



Banned Books Week

A fight for freedom of speech

Local libraries celebrate, support challenged literature

By Lauren Renteris
September 22, 2017

SIERRA VISTA — As the beginning of Banned Books Week draws near, two local libraries look forward to celebrating literary awareness and the First Amendment. All next week, the Sierra Vista Public Library and the Copper Queen Library plan to highlight banned literature in hopes of fighting censorship and advocate for the arts.

“Banned Books Week celebrates the diverse range of ideas in books. One of the cornerstones of a free society is the freedom of information and right to make up one's own mind,” said Emily Sherrer, library manager at the Sierra Vista Public Library.

Banned Books Week is a national initiative that takes a stand against censorship and fights for free access to literature, according to the American Library Association. The national campaign started back in 1982 to draw attention to the “harms of censorship,” according to the ALA website.

Though the campaign began in the 1980s, banning books is not a thing of the past.

Since 2010, 2,031 books have been challenged in school and libraries across the U.S., according to a study by Pen America. The study noted that many of the censored books in school libraries and reading lists are challenged because community members argue that certain pieces of literature aren't age-appropriate or that it promotes an uncommon ideology.

By celebrating and supporting challenged literature, Sherrer said the campaign promotes the importance of giving multiple — and oftentimes conflicting — viewpoints a platform.

“There should be something to offend everyone,” Sherrer said. “We need to have something for all viewpoints, especially in a public library.”

The Sierra Vista Public Library will celebrate Banned Books Week — which begins Sept. 24 — with a banned-books display near the library foyer. The display will feature both classic and contemporary works that were or are still banned in schools and libraries in the U.S.

The display will also have a makeshift prison cell for library-goers to read banned books in. There, patrons can take mugshots with their chosen piece of banned literature.

Alison Williams, assistant program manager at the Copper Queen Library, said Bisbee’s public library will celebrate Banned Books Week with some theatrics and costumes from “The Handmaid’s Tale.” The library will host a book discussion lead by John Doty, a retired Cochise College professor, at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 26. The library will also feature a display of banned books with descriptions explaining why they were challenged.

Before the discussion, though, the library will host a “handmaiden flash mob” on Main Street. Williams said seven women will dress as handmaidens in the iconic garb — white bonnet and blood-red gown — as they walk down the street at 5 p.m., just before the book discussion.

“The original art of the 1985 book cover, though it has been reinterpreted, that image has remained an incredibly striking image as a representation of the entire dystopian universe,” Williams said. “Maybe by embodying the character we can draw out more discussion.”

Every year, the Copper Queen Library chooses a banned book to highlight. This year, the Copper Queen Library staff chose “The Handmaid’s Tale” because of author Margaret Atwood’s startling representation of a “near future” as well as the book’s revival through an Emmy-winning drama series on Hulu.

“I just started noticing a resurgence of people reading it more,” Williams said. “It’s actually because of many laws that are being put in place around the country and on the state level trying to circumvent Roe v. Wade and because of the tension related to who has the right to a woman’s body.”

Though banning classics like “The Catcher in the Rye” by J.D. Salinger or “The Scarlet Letter” by Nathaniel Hawthorne is less common, the most challenged books in recent years cover topics like LGBTQ youth and sex education. Last year, five of the 10 top-challenged books of 2016 were opposed because it contained LGBTQ content, according the ALA, and eight of the 10 were challenged because of sexual content.

Studies show that many of the individuals who challenge books are parents of students. The 2016 Pen America study found that around half of all book challenges are headed by parents and 45 percent of all challenges are aimed at schools. Similarly, the ALA found that 49 percent of challenges are directed at public libraries.

Though book challenges have gone down slightly, according to the Pen America study, Sherrer believes the current political climate isn't helping with the fight against censorship.

"I think the political polarization has gotten so bad that there is either a right or wrong and the middle has kind of withered away," she said.

Banned Books Week begins Sunday, Sept. 24 across the nation.

For more information about local events, contact the Sierra Vista Public Library at 520-458-4225 and the Copper Queen Library at 520-432-4232.

If You Go

What: Banned Books Week: "The Handmaid's Tale" discussion and flashmob

Where: Copper Queen Library in Bisbee, 6 Main St.

When: Tuesday, Sept. 26

What time: 5 p.m.

How much: It's free!