

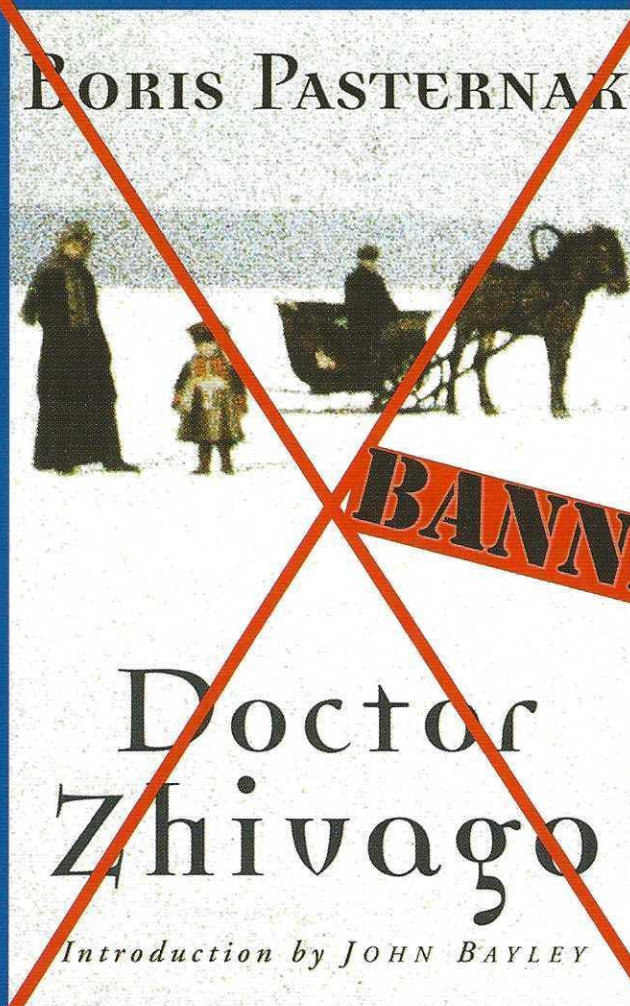
# SOLANDER

The Magazine of the Historical Novel Society

Portals to Hidden  
Histories: **Mary Sharratt**  
tours three living history  
museums

Historical  
Novels  
Censored?

**Alison Weir** makes  
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What Makes  
Historical Fiction  
**Believable?**



## Beware! Banned Books!

CINDY VALLAR explores the censorship of historical novels and why others want to curtail your freedom to read.

*The sun was obscured by the smoke of books, and all over the city sheets of burned paper, fragile pages of grey ashe[sic], floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page you could feel its beat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the beat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hands.*

- Kemal Bakaršić on the burning  
of the National Library in Sarajevo<sup>1</sup>

Libricide, or the killing of a book, is the most extreme form of censorship, yet any act of suppressing literature is meant to limit what we read and prohibit us from reading what someone else deems unsuitable for us. The difference between libricide and censorship is that the former often employs violence and its inflictors wish to distort and change society so that all citizens think as the state or regime wishes them to think. Most attempts, however, are less extreme than destruction, but no less emotional.

I first encountered censorship when my mother finished reading a book from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* series and deemed it inappropriate for me. The problem was that I was halfway through it at the time; I don't know what she found offensive or how the story ended. Not that I didn't try to find out. Rebel that I am, I looked in every nook and cranny where she could have hidden the book. I never found it. That memory of banning a book dwindled to an ember that wasn't rekindled until I became a librarian. The fact is that library books are challenged, and although I never encountered censorship where I worked, I kept abreast of attempts, both successful and unsuccessful. I also made it a point to add censored books to the collections I managed, for I believe people have a right to be informed, or as John Stuart Mill wrote, "The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by having what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this."<sup>2</sup> And how can anyone make an informed decision without knowing all the facts?

