Book Review by Yvonne Caruthers

The Most Dangerous Book: the battle for James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, by Kevin Birmingham

(on the shelf of new books at the GM library)

If your eye only takes in the first half of the title you might wonder what book could possibly qualify as ‘most dangerous’. Then when you read the second half of the title and realize this is a book about *Ulysses*, you might think, “How could a book about a book be interesting?”

But don’t skip this book, it’s a fascinating story, and a very well written one. The author is a young Harvard professor; this is his first book, but hopefully not his last. (Here’s a sample sentence, from page 273: “What was so strange about publishing at the time was that the passage between prestige and prison was so narrow.”) Several times I found myself thinking that this book is as much about today’s society as it is about that of the 1920’s, when *Ulysses* was banned and burned, as well as pirated.

Does it seem far-fetched that there used to be something called a “society for the suppression of vice”? I always thought joking references to the “vice squad” were just that: jokes. But no, it was a real thing, and the story of the young man who repeatedly risked his freedom to smuggle copies of *Ulysses* past customs agents at the Canadian border sounds like something that could have happened just up the road from our little town. He was terrified of being caught with ‘obscene’ literature because the penalty was a prison sentence!

Several people had important roles in publishing *Ulysses*, most of them women with names you’ve never heard of. They begged and borrowed money, they wrote countless letters, they became estranged from their families, they were caught up in court battles. But they believed in Joyce, and the right of the artist to publish whatever book s/he imagined.

If you’re interested in artistic freedom, I highly recommend this book. It will give you a lot to think about!