



## IDEA LAB

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# Idea Lab: Engaging with the Public During Times of Increased Book Challenges

## Introduction

*Stephanie Diaz, Reference and Instruction Librarian  
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In 2021, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) tracked 729 challenges to school, library, and university collections. Considering that in 2020 the OIF recorded 156 challenges, last year's increase was dramatic enough to catch the attention of news outlets and social media users across the United States. As a result, libraries of all kinds were positioned to make often difficult decisions about how to respond to the public's heightened focus on banned books. In this issue of the *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* the Idea Lab highlights two libraries: a true community library that was caught off guard by extraordinary media attention, and a public library that deftly responded to local book challenges.

## How the Matinicus Island Library Went Viral

*Eva Murray, Matinicus Island Library Association*

Matinicus Isle is one of Maine's smallest communities and is the Maine island farthest from the mainland with a year-round town. Well, calling my home a "town" might be a stretch; as an independent "quasi-municipal entity," the community is home to fewer than one hundred people much of the year. Residents—who are primarily commercial fishing families, making a living harvesting lobster—and the few visitors are served by a freestanding, municipally-owned electric power company, a taxpayer-funded one-room elementary school, and as of 2016, a library.

We joke that ours might be the smallest public library anywhere that is not actually on wheels.

Matinicus can seem truly remote, especially when storms brew—be those meteorological or psychological. Infrequent state-operated vehicle ferries, irregular charter passenger boat service, and weather-permitting-only "bush pilot" air service make travel to the mainland complicated and expensive, particularly for those who do not

own a lobster boat. Small extras in such a community are much appreciated, and our tiny library is that kind of luxury.

We began thinking about forming a library during a year when our one-room K-8 school had zero enrolled students. The island did not legally close its school, thankfully (and we do have students this year) but the interest in community services which could be initiated at relatively low cost grew legs.

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A neighbor who owned an 8' x 20' utility shed, but who wanted it moved, provided our library its first building. No massive granite lions flanked the front steps! We engaged a local carpenter to renovate the shed's interior, building a pleasant space lined with pine shelving, and the island electrician provided a few outlets and lights. We subscribed to a basic level of Internet service through the telephone company, did some local fundraising (mostly to pay for the lumber and the utility bills,) and conscripted some residents onto a Board of Directors to start our 501(c)3 nonprofit library.

At the island recycling center, a few shelves filled with cast-off books had grown into a sort of informal (if dusty) book room, and this sparked awareness that a well-maintained collection of more popular titles in better condition might be appreciated.

This island is located too far from mainland cell towers for cellular phone signal to be reliable, and you can forget about 5G data here. We knew that a wireless Internet hub or hotspot would be welcomed, and the library is centrally located—near the Post Office and easy to find. We had no idea, however, just how much love the collection of books—especially children's



Figure 1: Children's Room at the Matinicus Island Library

books—would garner! We soon outgrew our shed, and in 2020 some of our volunteers applied to the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation for grant funding to help acquire a second small building, this one exclusively for our Children's Library (yes—that would be Maine horror writer Stephen King, who is a great supporter of libraries). Along with many small local donations of money and labor, the King Foundation's contribution doubled the size of our facility, and the Children's Room is now a delightfully colorful space which makes everybody smile as they step inside (see figures 1 and 2)?"

When we looked into becoming an official Maine public library, we discovered a couple of required elements were lacking. We did not have any paid staff—that was not too big a hurdle—and we did not have our books catalogued yet (borrowing is by honor system, with a simple sign-out list which seems to work fine), but chief among the obstacles was our lack of a bathroom. As our un-plumbed sheds are on property with no room for a septic system, official status in the eyes of the state may or may not be in our future. We are not worried about that.

This spring (2022), things got interesting when a passing reference on our library's Facebook page mentioned that we take a stance against the banning of books, and that we have a few well-known and generally respected books on our shelves which other organizations may have chosen to remove from theirs. A newspaper reporter from the Bangor Daily News called me and we chatted at length about the Matinicus Library—about how it is entirely volunteer-run, about how the wireless hotspot is a of great value to this island, about the new

Children's Library—but only the topic of banned books seemed to interest her editors. Shortly thereafter, the Associated Press picked up on the Bangor Daily News article and re-wrote the story to suggest that we—as tiny as we are—wanted all the books everybody, everywhere, could send us, and that we not only included banned books in our collection, but we somehow specialized in them. Uh oh.

Thankfully, we have not been inundated with the boatloads of unwanted books that we at first feared. I replied to many inquiries from people who wanted to clean out their attics, pass along some deceased relatives' entire collection, or dispatch us yet another copy of *Maus* (we have several). We purchased every banned book that our regulars (meaning community members) have requested—patronizing brick-and-mortar Maine booksellers—but we are sincerely hoping that the recent, perhaps excessive, publicity calms down soon.

