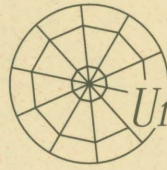


# Gatherings

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## First Forbidden Book

By Mary Schmich, Chicago Tribune

[Banned Books Week is sponsored each year by the American Library Association (ALA), the American Booksellers Association, the Association of American Publishers, and other organizations dedicated to the freedom to read. In 2002, during the last week in September, Chicago saw the gathering of more than 20 authors (headlined by Studs Terkel), artists, columnists, and librarians who participated in a read-out on the steps of ALA. Among the participants was Columnist Mary Schmich who wrote of her experiences for a September 25, 2002 column in the Chicago Tribune found in the Metro section, p. 1. Her column was titled "Flavor of First Forbidden Book Never Forgotten." Ms. Schmich is reprinted here with the permission of the Chicago Tribune.]

**Y**ou probably remember your first illicit book as vividly as you remember your first kiss.

By illicit, I mean a book you hoped no adult would catch you reading. A book for which you could be sentenced to a lifetime of school detention, toilet-scrubbing or scarlet shame. A heart-hammering book that confirmed your suspicions that there was a whole lot more to life than what you'd seen so far.

For me, that book was Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy," the tale of a young man who comes to the big city, falls in love with a rich beauty then plots to murder his pregnant girl-friend so that he can join high society.

I'd heard something vague but titillating about Dreiser's books when, in 7th grade, I mentioned him to my mother: "You might enjoy him when you get older," she said. Older? I felt like a starving hobo as someone lifts the top on a fragrant pot of soup then slams

it shut and says, "Not for you."

I was respectably older—8th grade—when I went to the library and surreptitiously checked out "An American Tragedy." At first, I read it just at night, by flashlight, then stashed it under my bed. Halfway through, I got greedy. Craving sex and murder in the daytime, too, I camouflaged my dirty book and began smuggling it to school. It would never occur to Sister Mary Carl to wonder what was wrapped in the Piggly Wiggly grocery bag, would it?

With Sister Mary Carl's angry lecture about bad books still scorched in my memory, on Tuesday I went to the American Library Association's "read-out" in honor of Banned Books Week. For a couple of hours, a variety of Chicagoans paraded to an outdoor podium on East Huron Street to read from a favorite banned book.

I chose "An American Tragedy"—not so much because it had been banned, but because it had been the first book I'd felt a need to read in secret. I asked some of the event's other readers to name their first forbidden book, whether or not it had been officially banned.

"The dictionary," said Nicole Hollander, creator of the "Sylvia" cartoon, recalling how she used to page

through the school dictionary in search of dirty words, a pursuit she deems "totally unsatisfactory."

"Dracula," said Richard T. Crowe, a ghost hunter (yes, that's what his business card says), who in 6th grade routinely sneaked into the library's adult section to thrill in privacy to Bram Stoker's tale of love and blood-sucking.

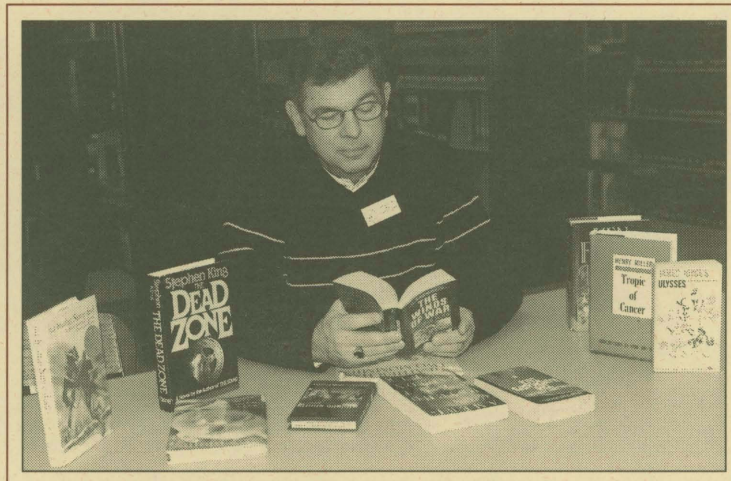
At 13, Haki Madhubuti, a Chicago writer and publisher, refused his mother's order to go to the Detroit library and bring her back a copy of Richard Wright's "Black Boy." He didn't like the idea of asking a white librarian for a controversial book, by a black writer, that had the word "black" in the title.

The day he eventually obeyed, he took the book to an isolated corner of the library and sat down. With growing awe, he read a third of the book right there. "It was the first time in my life I was reading words, language, ideas that were not an insult to my personhood," he said.

When Chicago mystery writer Sara Paretsky was 13, her parents and her teacher worried that emotional books would aggravate her overly emotional nature. They were dismayed when, against their wishes, she did a book report on "The Last of the Just," Andre Schwarz-Bart's novel about the persecution of Jews through the centuries.

"My parents thought it would be too much for me," she said. "I was going to prove that it wasn't." It was, but she survived.

As illicit books go, these are high-brow selections. (I would have happily read something trashier if I could have gotten my hands on it.) But whether your first forbidden book was a smut paperback, a teen romance, or a trashy classic, you surely remember it. And you remember it in part for the reason summed up by Ellen



Dean Reish and selected banned books

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## History ...

