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## Censorship spectre looms again

Censorship of books and criticism of book classification have created interest in the media over the last few months. Let us hope that this is primarily due to it being a slow news period and not a new mood sweeping through the community.

Some months back, at the time of the Banned Books Week in North America a journalist contacted me about the Australian equivalent — she was not aware of the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995*, the role of the Office of Film and Literature Classification, and the Classification and Classification Review Boards, or of state legislation and regulation. Then in January we had the story of a book featuring the work of American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe being removed from a Hindley Street Adelaide bookstore by local police. Federal Minister for the Arts Peter McGauran commented that he would prefer the book to be sealed in plastic so children could not read it. Adelaide as the location fuelled my interest. It was South Australia, in the late 1960s under the newly elected (Don) Dunstan government, that led the way in reforming Australia's censorship legislation and changes in attitude. Coincidentally, it was also the state branch of the Association that in the 1940s started Australian librarians' interest in censorship of books.

Further press coverage dealt with the story content and themes of children's and teen fiction; and classification. Interestingly, the points of contention swung from young readers' ability to cope with reality, to that of fantasy. In December, three Sydney psychiatrists, Kathleen M Bokey, Garry Walter and Joseph M Rey, published an article in *The Medical Journal of Australia* [<http://www.mja.com.au>] reporting their study of over 200 teenage characters in ninety-four recommended Australian books for the years 1996 to 1998. They found that the characters experienced a high degree of trauma and loss, and question how this accurately reflects teen lifestyles and attitudes and what influence it may have.

Again, in December and into January there was extensive coverage of the decision by the senior pastor of Nambour Christian Outreach College to remove the Harry Potter books from the school because the content was not considered suitable. Both news items elicited commentary on whom the

content is an issue or problem for — the children or young adults for whom it is written, or adults. This appears to be at the root of debate over suitability of content, reading selection and classification and is of interest to all librarians who provide services for children and young adults and who deal with those parents and individuals in the community who express differing views.

The Association's *Statement on freedom to read* [<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/freedom.to.read.html>], adopted in 1971, was slow in coming but still stands as a valuable policy statement.

### US mandatory filtering legislation

The American Library Association will legally challenge the *Children's Internet Protection Act* (CIPA), signed into law on 21 December 2000. The decision came after more than a week of intense discussion among leaders and members during the Association's annual midwinter meeting. In its press release, the ALA contends 'the act is unconstitutional and creates an infringement of First Amendment protections. The federal rider, which was attached to the *Labor HHS Education Appropriations Bill*, mandates libraries and schools install content filters on all computers that offer Internet access as a prerequisite to receiving federal grant funds. Funding sources include the e-rate program, the *Library Services and Technology Act* and the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. All three programs help ensure schools and libraries provide access to the resources communities need to thrive in the information age. CIPA runs counter to these federal efforts to close the digital divide for all Americans.'

### New group structure

The many meetings held or planned, the numerous discussions I have had, and the entries appearing on <http://www.alia.org.au/groups/pending/> indicate that a lot of members are taking up the opportunities offered through the new group structure. ALIA National Office has employed local coordinators to work with groups on the preparation of submissions due by 30 March.

### Draft core values statement

The Board of Directors has agreed not to proceed with the statement at this stage as directors consider there was not enough support for the notion of a core values statement or for this particular statement. ■