

# Introduction to Intellectual Freedom

Deb Thomas, MLIS

*Prepared for a staff training conference*

# What is intellectual freedom?

“Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored.”  
(American Library Association, 2007)

# Introduction to Intellectual Freedom

A short video from the American Library Association

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=At4aXL4jBsk>

# Questions to think about.....

- How can I explain intellectual freedom to patrons or other staff?
- Should the library be a place representing diverse voices, even those that some might find offensive?
- Are there materials that are sufficiently harmful to some groups that they should be removed from collections?
- Is it appropriate to express your personal beliefs while acting as a representative of the library?

# Intellectual Freedom Position Statement (CFLA-FCAB)

“The Canadian Federation of Library Associations

- supports and promotes the universal principles of intellectual freedom as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which include the interlocking freedoms to hold opinions and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.
- affirms that all persons in Canada have a fundamental right, subject only to the Constitution and the law, to have access to the full range of knowledge, imagination, ideas, and opinion, and to express their thoughts publicly. *Only the courts may abridge free expression rights in Canada.*”
- Full statement at <http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/statement-on-intellectual-freedom-and-libraries/>

# BCLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom - Part 1

*(Under review by the BCLA Board)*

- It is in the interest for libraries and librarians to make available the widest diversity of views and expression, including those which are unorthodox or unpopular with the majority.
- It would conflict with the public interest for libraries to establish their own political, moral or aesthetic views as the sole standard for determining what books and other materials should be published or circulated.
- It is contrary to the public interest for libraries or librarians to determine the acceptability of a book solely on the basis of the personal history or political affiliation of the author.
- There is no place in British Columbia for extra-legal efforts to coerce the taste of others, to confine adults to the reading matter deemed suitable for adolescents, or to inhibit the efforts of the writers to achieve artistic expression.

# BCLA Statement on Intellectual Freedom – Part 2

*(Under review by the BCLA Board)*

- It is not in the public interest to force a reader to accept any book with the prejudgment of a label characterizing the book or author as subversive or dangerous.
- It is the responsibility of library administrators and librarians, as guardians of the peoples' freedom to read, to contest encroachments upon that freedom by individuals or groups seeking to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large.
- It is the responsibility of libraries and librarians to give full meaning to intellectual freedom by providing books and other materials that enrich the quality of thought and expression. By the exercise of this affirmative responsibility, librarians can demonstrate that the answer to a bad book is a good one, the answer to a bad idea is a good one.
- Non-book materials should be judged by the same criteria as books.

**Full statement at** <https://bclaconnect.ca/about/statement-of-intellectual-freedom/>

# What is censorship?

“Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous.... Censors pressure public institutions, like libraries, to suppress and remove from public access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up their own minds about it.” (American Library Association, 2007)



# A short history of Public libraries and Intellectual Freedom

- In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, selection of library materials in the US and Canada favoured the dominant culture (white, European) and “a paternalistic best books approach”. (Samek, 2001)
- In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, strong pressure was exerted by politicians on libraries in the US and Canada not to hold any materials sympathetic to communism. (Book and Periodical Council, n.d.)
- Starting in the 1960s, there was increasing recognition that all voices in the communities served were not represented in library collections. Libraries consciously added materials from independent publishers and alternate presses with the intent to represent a broad range of voices and views including those considered controversial.
- In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are increasing calls to suppress speech deemed harmful to certain groups by removing materials from collections.

# School libraries and Intellectual Freedom

- From *School Library Programs, Teacher-librarians And Effective Teaching And Learning*:  
“Schools need to be teaching students *how* to learn, how to ask their own questions, find their own information, construct their own meaning from that information, and apply that meaning to new situations.” (BCTLA, Draft, 2020)
- “It's firmly our position that books ought not be censored in any way, but rather that the opportunity to discover and read diverse authors should be expanded in schools, so that you can illuminate and interrogate the older texts by reading the newer texts that reflect other viewpoints, diversity of points, that reflect the views and ideas of BIPOC authors in particular.” - OIF director Deborah Caldwell-Stone. (Yorio, 2021)

# The crossroads

One view:

“Public libraries must protect the right of people to be mistaken....To continue honouring their commitment to intellectual freedom in the face of outrage over unpopular speakers *[or collections]*, public libraries must err on the side of a plurality of ideas and perspectives, on the side of more voices and greater access.” (Schrader, 2019)

## And another view

“Today’s left movements are thinking hard about the complex factors that shape the relationship between speech and social justice. Far from unconcerned with freedom of speech, they are determined to exercise these freedoms to further their cause. They are naming the power relations in which speech is embedded, and thereby liberating more speech. They are also asking important questions about how to better protect the people who laws have traditionally left behind.”

