



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Threats to the freedom of expression of any person become threats to the freedom of all...”

-From ALA Policy 58.3:
“Abridgment of the Rights of Freedom of Foreign Nationals”
(ala.org)

Author, poet and commentator Andrei Codrescu recently caused a stir at the American Library Association’s (ALA) midwinter meeting in San Antonio, Texas. The title of the program was “The Future of Our Profession: Educating Tomorrow’s Librarians,” and besides Codrescu, there were two other speakers: Bill Johnson, Director of the New Orleans Public Library, and Michael Gorman, current president of ALA. During the program – according to emails and online comments I read – Codrescu attacked the ALA for not taking a strong stand on the issue of imprisoned Cuban librarians. So, when I discovered that there was going to be a re-broadcast of Codrescu’s speech – on BookTv – I made a point of watching it.

I’m not sure what I was expecting – maybe some yelling or at least some clear anger – but what I saw instead was a sometimes funny, sometimes intense presentation, followed

by a measured and respectful exchange of comments, observations and opinions. It is true that Codrescu clearly expressed the idea that “it was with a great deal of dismay that I learned that the American Library Association has taken no action to condemn the imprisonment of librarians, the banning of books, the repression of expression and the torture of dissidents only 90 miles away from our shores, in Cuba.” He then went on to explain briefly the history of this situation, the responses from various political figures, and his own personal experience with repression growing up in Romania. It was a heartfelt speech and one worth hearing. And the issue of the Cuban libraries, which I discussed in an earlier column, is a subject that continues to be discussed widely.

Another aspect of Codrescu’s conversation with Gorman was the definition of the word librarian. Codrescu

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had started his speech with three questions. The first of these was: “How is a librarian better than a mouse click?” In his answer, he compared Google to a librarian, although he pointed out this was an unfair comparison because “the machine never gets tired and doesn’t waste time caring about the quality of the information.” Those last few words got an enthusiastic response from the audience, which was made up of people who spend a lot of time worrying about the quality of their information.

As he and Gorman talked after the speech, however, they disagreed on just what a librarian is. Codrescu contended that someone who gives out books is a librarian; Gorman didn’t seem to agree. Although this concept was only an underlying theme in their particular conversation, I think it is worth examining.

Libraries are institutions

that are currently undergoing great changes. The trend in some libraries toward more autonomy for the library user has challenged librarians to examine their roles and responsibilities. As they do this, the library profession itself must be scrutinized, and questions must be asked. Perhaps the first one should be: Is a librarian a professional? And if so, what does that mean? To me it means we are more than a conduit for acquiring books. We are selectors, we are protectors and we are committed to providing access to a wide range of information.

With the available contradictory information, it is difficult to know whether or not the Cuban librarians are librarians in a traditional sense. On the one hand it doesn’t matter, since imprisoning someone for distributing literature of any kind is not an idea that should be supported

by governments or individuals. On the other hand, I think it is worth acknowledging the difference between a distributor of written materials and a librarian.