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## Reading Banned Books: 'A Small but Mighty Act of Revolution'

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## REASONS FOR BOOK CHALLENGES



TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 24, 2019

## Reading Banned Books: 'A Small but Mighty Act of Revolution'

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By Rachel Barnett

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*The American Library Association's Banned Books Week is Sept. 22-28, 2019. Roesch Library has its own display of banned books on the second floor.*

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For several years, Dayton Metro Library offered an activity at its former East Branch on Wyoming Street where folks could sign up to read in a makeshift jail cell for Banned Books Week. The jail was erected in the very public center of the library space, and a camera live-streamed the readings.

Participants weren't required to read from a banned book, but when I heard about the activity, I knew I had to read from a banned book in that makeshift jail cell. I was a bit nervous though. Not only would I be reading out loud to the patrons in the library that day, but my words were being transmitted to an unknown audience through this camera, an ever-present and watchful eye capturing every misspoken word and utterance that escaped my mouth. (Confession: I can be a bit dramatic sometimes in my thinking.)

I had to get over the nervousness though, and fortunately, I felt compelled to push through it, largely because I also felt that reading out loud from a banned book was a small but mighty act of revolution. I mean, the reason books get banned is that the ideas contained in them are thought to be dangerous and made some people in positions of power nervous. I had to overcome my own nervousness and support this important cause. So I did what I always do when things make me nervous: I put together a plan of action to feel more in control of the situation.

Weeks in advance, I combed through the banned books available and selected Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (I highly recommend it). The book is a coming-of-age story based on Maya Angelou's experiences as a precocious but quiet African American girl. The book has been banned or publicly challenged at least 39 times since 1983, mostly due to concerns about its explicit

## PREVIOUS POST

### Curl Up with a Good Govdoc

The newest government documents are now on display for browsing and circulation in the northeast corner of the first floor by the newspapers, magazines and the reference collection.

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## NEXT POST

### Book Desert Book Drive

The University Libraries Diversity and Inclusion Team is teaming up again with The Conscious Connect, and the student organization

discussion of sex (it includes scenes that depict child rape and sexual molestation) and encouragement of homosexuality as well as “anti-white” sentiments. Personally, I couldn’t put the book down once I started to read it. The portrait Maya Angelou painted of Marguerite’s struggles and the inspirational forces in her life as a young black woman in the South (and out West once they moved) brought out so much emotion in me. And when it came time to read for Banned Books week, I knew exactly the section I wanted to highlight for my public listening session.

In this autobiographical novel, Marguerite talks fondly of Mrs. Flowers, whom she describes as an aristocrat and one of the few gentlewomen she knew. Mrs. Flowers becomes for Marguerite “the measure of what a human being can be” with her graceful gestures, sweet-as-sugar voice, and sophisticated dress. She is unlike anyone Marguerite has known, and more importantly, she takes an interest in Marguerite. Mrs. Flowers knows Marguerite enjoys reading and is an exceptional student but that she isn’t talking in class. Mrs. Flowers tells Marguerite that reading to herself and on her own is not good enough.

“Words mean more than what is set down on paper,” Mrs. Flowers says. “It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”

Mrs. Flowers gives Marguerite regular “lessons in living,” asking Marguerite to recite poetry and read books aloud over tea and cookies. The opening up and sharing of her world transforms Marguerite. She becomes more confident and sociable. She feels valued and respected. When Mrs. Flowers gives voice to Marguerite (Maya Angelou), she gives voice to the writer who will become one of history’s most esteemed poets and authors, in turn giving voice and validation to the experiences of African American girls all over the nation — and black women worldwide — who read that novel and see themselves in it.

BATU (Black Action Thru Unity) to collect diverse books to end book deserts in Dayton.

[Read More](#)

So you may be wondering: Why does the caged bird sing? Maya Angelou knows why and shares the secret in her poem “Caged Bird”:

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
of things unknown but longed for still  
and his tune is heard on the distant hill  
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

I encourage anyone reading this blog post to pick up a banned book and read out loud its words — or songs — of freedom.

— Rachel Barnett is an access services specialist in the University Libraries.

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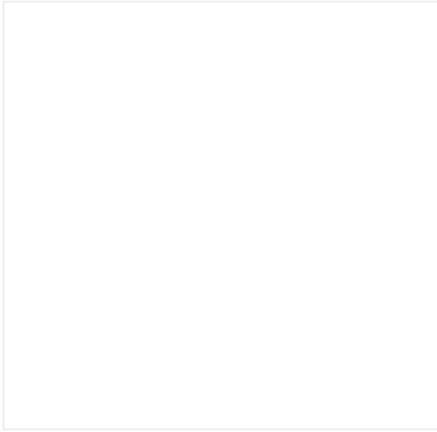
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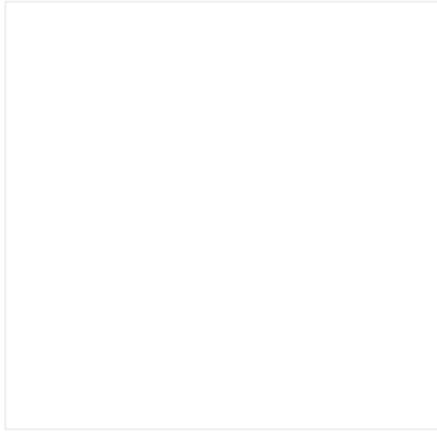


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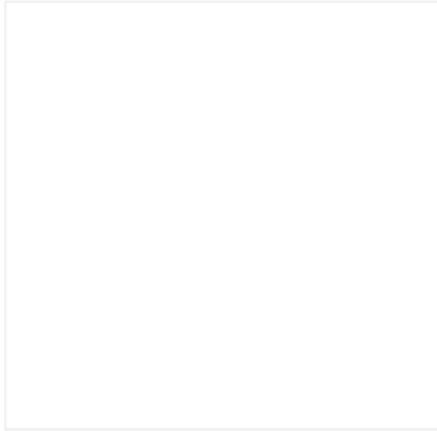
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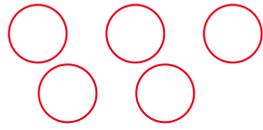
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