



Episode 027 – Banned in Burbank? (Transcript)

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at burbankinfo.org.

Announcements

“Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul” (Joyce Carol Oates). Burbank Public Library has everything you need for an engaging and fun-filled summer. Our Summer Reading Program runs from June 1 - July 31. All ages are welcome to participate. Track your daily reading and collect prizes. Read a book or magazine, listen to an audiobook, read aloud to a child or as a family - all types of reading count. Mark your calendar to attend the Summer Reading Kickoff Party on Saturday, June 1 from 4 – 5:30 pm at Buena Vista Branch Library, featuring live music from the Jazz Cartel! Enjoy your summer at Burbank Public Library!

Story

And now for today’s story.

According to Meg Medina from the Freedom to Read Foundation: To remove books from a library “because of the discomfort they create is a recipe for disaster. [It pushes readers to secrecy]. It undermines the studied opinion of

professional librarians and educators. It supports a false idea that there is one version of life that is acceptable. And it denigrates the work of authors who are brave enough to name experiences that are real.”

Burbank Public Library made the news in the early 1960s when then director Edward Caswell Perry refused to ban a controversial book that was being challenged nationally.

‘Tropic of Cancer’ is a semi-autobiographical novel published in France in 1934. It was written by American author Henry Miller who had moved to Paris on a self-imposed exile and lived a rather bohemian lifestyle. His book was banned in the United States due to sexual exploits of the main character. ‘Tropic of Cancer’ was finally published in the U.S. in 1961 by Grove Press. This led to the “obscenity trials that tested American laws on pornography. Shortly after its American debut, over sixty lawsuits were brought against booksellers in over 21 states.”

Several Los Angeles Times articles reported on booksellers that had been arrested for selling the scandalous novel. Hollywood bookseller Bradley R. Smith sold a copy of ‘Tropic of Cancer’ to an undercover vice squad officer and was arrested under the California state obscenity law which stated that there must be evidence that the bookseller knows the nature of the content in the book in question. The Los Angeles Police Department took it upon themselves to raid local bookstores. One L.A. Times reader wrote into the paper, “The fact that the police officials credit themselves with greater insight into the supposed obscenity of Henry Miller’s ‘Tropic of Cancer’ speaks very poorly of Los Angeles. The Supreme Court can hardly be dismissed as advocating obscenity and yet they saw fit to declare the book not obscene” (Edward Daniels). The following month, the neighboring

city of Glendale also declared the novel indecent and tasked their police force with tracking down any persons distributing the book.

Now, historically, the city of Burbank has had a conservative lean, but during this national outcry, our library happened to be led by Edward Caswell Perry and he was a strident advocate for free speech and minimizing censorship. In fact, in the 1960s, he was the acting chair for the California Library Association's Intellectual Freedoms Committee and he used this platform to try to educate people and to oppose, before the state assembly, proposed bills that would further criminalize works deemed offensive. During these contentions, the L.A. Times editor Robert R. Kirsch pointed out that the concept of the librarian had developed from one of a "gentle custodian on the margin of intellectual life to one of the crucial figures in free society. [He stated that] the librarian understands the need for free interplay of ideas and the necessity for resisting those who would destroy or diminish the availability of all sorts of ideas."

Burbank Police Department officials reviewed 'Tropic of Cancer' and concluded no legal case could be brought against it. The 1961 City Council "refused to act as a censorship board" and rejected a request to block Caswell's purchase of additional copies for the library. When at the library, the book was kept in a locked cabinet and loaned only to adults requesting it. At the time of the inquest, there were 40 hold requests for the one copy that the library did have. It seems perhaps the controversy actually catapulted the book into more readership than it might otherwise have had.

Times writer Ed Ainsworth addressed the topic by writing, "self-appointed censors are never concerned about themselves as they [protest] the proscribed material,

but always for the supposedly weak and easily-corrupted 'other fellow.' Also, that once started the censor is never satisfied. He is driven by his obsession to more and more stringent curbs upon his fellow men until he is telling them completely how to think and act." He declared that the normal end result of censorship is to "keep poor [and] ignorant people in a vacuum."

Edward Caswell Perry continued through the rest of his tenure as Burbank Public Library director to educate the community on the importance of free speech.

However, in 1963, in what seems to this librarian as a counter-intuitive move, that same freedom-loving department head instituted a library-wide ban on books...those of the textbook variety!

An October 23, 1963 Burbank Hi-Life article read as follows:

"LIBRARY PUTS TEXT BOOK BAN IN EFFECT

The setting: Burbank Public Library

It was a Monday evening. A few stragglers were going in and out. The number who came out of curiosity [to see the newly built library] had diminished to practically nothing. It was the same as it had been for the last month or so. Of course, there were some students coming in search of books, as [the] school [year] had started that day. However, things ran in a quiet and uneventful fashion.