In 1982, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom inaugurated Banned Books Week: Celebrating the Freedom to Read. I displayed and promoted banned books to library visitors each September.<sup>3</sup> After all, one of the best ways to get people to read a book is to tell them they can't. Upon reading a recent article in my

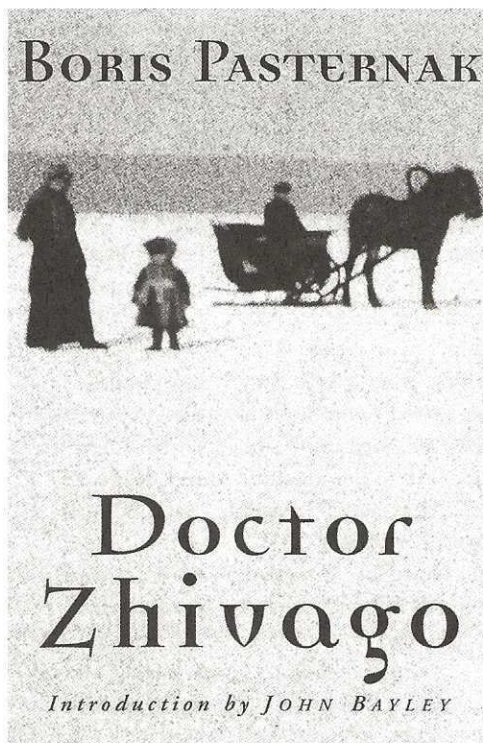
local newspaper, I wondered whether any historical novels were ever censored and if so, which ones and why.

In 1928, a German publisher released a new novel set during World War I entitled *Im Westen Nichts Neues*. Erich Maria Remarque's book sold 600,000 copies before its publication in English under the title of *All Quiet on the Western Front* a year later. Paul Baumer narrates the story of his experiences and those of his comrades in war and of the ignorance he encounters from those still at home. War's reality and inhumanity make him an outsider. National Socialists were insulted because of the book's message of pacifism and anti-militarism. Political pamphlets denounced it, and in 1930, Germany banned the book. Three years later, all of Remarque's writings were burned. Harassment took such a toll that he fled, first to Switzerland, then to the United States.

Censorship of *All Quiet on the Western Front* spread to other countries. Austrian soldiers were forbidden to read it, and Czechoslovakian military libraries removed it from their shelves. Italy considered the book to be antiwar propaganda and condemned it. In the United States, Putnam rejected the manuscript because an editor refused to "publish a book by a 'Hun'!"<sup>4</sup> When the Book-of-the-Month Club asked for revisions, Little, Brown and Company agreed to remove three words, five phrases, and two scenes, one of which involved a married couple, separated for two years, having sex in a hospital. The publishers believed "some words and sentences were too robust for our American edition."<sup>5</sup>

Another war novel that encountered political censorship was MacKinlay Kantor's *Andersonville*, first published in 1955. During the American Civil War, a southerner who doesn't favor the war pleads for help after witnessing

the horrifying conditions within the notorious prison camp and the sadistic superintendent who brutalizes and terrorizes the captured soldiers. The story is also about the Yankees and their struggle to survive. In 1967, Donald Hicks, an Amherst, Ohio history teacher, assigned the book to his students who wished to read it. One father considered the novel one percent history and 99 percent filth. Since only thirty out of 795 pages contained vulgar language, Hicks felt the novel's worth outweighed the objectionable sections. The school board president agreed: "... maybe we should not shield high school students ... Perhaps they should know these facts exist





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even though they are bad and may not exist in our community.”<sup>6</sup> The superintendent refused to remove the book.

*Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak is about an orphan, raised by intellectuals in Moscow, who becomes a doctor. Yuri Andreyevich Zhivago is conscripted into the Russian Army during World War I where he falls in love with a nurse named Lara, even though they are both married. His life and their love affair unfold during the turbulent backdrop of the war, the Russian Revolution, and the reign of terror during the 1930s. Pasternak didn't attempt to publish his manuscript until after Stalin died. The Soviet Union's State Publishing House initially praised the manuscript, so Pasternak sent it to Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore in Italy.

