

Banned books week

By Zach Dickerson
Campus News Editor

This week, Sept. 22 through 28, is Banned Books Week.

Banned Books Week is an annual awareness campaign promoted by the American Library Association (ALA) and Amnesty International. It is meant to celebrate the freedom to read, draw attention to banned and challenged books and highlight persecuted individuals.

One thing to note is the difference between banning and challenging. According to the ALA, a challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials.

This campaign has been held in the United States every year during the last week of September since 1982. In that same year there was even a major Supreme Court case, *Island Trees School District v. Pico*, in which the court ruled that school officials can't ban books in libraries simply because of their content.

According to the ALA, the campaign "stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those unorthodox or unpopular viewpoints to all who wish to read them."

The organization also notes that it is a requirement to keep material publicly available so that people can develop their own conclusions and opinions as well as further their own knowledge. Amnesty International also notes that these individuals are persecuted because of the writings that they produce, circulate or read.

While the ALA has not released a list of the most challenged books for this year, some notable titles from last years list includes "A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo" by Jill Twiss, the "Captain Underpants" series by Dav Pilkey, "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas, "Thirteen Reasons Why" by Jay Asher and "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie.

The ALA even holds events for Banned Books Week. One event is the Virtual Read-Out, during which people will read from a banned book or discuss censorship issues on camera. Another event that others can do is a First Amendment film festival where films and documentaries dealing with the First Amendment will be shown.

Brevard College is working to bring awareness to the issue this semester with the course ENG 330: Banned Books Literature, which is being taught by John Padgett, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the English Major.

In the course, students examine texts that

at various points in history have been banned, challenged or otherwise censored by some authoritative figure. Many of the works in the class have been banned or challenged on the grounds of social, political, religious and/or sexual messages within them.

Some questions that are considered during the course are "does literature reinforce or challenge prejudice stereotypes?," "how does fiction connect with reality?," "how does power operate in literature?" and "can literature be dangerous? Who decides?"

Some works being looked at in the course are "Fahrenheit 451" by Ray Bradbury, "Lolita" by Vladimir Nobokov, "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini, "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker and many other works.

This course came about when, during planning for the fall semester, English faculty realized there was a need for a 300-level literature course. Many of the students were asked for ideas on topics and the best one was chosen from them.

"In some ways, this special topics class on banned books literature is a sequel to a LINC that I have taught many times with [retired professor] Ralph Hamlett—most recently this past spring—that focuses on mass media and First Amendment freedoms," Padgett said.

"Every time we've taught it, the question of banning or challenging books comes up, and so it was a natural segue to move from the LINC to this course."

The importance of this course, like with the First Amendment, is to draw attention to the rights of religion, free speech and the press

guaranteed in the Constitution. "It's especially important at a time like now," Padgett said, "when so many authority figures, starting at the top, would love nothing more than to erode those freedoms, and in fact actively try to suppress messages they don't like.

"I think that's the main reason for 'Banned Books Week' too," Padgett said, "to remind everyone that the rights we often take for granted can be taken away if we're not diligent and pay attention."

There are multiple reasons given for why people challenge books, "but I think many of them can be boiled down to a combination of ignorance and self-righteousness," Padgett said. "I say ignorance because quite often, people who want to ban books have not even read the work in question: they get some idea based on word of mouth or press reports that 'X is not right for Y,' and because of their own sense of superiority or self-righteousness, they want to limit others' access to that work."

Protecting the children is also a major stated reason why. "Honestly, I don't have a problem with that—that's called 'parenting,'" Padgett said. "Where I do have problems, however, is when someone goes from stopping their own kids from reading a particular book to taking steps to try to prevent other parents' kids from reading that book. That's banning, and it's wrong."

There are also ways to work against banning books. "As I suggested earlier," Padgett said, "probably the main way to fight would-be bans and challenges of books is to be diligent and vigilant in the fight against them. Whenever the issue comes up—at PTA meetings, school board hearings and the like—let your voice be heard that this kind of totalitarian behavior will not be tolerated. If you see something in the newspaper proposing a ban, write a letter to the editor opposing the idea."

"And be sure to let decision makers know of your opposition," Padgett said. "Sometimes, I think books get banned or removed from school curricula and libraries simply because those in charge don't hear from the opposition - all they hear are the calls to remove, and pulling a book might seem the easiest solution. It is important for all of us to help school and library officials realize that banning a book is not the solution."

"One final irony about banning a book," Padgett said, "is that such efforts often backfire: the mere fact of banning a book actually often brings it more attention than it might otherwise have gotten. Books that have been banned or challenged often become best sellers because of the challenges."

