

Related to Public Awareness:

1. Promote increased public awareness – through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity – of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
2. Promote direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
3. Collect, display, and make readily accessible current and up-to-date information on issues such as wealth distribution, child-care, welfare reform, living wage laws, single-payer health insurance, and affordable housing.
4. Promote the publication, production, purchase, and ready accessibility of print and non-print materials that honestly address the issues of domestic and global poverty, hunger, and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.

Related to Professional Association activities:

1. Read ALA's "Poor People's Policy" and think about how its recommendations may be implemented in the libraries where you work.
2. Distribute copies of ALA's "Poor People's Policy" to colleagues. Initiate a discussion of the "Poor People's Policy" at the libraries where you work, and get your colleagues thinking about and discussing ways it can be implemented.
3. Ask ALA's Washington Office to actively support legislative initiatives that would contribute to reducing, if not eliminating, poverty (e.g. living wage, more low-income housing, and universal health care).
4. Get involved in the ALA units working on the issues of library services to poor people, such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty or the OLOS subcommittee on the "Poor People's Policy."
5. Document effective library services aimed at serving poor people and share information about these programs through ALA publications, conference sessions and electronic discussion lists, as well as with groups outside ALA.
6. Encourage library science programs to offer courses on services to both urban and rural poor people.
7. Volunteer to develop and lead creative strategies within ALA and other professional associations that can bring visibility to the issue of libraries' services for poor people.
8. Ask all ALA units to report on past, present, and future activities undertaken to implement the "Poor People's Policy."

Compiled by the ALA/SRRT Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty
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The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship and the American Library by Louise S. Robbins, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Zoia Horn

There is nothing like a story about a real person battling for a principle against great odds to bring a surge of faith, optimism and even action in support of the good cause. *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown* is such an account

The bare bones of the story are simple. Ruth Brown, a long-time librarian at the public library in Bartlesville, a small city in Oklahoma, was dismissed by its City Commission. She was highly regarded in the community. There was no question of her competency. But, early in 1950, forty Bartlesville citizens accused her of "supplying 'subversive' materials at the library" (p. 55). When asked for particulars, they identified subscriptions to the *Nation*, the *New Republic* and *Soviet Russia Today*. The Bartlesville Library Board supported her. A "Friends of Miss Brown" Committee was quickly formed to publicize what had happened and to raise funds for her.

The pressures against Miss Brown escalated. The City Commission crafted a new ordinance that permitted a summary dismissal of the Library Board and the replacement of the board members with anti-Brown people who could then "control" and oversee "material selection" (p. 69). Such were the times after World War II when the cold war was revving up, and anti-communism was unleashed by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy with its flagrant witch hunts and loyalty oaths. As Louise Robbins graphically describes, on the surface, this was a censorship issue. But, the urge to censor had an underlying fear driving it. Ruth Brown had shown a "commitment to racial equality" both within and outside the library. She had informally opened the library to African-Americans; she had friends among them, and she had, most shockingly to the community, come with two African-American teachers from the local segregated school into "the largest drugstore that served food" (p.54) and asked to be served. (This was five years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man and before the sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement.) It was February 1950, which was Brotherhood Month, and it seemed an appropriate step to take. She had come to her anti-racist views through voracious reading over

the years, but particularly from reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy*.

It was Ruth Brown's anti-racism, anti-discrimination and support of interracial programs that were perceived as the threat to the comfortable life of many in the community where an adequate supply of "Negro" manual labor was always available to do the daily chores. This fear of a challenge to their way of life was the driving force behind the attack on Ruth Brown.

The remarkable quality of this book is the interweaving of the social, political and economic pressures on people in this period of United States history exemplified by this incident in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Using quotes from interviews, letters, and books mentioned in her extensive notes and bibliography, she provides a sense of immediacy to the events and to the analysis of them. The many uses of anti-communism, for example, have an economic as well as a political function. "Conservative businessmen...used the cold war anti-communist crusade to diminish the strength of labor unions and to combat liberalism generally." (p. 6) There was a fear of losing cheap black labor by business, or fear of job competition. The Roosevelt New Deal reforms "which emphasized social and economic welfare of all people" (p. 4) were called communistic, and people advocating racial justice and equality were accused of being communists (p. 159).

