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Random Ramblings — Alabama Story, ALA, and Intellectual Freedom: The Hidden Secret

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Alabama Story, a play by **Kenneth Jones**, tells the story of **Emily Wheelock Reed**, the State Librarian of Alabama, who resisted attempts in 1959 by an Alabama Senator to censor the children's book, *The Rabbits' Wedding*, by **Garth Williams**. Because of its strong intellectual freedom focus, the **American Library Association (ALA)** publicized this play on August 31, 2016, in the *Intellectual Freedom Blog* with a post by **Ellie Diaz**, a program officer in the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). (<http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=7181>) On September 2, 2016, *American Libraries Direct* provided a quote from the blog post and a link to the entry. (al.direct.ala.org/sites/default/al_direct/2016/september/090216-2.htm) The blog post has a laudatory tone and gives the dates and venues for the play's performance by eleven theatre companies. What **Diaz** leaves out is that the play paints a negative portrait of the **American Library Association** as will be seen below.

To provide context, I'll give background on the book, the librarian, and the play. **Garth Williams** wrote and illustrated *The Rabbit's Wedding* that was published on April 30, 1958 by **Harper Collins**. **Amazon** indicates that the book is still in print and has a suggested age range of 4-8. I owned the book and read its story of a black rabbit and white rabbit who spend a happy day together and decide to get married. As of today, January 31, 2018, the book has an excellent sales ranking of 75,978 on **Amazon** and an average reader review of 4.5 stars out of 5.

In librarian **Reed's** obituary in the *New York Times*, May 29, 2000, **Douglas Martin** writes:

"**Harpers** issued a statement from **Mr. Williams** saying the book had 'no political significance.' 'I was completely unaware that animals with white fur, such as white polar bears and white dogs and white rabbits, were considered blood relations of white human beings,' **Mr. Williams** said. He added that his tale of rabbits 'was not written for adults, who will not understand it because it is only about a soft, furry love and has no hidden messages of hate.'"

I quite bluntly don't believe **William's** denial of an implicit attack on laws against interracial marriage, especially since the statement was released by his publisher. In 1959, admitting this hidden meaning would have most likely led to the book being removed from bookstores and banned from libraries wherever **Jim Crow** laws applied. He and his publisher had important financial reasons for denying a very obvious message.

The play, *Alabama Story*, had its world premiere in Salt Lake City by the **Utah Pioneer Theatre Company**, located on the **University**

of Utah campus, with performances from January 9-24, 2015. The play was enthusiastically reviewed by **Barbara M. Bannon**, *Salt Lake Tribune*. An extended 50-minute interview with **Jones**, the director, and the actors is available here: <http://radiowest.kuer.org/post/alabama-story>. **Diaz** wrote her favorable blog post based on this production since she reports that:

"In honor of its 45th anniversary, **Freedom to Read Foundation** members traveled to **Salt Lake City's Pioneer Theatre Company** in January 2015 to witness something others seldom saw in a play: a librarian, center stage, battling segregationists and legislators to defend a children's book in the late 1950s."

The play received additional critical acclaim by being named a finalist in the **2014 National Playwrights Conference** of the **Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center** and was a 2016 nominee for the **Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award**.

The play deals with the conflict between **Emily Reed** and Alabama state senator, **Edward Oswald Eddins**, called **E. W. Higgins** in the play to avoid any legal complications, over the book, *The Rabbits' Wedding*, as well as other materials. **Reed** purchased the item from an **ALA** list of recommended books and forwarded copies of the list to other Alabama libraries. **Higgins** demands that this book be removed from the library and suggests that it be burned. **Reed** resists removing the book but agrees to put in on the shelf of controversial books that anyone may request. She also refuses to give her personal views on racial integration since this has nothing to do with her professional duties. **Higgins** then tries to change the law so that **Reed** is no longer eligible to keep her position but gives up when he realizes that any new law would not apply to her. In an epilogue, we learn that **Reed** left Alabama the next year for a position with the **District of Columbia Library System** and moved to the **Enoch Pratt Library** in 1966 where she remained until she retired in 1977. She was added to the **Freedom to Read Foundation's Roll of Honor** in 2000 but died two weeks before receiving the award.

