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Banned Books Week and the Freedom of the Press: Using a research collection for campus outreach

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Developing campus and community interest in a special research collection can be difficult. These collections are typically used by graduate students and faculty members who are working on specific research projects. However, the presence of such collections on university campuses can serve as a focal point for community discussion of current issues. Every year, Morris Library at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale uses Banned Books Week¹ as an opportunity to promote the Freedom of the Press Collection, and to engage the community in a discussion about censorship and access to literature in the United States.

In the 27 years Banned Books Week has been sponsored by ALA, it has served to raise awareness of continued challenges to books in American libraries and schools throughout the United States. It is celebrated by public libraries and bookstores throughout the country with displays and “Read-Outs,” which are readings of banned and challenged books. At Morris Library, we use Banned Books Week as an opportunity to promote the Ralph E. McCoy Collection of the Freedom of the Press, which documents the history of freedom of expression issues in the Anglo-American world from the year 1600 to the present.

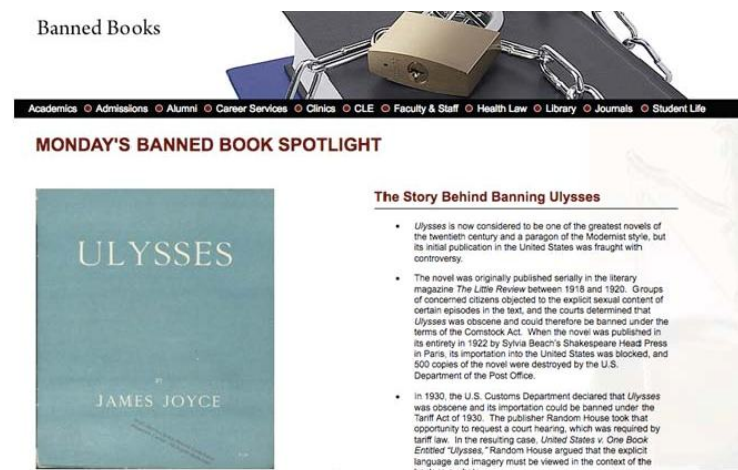


Image from the Banned Books Week Web site, designed by Jason Raymond of the Southern Illinois University School of Law Library.

The collection was originally developed by Ralph McCoy, director of Morris Library from 1955 to 1976, and an avid scholar of First Amendment Freedoms. McCoy used the books he collected in the creation of *Freedom of the Press: An Annotated Bibliography*, a monumental subject bibliography originally published in 1968 and updated with two supplemental volumes. McCoy donated his personal collection of books to Morris Library in 1981, where it is maintained as part of the rare book collections in the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC).² The collection includes books about freedom of expression, as well as examples of books that have been banned, burned, or censored throughout history. SCRC continues to develop the collection by acquiring books that have been banned or challenged in the United States and elsewhere. The McCoy Collection is currently one of the largest collections of print materials in the country for the study of the history of censorship and the control of information in the Western world.

Morris Library has celebrated Banned Books Week for the past five years, and the primary outreach event has always been a reading of selections from banned books. We also engage in

numerous activities to publicize the event in the month leading up to Banned Books Week. This year the library issued a press release advertising the reading about two weeks prior to the event. The statement briefly describes the McCoy Collection, but also points to the ALA Web site for Banned Books Week,³ where people can go for more information about the history and mission of the national event.

After we issued our press release this year, I was interviewed by three local news organizations: the local newspaper, the student newspaper on campus, and the local National Public Radio affiliate. I found that journalists are very interested in the books that are still regularly challenged in the United States, and the reasons for such challenges. In all of the interviews, I responded to questions about current book challenges in the United States, and ALA's position on access to challenged materials. However, I also tried to steer the conversation toward discussing the broader history of book banning and censorship, always mentioning that this history can be explored in detail in our Freedom of the Press Collection. This approach was easiest with the reporter from the student newspaper *The Daily Egyptian*, who was very interested in the relationship between the collection on campus and the current events discussed on the ALA Web site. I was also able to publish an opinion piece about the history of book banning in *The Daily Egyptian* during Banned Books Week.

In addition to being interviewed by local news organizations, I also used the university's Web site to promote the collection. Every month, the library homepage features one resource within the library with a brief write-up. In the month of September, I wrote a few paragraphs on "banned books in Morris Library" for this featured resource page. I described some of the historical events documented in the collection, and used this prime Web real estate to encourage people to visit the SCRC to learn more. This resulted in a few enquiries from undergraduates about the nature of the Freedom of the Press Collection, which was one of the desired outcomes. Although undergraduates are not traditional researchers in special collections reading rooms, we hope to increase their interest and make them aware of the primary sources that are available to them at the university.

During Banned Books Week, I collaborated with the university's law library to produce a Web site on the legal history of book banning in the United States.⁴ Each day of the week, the site featured a book from our collection and described the legal mechanisms by which it was banned, as well as any relevant court cases resulting from the distribution of the book. Each page featured images of the books in our collection. The Web site will remain available, with links from the Web sites of the Law Library and SCRC.

The culmination of our promotional activities was the reading of banned books at a local coffee shop near campus. The setting was casual, and the room we used was small enough to feel intimate, but large enough to accommodate about 50 people. Prior to the reading, SCRC staff members and student workers staged a "protest" outside the venue—they marched with signs reading, "Read Banned Books. It's your freedom we're talking about!" The protest attracted the attention of passersby and was a wonderful photo opportunity with the local and campus press. At the event, the library purchased coffee and cookies from the shop to offer the attendees. Sixteen people volunteered to read; most were library faculty and staff, but some teaching faculty also joined us.

I began the program by giving a few remarks on the history of book banning and the importance of the freedom to read, and, of course, I mentioned the research potential in the McCoy Collection. The readings began with a selection from *Areopagitica*, John Milton's text on the importance of the freedom of the press. I asked each reader to select a book that they love, and the choices ranged from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to Joyce's *Ulysses*. We even had a selection from *And Tango Makes Three*, a children's book about two male penguins who raise an egg together, which was the most-challenged book of 2007, according to ALA. The event was well-attended by faculty, students, and community members. The readings lasted for about two hours, and while some people drifted in and out as a result of the casual environment, many remained through the entire event.



Nathalia Monteiro, graduate assistant at SCRC, read from *Tropic of Cancer*, by Henry Miller. Photo by Alex Wasilewski.

The event was covered on the front page of the local newspaper, and the third page of the student newspaper, under the headline "Banned Books Week brings enlightenment, appreciation." The journalists for the student paper also wrote a blog entry⁵ discussing their own favorite banned books, which was perhaps the most gratifying result of the month of Banned Books Week publicity. By linking our research collection to a current issue, we were able to engage the campus and local community in a dialogue about censorship and freedom of expression. Doing so reinforced the centrality of the SCRC to the cultural environment of the campus. Banned Books Week has become a very popular event in the campus community, and we will continue to hold and promote readings in future years. We also plan to create other Web sites about different events in the long history of book banning, showing the depth and variety of the collection. We hope that this will raise awareness about the research potential of the Freedom of the Press Collection among undergraduates and other community members who may not be aware of the value of primary source materials.

Notes

1. The 2009 Banned Books Week will be held September 26–October 3.

2. Special Collections Research Center, lib.siu.edu/departments/speccoll.
3. ALA Web site for Banned Books Week, ala.org/bbooks.
4. cryptomundo.com/cryptozoo_news/ban-bfbkwk.
5. www.law.siu.edu/lawlib/Banned%20Books/intro.asp.