



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“The most valuable contribution that novelas make to the library is that they bring many people into the building who would not otherwise come, and these readers keep coming back for more. Hopefully...one thing leads to another, and novela customers will begin to check out magazines, attend a playgroup or storytime with their children, and maybe take an ESL or citizenship class at the library...”***

-June 2002 *Library Journal*; “Focus on Special Literature: Fotonovelas” by Robert Logan

When I was working as a jails librarian, fotonovelas were one of the popular items we provided to our library patrons. I loved going to the Mission district in San Francisco to pick them up – and I always took a few minutes to stop at my favorite Mexican bakery. So, when I saw that these small inexpensively-made Spanish comic books had made the news lately, I was interested to read more about the controversy.

According to the many reports and emails I read, this topic started with a complaint from an organization called “Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform” (CAIR). Their challenge to these books was apparently about explicit drawings they found in some of the titles at the Denver Public Library, although the issue seems to have then evolved into the larger question of Spanish language materials versus English language ones. There was a protest outside the

Central Library on August 8, with a local radio commentator, Michael Corbin, quoted by Fernando Quintero in the “Rocky Mountain News” as saying: “It’s outrageous that we’ve got the library, of all places, peddling porn...” (August 9, 2005). Corbin was joined by a representative from the Colorado Minutemen – a group that monitors border crossings – and others, as they demanded the resignation of the city librarian Rick Ashton.

On the other side were library supporters, who carried signs that supported multilingualism and questioned censorship. Corey Sampson, who represented an organization called “Colorado for Immigrant Rights,” pointed out that this issue was being used to further the racist beliefs of organizations like CAIR.

There is a lot more information about this controversy on the CAIR website ([www.cairco.org](http://www.cairco.org)), on the American Library Association

website (ala.org) and on the Denver Public Library website (denverlibrary.org), as well as various news sites. And on August 1, 2005, *The Washington Times* (www.washingtontimes.com) published an article by Valerie Richardson about the Denver library’s “Language and Learning” plan, which will enhance the library offerings to its Spanish-speaking patrons. This plan sparked much of the debate about the role of public libraries and the use of the taxpayers’ money.

But rather than get into more detail, I’d like to address that basic question: What is the role of a public library, especially as it relates to immigrants and non-English materials? In the August 2005 issue of *American Libraries*, there is a special literacy toolkit which begins: “When Andrew Carnegie set out to expand America’s public library system...the libraries he

supported were built to educate and prepare a generation of people, mostly new immigrants, to be productive citizens...” This idea that we look at who we are serving and how we can meet their needs, while at the same time making our communities and our country a better place for all of us, should be the mission for all public libraries. Providing library materials in familiar formats and native languages is just one way a library can help its users. As library official Beth Elder says in the *Washington Times* article, “Libraries have always welcomed immigrants and always been a resource for immigrants to improve their lives...” I couldn’t agree more – and for us to do less would be to undermine who we are: Libraries for the public – all of the public.