Then the State Publishing House reversed its decision and condemned the book because the “cumulative effect casts doubt on the validity of the Bolshevik Revolution which it depicts as if it were the great crime in Russian history.”<sup>7</sup> The Italian publisher refused to return the manuscript to Pasternak and released the book in 1957. The following year, Pantheon Books published the English edition, and the author received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Russian government forced him to refuse the award because they considered it a “hostile political act for recognizing a work withheld from Russian readers which was counter-revolutionary and slanderous.”<sup>8</sup> Russians didn't have the chance to read *Doctor Zhivago* until 1988.

During the past twenty-five years, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (Delacorte, 1969) has been one of the most frequently censored books. Students, educators, parents, librarians, and the clergy have challenged it for its obscenity, language, violence, inappropriate behaviors, immorality, and lack of patriotism. “The book is an indictment of war, criticizes government actions, is anti-American, and is unpatriotic,”<sup>9</sup> said June Edwards, who feared people would refuse to fight in future wars if they read about the horrors of war. Vonnegut's whole purpose in writing the story was to demonstrate that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.”<sup>10</sup> Based on his experiences during World War II as a prisoner of war (POW) in *Schlachthof-fünf* (*Slaughterhouse Five*) in Dresden, Germany, Vonnegut combined history (the war and being a POW) with science fiction (time travel and telepathic aliens) to recount the story of Billy Pilgrim.

Bruce Severy, a North Dakota high-school teacher, assigned this novel as required reading after checking with the superintendent. A student, who objected to the book's language, and a minister, who considered it to be “a tool of the devil,” convinced the school board to ban the book, even though none of them had read it. Severy also lost his job. “A few four-letter words in a book is no big deal. Those students have all heard these words before, none learned any new words. I've always thought the purpose of school was to prepare these people for living in the ‘big, bad world,’ but it evidently isn't so.”<sup>11</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union assisted him in suing the school district. As a result, teachers at Drake High School were permitted to use *Slaughterhouse Five* in junior and senior English

classes; no unsatisfactory comments could be made against Severy's performance as a teacher; and he was awarded \$5,000.

Vonnegut's novel also has the distinction of being the first censorship case argued before the United States Supreme Court. Two members of a New York school board found nine books on library shelves that were considered objectionable, so they were removed even though the district had a policy for dealing with challenged books. Claiming the books' removal violated their First Amendment Rights, Stephen Pico and other high school students filed a lawsuit in 1977. Although the federal district court ruled in favor of the school board, the appellate court ordered a full trial. Eventually, the case made its way to

the Supreme Court, which upheld the appellate court's decision. In August 1982, the school board returned the books to the library, and if a student borrowed one of the books, the librarian had to warn parents about its objectionable content.

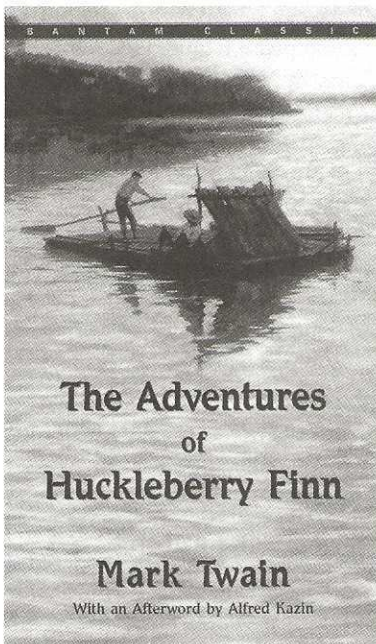
While the novel was conducive to sleep, it was not conducive to a desire to sleep with a member of the opposite sex.

These instances of censorship are fairly modern, but literature has been suppressed for centuries. The earliest attempts trace back to the infancy of Christianity when the Church considered opposing viewpoints heretical. In 1559 Pope Paul IV decreed the first publication of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. The Vatican didn't abolish the *Index of Forbidden Books* until 1966. In the last printed edition, 4,126 books made the list, as did a number of respected authors – including Defoe, Descartes, Diderot, Flaubert, Kant, Locke, Pascal, Rousseau, Stendhal, Voltaire, and Zola – because of their immorality, vulgar language, and sexual content.