(Park, 2021)

# Social responsibility & Intellectual Freedom

## Early beginnings in the USA

- In 1968, members of a fledgling group of librarians “...were unwilling to separate their politics from their work, most wanted the library profession to take a stand on social issues...” They argued that “a purist moral stance on intellectual freedom [meant that] the library served mainstream social sectors, not the whole community.” They wanted to see “the library as an active agent for change.”
- The Roundtable on Social Responsibilities of Libraries was approved after much heated discussion at the 1968 ALA conference and remains active today.

(Samek, 2001)

# BCLA – Intellectual Freedom & Social Responsibility

The BCLA Values Statement includes the following:

- **Inclusion & Diversity**

BCLA promotes inclusive and equitable libraries, collections and communities.

- **Intellectual Freedom**

BCLA upholds the right to seek, receive, hold and disseminate information from all points of view.

- **Social Responsibility**

BCLA promotes the social good by advocating for policies and resources that support individual and institutional members in addressing barriers in their communities.

- **Intellectual & Ethical Integrity**

BCLA supports the development of individual perspectives on critical issues and believes that open and transparent dialogue is essential to the development of relevant services.

# Pause to reflect

- Values – Inclusion and Diversity; Intellectual Freedom; Social Responsibility; Intellectual & Ethical Integrity
- Can we balance our commitment to intellectual freedom with an inclusive and socially responsible approach to library collections and service? Can we be a “safe” space for everyone? Should we try?



# Intellectual freedom and social responsibility

## *Divergent views*

### **One view:**

“A tenacious commitment to freedom of expression is one of the best traditions of the democratic left. But the contemporary left—a big part of it, at any rate—has embraced the belief that unwelcome ideas and works of art cause harm, and that the proper responses to such harms are calls for retraction and apology, rather than refutation (in the case of political ideas) and more powerful art (in the case of aesthetic productions).” (Morton, 2021)



# Intellectual freedom and social responsibility

## *Divergent views*

### **Another view:**

“...it is naïve for liberals to ignore the way the right has weaponized a narrative about a ‘woke’ left that opposes free speech—a tactic aimed at silencing the growing voice of social movements. For anyone who truly believes that free speech is important to a democratic society, it should be energizing and encouraging to watch the conversation about free speech itself open up. A plurality of diverse voices with new ideas are working to build a world that comes closer to the ideal of free expression for all.” (Park, 2021)

# Challenges 2019-2021

- 48 challenges were reported between September 2019 to September 2021.
- 45 are related to materials. Only one title was not retained.
- 3 challenges were about programs or displays – 2 drag queen story times and a Read Woke campaign display
- All of the challenges were initiated at public libraries except one in a prison library.

# Challenges 2019-2021

Top three themes were:

- 2019

1. LGBTQIA2S+ / Racism (tied)
2. Age inappropriate
3. Promotes hatred

- 2020-21

1. Sex & sexuality
2. LGBTQIA2S+ / Age inappropriate / Creator of work (tied)
3. Racism / Promotes hatred / Violence (tied)

A full list of challenges can be found on the [Freedom to Read website](#)

