

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the [IFC committee](#).



Intellectual Freedom Committee

Oregon Library Association

May 2018 Tuesday Topic: When good authors (or any authors) do bad things

Celebrity and authorship are a long-standing combination. For probably as long as there have been printed books, famous people have used their fame to sell them. Likewise, authors have long become celebrities based on their writing, and turned that fame into lecture tours, book readings, and increased book sales (with larger and larger placement of author name and photo on book jackets). It is easy and instinctual to equate books with writers. But they are not the same thing: a book is a finite intellectual expression, whereas a writer is a human being with multitudinous flaws and virtues.

The books/writers distinction is worth thinking about right now when many authors are being exposed as perpetrators of sexual misbehavior, harassment, and/or outright assault (Junot Diaz, Bill Cosby, Jay Asher, Sherman Alexie, and Garrison Keillor are some recent examples). Librarians and consumers are wondering what to do with the knowledge that books they love (books that they have on their bookshelves, that they've recommended to others, that have shaped who they are) were written by a creep. Individually, we, the reader and consumer, should each decide on a response that feels right. In the libraries where we work, however, it is not all about us.

A recent post on the StackedBooks.org blog discusses ways that librarians should or should not respond when they learn about authors having done bad things ("[What to do with books by authors accused of assault, racism, or other inappropriate or illegal behaviors](#)"). Another blog post, on the American Association of School Librarians' Knowledge Quest website, takes a more aggressive response in reassessing works by problematic authors ("[The Problem with Problematic YA Authors](#)"). I do not agree with all the approaches advanced in these posts; in particular, I think that the author of the second article goes too far in singling out books by accused authors for review. But both authors deserve credit for thinking deeply about decisions rather than making knee-jerk reactions. And both of the posts emphasize the importance of having a clear **collection development policy** and sticking to it, especially whenever you have a challenge to an item in the library's collection, including challenges from library staff. If you need tips on collection development policies, visit the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse [webpage about preparing for challenges](#). In order for collection decisions to be fair and evenly enforced, they need to be driven by a well-thought-out policy.

Hopefully your collection policy aspires to a collection that supports “access to content on all subjects that meet, as closely as possible, the needs, interests, and abilities of all persons in the community the library serves” (as stated in the American Library Association’s [“Diversity in collection development, an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights”](#)). Just because a writer is a despicable person, it does not mean that people should not be able to read the author’s books if that’s what they want to do. The library where we work is not our own library; it belongs to the community and the library users, and it is up to them to choose what they want to read or not read.

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