It then became easy to label books and other publications that were liberal or just critical of the status quo. Librarians became even more vulnerable to pressures to remove books. Ruth Brown was one of those who battled censorship, but no one knows how many chose to avoid any problems by not purchasing potentially controversial publications. Ruth Brown had called for help from the American Library Association, which responded by publicizing her case, and even "mandated the first on-site investigation of a censorship episode." But, as Brown put it, "I could not...understand why the ALA carefully seemed to avoid the racial aspects of the case." As a matter of fact ALA may have unwittingly "helped to obscure the issues of race [and] to nullify the attention Brown was trying to focus on segregation." (p.163)

Robbins points out "the importance of gender in this skirmish (in Bartlesville) and in the nationwide battles" (p.154). Women's cultural boundaries were understood. They were to be "submissive, nurturant, moral, and domestic." This community had a patriarchal atmosphere "cultivated and exploited" by the major employer, Phillips Petroleum Company. Librarians being, at that time, 88.8 percent women, they were

expected to provide a "homelike space," well-organized materials and services, and to be "submissive to the prevailing ideology." Brown stepped over these cultural strictures when she acted upon interracial commitments. She found strong allies among other women who had turned their energies beyond home-making alone, to social reforms that would improve the general welfare: peace, consumer protection, and advancement of women and minorities. The YWCA was central among local institutions to work for these causes. But the power was elsewhere. She makes an interesting point that the "containment of communism" was mirrored in other containments domestically: the containment of women at home or in low paying jobs; of African Americans and other minorities in segregated ghettos, with limited educational and economic opportunities; and also, the containment of ideas that might transgress the prescribed beliefs.

Ruth Brown's story became the basis of the film *Storm Center*, starring Bette Davis, when a screenwriter read an eloquent letter to the editor in the *Saturday Review* written by a friend of Brown's, describing "the events surrounding Brown's firing" (p.128). Here too the example of the film's making and the reactions to it is revelatory. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had as early as 1947 held hearings to "uncover communist influence in the film industry" with devastating results. Suspicion and fear permeated the atmosphere within the film industry (p. 130). Blacklisting destroyed jobs for many talented people. (Some were imprisoned for refusing to "name names" of friends and colleagues whose freedom to speak, write and associate with others was being endangered, despite the First Amendment.) The intimidation by HUAC's activities resulted in the film industry's choice of safe, non-controversial scripts.

The film *Storm Center* (originally named *The Librarian*) was going to "Fight...McCarthyism through film" (p. 128). The core of the film was the librarian's battle against pressure to remove books that were called "subversive" and "communist" in a "red scare" atmosphere. The racial equality issue is totally missing from the film.

Support for the film came from outstanding people like Drew Pearson and Eleanor Roosevelt. ALA's Library Bill of Rights was used in a brochure put out by the Motion Picture Association of America with Eisenhower's "Don't Join the Book Burners" speech (p.143). ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee chairman was used as a technical consultant on the script. A pre-release screening of the film was held at the ALA Conference for

2000 librarians. They were less than enthusiastic about it, for varied reasons. *Storm Center* received more praise and acceptance abroad. As Robbins sums up, the film "was both the Ruth Brown story and the Hollywood story" for it "captured...the reality of the red scare."

Louise Robbins' first book, *Censorship and the American Library: The American Library Association's Response to Threats to Intellectual Freedom, 1939-1969*, promised much with its careful scholarship, its historical viewpoint and the enthusiasm she brought to her writing. In *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown*, Robbins has hit her long stride. She has brought to the surface how anti-intellectualism, the cold war with its anti-communism and its flagrant manifestations of loyalty oaths, witch-hunts, censorship, and guilt by association, have divided communities, undermined democratic principles, and victimized many people. She also shares with the reader her experience and involvement in writing about Ruth Brown. It is good history, a good story, and an inspiration. It is to be hoped that Robbins will take on the challenge of another book, covering another challenging period for librarians, from 1969 to 1999, with the same verve and enthusiasm.

ardent advocate for intellectual freedom. She served as chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee of ALA and is the author of the memoir *Zoia* (McFarland, 1995).

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