

Review

Intellectual Freedom Stories from a Shifting Landscape. Ed. Valerie Nye. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2020. 186 pgs. \$44.99. 9780838947265.

Intellectual Freedom Stories from a Shifting Landscape is undoubtedly a compilation from the American Library Association of the time it was published (2020). There is, of course, a hyper focus on the instability of 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and a whole host of other incidents under former President Donald Trump and the political unrest that plagued the year and, I would argue, have not yet ceased here and now in 2024.

Intellectual Freedom is a compilation of short stories, mostly first-person experiences, from incidents that have happened in and around libraries, all before the publication date of 2020. The anthology of short stories, of a kind, are broken into parts that largely focus on the different “tough” areas we have come to associate with library work like: public events and protests in the library, difficult conversations with likeminded (or not) patrons and colleagues, new cultural sensitivities that we should be aware of and, of course, the ever present conversation of book banning that has not ceased being an issue since the beginning of time and will likely always remain. While many of these issues date to the late 2010’s and are success (or horror) stories of real librarians and directors in the field, many of which continue to represent librarianship, they have actually grown in resonance since publication, as the “shifting landscape” of libraries becomes more and more like a circular maze in which the issues we continue to hack through, we stumble upon, again and again.

A couple of themes emerge throughout the stories that make this more of a helpful and instructional read for librarians and our colleagues than just a compilation of stories surrounding the singular issue of intellectual freedom. One: that a well-fleshed out policy at the forefront of our operations will save us in the heat of the moment. When a heated protest or angry patron arrives at your door and you are grasping for an answer as to why do you have this book, why is this group holding a program, etc. etc., regardless of the political side in which it or YOU fall, a well-established policy that has institutional support takes the pressure off the front-line worker and allows the institution to function as a cohesive whole that maintains its own mission. The time for decision making and policy building is not in the middle of an argument and even the most incensed patron can be dealt with, at the very least, with the bureaucratic helping hand of a well-intentioned and signed-off on policy. Same goes for those student and patron events, protests and exhibitions that you do want to support, but find to be controversial or have the potential for outside outrage.

Another universal theme of these stories centers around knowing and understanding the power we do wield. As academic, public, or special collections librarians, we so often view ourselves as purveyors of information, making literature, arts, and sciences available to the masses, but we also have the power to both gatekeep and open doors. Even divorcing ourselves from the social justice narratives of the library and institution, there is a real seat at the table with big data for us as librarians to continue to

bring equitable access and information to all people, as is our core mission as a profession. The insane prices surrounding database subscription, e-materials, and the lack of laws surrounding library use and patron access to these materials are all places where we do have a real ability to make a difference in shifting weight towards equitable access.

Intellectual Freedom Stories from a Shifting Landscape continues to be a timely and incredibly interesting read. The stories are sourced globally and showcase fascinating examples of libraries and institutions running up against debates of intellectual freedom. As the readers, we get to see where libraries and educators experience faltered, encountered pitfalls, and did well in this fight. I found it to be especially apt now, in 2024, as so many libraries and higher education institutions are seeing a repeat of social and political unrest centered around the upcoming U.S. federal elections and Israeli military action in Gaza and global student protests over the treatment of the Palestinian people. The text’s “here and now” focus on police brutality, peaceful protest, and the extreme views plaguing society, mirror current concerns, as does its roots in the very tenants that form librarianship, free thinking, and intellectual freedom. This is a book that’s message and reflections could be re-released every ten years with new interesting stories, and it would not only continue to hold relevance but most likely touch upon the same universal themes.—*Alexandra Acri Godfrey (agodfrey@os.pasen.gov), Librarian of the Senate of Pennsylvania, Senate of Pennsylvania*