# Most challenges can be resolved in a conversation...

**SHELF CHECK #98 - BY POESYGALORE**

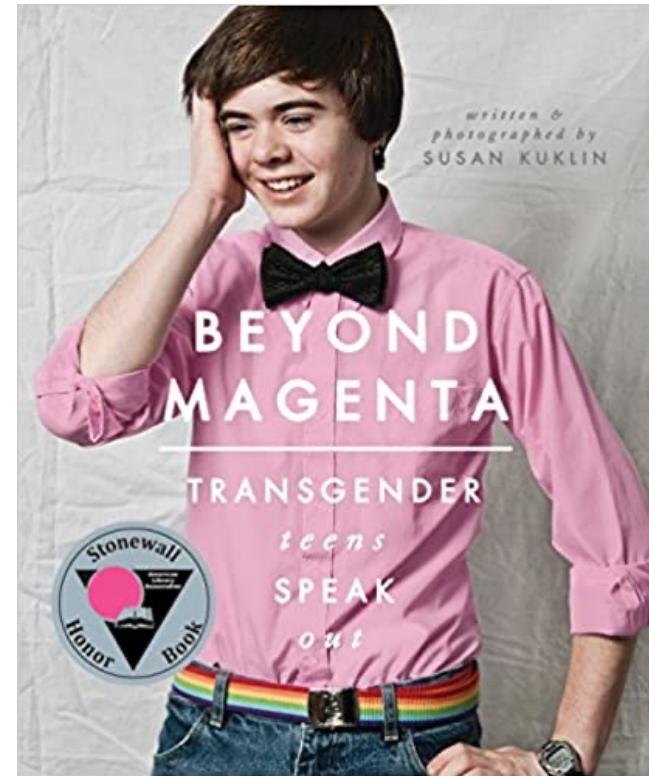
[www.toondoo.com](http://www.toondoo.com)



# Challenge examples in 2019-21:

***Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out*** by Susan Kuklin

*Two challenges were reported.*  
Author and photographer Susan Kuklin met and interviewed six transgender or gender-neutral young adults and used her skills to represent them thoughtfully and respectfully before, during, and after their personal acknowledgement of gender preference.



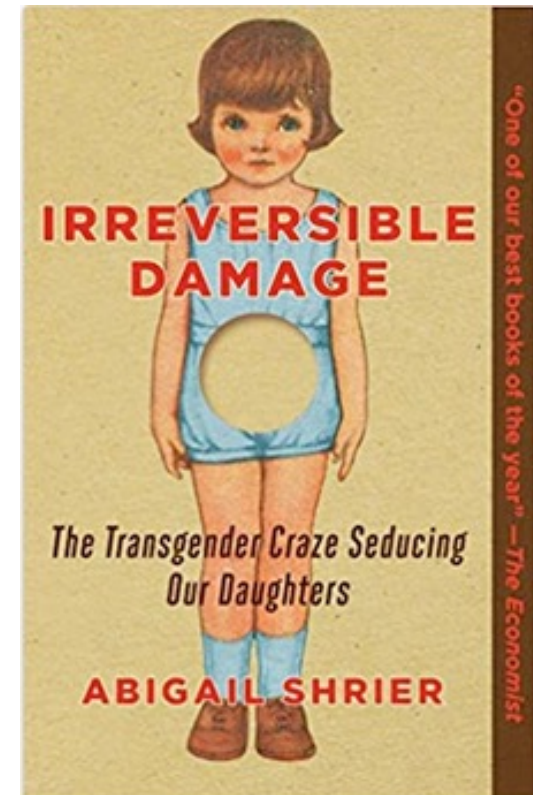
# Challenge examples in 2019-21:

## ***Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters***

by Abigail Shrier

*Nine challenges were reported.*

Abigail Shrier asserts that "trans influencers" are encouraging teenage girls to come out as transgender for social status. Shrier talks to the girls, their parents, and the counselors and doctors who enable gender transitions, as well as to some girls who have chosen to "detransition."