Nikos Kazantzakis wrote a novel about Jesus of Nazareth, which was published in Greece in 1953 by Athenai, and in the United States seven years later by Simon & Schuster. *The Last Temptation of Christ* portrays Jesus as a man who struggles with fear, pain, temptation, and death. The author wanted to portray “the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh,”<sup>12</sup> so that people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century understood what Jesus endured. Critics praised the book, but the Eastern Orthodox Church excommunicated Kazantzakis. They considered his book “extremely indecent, atheistic and treasonable,”<sup>13</sup> although no one involved in the decision had read the novel. The Roman Catholic Church included *The Last Temptation of Christ* on its 1954 Index. The publicity over the book's censorship actually increased sales, and Princess Marie Bonaparte recommended it to the Greek queen.

Most historical novels, as well as other genres, are suppressed not on political or religious grounds, but because of their sexual content. Many books banned during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were because the authors used dirty words. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* dared to refer to prostitution, pregnancy outside of marriage, and adultery – all which occur in everyday life, even in the past. Over time society's view about sex has changed, so novels once thought pornographic are now bestsellers. Based on the 1906 Chester Gillette murder case, *An American*





*Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser (Bone and Liveright, 1925) is about Clyde Griffiths, whose parents work at a skid-row mission. Their income doesn't provide him with the finer things in life or the social standing that he craves. Dreiser looks at how Griffiths' background and personality, as well as his environment, determine his fate.

After an all-male jury found the publisher guilty of violating Massachusetts' anti-obscenity law in 1929, Boston banned the book even though neither the judge nor the jury had read it. They

The final reason for censoring books concerns social issues. Sometimes it's the language or the use of drugs that people object to, other times it's the racial content or sexual orientation. They consider the views portrayed in the novels to be harmful to readers and the characters do not conform to the censors' standards of acceptable social mores. Perhaps the best-known novel in this category is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London, 1884). People want Huck to reform his rambunctious ways so that he fits in with proper society, which he doesn't see any reason to do. Kidnapped and beaten by his father, Huck escapes to an island in the Mississippi River where he is reunited with his friend Jim, a runaway slave. The novel recounts their adventures and struggles – both good and bad – and Huck's desire to free Jim. Set during the early 1800s, *Huckle Finn* was controversial from the start. The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts banned the book in 1885 because it was “trash suitable only for the slums,”<sup>18</sup> not only because of the language Huck and Jim spoke, but also because of their unacceptable behavior. Around the turn of the century, the Brooklyn Public Library removed it from the children's shelves since “Huck not only itched but he scratched, and that he said sweat when he should have said perspiration.”<sup>19</sup> Soviet border guards confiscated copies of the book in 1930.

only heard passages read aloud during the trial. After reading a scene set in a brothel about a girl undressing, the prosecutor addressed the jury: “Well, perhaps where the gentleman who published this book comes from it is not considered obscene, indecent, and impure for a woman to start disrobing before a man, but it happens to be out in Roxbury where *I* come from.”<sup>14</sup> At the time of the trial, *An American Tragedy* was required reading for an English course taught at Harvard University in Boston.

*Forever Amber* (Macmillan, 1994) by Kathleen Winsor sold 1.3 million copies over four years before Massachusetts censors targeted it. Set during the English Restoration, the story recounts the life of an illegitimate daughter with noble blood who becomes a duchess and the mistress of Charles II, marries four times, and has children fathered by three different men. The State Attorney General, George Rowell, apparently counted the various sexual references in the novel, for it contained “70 references to sexual intercourse; 39 to illegitimate pregnancies; 7 to abortions; 10 descriptions of women undressing, dressing or bathing in the presence of men; 5 references to incest; 13 references to ridiculing marriage; and 49 miscellaneous objectionable passages.”<sup>15</sup> Judge Donahue of the Massachusetts Supreme Court thought the novel showed “. . . a certain amount of study and research . . . *Forever Amber* is sufficiently accurate for the purpose of representing a portrait of the period and its customs and morals; that it does not exaggerate or falsify any traits of the Restoration.”<sup>16</sup> He concluded, “. . . while the novel was conducive to sleep, it was not conducive to a desire to sleep with a member of the opposite sex.”<sup>17</sup>



## THE SCARLET LETTER



EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY

Although the furor over the book died down for a time, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People raised objections about its racial content in 1957. This became only the first of many attempts to censor the novel. In 1973 Tennessee school officials demanded that Scott, Foresman omit objectionable material, and the publisher acquiesced. One missing scene concerns a family that drinks alcoholic toasts each morning to the parents. Language, however, remains a key reason for most censorship attempts. Until 1975, textbook publishers often substituted “slave” or “servant” for “nigger.”