Judging from the past week, the next week was expected to run just as smoothly. More students were expected because school and homework were well under way. And they came and came! Still they kept coming and coming and coming. Everyone was walking in and nobody was walking out. This was the start of the recent heat wave and in addition, the amount of homework assignments being

passed out immense. The first impression anyone got was that the 200 students or so had come to use the library facilities, which of course thrilled the librarians. They had never seen such an enthusiastic bunch.

The novelty wore off. Every night for the following week the same social minded, over heated group came in and studied. But they brought their own books. Many came in search for library materials, but by the time they arrived, there was no place for them to sit. It was estimated that in one night about 1,000 students entered the library. A solution was needed and fast.”

In the fall of that year, Perry banned students from using the library to do their homework. Textbooks were required to be checked in at the circulation desk. He claimed that the library had become so overcrowded with students that other patrons wanting to use the library facilities were unable to do so. Burbank resident Larry Levine brought a grievance to the City Council after he had been thrown out of the new Central Library building for possession of a textbook. Levine stated to the council that he was not a student, but was doing research which required a textbook as well as library reference material. He stated “I can’t believe that a public facility, especially one designed to promote learning should be declared off-limits to students who want to use it to study.”

The City Council initially opposed Perry’s stance, even going so far as to proclaim the ban “idiotic.” Perry worked to clarify that the restriction was not just based on overcrowding, but also on a growing problem with discipline. Limiting the number of students was also necessary to ease staff burdens. “The library staff complained bitterly that they had no time to perform their normal reference functions during the evening hours because student attendance was overflowing

the space and seating in the building to such a degree as to prevent library personnel from doing anything except attempting to maintain some semblance of order.” Perry felt obligated to make the building a usable space for patrons who were keen on using the library resources and materials. By the end of the month, he has eased the ban, allowing students who were using textbooks in conjunction with library materials to be admitted to use the facility, however, they had to have written permission from an authorized signer.

It is unknown when the textbook ban was completely done away with. But a 1966 Burbank Daily Review article that surveyed Perry indicated that “There is no longer the problem of misbehavior by students. However, the youthful readers have forced older persons to adjust the time when they normally use the libraries.” Modern-day librarians would delight to see an influx of younger patrons. We promote library usage to local schools and students, still teen patrons are, unfortunately, a rare sight.

And more than sixty years later, attempts to ban books are still happening nationally. Thankfully, in library school, one of the requirements is to fully comprehend the five laws of library science, the second and third law come into play in the question of censorship. The second law is “Every person his or her book” meaning that as librarians, we “serve a wide collection of patrons, [and therefore must] acquire literature to fit a wide variety of needs, and refrain from prejudice or judging what specific patrons choose to read.” The third law is “Every book its reader” meaning that “all books have a place in the library, even if only a small demographic might choose to read them.” Librarians today are still fighting the fight to make sure our patrons have the right to choose from varied literature.

Jason Reynolds wrote “What does it mean when we say, ‘Books unite us?’ It means that books are the tethers that connect us culturally. Stories ground us in our humanity; they convince us that we’re not actually that different and that the things that are actually different about us should be celebrated because they are what make up this tapestry of life.”

[News from Burbank](#)

Today’s news is from the August 19, 1953 Burbank Daily Review.

Library Book Rouses Ire of Elderly Man

An excited, 82-year-old man brought a book from the Burbank Public Library to the City Council last night and presented it as a “book not fit for anyone to read.”

Ernest Bagge, 9142 Wheatland, Sun Valley, found a word in the book which he asserted should ban it from the sight of all humankind, especially children.

“I’m only 82 years old and I never saw anything like it in my life,” Bagge said. He referred to ‘No Innocence Abroad,’ a book described on the cover as a “gallery of unusual people.”

The volume, written by Michael Stern, [chronicles real-life] underworld characters. The objectionable word was used in a direct quotation by Virginia Hill, one time friend of mobsters who is reported to have become respectable.

In its four-letter form, the word can be used as a noun or verb. Miss Hill used the word as an adjective to describe persons she deemed undesirable. Though not found in all current dictionaries, it is not unusual in current literature.

The council moved to refer it to the library board, and acting Mayor Earle Blais asked Bagge to turn the book over to City Clerk Naomi Putnam.

“No, no,” he protested, “I wouldn’t give it to a woman. [I’m] so mad I can’t talk. I don’t want anyone to read it.”

The book is part of the private McNaughton rental collection housed under contract in the public library. It was published by Random House, New York, and copyrighted in 1947. It has enjoyed several publications since first published.

And that’s the news from August 19, 1953.

End Credits

RememBURBANK was researched, written, edited, and hosted by Carolyn Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library. The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan. You can find show notes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at burbankinfo.org
Thank you for joining us today.