# Other examples of challenges in 2019-21:

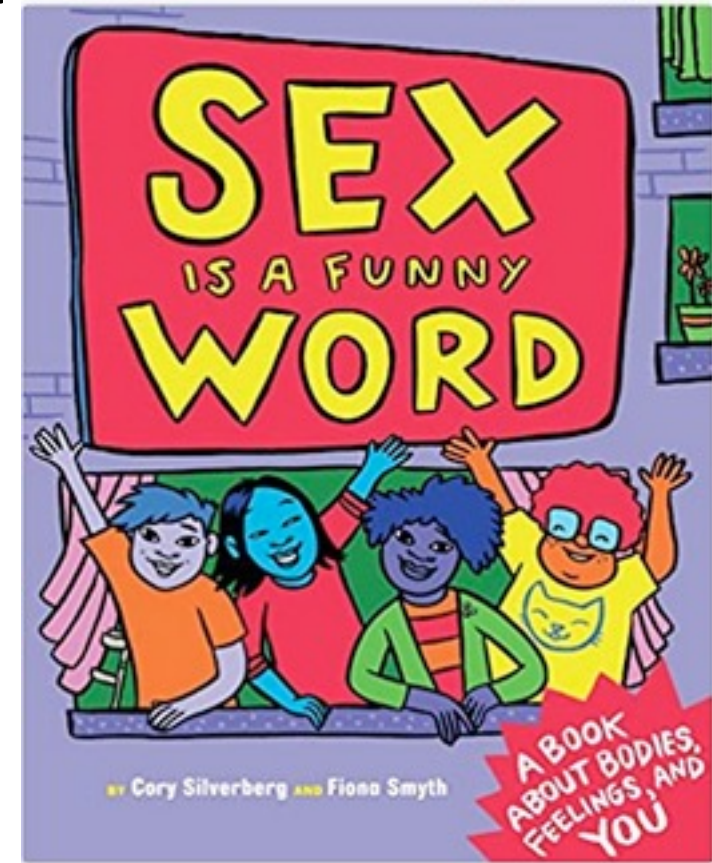
***The Poison Jungle*** by Tui Sutherland  
This title is Book 13 of the Wings of Fire series. The series of children's fantasy novels written by author Tui T. Sutherland. It has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than 122 weeks. The series currently consists of three arcs, which focus on young dragons fulfilling prophecies in a fantasy world. This book has an LGBTQ+ protagonist.



# Other examples of challenges in 2019-21:

***Sex is a Funny Word*** by Corey Silverberg and Fiona Smyth

A comic book for kids that includes children and families of all makeups, orientations, and gender identities, this book is an essential resource about bodies, gender, and sexuality for children ages 8 to 10 as well as their parents and caregivers.



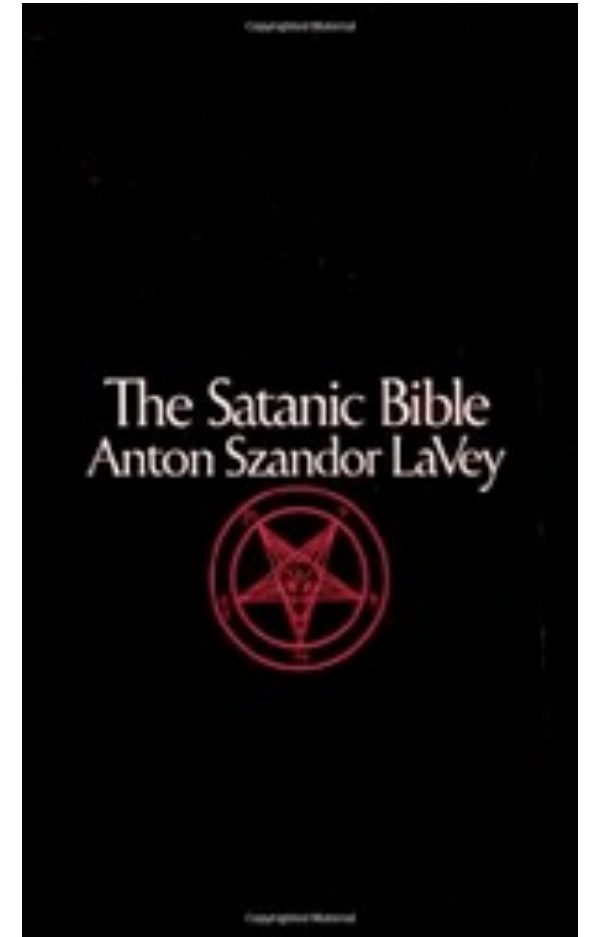


# Other examples of challenges in 2019-21:

## ***The Satanic Bible*** by Anton Szandor LaVey

This book was first published in 1969. It is a collection of essays, observations and rituals, and outlines LaVey's Satanic ideology. It contains the core principles of LaVey's Church of Satan. It has been described as "influential" as a foundational book on Satanism. Criticism stems both from qualms over the quality of LaVey's writing and disapproval of the content.