An earlier novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Ticknor and Fields, 1850), is often required reading in high-school

English classes. Taken from her English home and husband, Hester Prynne finds herself alone and friendless in Puritan Massachusetts. She falls in love with a minister, and they have a daughter, although she never reveals the father's identity. The townspeople condemn her, and she is forced to wear the scarlet letter “A” that marks her as an adulteress. More than a century after its publication censors labeled it “pornographic and obscene” and “immoral.” After a parent and principal objected to its inclusion in the English curriculum at a Michigan high school, *The Scarlet Letter* was removed from both



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the classroom and a reading list. When a high-school librarian in Missouri heard about a parent's demand to remove the book from the collection because it contained "4-letter words," the librarian realized the parent hadn't read the novel because it doesn't include any obscene language. The book remained in the library.

Show me a book that offends no one, and I will show you a book that no one, in the whole history of the world, has ever willingly read.

- Nora Baines, History Teacher

More recently published historical novels suppressed for social reasons include *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller (Simon & Schuster, 1961) and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr. (Grove Press, 1964). In *Catch-22*, Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier in the United States Air Force during World War II, tries to get relieved from combat duty by feigning insanity. The military doesn't believe an insane person would willingly go into combat. Therefore, John must be sane. When Strongsville, Ohio English teachers wished to teach the novel, they were refused because *Catch-22* was "completely sick" and "garbage." *Catch-22* and two other books were also removed from the high-school library. This prompted five students and their families to file a class action law suit for violating the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The initial court ruling said the school board had followed Ohio law and done nothing wrong. The Sixth Circuit United States Court of Appeals agreed that the school board had the right to decide which textbooks would be used, but it didn't have the right to remove the three books from the library. "A public school library is also a valuable adjunct to classroom discussions. If one of the English teachers considered Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* to be one of the more important modern American novels (as, indeed, at least one did), we assume that no one would dispute that the First Amendment's protection of academic freedom would protect both his right to say so in class and his students' right to hear him and to find and read the book. Obviously, the students' success in this last endeavor would be greatly hindered by the fact that the book sought had been removed from a school library."<sup>20</sup> The school district appealed, but the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* recounts the violent lives of lower-class hoodlums in Brooklyn during the forties and fifties. They use and brutalize other men and women, as well as their own children, to gain access to booze and drugs, and to have fun. Themes in the book explore transvestites, prostitution, rape, abuse, and despair. When Sir Charles Taylor, a seventy-year-old Member of the British Parliament, read the book in 1966, he claimed what few years were left to him had been "defiled." He complained to the Solicitor General, but the book had already sold 711,000 copies and was no longer doing as well in bookstores, so nothing was done. When *The Sunday Times* learned of the complaint, they wrote: "Sir Charles Taylor, MP has described *Last Exit* as filthy, disgusting, degrading. It is one of the most important novels to come out of America...."<sup>21</sup> Sir Cyril Black, another

Member of Parliament, fared somewhat better in his attempt to censor the book that same year. His complaint required the publisher to prove the book's merit and explain why it shouldn't be suppressed. Prosecution witnesses repeatedly mentioned the book's disgusting scenes, especially Tralala's brutal rape. The magistrate said, "this book in its descriptions goes beyond any book of a merely pornographic

kind that we have seen in this court [and] . . . is more likely to deprave and corrupt than any of those cyclostyled horrors."<sup>22</sup>

The English publisher, Calder & Boyars, refused to cease publication of the novel. A year later, a trial opened with all men serving on the jury, so women wouldn't be embarrassed at

having to read such a book. Witnesses testified over nine days, and the jury deliberated for almost six hours before they rendered a guilty verdict. The judge upheld the verdict, but felt the respectable publishers had released the book in good faith. He fined them £100 plus court costs of £500. Selby's book was also banned in Italy and Ireland, and appeared on the restricted list in the Soviet Union.

