

What the BCLA Intellectual Freedom Committee has been up to...

By Jon Scop.

BC libraries feature challenged books

February 20–26 was Canada's Freedom to Read Week, and libraries throughout the province once again stepped up to raise awareness of the principles of intellectual freedom, often surprising their patrons with the wide range of materials which have been and continue to be challenged in North American libraries. Following distribution of Freedom to Read posters and materials to libraries by the BCLA office, library staff members created some interesting displays and activities.



Vancouver Public Library Kitsilano Branch. Photo by April Ens.

Vancouver Public Library's Kitsilano Branch presented "mug shots" of challenged books in its entranceway, and invited patrons to check off challenged books they had read, which prompted some lively discussions. VPL's Carnegie Branch featured a crossword puzzle with banned and challenged books as clues.

The Thompson-Nicola Regional District Library System invited patrons to submit their own photographs, paintings and drawings celebrating freedom of expression.

Simon Fraser University Library displayed posters of staff members reading challenged books, and created large displays where students could write their own comments about intellectual freedom.



Simon Fraser University students add their comments about challenged books. Photo by Janis McKenzie.

Most branches of the Vancouver Island Regional Library featured images of challenged books and DVDs wrapped in paper, torn to reveal the titles. The displays prompted an article in the Cowichan News Leader, [Libraries celebrating our freedom to read](#).



Packages are torn to display challenged materials at Vancouver Island Regional Library. Photo by Monica Finn.

Responding to issues

At a meeting in February, we discussed the many factors involved in deciding whether to formally address the wide variety of intellectual freedom issues of interest to our members. While issues directly concerning libraries, and those based in BC, are obviously important to address, we reaffirmed that any issue involving freedom of expression, whether nationwide or beyond our borders, is worthy of discussion. If there is consensus that the topic needs attention and, crucially, if one or more members are willing to go forward with drafts or other appropriate proposals, then the issue will be addressed.

Freedom of speech and assembly at the G-20

Last summer's joint IFC / BCLA letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty regarding abuses of civil liberties at the G-20 Summit in Toronto gained national attention, and was cited in online publications of Librarians for Human Rights, BC Fahrenheit 451, and Social Justice Librarian, among others. We received a response to our letter from Premier McGuinty.

Concerns regarding Bibliocommons "notices"

As the Browser goes to press, the IFC is recommending a letter be sent regarding a feature of Bibliocommons, the new, interactive catalogue

being adopted by several BC libraries. In addition to comments about materials, patrons are also invited to highlight "notices," which are limited to coarse language, sexual content or graphic violence. We feel that this serves as a vehicle for de facto warning labels which can be a form of censorship, and places the three "permitted" concerns in an exalted position over other equally valid objections patrons might have, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. The Bibliocommons "comments" section already allows patrons to make open-ended observations and, if appropriate, warnings about library material, without having to fit these into categories which are often inappropriate.

Conference sessions

If you're reading this before or during the BC Library 100 Year Anniversary Conference in Victoria (April 7—9), we hope you'll check out two IFC-sponsored sessions, presented by Dr. Ann Curry:

- "A Century of Censorship Challenges in BC" (Friday, 9:00-10:15), and
- "Andrew Carnegie Redux: how his vision of public library architecture is still relevant after 100 years" (Saturday, 2:00-3:15).

Jon Scop is current chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee and is an auxiliary librarian at Burnaby and Vancouver Public Libraries.