

Thoughts from the State Librarian

by Christie Brandau, State Librarian



One of the first public libraries I worked in over 30 years ago had several shelves in the staff workroom where "dirty" books were housed. These books were ones that the library director deemed important enough for the library to own, but objectionable enough to not shelve in the stacks. I innocently asked the director once about the circulation of these materials. She replied that the books were hidden in order to protect patrons and that "people who want to read those kinds of books can ask ME for them."

That seems like an almost quaint practice now. The world has changed since 1975 and today people of all ages are exposed to "dirty" television programs, computer games, radio disk jockeys and even news reports. Rather than hiding books, librarians have been careful to separate children's materials from adult materials. We protect the right to read, but we also make common sense decisions as to the location and age suitability of certain materials. But can we turn the clock back in time and isolate materials that may be objectionable? And can we *really* identify what is considered objectionable to the satisfaction of all? The Oklahoma House of Representatives thinks we can.

The Oklahoma House of Representatives passed a bill recently that is designed to protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit library books. House Bill 2158 states: "The Oklahoma Department of Libraries Board shall not grant or distribute any state funds that are allocated to libraries on a formula basis to any library, library district, or library system unless the library has taken action to place all children and young adult materials that contain homosexual or sexually explicit subject matter in a special area of the library which is separate and apart from the children and young adult sections of the library and the library has a policy in place to limit distribution of the material to adults only."

Will this legislation protect children from a world that is full of "sexually explicit subject matter?" No, but it may marginalize and embarrass patrons looking for legitimate sources of information at the library.

Just as parents are responsible for exercising controls over what their children view on television or connect to on the web, they are equally responsible for knowing what books their children are reading. And even if every library book with objectionable material were separated from the other materials, it will not be the world it was 30 years ago. There are many problems in today's world, but a shelf in the back room of the library is not the answer to them.

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