On 7 August 2006, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom released the list of "10 Most Challenged Books of 2005." Homosexuality, nudity, sex, religion, language, and racism were the reasons why challenges were brought against these books, which were mostly written for children and young adults.<sup>23</sup> One historical novel missing from the list was *Huck Finn*, even though it has often been challenged in the past. While some of the book's language is offensive, Dave Matthews, a Washington English teacher whose student once challenged the novel, believes that *Huck Finn* "raises our consciousness because it shows how terribly blacks were treated back then. We need to know who we are and what we come from. That's how society can change for the better."<sup>24</sup> The same can be said of most censored books.

The next time you read a book, consider these comments from Nat Hentoff's *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*. It's a young adult novel about an attempt to censor Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Show me a book that offends no one, and I will show you a book that no one, in the whole history of the world, has ever willingly read.

- Nora Baines, History Teacher

Once a book is not allowed to circulate freely, once a book cannot move freely from one reader to another, it's just as if the book had been arrested and had its liberty curtailed.

- Reuben Forster, School Board President

Have you read a banned book recently? If not, consider reading one



mentioned above. Or try one of these historical novels:

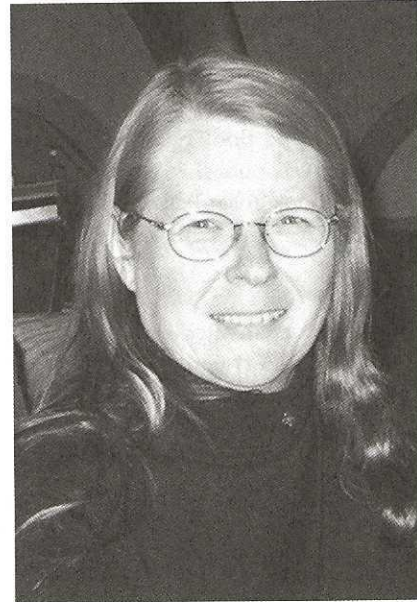
*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker  
*My Brother Sam Is Dead* by James Lincoln  
 and Christopher Collier  
*The House of Spirits and Daughter of Fortune*  
 by Isabel Allende  
*Beloved* by Toni Morrison  
*Snow Falling on Cedars* by David  
 Guterson  
*Fool's Crow* by James Welch  
*Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers  
*Grendel* by John Champlin Gardner  
*The Ox-Bow Incident* by Walter Van  
 Tilburg Clark  
*Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen  
*The Innocents Within* by Robert Daley  
*The Fighting Ground* by Avi

While you do so, remember what Benjamin Franklin wrote: "Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech. Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom . . ." <sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 2.
2. *Censorship: Opposing Viewpoints*, edited by Andrea C. Nakaya (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2005), 7.
3. Banned Books Week is celebrated the last week of September. It will run from 22 September through 29 September in 2007.
4. Quote from Erich Maria Remarque that appears in *100 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature* by Nicholas J. Karoledes, Margaret Bald, and Dawn B. Sova (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999), 6.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 10.
7. Ibid., 42.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 137.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 219.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 269.
15. Ibid., 291.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 336.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 364.
21. Ibid., 384.
22. Ibid., 385.
23. "10 Most Challenged Books of 2005" press release obtained from the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom's website located at [www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bannedbooksweek.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bannedbooksweek.htm) on 8 August 2006.

24. Herbert N. Foerstel, *Banned in the U.S.A.: A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 191.
25. Banned Books Week, ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom's website, 12 January 2006.



Cindy Vallar is an associate editor for Solander and the Editor of *Pirates and Privateers*. *Amber Quill Press* will publish her historical novel, *The Scottish Thistle*, in November 2006. A retired librarian, she now devotes her time to writing, editing, reviewing historical fiction and books on maritime piracy, and conducting workshops on piracy, Scotland, and historical fiction.