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Intellectual
Freedom

The Library and
the Censor

Eli M. Oboler

Defending Intellectual Freedom

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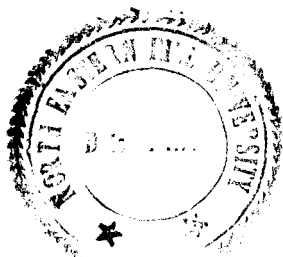
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READING LISTS:

"The Freedom to Read: A Selected Reading List," revised in 1979 from Idaho State University Library List No. 76-7 (1976).

"The Censor's Library," *NOIF* 26 (May 1977): 68, 89.

To my sister, Dr. Minnie Oboler Perlstein,
and my brother, Arch Oboler—
exemplars of courage and independence

Outside of the prison cell in a state of freedom there are certain problems, yes. They are not prison misfortunes. They are misfortunes of freedom. These are liberty's burdens, which are not easy but cannot be compared to the heavy weight of unfreedom.

Alexander Ginzburg and four other
freed Russian dissenters, in a joint
statement released to the world press
28 April 1979.

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Foreword

Eli M. Oboler, university librarian at Idaho State University for over three decades, has been an exemplar of service to his profession. In addition to his contributions to higher education, he has been one of librarianship's most persistent critics of censorship and one of its most vocal proponents of intellectual freedom.

Mr. Oboler has not only spoken for intellectual freedom on behalf of librarianship and the American Library Association, he has been our loyal gadfly, constantly demanding the dismantling of barriers to freedom of expression and freedom of inquiry.

In urging the American Library Association not to follow but to lead in social movements advancing freedom, Mr. Oboler was one of ALA's premier advocates of the removal of racial restrictions in library services during the early civil rights movement in America. Later, as one of the essays in this volume shows, he called for the elimination of restrictions on library services to youth.

In 1961, the *Library Bill of Rights*, ALA's basic statement on intellectual freedom in library services, was amended to oppose abridgment of the right to use a library based on "race, religion, national origins or political views." In 1967, the word "age" was added to this article against discrimination. On both occasions, the forceful voice of Eli Oboler was heard.

In the jargon of First Amendment debates, Mr. Oboler has been a purist. But purists have never had an easy time of it.

In the not-too-distant past, the term "purist" was applied to idealists striving for a world that was not and, in the views of most, never would be. The term often prompted a disbelieving shake of the head.

Today, the word "purist" sometimes carries with it the hint of a taint. Purists believe that the First Amendment applies to the expressions of the views of both civil rights advocates and neo-Nazis. Fortunately for his colleagues, Mr. Oboler has not been deterred by those who would tar the purist with the brush of the hated dogmas of speakers whose First Amendment rights he defends.

Of all the issues raised in this volume, perhaps none will be more vexatious in the next decade than the defense of purism. In the years ahead, I hope we can use the bench mark presented in these pages.

But the urgency of this question of purism should not hide from readers the fact that some of today's popular views on intellectual freedom were once regarded as extremely odious by many influential people, both within and without librarianship. Thus, the elaboration of a consistent and comprehensive philosophy of freedom of expression is not the easy task that it sometimes appears in retrospect.

In 1922, in a series of articles on "questionable" books in libraries, *Library Journal* condemned "salacious" works which supposedly appealed to the "prurient" interest. The editors refused to name specific publications, fearing that a demand would be created for them. The conversion of most librarians to the philosophy of the *Library Bill of Rights* did not occur overnight. Those who join the profession of librarianship today, and perhaps even more all those who use library services, owe a debt of gratitude to Eli Oboler.

Judith F. Krug, *Director*

OFFICE FOR INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Preface

Alfred North Whitehead defined *dogma* as “the product of mere abstract thought elaborating its notions of the fitness of things”—what a minor American philosopher, Henshaw Ward, described as “thobbing: *thinking out beliefs.*” Although I am sure I shall be deemed both a dogmatist and a “thobber” in at least some of the pages that follow, my honest intention has been to follow Whitehead’s advice concerning research methodology: to “. . . pay full attention to the empirical evidence, and to the whole of that evidence.”

There is a great deal of evidence that intellectual freedom in America these last thirty years has been in constant danger of diminution, if not extinction. The Joe McCarthyism of the 1950s that hinged on the belief that America was in extreme danger from an internal pro-Communist conspiracy and the Gene McCarthyism of the 1960s that claimed the existence of an equally dangerous plot against democracy by American ultrarightists both had their effects on libraries and librarianship. Through both periods I was involved in the efforts of some—and eventually a majority—of the library profession to give full professional rights to all librarians within the American Library Association and to minimize the censorial ventures of those in and out of our profession who neither believed in nor practiced the freedom to read.