The **University of Detroit Mercy Theatre Company** gave twelve performances of *Alabama Story* from September 22-October

9, 2016 at the **Marlene Boll Theatre** in downtown Detroit. The author, **Kenneth Jones**, was pleased to recount in his publicity release that he had "roots in the metro Detroit area, where he was raised in Southfield and Beverly Hills and later lived as a free-lance writer in Grosse Pointe before moving to New York City" and that **Reed** "worked for the **Detroit Public Library** in the 1940s after graduating from **The University of Michigan**" (<http://www.bykennethjones.com/michigan-premiere-alabama-story-launches-sept-22-detroit-tickets-sale/>). On September 22, 2016, **Steve Henderson** interviewed **Jones** on "Detroit Today" on **WDET**, the local public radio station. The interview focused on the importance of intellectual freedom and on **Reed's** heroic efforts to keep *The Rabbit's Wedding* from being banned (<https://wdet.org/posts/2016/09/22/83912-new-play-tells-story-of-librarian-who-worked-to-save-banned-childrens-book/>).

The **University of Detroit Mercy** offered free tickets on opening night to all librarians in libraries belonging to the **Southeastern Michigan League of Libraries**. My librarian spouse and I took advantage of this gift and attended the premiere on September 22. While I thought the production was excellent, I left the theater pondering the "hidden secret" that the play presented the **American Library Association** in a negative light. According to the play, **ALA** had *not* supported **Emily Reed** in her efforts to avoid having the book banned

though she reached out to **ALA** on several occasions. While I did not have access to the script, I believe that I'm correct in remembering that she called **ALA** twice and received no answer. On the third try, a man at **ALA** told her that he didn't have time to help her because

he had more important matters to attend to.

I was especially surprised at this plot development because the posting by **Diaz** in the *Intellectual Freedom Blog* did not mention this negative portrayal of **ALA**. The next day, I started my research by sending an email to **Jamie LaRue**, OIF director, and **Karen Muller**, **ALA** Librarian. **Jamie** reported that "the events took place in 1959 that was long before the Office for Intellectual Freedom was created" though the Intellectual Freedom Committee did exist. He wasn't able to find any evidence in **ALA** files about this event.

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Karen sent me Reed's obituary from the *Washington Post* that didn't answer the question. Deborah Caldwell-Stone, OIF Deputy Director, OIF, did some research on the issue and sent me a long, informative email on September 26, 2016, that included citations to the two principal secondary sources. Her conclusion was: "What cannot be disputed is that ALA did not address or take a position on the controversy concerning *The Rabbits' Wedding*. The silence was notable because the IFC often took public positions against book censorship during this period. But based on the information provided by Robbins' and Graham's accounts, Reed did not ask for help from the ALA, and ALA did not actively deny or ignore a request for assistance."

I didn't do any additional research on ALA's role in this censorship attempt until I decided to write this column. In the end, the most important source was *A Right to Read: Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900-1965* by Patterson Toby Graham. He devotes over ten pages to Reed (pp.101-112). He states bluntly that "the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee failed to support Emily Reed during the censorship controversy...." Graham also appears in a "video by University of Georgia's University Librarian Toby Graham, for the #FTRF45 reception in Salt Lake" for the opening of *Alabama Story*" (<http://www.ftrf.org/page/ROHReed>). In the video, he affirms that he interviewed Reed in 1997, a fact that lends credibility to his account. He also repeats that she received no significant support in the state or nationally, which I believe she told him this during the interview. I also suspect that he may have been the one who nominated her for the FTRF Honor Roll.

Contrary to the statement by Caldwell-Stone, I did not find any irrefutable, direct evidence in the sources I consulted that Reed didn't ask for help from ALA; but I would also come to this conclusion from the indirect evidence presented. The overall tone

indicated to me that she was firm about keeping the book available but that she was not willing to turn this censorship attempt into a major controversy. She did so to protect funding for her library and perhaps for other libraries in Alabama and also because she believed that calling in outsiders would have been counterproductive to keeping the book available. In addition, Louise S. Robbins reports in *Censorship and the American Library: The American Library Association's Response to Threats to Intellectual Freedom, 1939-1969* that the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee chair wrote to Reed and "belatedly asked if she would like ALA to take any kind of action in her support. She was glad that the IFC had taken no action in the matter, Reed reported; she preferred 'quiet moral support'" (p. 109). I would contend, however, that his statement is not completely contradictory with the possibility of her having earlier asked for help.