[2019-2021 List of Challenges](#)



# Complaints about Programs

A near cancellation of a Drag Queen Storytime at Okanagan Regional Library informed a Doc Project episode on the CBC:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/docproject/how-a-b-c-library-s-drag-queen-story-hour-turned-into-a-nationwide-fight-for-intellectual-freedom-1.5786657>



# Pause to reflect

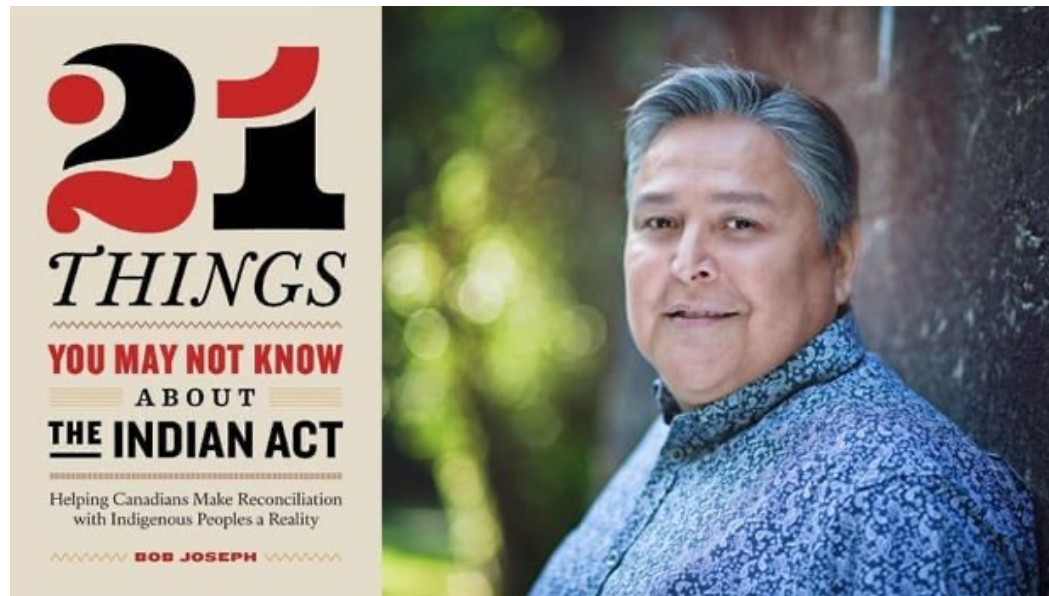
The CEO may have been responding to public pressure and community concerns about the drag queen storytime when he wrote his memo.

Should the library consider anticipated community concerns when designing its programs or building its collections? How can we balance our commitment to intellectual freedom with our commitment to serving our communities?



# Complaints about Programs

Challenges were made by some Indigenous community members to a planned evening with Bob Joseph, author of *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act*, at a rural library in northern BC because of his ties to the resource industry.



# Challenges to Programs: Feminist Current bookings

January 10, 2019 – Megan Murphy rents a meeting room at Vancouver Public Library. Special security measures are put in place due to expected protests. A second event planned for spring 2020 is cancelled due to pandemic restrictions.

October 29, 2019 – Megan Murphy holds an event titled “Gender Identity: What Does It Mean for Society, the Law, and Women?” at Toronto Public Library

# Challenges to Programs: Feminist Current booking

*Divergent views:*

“Murphy’s critics are right that we live in a transphobic society in which transgendered people are marginalized. But censoring offensive expression, attractive as it may seem, is not a road to equality or an end to marginalization, nor does censorship ever lead to equality.”  
(Turk, 2019)

“Trans people and allies have made it clear that we expect public libraries to take stronger stances against transphobia. Knowing that library patrons care about libraries being trans inclusive and will advocate for this has been deeply reassuring...” (Jones et al, 2019)

# Challenges to Programs: Feminist Current bookings

Other responses from the wider community:

- “To blame any respected learning centres for providing forums for democratic expression verges on censorship – a word we queer folk are all too familiar with...” (Letter to the editor, Vancouver Sun, Herman, 2019)
- “Public institutions should not be hosting events or renting space where speakers promote hate against any group of people protected under the BC Human Rights Code. Public libraries, like public schools, must be safe inclusive spaces for all - including trans youth and adults.” (A post from BC Teacher’s Federation on VPL’s Twitter feed, 2019)

# Intellectual Freedom & Privacy

**Examples** of how we protect the right of our patrons to privacy in what they borrow or view:

- Libraries no longer keep histories of what a patron has borrowed in the automated systems
- Libraries no longer keep logs of Internet use by patrons that record what they have viewed
- When calling a patron to tell them an item they placed on hold is ready for pickup, we don't mention the title of the book. *Libraries that use email notifications generally do list the title.*



# Where does the library community go from here?

“The thorny question remains unanswered of which exact speech acts we recognize as oppressive and worthy of shutting down. The answer cannot be that any speech a person or group finds oppressive should be seen as an oppressive speech act...”