This volume includes previously published articles, editorials, letters, and reviews, as well as new material, that expatiate on a theme. That theme—which, I suppose, is that of my professional life and career—is that man is by nature free in mind as well as body, and that librarians, of all mankind, are (or *should* be) the leaders in explanation, defense, promulgation, and practice of intellectual freedom. This book is, I hope, not my last word on either intellectual freedom or censorship, but I think it says some things worth preserving and noting as reflections of the embattled state of the freedom of the mind in America, and particularly in American libraries, in the mid-years of the contentious twentieth century. It will be successful if it reminds its readers that what the Russian dissenters have described as “liberty’s burden” is a universal, continuing, and bearable load that all who love freedom must be prepared to assume when the occasion arises.

My previous volume in the *Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science* series, *Ideas and the University Library*, was criticized by some readers and reviewers because its contents—mostly previously printed articles, as in this volume—had not been updated and revised. However, I cling to the obviously outdated and ridiculously old-fashioned notion that intellectual honesty is as important as, or perhaps more important than, timeliness. So, once again, these products of my pen are republished as they first appeared, warts and all.

I owe particular thanks to the many editors and publishers (all noted on the acknowledgments pages) who have graciously permitted me to reprint what they first found worthy of publication. Those items not listed as previously published are otherwise acknowledged.

Finally, let me offer due appreciation to my colleagues, in and out of Idaho State University, who helped me toward reasonable views on some highly charged, emotion-filled issues. The ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (and especially Judy Krug, who speaks for herself elsewhere in this book), the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee in the 1960s, the Freedom to Read Foundation, and especially my fellow members of the Idaho Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee—all are owed thanks

for their special shares in this work, for the imperfections of which, of course, I take full responsibility.

And, as with all my writings, the Muse Polyhymnia made her tuneful contribution—via flute, oboe, and violin, especially.

E.M.O.

Pocatello, Idaho
Idaho State University
August 1979

Defending Intellectual Freedom

The free mind: Intellectual freedom's perils and prospects *

1

(This article, which formed part of Library Journal's 1976 100th Anniversary issue whose theme was "Libraries in America's Future," was perhaps a little more euphoric than the grim facts of the struggle against censorship in America really justified; but it was intended to be, even if somewhat rhetorical, a reminder to experienced librarians and a stimulus to library neophytes to engage, personally and directly, in the necessary battle to save intellectual freedom. After several years, about the only additions I believe needed are to underscore its perhaps prescient comments on the inchoate dangers to libraries in the commercial information industry and once again to ask vehemently for strong measures by the library profession to prevent the spreading contagion of censorship [whether conscious or unconscious] by librarians themselves.)

THE FREE MIND: INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM'S PERILS AND PROSPECTS

"Let us look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart."¹

When de Tocqueville wrote this ringing exhortation, nearly 150 years ago, he was convinced that "the press is the chiefest (sic)

*Reprinted from *Library Journal*, January 1, 1976. Published by R. R. Bowker Co. (a Xerox Company). Copyright © 1976 by Xerox Corporation.

The politics of censorship

2

(The first two sections of this chapter, both published under the title of "Congress as Censor," were among a very few in the whole literature of librarianship to single out the legislative branch of our government as an actual or prospective censor. The first article was a call to action, as well as a recital of censorship threats. The second, published nearly two decades after the first, was itself a witness to the statement contained therein, "the threat of censorship from Congress is perennial, and seemingly will continue to be so.")

CONGRESS AS CENSOR—1952*

During the second session of the 82nd Congress, a total of 4,549 measures were introduced. Of these, only a very few concerned librarians who are becoming increasingly aware of the post-war censorship that is seemingly inevitably descending upon us. A total of less than ten bills and resolutions from more than 4,500 possibilities would seem like a not too worrisome proportion. Yet the danger in these censorship measures far exceeds their insignificant number.

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The fear of science: Back of the speaker controversy

3

(This is an article with an interesting, even curious, history. It was rejected by the editors of Library Journal, Wilson Library Bulletin, and American Libraries—for various reasons or no reason. But its author believes it has something rather special to say, perhaps even to ordinary citizens concerned about freedom to think, to speculate, and to do research, no matter whose toes are stepped on in the process. It appears here without apology or further explanation; as our legal friends say, ipse dixit.)

THE FEAR OF SCIENCE: BACK OF THE SPEAKER CONTROVERSY

... Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences upon the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences.

