to Adult Graphic Novels - The book was relocated to the adult graphic novel collection. "There are many books published in decades past that would not pass muster with 21st-century readers, were they to be presented for publication today. However, removing books from library shelves with which we may disagree makes it more difficult to discuss how our society's beliefs and attitudes have changed, and how a word or an image can be hurtful. By providing access to controversial, even offensive books, libraries play a vital role in maintaining an open dialogue about historical stereotypes and changing perceptions."

Individual items – 1 challenge each:

100 Questions about Islam, by Mohammed el Ghazali (ON)

- Adult, book (Arabic), Non-fiction
- Religious viewpoint, political viewpoint, anti-Western, holding extreme Islamist views – Community group or organization (anon. blogger): Remove
- Retained.

Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America, by John Waters (AB)

- Adult, book, Non-fiction
- Sexually explicit – Requested the book be moved from non-fiction to fiction. "I found this book in the travel section, which is my favorite, but feel this book does not belong here. The first 2/3 of the book is made up of the author's x-rated fantasy hitch-hiking." Patron: Reclassify.
- Retained. While the library acknowledges your personal response to *Carsick*, the item does fall within our guidelines for inclusion in the adult non-fiction collection. *Carsick* has been assigned the Dewey number 917.30493, which is the classification for travel in the US in the 21st century. This is appropriate when the traveling is factual whether in whole or in part. Other public libraries have placed the book in their travel sections as well, including Vancouver Public Library and Ottawa Public Library.

Chicken Clicking, by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross (BC)

- Children's, picture book, Fiction
- Age inappropriate - Objects to "Moral of story [or] lack thereof - stealing...fight[ing]...going online - posting a picture and age, not telling mom and dad and meeting stranger alone." – Patron: Remove.
- Retained - "As a cautionary tale, the storyline takes a dark trajectory in the tradition of folk tales such as Little Red Riding Hood, and Chicken Little, which it references. With its short, lively text and dynamic illustrations, this picture book is appropriate for sharing with young children and could be used in order to start a conversation about the perils of behaving impetuously, online or otherwise."

Close Range – Wyoming Stories, by Annie Proulx (NB)

- Adult, book, Fiction – include “Brokeback Mountain” among 12 short stories
- Violence, homosexuality (?) – Patron: Remove
- Retained

Cold Fear: Gay Life in Russia, DVD, produced by the BBC (ON)

- General, Unrated, Non-fiction documentary
- Homosexuality – Patron: Remove as homophobic (?) – video promoted as party of Gay Pride Week
- Retained

Country Matters, DVD, directed by Donald McWhinnie, Barry Davis, John McKenzie, Richard Martin, and Silvio Narizzano. adapted from short stories by A.E. Coppard and H.E. Bates (BC)

- PG, Fiction, Historical drama, 5 episodes in TV series
- Sexually explicit – Patron: Remove
- Retained.

Darth Maul: Sith Apprentice, by Jo Casey and Catherine Saunders, in the *Star Wars DK Readers L4* series (AB)

- Children's, easy reader graphic novel, Fiction
- Age inappropriate, sexually explicit, violence, “suggestive sexual and visual sexual scenes” and the possibility of violence made it inappropriate for the juvenile graphic novel collection – Parent: "Remove this specific reader and any other readers that contain graphics, written and other content that is not age appropriate for the targeted age.”
- Retained. The book had images from the movie that was rated PG-13.

The Day I Met Jesus: The Revealing Diaries of Five Women from the Gospels, by Frank Viola and Mary Demuth (AB)

- Adult, Audio book, Fiction
- Religious viewpoint – Patron: Remove
- Retained

Exposed, DVD documentary, directed by Beth B. (BC)

- Adult, Unrated, Non-fiction documentary
- Sexism, sexually explicit, violence - Objects to a scene in the documentary depicting "the soul of a sexually tormented man who is willing to mutilate his own body and to demean women as well." – Patron: Rerate/reclassify to Adult
- Retained - "The documentary is unrated: unrated adult films are made available to the public in the library's general adult film collection, and cannot be borrowed using a child's library card. The library does not have the legal authority or expertise to create its own ratings or warning system or to change a film's rating." Also, "There is a warning statement on the DVD cover: “This film contains explicit full-frontal nudity.” As well, the description on the cover does place this documentary about burlesque in the context of controversial filmmaking and performance art (it “challenge[s] our notions of gender identity, disability, and sexuality” and exposes “the contradictions inherent in our society's taboos”)."

Fifty Shades of Grey, DVD, directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson (ON)

- Adult 18A, Fiction
- Sexually explicit, violence – Patron: Remove from the collection and give to a pornography shop.
- Retained – The DVD was already rated 18A and thus restricted to adult cardholders.

