



The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship, and the American Library

By Louise S. Robbins

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In 1950 Ruth W. Brown, librarian at the Bartlesville Public Library, was dismissed from her job after thirty years of exemplary service, ostensibly because she had circulated subversive materials. In truth, however, Brown was fired because she was active in a group affiliated with the Congress of Racial Equality.

This episode in a small Oklahoma town almost a half-century ago is more than a disturbing local event. It exemplifies the strange period of the Cold War known as the McCarthy era, foregrounding those who labored for racial justice, sometimes at great cost, before the civil rights movement.

The fundamental issues of the Brown case make it especially pertinent today, when differences--in race, gender, class, and national origin--are again feared, and as challenges to materials in library collections again escalate. Ruth Brown's story helps us understand the matrix of personal, community, state, and national forces that can lead to censorship, intolerance, and the suppression of individual rights.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This little book is a major contribution to our understanding of library history and the core values of librarianship, but it is much more than that. It uniquely illuminates the way American society has used patriotism, loyalty, and the threat of communism to maintain and mask the subtle, even unwitting, racist and sexist agendas and traditions so deeply entrenched in our communities and their institutions. In 1950, Miss Ruth Brown was dismissed from her job as librarian at the Bartlesville Public Library, OK, a position she had held for 30 years, ostensibly because she had circulated such subversive and communist materials as the *Nation*, *New Republic*, and *Soviet Russia Today*. But many believed the real reason for her firing was due to her efforts to promote racial equality. This reviewer had heard about Brown and Bartlesville for decades. Thanks to Robbins (director, SLIS, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of *Censorship and the American Library: The American Library Association's Response to Threats to Intellectual Freedom, 1939-1969*), one can finally understand what happened there and much more about America and librarianship. At the same time, the author introduces Brown's story to a new generation of librarians unfamiliar with the case but who are now facing the [same] search for scapegoats, contests over cultural values, and the move by conservative groups touting family values! (rather than Americanism) to screen library materials. This title ranks with Jesse Shera's classic *Foundations of the Public Library* in its historical insight and sweep. It also sheds revealing light on the reasons why our strong professional commitment to intellectual freedom has so frequently been blinded to or silent about our vulnerability to racial and gender injustice and inequity in our midst. We begin to know from Robbins who and why we librarians are what we are. We see the complexity of our value system and the imperative to articulate it more effectively to our public. The bonus here is Robbins's epilog telling how she found the sources and conducted the research. It is academic detective work at its most thrilling. You owe it to yourself and your profession to make sure your library has this book, that you read it, and that you share it with your colleagues. We really needed this one."John Berry, *Library Journal*

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About the Author

Louise S. Robbins, Associate Professor and Director, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, is author of *Censorship and the American Library: The American Library Association's Response to Threats to Intellectual Freedom, 1939-1969*.

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