—John Stuart Mill

... I have reached the inescapable opinion that a major cause of American Negroes' intellectual and social deficits is hereditary and racially genetic in origin. This is not remediable to a major degree by practical improvements in environment.

—William B. Shockley

The young adult and intellectual freedom

4

(Perhaps the most difficult area of book selection for current librarians is in the so-called young adult area. Consider the almost monthly misgivings of School Library Journal, the questionings of patrons, parents, and librarians alike about the increasingly frank YA novel, the self-doubts of even the most liberal of First Amendment purists about the limits of what to buy for the fifteen to twenty-one-year-old readers. The following two statements, written nearly a decade apart [the first as a talk in 1976], pretty well express my current views on this perplexing topic.)

SOCIETAL PRESSURES AND SELECTION OF BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Back in library school, a course in “Book Selection”—whether called just that, or, in modern parlance referred to as something like “The Parameters of Optional Media Alternatives”—is usually one of the more popular, if not likely to be “Mickey Mouse” courses. The instructor usually sets up straw-men “censors,” and, almost as though they were targets with no recourse but being targets, knocks them down with the heavy artillery of John Stuart Mill, Justice William Douglas, or, maybe, even Eli Oboler to provide obviously truly logical and reasonable and demonstrably irresistible arguments. Foolish folk who dare to question the “professional”—and note that word is not only in quotes, but has some

The etiology of censorship

5

(When Titus Lucretius Carus, some two millennia ago, told his fellow Romans that “happy is he who knows the causes of things,” he was not, unfortunately, completely accurate. Sometimes it is more pleasant and relaxing neither to know nor to worry about why. The three sections of this chapter are all, in different ways, explanations of the “causes, origins, or reasons” of and for censorship. The first two are serious attempts at querying the denial of the right to inquire; the third seeks to delimit the almost delimitable term, “intellectual freedom.”)

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT CENSORSHIP* *(BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK), EXPLAINED**

When Dr. David Reuben of best-seller fame hit on the obviously “selling” title of his popular book about sex, the temptation to develop variations of this theme were many and have not always been resisted, as the title of this article should indicate. This portmanteau rubric does make a convenient starting place for the discussion of some (if not quite all!) facets of censorship which are usually ignored, or, at best, slighted.

****This article in a somewhat altered form has previously been published in the author’s *The Fear of the World: Censorship and Sex* (Scarecrow Press, 1974).**

Public relations and fighting censorship

6

(The sad truth is that the free exercise of intellectual freedom is not usually a reward which comes to the complaisant librarian who doesn't work for it. This chapter includes two views of the problem, with suggested practical solutions. None of them will work, of course, in every instance, but they should help in most situations, assuming that preventative, rather than remedial, measures are the best way to deal with threatened dangers.)

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

At first blush, the title of this paper may seem either ridiculous or obvious. If any self-respecting librarian who believes in and practices (as well as talking and attending meetings and conferences about) intellectual freedom *doesn't* have good public relations, that librarian most certainly doesn't have the opportunity to use intellectual freedom either. And the intimate, synergistic relationship between public relations and intellectual freedom *should* be so obvious that it is hardly worth discussing.

Or *is* it so obvious? Do librarians have at least *part* of their library's public relation programs (and I'm presuming each of you has one in your library, acknowledged and labelled so, or at least, operating *pro forma*) devoted to making clear to the staff and patrons and administration and board and fund providers and

The censorship battle in a conservative state

7

(The past two decades in Idaho have been a microcosm of the same years nationwide so far as fighting censorship is concerned. In university classes, newspaper articles and editorials, Idaho Library Association magazine articles, and ILA conference meetings I have spoken and written to the point where the media in Idaho seems to contact me more or less automatically when any censorship brouhahas come up. This chapter could, I'm sure, be repeated in almost all fifty states; Idaho's chief claim to uniqueness, in this respect, would seem to be that it spawns independent, ultraconservative, obscenity-and-curriculum-baiting groups as frequently and as numerous as its native Snake River salmon.)

IDAHO SCHOOL LIBRARIANS AND SALINGER'S THE CATCHER IN THE RYE: A CANDID REPORT

Last summer some 69 Idaho school librarians, active and prospective, attended a workshop at Idaho State University dealing with book selection and attendant problems. At the end of the 10-day workshop a written examination was given, including the following questions: "Your school board of education sends you a written memorandum requiring you to remove all copies of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* from your school library immediately.

