



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

Louise S. Robbins

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In 1950 Ruth W. Brown, librarian at the Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Public Library, was summarily 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 had become active in promoting racial equality and had helped form a group affiliated with the Congress of Racial Equality.

Louise S. Robbins tells the story of the political, social, economic, and cultural threads that became interwoven in a particular time and place, creating a strong web of opposition. This combination of forces ensnared Ruth Brown and her colleagues—for the most part women and African Americans—who championed the cause 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 McCarthy era, foregrounding those who labored for racial justice, sometimes at great cost, before the civil rights movement. In addition, it reveals a masking of concerns that led even Brown's allies to obscure the cause of racial integration for which she fought. Relevant today, 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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