“These decisions will necessarily involve ...disagreement; they require listening to communities on the frontlines of liberation struggles and being aware that it is not simply a matter of opinion or feelings as to which groups are or are not oppressed.” (Leonard, 2021)

And then there's this approach:

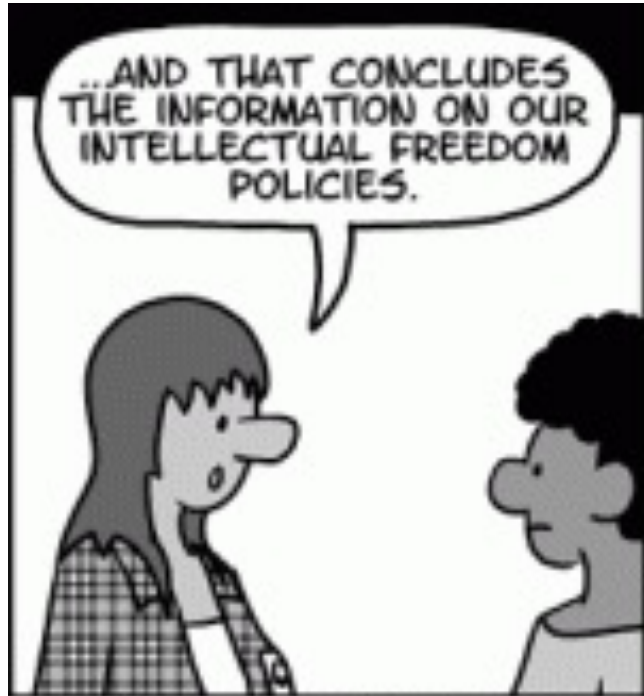


# What should you do if faced with a concern about something in your library's collections?

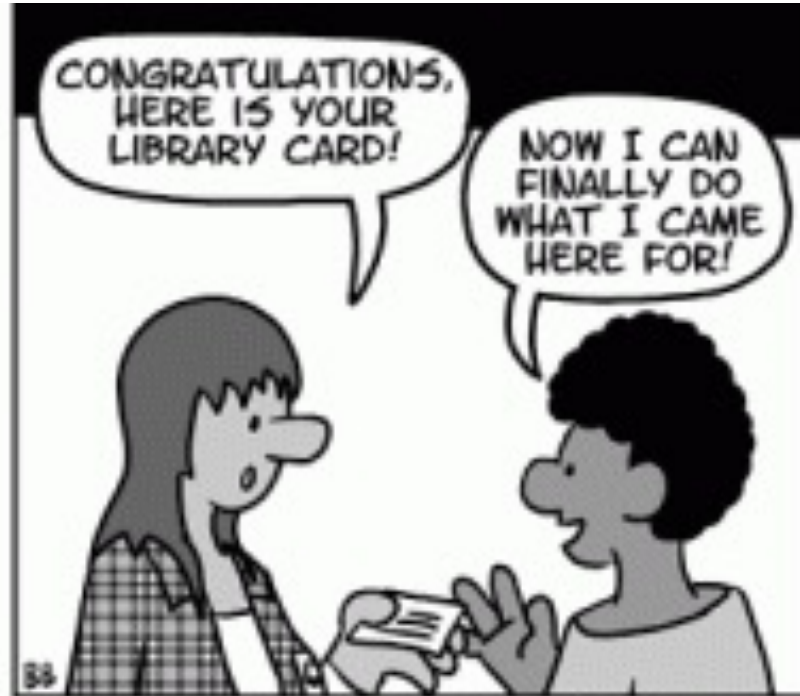
**The majority of patron concerns can be addressed in a respectful conversation.**

- First, respectfully acknowledge the person's concerns
- Inform them of the library's policy on Intellectual Freedom and how it guides material selection and share the link to the page on TNRL's website on intellectual freedom - <https://www.tnrl.ca/using-the-library/about-us/intellectual-freedom/>
- Offer them a *Library User's Statement of Concern About Library Materials* if they wish to further pursue a complaint.