Editorials and letters on intellectual freedom

8

(A miscellany of letters, including one sent to but never published by Wilson Library Bulletin, and editorials, all of which may add up to what clever Ron Norman of Kearney, Nebraska, memorably described [in Morte d'Arthur terminology] as "Sir Eli . . . sallying forth from . . . Academe . . . to protect the holy cause of intellectual freedom." But at least I avoided one of the more gruesome quarters of Dante's Inferno by not staying neutral. Incidentally, it is a pleasure to include the entire Norman-Oboler colloquy in print; it was fun—even if somewhat stuffily ended by "Sir Eli.")*

EDITORIALS

THREE AND FOUR LETTER WORDS [for *PNLA Quarterly*]

The acronym "ACLU" may become as familiar to librarians as ALA, PNLA, and LC, if the recently announced policy statement by the American Civil Liberties Union dealing with censorship of allegedly obscene material becomes widely accepted. The June 18, 1962 issue of *Publishers' Weekly* states that the American Civil Liberties Union, "having considered a three-year review of the issue

*With Ron Norman's personal approval, of course.

Recent censorship literature reviewed and two lists

9

(The nineteen book reviews [two of one book—to what turned out to be against the rules of two editors!]) and two booklists in this chapter cover quite an imposing library of books worth reading in the difficult area of intellectual freedom/censorship. From Marjorie Fiske in 1959 to Ralph McCoy in 1979, the perspective is broad, and the disputes are many. I think I see at least some consistency in the reviewer's attitude, if not necessarily in those of the authors.)

REVIEWS

Book Selection and Censorship: A Study of School and Public Libraries in California. Marjorie Fiske. University of California Press, 1959.

For some time there has been discussion and even apprehension throughout the library world about the Fiske report. Advance news told us that this study, financed by the Ford Fund for the Republic and sponsored by the University of California School of Librarianship, would show that public and school librarians were doing far more actual censoring on their own, quietly, than was even advocated, let alone successfully carried on, by outside pressure groups.

Unfortunately a reading of the actual printed report serves to make the picture a good deal blacker than those who are sincere

Notes, maxims, and an intellectual freedom creed

10

(These condensed comments on intellectual freedom and censorship do not aspire to the pithiness and worldly-wiseness of a La Rochefoucauld or a Lord Chesterfield, or even the homely truths of a Thoreau or Franklin; let's settle for the occasional achievement of something worth saying in a style worth reading. Nothing in this chapter has been published previously.)

SOME NOTES AND MAXIMS

. . . In this postliterate age the freedom to see and hear is more in danger than the freedom to read, which has had a longer history of attack and defense. The major battles for the book have all been fought; only the minor skirmishes, the preliminary maneuvering have occurred in regards to film and television and all the other impedimenta of the McLuhan era. The fear of actually looking at life as it is, of hearing the sounds of reality, far transcends whatever comparatively slight trepidation comes out of printed pages.

. . . The librarian who selects books on the basis of personal prejudices is not practicing book selection for his or her library; he or she is simply buying books for his or her personal library.

. . . Of all the basic requirements for being a truly professional librarian, the primary one is the ability to differentiate between book selection and book censorship.

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About the Author

ELI M. OBOLER is university librarian at Idaho State University in Pocatello. He is the author of *The Fear of the Word: Censorship and Sex and Ideas and the University Librarian* (Greenwood Press, 1977), as well as of numerous articles in journals and newspapers. For 1979-80 he is vice-president of the Freedom to Read Foundation, vice-chairman (chairman-elect) of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Round Table, and a member of the ALA Council.

Description of Book

Eli M. Oboler believes that librarians, because of their unique role as caretakers of our cultural heritage, must be at the forefront of safeguarding our intellectual freedom. For nearly four decades, through his involvement with the American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee, the Freedom to Read Foundation, and other free-speech movements and campaigns, he has practiced what he preaches. Defending Intellectual Freedom is a collection of Oboler's essays on the defense and promulgation of freedom of thought and the battle against censorship.

Oboler examines the specter of censorship in the many guises under which it has appeared in the postwar era. Political censorship -- the suppression of books on ideological grounds -- emerging from both right and left wing elements, and moral censorship -- advocated for religious reasons and the interest of social welfare -- are considered and discussed. But Oboler does more than just describe the enemies of free thought. He explains the ways librarians and those interested in libraries can combat the censor and fulfill their responsibility to the reading public.

Defending Intellectual Freedom is more than a plea for the liberty of every American's intellect. It is a carefully reasoned analysis of the many complex issues involved in the question of censorship. Both librarians and concerned lay readers will find it a vital aid to understanding one of our most basic civil rights.