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Banning Books Stifles Freedom to Choose Says University of Dayton Librarian

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BANNING BOOKS STIFLES FREEDOM TO CHOOSE, SAYS UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON LIBRARIAN

DAYTON, Ohio — Graphic sex, violence and language are the most common reasons that books are successfully banned from school libraries, but a book called *Laugh Lines* has been ousted from the McKinleyville (Calif.) Elementary School library because a complaint charged that it has a "demeaning manner" toward people who can't figure out its riddles.

Although school boards generally don't remove books from school libraries, that doesn't stop parents from challenging the reading materials made available to their kids, says Edward Garten, director of libraries at the University of Dayton. Banned Books Week, designed to draw attention to the dangers of censorship, is Sept. 26 to Oct. 3.

"The message of Banned Books Week is more than the freedom to choose or the freedom to express one's opinion even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular," says Garten. "The essential message of Banned Books Week is the importance of ensuring the availability of these unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints to all who wish to read them."

Parents cite many reasons for challenging books in school libraries. Romance books are charged with being too graphic, and occult subject matter is a magnet for parents' complaints.

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Other complaints to school libraries are more subjective. *Welcome Home, Jellybean* was challenged in Maryland last year because two school board members thought it was too depressing, and in the same school district *Halloween ABC* was challenged because “there should be an effort to tone down Halloween.” *A Wrinkle in Time* drew fire in Alabama in 1990 because a character in the book included Jesus Christ with great artists, philosophers, scientists and religious leaders when she named the defenders of Earth against evil.

Public libraries are also the target of complaints. A Missouri librarian quit her job rather than withdraw *American Psycho* from the public library’s shelves. An Oregon library kept *Improvised Radio Jamming Techniques* even though a patron wanted it banned because it promoted illegal actions. Bawdy language prompted a challenge to *The Limerick: 1,700 Examples with Notes, Variants and Index* in an Illinois public library.

Books considered literary classics haven’t escaped complaints. Over the years John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* have been challenged numerous times, and just since 1990 *Of Mice and Men* has been accused, in separate complaints, of containing profanity, terminology offensive to blacks, indecency, blasphemous language and sexual overtones.

It’s a waste of time for patrons to challenge books in university libraries, says Garten. “There’s virtually no argument at academic libraries,” he says. “We tend to say we have a specific book here for a certain reason, that it’s needed here because it presents a particular viewpoint. And then we stick to our guns.”

For media interviews, contact Edward Garten at (513) 229-4265.