

Party like it's 1984: Library observes Banned Books Week with discussion, flash mob of Orwell novel

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“Thought criminal” Donna Pulling stops traffic during a flash mob paying homage to the banned book “1984” in Bisbee.

Photo: Emily Ellis

BISBEE — “Little Red Riding Hood.” “The Handmaid’s Tale.” “1984.”

These are just some of the books that have been censored or banned from schools, libraries and bookstores across the country — and they are just some of the titles that the Copper Queen Library in Bisbee has highlighted as a part of National Banned Books Week, a movement started by the American Library Association to celebrate the freedom of reading.

The highlight of the library’s annual observation of condemned literature kicked off on Tuesday evening, when local book aficionados dressed as “thought criminals” — a term from George Orwell’s dystopian 1949 novel, “1984” — and formed a flash mob, marching through town dressed in Orwellian jumpsuits and gags to represent the right to freedom of speech and information.

The flash mob was followed by a roundtable discussion of the famed novel in the library, led by retired Cochise College professor John Doty.

The library tries to choose currently relevant books to center its Banned Books event around, said manager Jason Macoviak. Orwell’s work, about a future totalitarian government, seemed like a good fit due to the classic novel’s surge in popularity within the past year, he said.

“What’s happening today is resonating with what George Orwell wrote about in the 1940s,” said Macoviak. “So the ideas that he came up with back then, we’re kind of dealing with today. And it’s funny, when you look at some of the stuff like surveillance in people’s rooms — a lot of people have the GoogleHome, the Alexa app, and we’re all just feeding information to these machines — and Orwell warned us about that so long ago.”

Doty, who has volunteered to lead numerous book discussions at the library over the years, said he planned to focus the discussion of “1984” on themes of language, repression and control.

“It’s one of those books that bears rereading,” he said. “It raises the question of why is any book banned, including this one. Is it that we’re opposed to freedom of thought, freedom to read? I don’t understand the whole philosophy behind banned books. It’s a foreign concept to me.

“I for one would never ban a book — even if it’s trashy.”

Language was a big topic of discussion during Doty’s roundtable on “1984,” with many attendees chiming in with their own observations about how technology had changed the way people communicate. Bringing people together to discuss some of history’s most culturally important literature is one of the best parts of Banned Books Week, said Macoviak.

“This week is kind of special to us,” he said. “Just celebrating our freedom to read, and our freedom to access information. ... We’re just trying to get people to think about for a moment what it means to have that freedom.”

Flash mob participant Melissa Holden, who came to the event with her two young children, said it was important for her to teach them about different ideas and perspectives through reading.

Her family’s favorite banned literature? The 2005 children’s book “And Tango Makes Three,” about two male penguins raising a family together.

“It’s important to show all types of families,” she said. “My kids love it. ... It’s only different and weird if you tell them it is.”

Part of the reason Doty continues to help people study literature in his retirement is in order to show how reading can broaden their perspectives, he said.

“Appreciation of different ideas is essential for learning, for all of us,” he said. “And hopefully it’s not something we ever stop.”

Did you miss the Copper Queen Library’s salute to “1984”? No problem. The Sierra Vista Public Library will be holding a banned book button-making event to celebrate the end of Banned Books Week on Saturday from 2 to 3 p.m.



Jan Pieper opens her copy of “1984” during a discussion of the novel for the Copper Queen Library’s Banned Books Week celebration.

Photo: Emily Ellis



Participants dressed to represent the novel “1984” prepare to walk through Bisbee during the Copper Queen Library’s Banned Books Week celebration.

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