My duties at the library are usually to pay the electric and telephone bills, to send receipts to anybody who contributes to our nonprofit, and to give the floor a coat of paint once a year—not to write back to people ten states away explaining why we don't really need their 1923 copy of *Little Black Sambo* for our “banned book project.” This experience has been interesting. If Matinicus Island is going to be in the news, though, I am glad it is for something



Figure 2: Shelves in Matinicus Island Library with local interest

I consider admirable: our small community's consensus that no committee has the right to decide what the wider public reads.

### Author Details

Eva Murray has been a year-round resident of Matinicus Island for 35 years, arriving as the one-room school teacher in 1987. She is the author of three books, “Well Out to Sea—Year-round on Matinicus Island,” “Island Schoolhouse—One Room for All,” and “Island Birthday,” an illustrated book for children. The Matinicus Island Library Association is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and a registered charity in Maine. Murray is the treasurer.

### Promoting the Freedom to Read at the Walla Walla Public Library

*Mary Lubbers, Walla Walla Public Library*

Every October, the Walla Walla Public Library promotes free access to information by celebrating Banned Books Week. We create displays featuring challenged and banned titles that attract so much attention, patrons borrow the books quickly after they are set up. In October of 2021, however, the most recent display did not circulate nearly as well as usual. Patrons still stopped to look at the display, but the conversation stopped at “That book? Why?” If a knowledgeable member of staff wasn't nearby to answer that question, the item stayed on the shelf.



In February 2022, several local challenges to books available in the high school library put the issue of book banning and censorship at the forefront of our patrons' minds. These challenges (to *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George Matthew Johnson, *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison) provided us both the opportunity to highlight that we offered these materials at the public library and to position ourselves in a larger community conversation about censorship. The challenges to these four titles ultimately came to nothing; the local school board decided unanimously to keep all the books accessible to students. However, the desire of select community members to censor library materials has only eased slightly. We thought it more important than ever to provide an additional safe place to access those titles and others commonly challenged or banned around the country.

With censorship in the forefront of the community's mind, we revived the banned books display in a way that was more engaging to the public, despite it being outside the usual time frame for Banned Books Week. Since our last display did not connect in the way we wanted, we needed to find a better way of providing background information on the ban or challenge for each title. Relaying the status of the book (banned or challenged) and the reason why directly on the cover seemed like the best way to catch people's attention and motivate them to read or reread the book (see figure 3).

Beyond a new display, we made sure to communicate this information directly to students outside library, increasing our outreach to the local school district. We travel to promote library use and to educate students on the resources they can access, and to develop relationships with teens, as they are often most caught up in these attempts to censor information. Inside and outside the library, we work to present ourselves as welcoming to everyone and provide a place where patrons are free to access materials without restriction.

The official policy of the Walla Walla Public Library is that we do not censor materials. It is the right of the patron to self-censor and reject materials they deem inappropriate, but that right cannot be used to restrict how others choose to read, listen, view, or inquire. We also place the responsibility of guiding their child's reading, viewing, and listening on parents. The library does not restrict youth from accessing materials, so it is up to parents if they want to accompany their children to monitor the materials they access. That is not a role that has been or will be taken by the library.

The book challenge at the high school has yielded encouraging results in our community. We are proud of students at the local high school who started a "Banned Books Club" dedicated to reading the challenged books by Kobabe, Johnson, Evison, and Morrison, and getting them into the hands of as many students as possible. The library will continue to provide support for these kinds of student-run organizations, and to any patrons who want access to information. Providing the space where patrons, especially youth, can access

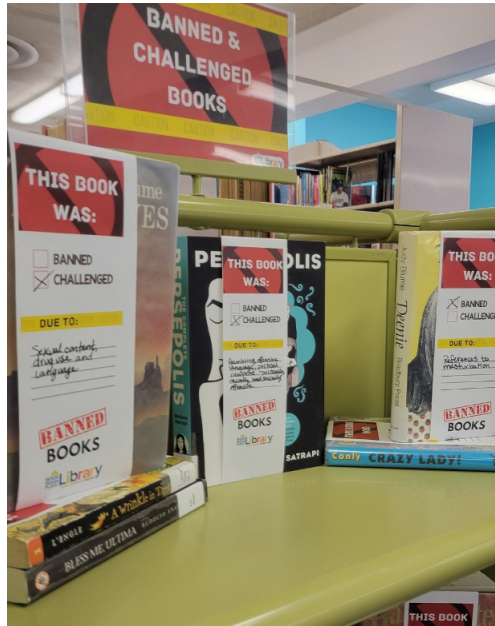


Figure 3: Banned Books Display at the Walla Walla Public Library

materials with characters they relate to and with whom they may have shared experiences is critically important. And the Walla Walla Public Library will continue to leave the access to those materials unrestricted.

#### **Author Details**

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