Of course it's possible to go overboard...



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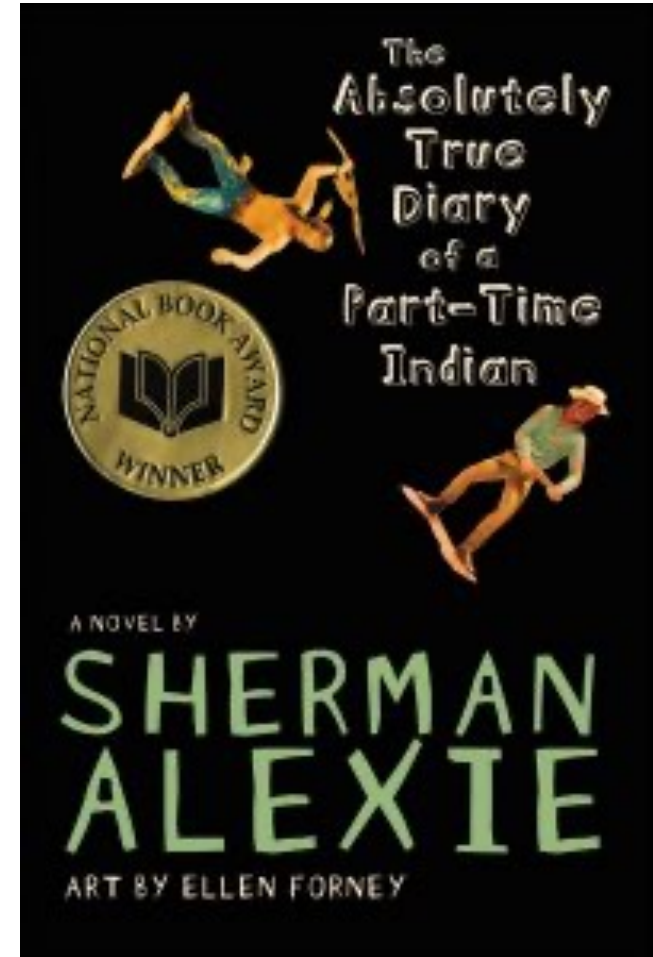
# Breakout group discussion

You are working in public services and a patron tells you that she is unhappy that the library has this award-winning book in its Teen section. She expresses surprise that the library has this particular work because it contains profanity, violence and situations that are sexually explicit. She asks that you remove all copies of this title.

What would you say to this patron? What would be your next steps?

## **Description:**

The protagonist and first-person narrator of is 14-year-old Arnold Spirit Jr, or Junior. The budding cartoonist lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation, and he leaves the rez to attend an all-white high school. Alexie drew from his own experiences for the novel, which addresses themes of racial identity, coming of age, bullying, violence, poverty, and more with Alexie's characteristic humor.



# Background on *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

## **Awards:**

National Book Award for Young People's Literature ; Horn Book Award; the California Young Reader Medal. *School Library Journal* named it a best book of 2007 and the Young Adult Library Services Association included it among their Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults.

## **Challenges to this title:**

Sherman Alexie's National Book Award-winning *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has appeared on ALA's top ten challenged books list six times since its 2007 publication. In 2017, it held the #2 slot on the list due to challenges based on profanity, violence and situations that were deemed sexually explicit. Challenges were defeated in every case.

<https://bannedbooksweek.org/banned-spotlight-the-absolutely-true-diary-of-a-part-time-indian/>

# Questions to think about.....

- How can I explain intellectual freedom to patrons or other staff?
- Should the library be a place representing diverse voices, even those that some might find offensive?
- Are there materials that are sufficiently harmful to some groups that they should be removed from collections?
- Is it appropriate to express your personal beliefs while acting as a representative of the library?

# Resources

Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries

<http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/statement-on-intellectual-freedom-and-libraries/>

TNRL – On Intellectual Freedom

<https://www.tnrl.ca/using-the-library/about-us/intellectual-freedom/>

TNRL Policy on Intellectual Freedom

<https://tnrd.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/79592?preview=147507>

Freedom to Read Links

<https://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/links-about-intellectual-freedom/>



# References

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Contact me at:

Deb Thomas

[da.thomas@shaw.ca](mailto:da.thomas@shaw.ca)