Filth, DVD, directed by [Jon S. Baird \(NS\)](#)

- Adult, Fiction
- Offensive - Patron stated that the movie was 'filthy' and did not belong in the library. Patron indicated that she was worried about children watching it. – Patron: Remove
- Item was classified as Restricted and not available for borrowing by children/youth under 18 years of age. Restricted label was clear on the DVD case.
- retained

The Graveyard Book, vols. 1 and 2, by P. Craig Russell (ON)

- Children's, graphic novel, Fiction
- Violence – Patron: Remove – She doesn't specify what action she wants, but she uses the form to complain of the illustrations. Her son, age 10 was crying from the impact of the images in the book.
- Retained – We evaluated based on other library collections, on research and reviews.

Hulk: Abominable, by Bruce Jones (BC)

- Young adult, graphic novel, Fiction
- Age inappropriate, sexually explicit, violence – Objects to "graphic sex and violence" in case children were to read it. - Patron: Reclassify as adult
- Retained - "This graphic novel is shelved in the teen graphic novel collection. The suggestive images and violence depicted in this comic collection is similar to other graphic novels marketed to a teen audience, and selected for [the library's] teen graphic novel collection."

If I Ran the Zoo, by Dr. Seuss (BC)

- Children's, picture book, Fiction
- Insensitivity, ethnic stereotyping - Objects to "Scenes depicting orientalism, major Asian stereotyping in images and words. Use of exaggerated 'black face' characters." – Patron: Remove.
- Retained

Kim, by Rudyard Kipling (ON)

- Children's, book, Fiction
- Strange publication – poorly done edition of a classic with many errors, sloppy, excessive typos, not a familiar publisher – Patron: Remove
- Replaced with copies from a more established publisher in the expectation of better quality

My First Ramadan, by Karen Katz (ON)

- Children's, picture book, Fiction
- Insensitive, inappropriate for any age, an inappropriate illustration to the Muslim religion – Patron: Remove
- Retained - research was conducted, and authoritative reviews found to support the viewpoint that there isn't an image of Muhammad in the illustrations. Reviews were very favourable. The library team determined it was not "meant to offend or be insensitive"

Last Ounce of Courage, DVD, directed by Darrel Campbell and Kevin McAfee (BC)

- Adult, Fiction [imdb: "family film," MPAA rated: PG]
- Political viewpoint, religious viewpoint - Objection to "General overarching tone. Proselytization on behalf of 'US style' Christian patriotism. Promoted as a 'wonderful family film.'" – Patron: Label as "Religious proselytizing"
- Retained

Mistress of the Game, by Tilly Bagshawe (BC)

- Adult, book, Fiction
- Inaccuracy, insensitivity, offensive language, sexually explicit, Also objected that this book resumed a series for which an author recently passed away. They thought the new author did a terrible job of resuming the series, did not deserve to work on that series, and ruined what the original author had done. – Patron: Remove.

- Retained

Mommy, DVD, (ON)

- Rated PG 13+ (French language), Fiction
- Sexually explicit – Patron: Remove
- Retained.

Nymphomaniac, DVD, 2 volumes, directed by Lars von Trier (ON)

- PG, Fiction
- Sexually explicit – Patron: Remove
- Retained

Old Testament (AB)

- Children's, graphic novel, Fiction
- Age inappropriate – School administrator (superintendent): Reclassify – Initiator wanted all librarians to remove this title from circulation to students and to add it to the teacher collection.
- Reclassified – “And at the time the students were very angry. Now that they don't see it, they assume it's always gone. If someone asks me where it is I simply tell them a teacher has it.”

Practical Guide to Children's Health, by Kate Kietje (ON)

- Adult, book, Non-fiction
- Inaccuracy - bad science – anti-vaccination
- Patron: Remove
- Retained

Star Weekly at War, by Ian MacDonald (ON)

- General, book (like a graphic novel, a compilation of the World War II covers of the *Weekly* 1939-1945, described as a compelling collection of Norman Rockwellesque war propaganda images), Non-fiction
- Political viewpoint – bordering on anti-Semitism – Patron: Reclassify
- Ian McDonald's *Star Weekly at War*. Torstar Syndicate (publishers of the *Star Weekly* back in the day) never kept copies of its own magazine so the covers are scattered hither and yon. Which makes this compilation historically valuable. TPL's position keeps 1 copy in reference. We decided to keep the item because of its historical value despite the rather anti-Semitic views of the author as expressed in the (limited) text. Currently there are 2 holds on the book. We let the item fill those holds then moved it to the Ref collection. There was never any issue with removing it from the collection so it was treated this as a challenged item
- Reclassified

Stranger by the Lake, DVD, directed by Alain Guiraudie (BC)

- Adult, unrated, Fiction
- Nudity, sexually explicit, homosexuality, Objects to "Total gay porn - entire film frontal nudity - graphic scenes of gay sex...explicit language." – Patron: Rerate/reclassify – Restrict to 18+ “at least”
- Retained - "The film is not rated: unrated adult films are made available to the public in the library's general adult film collection, and may not be borrowed on a child's library card. The library does not have the legal authority or expertise to create its own ratings or warning system or to change a film's rating." Also, "There is a warning statement on the DVD back cover: “This Film Contains Nudity and Mature Subject Matter.” As well, the description on the back cover does describe the film's setting as “[a] picturesque cruising spot,” which “sets the scene between desire and murder” in this “unique, erotic thriller of seduction and sexual obsession”; together with the cover images, it is clear this film is about sexual behaviour."

