



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“The Constitution exists precisely so that opinions and judgments, including esthetic and moral judgments about art and literature, can be formed, tested and expressed. What the Constitution says is that these judgments are for the individual to make, not for the Government to decree, even with the mandate or approval of the majority.”***

-Anthony M. Kennedy,  
Supreme Court Justice, in  
*United States et al. v.  
Playboy Entertainment  
Group, Inc.*

A recent posting on the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) listserv caught my attention recently. A library school student asked the list members for comments or opinions on book censorship in schools. One of the members of this list posted a link to a blog called “Let them read books!” ([letthemread.blogspot.com](http://letthemread.blogspot.com)). It is written by Mary Zdrojewski, who is a graduate student in the School Library Media program in the University at Buffalo’s School of Information.

She begins with a description of a children’s literature class she took a few years ago and the short amount of time given to discussing the censorship or challenges of children’s literature. What she finds most difficult is that they were given complaint forms and rote answers, and an effort was made to avoid conflict by avoiding certain books. Isn’t this censorship, she asks?

The topic of book challenges in school districts is on-

going and constant. In fact, when I did a search for articles on challenged books in the library’s online academic database, there were so many I had to limit my search to 2004 and later.

The cases I read included school districts in Merced, California; Bozeman, Montana; Hernando County, Florida; Fargo, North Dakota; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and Twin Bridges, Montana. Four of the schools involved ended up retaining the books and one – Merced City School District – removed the book from the shelves of their two middle school libraries. The sixth school district – Fayetteville – had removed three sex-education books from their middle school library shelves and this action was followed by a demand from a parent to remove 70 other titles.

The retained books were: Louise Rennison’s *On the Bright Side, I’m Now the Girlfriend of a Sex God: Further Confessions of Georgia Nicolson*; *America*, by

E.R. Frank; *Mick Harte was Here*, by Barbara Park; and *Deenie* by Judy Blume. *Deenie*, however, can only be checked out if a student has written parental permission to do so.

A number of of these challenges are resolved locally, while others go on to lower courts or sometimes even the Supreme Court. Some of the court cases I found were part of a “Notable First Amendment Court Cases” document on the American Library Association website ([ala.org](http://ala.org)). The verdicts in many of these cases help to clarify the role of the school district in book selection.

For example, a 2003 Cedarville, Arkansas case – where the school district had decided to limit the access to the Harry Potter books – was decided by the District Court, who noted “that it [the Board] was still bound by the Bill of Rights and could not abridge the student’s First Amendment right to read

a book on the basis of an undifferentiated fear of disturbance or because the Board disagreed with the ideas contained in the book.”

This issue is huge and I know I have barely begun to describe it. For me, working in a public library, I am always conscious of the need for libraries to provide as much diversity and as many contradictory opinions as possible - as long as the literature is well written and sincere. I believe that by providing this kind of diversity to children, we are helping them decide for themselves what they really think.