The person who could answer this question is the play's author Kenneth Jones, but he didn't respond to my email when I asked him about the historical accuracy of her calling upon ALA for support. Another piece of evidence against any such calls is that the person at ALA isn't named and that the chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee, who would be the logical person to call, would most likely be a practicing librarian and not at ALA Headquarters. While based on historical events, the play is obviously fiction since Jones had to create the dialog and add other embellishments to create a coherent story. Having Reed call ALA and be rebuffed makes dramatic sense by increasing the audience's judgment of her as a heroic woman who is standing up against the powerful forces of censorship and dealing with a state senator who "was a six-foot-one-inch, 250-pound ex-marine, 'a man you don't push around'" (Graham, 106). In addition, without the phone calls, it would be dramatically hard to point out that ALA didn't support her. For the author, the fact that the audience would come away from the play with a negative view of ALA could be acceptable collateral damage. In a country where *Gone with the Wind* is all that many people know about the Civil War, I suspect few in the audience would question the

accuracy of the play. Not helping her would be bad enough; turning down her cry for help is even worse. Especially if the calls to ALA are fiction, I have recommended to OIF that Jones not be considered for any intellectual freedom awards.

I also have concerns about Diaz's blog post. I can see why OIF would want to publicize the play because Reed is a library heroine for intellectual freedom who deserves all the recognition she has received. Overall, it's a feel-good story because the book remained available. The heroine doesn't suffer any serious negative consequences and is in the end rather belatedly recognized by ALA for her bravery. My first concern is that the article lies by omission in a profession that is currently worried about "fake news." In my long career, I have encountered many instances where ALA, like most organizations, has exercised damage control. The facts in the article are correct, but important facts for a library audience are missing. Second, Diaz might have offered a teachable moment showing that ALA hasn't always lived up to its principles. In seeking secondary sources for this column, I could not avoid encountering other examples where ALA was not at the forefront in opposing segregation and Jim Crow. I don't believe that trying to erase this less than glorious history is proper. Seeing how the desire to avoid conflict led to this timidity could remind us all to avoid doing so again. News reporting about the *Rabbits' Wedding* was widespread enough that ALA leaders must have known about this censorship attempt even if Reed never called ALA. Finally, more disclosure would have saved librarians like me from having to dig for the facts. They would be prepared for a theater experience very different from what they might have expected.

In the end, I have only one more thing to say. Go see the play for its excellent portrayal of a brave but modest heroine for intellectual freedom who stood up against powerful men in an era when doing so was unusual. While only in jest, I suggest that we librarians in the audience "boo" the ALA scenes. 🐼

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discounts on WileyPLUS and Wiley eTexts to their students. Wiley's partnership with the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's VolShop, powered by VitalSource, has helped grow their inclusive access program and extend the benefits of the program to more and more students and faculty each term. Shirley Streeter, Assistant Director of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's campus store, Volshop, reported, "Wiley has proven to be a valuable partner in the growth of our inclusive access program. Their leadership, representatives and products are essential in the

continuing success of our program." Students and instructors have also been very pleased with Wiley Inclusive Access as evidenced by the instructor participation doubling in the last year and student participation rate growing to 90%. Dr. Mike Hale, Vice President of Education, VitalSource comments "We are proud to collaborate with Wiley and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville's VolShop to power Inclusive Access." Another key partner for Wiley is Red Shelf, which currently serves over 600 campuses in the United States. Tom Scotty, Chief Operating Officer of RedShelf commented, "RedShelf greatly values its deep partnership with Wiley, and we've been excited to drive improved affordability and access for students together through inclusive access

programs." To learn more about Wiley's inclusive access program, visit <https://www.wiley.com/college/inclusive-access/>.

Returning to LC, the Library of Congress has launched three new online interactive applications that highlight creative ways to facilitate the accessibility of thousands of collections, using the Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-based tool Story Maps. Presenting the information in a curated format, Story Maps allows users to combine text, images and multimedia content in an online application that tells stories through data and the capabilities of GIS technology, within a software platform created by ESRI. From the first female photographers who traveled

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