Sutton Place, by Louise Gayland (AB)

- Adult, book, Fiction
- Sexually explicit, graphic sex, violence – Patron: Remove.
- Retained.

The Three Musketeers (Classics Illustrated Deluxe Graphic Novel), by Alexandre Dumas, adapted by Morvan, Dufranne, Ruben, and Galopin (AB)

- Children's, graphic novel, Fiction
- Age inappropriate, sexually explicit – Complainant had flagged a page 2/3 of the way through the book (there are no page numbers). First text on the page is “A few days later...” and “Patience! I hear you...” The illustrations on these pages show a man and woman kissing. The following pages show a shirtless man and a clothed woman kissing and talking in bed. The person who initiated the challenge included a short note which stated that she thought some of the content in the book "might be more YA" implying that she wanted the item moved to the YA section. Parent: Reclassify.
- Retained. At the time, there were 8 copies of this book in our consortium. In three libraries, it was shelved with young adult materials, and in the other five (including our own) it was shelved with juvenile/junior materials. Given that our other “Classics Illustrated” books are in the Juvenile Graphic Novels, I decided not to move the item to a different collection.

Within His Keeping, God's Amazing Embrace of Your Life, by Teresa Jones (AB)

- Adult, book, Non-fiction
- Patron: Relocate/reclassify from non-fiction section of the library to fiction.
- Retained.

Zeke Pippin, by William Steig (BC)

- Children's, book, Fiction
- Age inappropriate, violence – Patron: Remove.
- Retained.

Policy challenges:

Collection “genre” policy challenge in an Alberta public library regarding all titles by author Meljean Brook

- Adult, book, Fiction
- Homosexuality, inappropriate for any age, sexually explicit – Patron: Remove all.
- Retained.

Collection genre policy challenge in a BC public library to adult magazine subscriptions both physical magazines and e-magazines through Zinio, including at minimum 17 titles: *Cosmopolitan, Details, Esquire, Glamour, GQ, Health, Men's Fitness, Men's Health, Redbook, Rolling Stone, SELF, Seventeen, Shape, Sports Illustrated, Teen Vogue, US Weekly, and Women's Health*, on the grounds of sexism, insensitivity, inaccuracy, depiction of bodies that are being "negatively objectified" – Patron: Cancel subscriptions (Remove).

- Retained – We will not be asking other libraries in our library consortium to consider dropping titles that are enjoyed by all of our reading public. The magazine subscriptions in the library are already downsized and only those with a regular readership are being bought.

Collection genre policy challenge in an AB public library to the children's graphic novel Easy Reader fiction series *Star Wars DK Readers*, including *Darth Maul: Sith Apprentice*, by Jo Casey and Catherine Saunders – the library owns 41 of 56 titles in the series (AB)

- Age inappropriate, sexually explicit, violence, “suggestive sexual and visual sexual scenes” and the possibility of violence made it inappropriate for the juvenile graphic novel collection – Parent: Reclassify series to be age appropriate and “any other readers that contain graphics, written and other content that is not age appropriate for the targeted age.”
- Retained. The primary users of this collection are preschool and elementary aged beginning readers with a wide range of interests and skill levels, requiring a broad collection of material including a variety of reading levels, writing styles, and topics. As a result, this material is shelved as a single collection, regardless of publisher, series, and reading level. Shelving in this fashion also serves to assist readers and caregivers in finding and continuing with preferred series and publishers.

Collection genre policy challenge in an AB public library to the children's graphic novel fiction series of 20 titles *Legends from China: Three Kingdoms*, by Wei Dong Chen and Xiao Long Liang (AB)

- Children's, graphic novel

- Sexually explicit, violence, age inappropriate – There are suggestive, sexual and visual, sexual scenes, and the possibility of violence. It is inappropriate for the juvenile graphic novel collection. Patron: Reclassify.
- Reclassified. We have reviewed the series in question and consulted a variety of reviewing resources for school and public libraries to determine the appropriate location for these titles. This series is positively reviewed in all sources consulted but is recommended for age 12 and up due to the complexity of the subject matter. As a result, the library will retain the series in its collections but move it to the teen graphic novel collection.

Display policy challenge in a BC public library to adult magazines displayed with covers face out.

- sexism, insensitivity, inaccuracy, depiction of bodies that are being "negatively objectified" – Patron: Relocate – “No display of covers where patrons and young people can see them.”
- Retained. The covers from Zinio were due to come down from display and we chose to add other e-products without individual titles displayed. However we will not be asking other libraries in our Federation to consider dropping titles that are enjoyed by all of our reading public.

Entrance accessibility and snow removal policies – Manitoba public library. Library staff member: Fix entrance and remove snow.

- Waiting for funding; snow removal workers informed