

More than Books

Celebrating Banned Books Week

During Banned Books Week, September 21-27, thousands of libraries and bookstores across the nation celebrate one of a democratic society's most basic freedoms – the freedom to read – by calling attention to titles that have been banned or challenged during the year. I decided I would celebrate Banned Books Week by reading one of the most challenged books of the previous year.

What's the difference between a challenge and a ban? The American Library Association (ALA) explains, "A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials."

While the ALA did not report any instances of books being banned from either school or public libraries last year, it does list 301 instances nationally of people sending written requests to libraries to have books removed because of their content. At the top of the top 10 list of most challenged books was the "Captain Underpants" series by Dav Pilkey.

As I was perusing "Captain Underpants and the Terrifying Return of Tippy Tinkletrousers," I was reminded of a former ALA president's observation that, "Not every book is right for every reader," Clearly, I am not the target audience for the Captain Underpants series.

Series enthusiasts say the books encourage boys to read. Its detractors, on the other hand, complain about the series' villainous characters and toilet humor.

Public libraries, of course, serve users of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. That's why Freeport Library needs - and has - such a wide range of materials. Individuals may choose what materials from the collection are suitable for themselves and their families.

Number two on the ALA top 10 list of most challenged books was "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison. Since I'd already read that one, I went on to the third title on the list, "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie.

Great, I thought, now I'm getting somewhere. The Freeport Shakespeare Society is reading Pacific Northwest Writers this year, and, since Alexie was born in Spokane, WA and lives in Seattle, and, since I am giving the Society's opening lecture in October, this is the frequently-challenged book I'll read.

"The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" is a semi-autobiographical young adult novel published in 2007. It received great reviews and won the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

I listened to the audio book, which Alexie read himself. It was only after I finished listening that I learned his reading had won another award as the year's best audio book for children or young adults in 2008.

"The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" continues to sell well and to be attacked for, among other things, offensive language. Despite that, and despite its being a young adult novel, I'm going to recommend it in my lecture to the Shakespeare Society members. I won't be recommending the Captain Underpants series unless there are some third-graders in the audience.

Which takes me back to the observation that, "Not every book is right for every reader," While I was impressed by Alexie as both a writer and a reader of audio books, and while some Shakespeare Society members may like "The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," others may hate it. Still others may not want to read it at all. I'm glad they all have the opportunity to decide for themselves what they think of this and others of his books.

The right to think for yourself is at the heart of the Banned Books Week. Celebrate it as I did - by reading whatever you please.

I also recommend checking out the library's display of banned or challenged books. The titles may surprise you.

The sponsors of Banned Books Week are the American Booksellers Association, the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, the American Library Association (ALA), the Association of American Publishers, the American Society of Journalists and Authors and the National Association of College Stores. In addition, the Library of Congress Center for the Book endorses Banned Books Week. Since 2011, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, National Coalition Against Censorship, National Council of Teachers of English, and PEN American Center also signed on as sponsors.

Library Director Carole Dickerson may be reached by phone at 815-233-3000, ext. 216 or by email at cdickerson@freeportpubliclibrary.org.