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collection titled "Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, ca. 1820-1910." The collection describes the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin from the 17th to the early 20th centuries through first-person accounts, promotional literature, ethnographic texts, biographies, colonial archival papers, and other works from the Library of Congress' collections. The Library has digitized 138 volumes portraying the land and its resources; conflicts between Native Americans and the European settlers; accounts of pioneers, missionaries, reformers, immigrants, and soldiers; the development of local communities and cultural traditions; and the growth of regional and national leadership in business, medicine, politics, journalism, law, agriculture, the role of women, and education. For students and others interested in Michigan history, this is a resource not to be missed!

One of the best things about the Internet is the plethora of quality Web sites sponsored by the federal government. Of special interest to historians is the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Web site at <http://www.archives.gov>. We all know that the National Archives houses the great documents of our country, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights, but NARA is so much more. The Archives helps to preserve our nation's history by supervising the management of all federal records and documents. And when one thinks of the amount of paper generated each year by the federal government, this is a gargantuan task!

The National Archives allows citizens and researchers alike to examine for themselves the record of what the government and its federal officials have done. It truly is a national democratic resource and for those of us who cannot visit it in person, NARA has digitized a phenomenal amount of information easily accessible on the [archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) Web site. You can

begin your adventure by taking a virtual tour of the National Archives. You will learn that in its 33 facilities across the nation, NARA contains approximately 21.5 cubic feet of original text materials—this is more than 4 billion pieces of paper from the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. The Archives' multimedia collection also includes motion pictures, maps, architectural drawings, charts, sound and video recordings, aerial photographs, still pictures and photographs, and computer data sets. The amount of information is mind-boggling even to the most steadfast librarian, archivist, or historian!

One of the most interesting parts of NARA's Web site is the Exhibit Hall section ([http://www.archives.gov/exhibit\\_hall/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/index.html)) that currently contains digitized images from 32 online exhibits featuring the many documents and visual materials held at the Archives. There is something to interest everyone on this site, from presidential diary entries to the treasures of Congress to the legends of Christmas to the day when Nixon met Elvis in 1970. One of the exhibits I found especially interesting is "Picturing the Century" which includes photographs from life in 20th century America. One can click on the photographs to enlarge them, and then visit Fifth Avenue in turn-of-the-19th-century New York City on Easter Sunday, observe children picking sugar beets in the fields of Nebraska during the Depression, and see the determination on the face of a young civil rights demonstrator in Washington, DC, in 1963.

In another intriguing glimpse of reality, "Powers of Persuasion: Posters from World War II" displays compelling wartime images that helped unify and mobilize our country during that challenging conflict. Besides the famous poster of Rosie the Riveter proclaiming "We Can Do It!," one can study posters that urged conservation of resources such as gasoline and rubber, Norman Rockwell's posters on the "four freedoms," images showing the deadly repercussions of gossip and loose talk, and a series of posters that played on Americans' emotions and their real fear of the enemy.

If one has an involvement in education, the Digital Classroom portion of the site ([http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/index.html)) offers a bonanza of marvelous teaching materials. NARA has partnered with ABC-CLIO to produce "Teaching with Doc-

uments," a 13-unit curriculum series using primary documents from the Archives' collections. Although designed primarily for students in grades 7 to 12, the activities and documents can certainly be adapted for use with elementary and college students. This site contains reproducible copies of primary documents from the holdings of NARA, and teaching activities that correspond to the National History Standards and National Standards for Civics and Government. There are tips on how to conduct research using primary documents and how to cite them, ways to celebrate National History Day, and how to build a school archives. The site also contains document analysis worksheets, developed by the education staff at NARA, to help students and researchers analyze written documents, maps, artifacts, cartoons, posters, photographs, motion pictures and sound recordings.

Just two sites, but these two incorporate an immense number of unique historical collections that eliminate barriers of time, space, and location for the beginning or sophisticated historian-or curious explorer of the past in the present. Let me also remind you of the University Libraries' **History Web Resources** page (<http://www.wmich.edu/library/sr/history-web-resources.html>), and **Primary Sources on the Web** page (<http://www.wmich.edu/library/handouts/primary-sources.html>); both are found on the University Libraries' site.

These two guides provide dozens of other links to sites that offer primary research data. And, finally, remember that a computer terminal and Internet access now provide an almost infinite assortment of full-text primary source materials. Happy researching *redux*!

## First Forbidden Book

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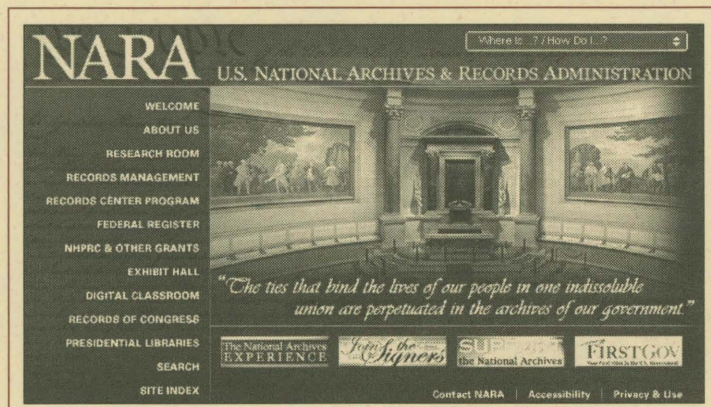
Wadey, executive director of the Guild Complex, who in 7th grade leafed through Shakespeare's plays looking for the bawdy, violent parts.

"I realized there were things I could find out in books," she says, "that my parents weren't going to tell me."

It remains a good reason for reading books other people don't want you to read: to find out things they don't want you to know.

*What was your first forbidden book? Send the title, reason, and result of opening the pages of a banned or challenged book to the editor of Gatherings. Future issues may contain your contribution to the right to read.*

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