

## Readers, Challenge Yourselves!



me any more comics and threatened to throw my collection out. She said I was too old for Archie. Little did she know, reading my endangered comic books over and over again was just as satisfying as reading new ones.

Yes, I admit that I had an underground collection of Archie comics. Some might say that I was a bit of a radical in my youth, but I firmly believed in my right to read what I wanted to read. At the age of 10, in my own little way, I was exercising my freedom to read. I was doing something that we should all remember to do once in awhile; especially since we have Freedom to Read Week to celebrate.

Freedom to Read Week reminds Canadians that we have the right to read what we want, when we want to – whether it's books, magazines, comic books, or blogs. It reminds us to reflect on our right to hold any opinion about any subject and express those opinions without interference. Freedom to Read Week gives us the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to our right to freedom of expression.

Traditionally, Freedom to Read Week calls attention to challenged books and the people who try to ban them. It conjures up images of individuals suspiciously taking “profane” books off of library shelves and throwing them in the trash or people alerting principals about “obscene” books in classrooms. It also reminds us of the unfortunate occasions where editors reluctantly pass on manuscripts in anticipation of well-worn challenges or authors soften choice dialogue to pre-empt a censorship blitz. While these censorship issues are at the core of Freedom to Read Week, this week also offers us the opportunity to think about some of the ways that we – as librarians, teachers, critics and readers – act as censors without even knowing it.

While we all like to think of ourselves as standing up against censorship, there are still ways that we can play the part of the censor. Although we may not be the book burning-type, in our unique position as the tastemakers of Canadian children's literature, we have the power to change, influence and define the opinions of the

parents and youth of Canada. And while there is a tendency to want to present ourselves as being completely open to the myriad of children's books published in Canada, are we really? If we are not keenly exploring new and developing ideas, views, genres and tastes, can we really say that we are doing our jobs of informing Canadians about the best that is out there?

**“While we all like to think of ourselves as standing up against censorship, there are still ways that we can play the part of the censor.”**

During Freedom to Read Week, why not take the time to reaffirm your openness to freedom of expression by asking yourself if there are any topics, books and genres that are off limits to you personally as a reader? Was there over a time that you dismissed a picture book because you didn't like its art style; said you just didn't “get” mystery novels; stopped reading a romance novel these pages in because you thought it was “just fluff”; or told a child that the comic he was reading wasn't worth his time because it's “not literature.” Now is the time to look closely at your reading habits, examine any gaps and ask yourself why they're there. If banning a book is a crime against our freedom of expression, dismissing a well-crafted book because of your personal biases is its insidious twin.

As teachers and librarians, we have to remember that making young people feel like they are in the wrong for enjoying a particular book or genre is just plain



ignorant. Instead of telling kids what they should or should not read, why not support what they are reading? Yes, we should be introducing them to the world of books that is out there, but not at the expense of shattering their interests.

While we, as critics, may not determine bestsellers, we have to remember that a review that trivializes a book can sometimes be just as powerful as a ban, with so many books to choose from nowadays. While I am not advocating that we do away with our critical faculties when we review books, I am advocating that we remember that although we may not like a particular style of writing or genre, someone else may. As the list of finalists for the 2008 Governor General's Literary Awards showed us, comics are no longer synonymous with lowbrow culture. The shortlisted *Slate*, written by Marius Tarnaki and illustrated by Jillian Tarnaki, is a prime example of how we, as tastemakers, can truly be open to original voices and genres.

During this year's Freedom to Read Week, why not grant yourself the freedom to read a book you've previously dismissed. If you've ever dismissed

William Kotwinicki, Glenn Murray and Audrey Colman's *Water the Farling Day*, borrow a copy from your local library. If you've ever said you don't “get” comics, pick up a copy of Matthew Forsythe's *Ojogogo* tomorrow. If you've ever thought that chick lit is just fluff, try reading Sarah Mlynowski's *Iron and Blossoms*. If you've ever scoffed at fantasy novels, go out and get Carrie Mac's *The Doughlanders*.

And when you sit down to read that book you've previously dismissed, be sure to remind yourself that, somewhere in Canada, there is a child who is reading and re-reading that exact same book you are holding in your hands. Make the effort to challenge your assumptions about literature and art. Open your mind and your heart to this new experience and, most importantly, give yourself the freedom to enjoy it.

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**Celebrating 25 Years of Freedom to Read Week**  
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“If you don't stand up for the stuff you don't like, when they come for the stuff you do like, you're already lost.” – Neil Gaiman

After 25 years of asking Canadians to reaffirm their commitment to intellectual freedom, Freedom to Read Week has no reason to slow down: books are still being challenged all over Canada – in schools, libraries and even at the border. Sometimes we hear about these challenges, but most times we don't. Our freedom of expression cannot be taken for granted and it's our responsibility to maintain our rights by standing up to would-be censors. One of the ways we can combat the challengers and censors of books is by spreading the word about Freedom to Read Week.

The Freedom to Read Week website ([www.freedomtoread.ca](http://www.freedomtoread.ca)) features a number of free resources on freedom of expression and censorship in Canada. These resources include a booklet on dealing with would-be censors, a list of challenged books and magazines, and a list of books and articles on freedom of expression. In addition, be sure to check out their Freedom to Read Kit (\$15) that includes a fabulous poster and a 40-page review featuring articles on current censorship issues in Canada and suggested classroom exercises. The website also features a myriad of ways that booksellers, educators, teachers and librarians can promote Freedom to Read Week in their stores, classrooms and libraries through displays, photo contests and more.

Your right to freedom of expression is a lot like your right to vote. The only way you can make a difference is if you take advantage of it.