

# A Fundamental Freedom

Celebrate during Banned Books Week

by Jim Rettig

Values, like muscles, atrophy without exercise. Each fall, Banned Books Week—September 27–October 4 this year—offers an exceptional opportunity for all who value First Amendment rights.

Celebrated nationwide with displays, events, and read-outs, Banned Books Week helps librarians heighten people's awareness that every time they use their library they exercise their inviolate right to read.

Chris Crutcher, Lois Lowry, and other authors whose books regularly come under assault from would-be censors will share their work September 27 in Chicago to kick off the celebration. ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom Director Judith Krug, ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels, and I will participate in a read-out at Pioneer Plaza, just steps from the McCormick Freedom Museum, the nation's first museum dedicated to freedom and the First Amendment.

## Freedom's roots

For the past 20 years, I have lived in Williamsburg, Virginia. A walk in the restored historic area is a visit to our First Amendment rights' origins. The streets and taverns of 18th-century Williamsburg incubated values the American people hold dear, values ALA promotes with passion and defends without compromise. As we demonstrate to others the value of the freedom to read, it is good to remember how it became our fundamental freedom.

Virginians made significant contributions to the political and intellectual ferment of the 1770s. After the royal governor dissolved the House of Burgesses in 1774, its members left the capitol building and reconvened at the nearby Raleigh Tavern. They formed the first Virginia Convention, a foreshadowing of the Continental Congress.

The fifth Virginia Convention met in Williamsburg in May 1776, and on June 12 unanimously adopted the Virginia Declaration of Rights proposed by George Mason. One of its 16 provisions states: "The freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained but by despotic governments."

Fifteen years later, the Bill of Rights became part of the U.S. Constitution. Its First Amendment owes much to the fifth Virginia Convention. Many of us know that majestic amendment word for word: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Our own Library Bill of Rights endorses these principles. It charges us with responsibility to chal-



The library is the Ellis Island of ideas. We welcome

ideas from all and provide a place where they clash, meld, morph, and synthesize.

lenge censorship and to "cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas."

On this bedrock value of freedom of speech we vigorously defend American classics such as *The*

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, British author J. K. Rowling's tales of a young wizard in training, and a charming children's book about two male penguins who care for an egg.

We present programs on controversial subjects, inviting proponents and opponents to share their views in a trusted public forum. We make our meeting rooms available without prejudice to groups whose own prejudices some may find repugnant.

The library is the Ellis Island of ideas. We welcome ideas from all and provide a place where they clash, meld, morph, and synthesize to challenge society and energize its public discourse.

Welcome and celebrate the world of ideas "@ your library" this month. Read a banned book; sponsor a read-out in your school, community, or campus; invite a speaker on the First Amendment or a controversial topic. Exercise our fundamental freedom! ■

ALA President JIM RETTIG is university librarian at Boatwright Memorial Library, University of Richmond in Virginia. Visit [jimrettig.org](http://jimrettig.org).