

Challenges to Children's Picture Books with LGBTQ Themes

A 30-Year Review

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For more than thirty years, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) has collected data regarding banned and challenged books in the U.S. Since this record keeping began, books with LGBTQ themes have made up a significant portion of the challenged books listed on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the decade lists¹ and Top 10 Most Challenged Books of the year lists.²

Much of the controversy surrounding LGBTQ-themed literature and materials deals with their dissemination to children. In 2006, DePalma and Atkinson wrote how often children are considered to be innocent asexual beings and therefore must be "protected from the dangerous knowledge of homosexuality."³ Parents and others frequently challenge children's books with LGBTQ themes, claiming they are not suitable for the child's age group. Historically, this has made it difficult for families with LGBTQ members to access these materials. In 1989, Virginia L. Wolf wrote, "Homophobia . . . still keeps most gay families hidden and accounts for the absence of information about them. It also keeps what information there is out of the library, especially the children's room, and makes it difficult to locate through conventional research strategies."⁴

At the time Wolf published her article, children's picture books with LGBTQ themes were just beginning to be published.

Three decades later, the genre has grown. However, has public sentiment changed? The author investigated this by reviewing ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the decade lists for 1990 to 1999, 2000 to 2009, and 2010 to 2019, as well as ALA's Top 10 Most Challenged Books of the year lists from 2001 to 2020.

During the review, the author noted each book appearing on these lists with LGBTQ themes and can be classified in the children's picture book genre. Eleven titles were retrieved from this review. As children's picture books with LGBTQ themes continue to show up on the lists of most challenged books, it is important to look at the stories behind the challenges.



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Heather Has Two Mommies (1989)

One of the first pieces of LGBTQ children's literature to garner broad attention was *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman.⁵ The story is about a child, Heather, raised by lesbian women: her biological mother, Jane, who gave birth to her after artificial insemination, and her biological mother's same-sex partner, Kate. The book was listed at number nine on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade. It dropped off the list for the 2000 to 2009 decade, but returned at number 87 for the 2010 to 2019 list.

The book's author received numerous letters from concerned parents and other citizens that insisted she was promoting a homosexual agenda. Copies of her books as well as other gay-themed children's books disappeared from public library shelves throughout the 1990s, as censors tried to limit public access to the books.⁶

After her book received such an overwhelming number of censorship attempts, Newman explained her frustrations in *Horn Book Magazine*. "It seems to me that a disproportionate number of parents live in fear of their child reading just one book with a gay character in it, for such exposure will, in these parents' minds, cause their child to grow up to be lesbian or gay. It is usually useless to point out that the vast majority of lesbians and gay men were brought up by heterosexual parents and spent countless hours of their childhood reading books with heterosexual characters . . . I have no problem with parents deciding their child cannot read *Heather Has Two Mommies*. I do have a problem with these same parents deciding that nobody can have access to it-or to any other book, for that matter."⁷

Daddy's Roommate (1990)

Another early children's book to address the subject of homosexuality was *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite.⁸ The story follows a young boy whose divorced father now lives with his life partner, and the book was awarded a Lambda Literary Award in 1991. The ALA listed *Daddy's Roommate* at number two on their list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade.

One example of censorship involving both *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies* is the federal court case *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas* (2000).⁹ In this case, city residents, who were members of a church, sought removal of the two books because they disapproved of the books' themes of homosexuality.¹⁰ The Wichita Falls City Council then passed a resolution to restrict access to the books if a petition was able to get three hundred signatures of people asking for the restriction. A different group of citizens then filed suit after copies of the two books were removed from the children's section of the library and placed on a locked shelf in the adult area. The District Court ruled that the city's resolution permitting the removal of the two books improperly

delegated governmental authority regarding selection decisions of books carried in the library and prohibited the city from enforcing it.¹¹

King & King (2002)

King & King by Stern Nijland and Linda de Haanis is the story of a prince whose mother, the queen, wishes him to marry; however, instead of a princess, he ends up marrying another prince, and the story ends with a kiss between the two new kings.¹² A sequel followed in 2004, titled *King & King & Family*,¹³ in which the newlywed kings go on their honeymoon and eventually adopt a child, raising their new daughter as a princess. *King & King* made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number nine in 2003 and number eight in 2004. The book was also listed at number 20 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2000 to 2009 decade.

One example of a challenge involving *King & King* occurred in Oklahoma in 2005. That year, seventy-five members of the state's legislature signed a petition for the Oklahoma Metropolitan Library System (OMLS) to force libraries to place the children's book in the adult section. In May 2005, the OMLS Commission voted 10–7 to move "easy, easy-reader, and tween" books containing "sensitive or controversial" themes to an area that could only be accessed by adults.¹⁴ The Commission's decision was implemented in February 2006 as a Family Talk section that contained such controversial content. Further restrictions were added in November 2008, when the Commission added the requirement that such material must be placed at least sixty inches off the ground to be out of the reach of many children.¹⁵

And Tango Makes Three (2005)

One of the most frequently challenged books is *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell.¹⁶ It's the true story of two male Central Park Zoo penguins, Roy and Silo, who form a couple and after a failed attempt at hatching a rock, end up hatching a true penguin egg and raising a female baby penguin named Tango. According to the ALA, *And Tango Makes Three* was the most challenged book of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010 and the second most challenged book of 2009. The book continued to be in the Top 10 Most Challenged Books in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019. *And Tango Makes Three* was also listed at number four on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2000 to 2009 decade, and at number six for the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One example of librarians having to fight censorship challenges of *And Tango Makes Three* took place in Loudoun County, VA. In 2008, the Loudoun County Public Schools Superintendent removed the book from general circulation at public elementary school libraries on the basis of a parent's complaint. After the parent formally challenged the book, an

advisory committee of principals, librarians, teachers, and parents reviewed the book, deemed it acceptable, and the anonymous parent made an appeal. Another committee of administrators, librarians, and parents reviewed the book and recommended that it remain in the collection. After originally deciding to override the decision of the committees and make the book available only to teachers and parents, the superintendent ended up returning the book to circulation.¹⁷

Another challenge took place in Ankeny, IA, in 2008. Parents at the local elementary school asked that the book be placed in a restricted section of the library so only parents could check it out. However, the Ankeny school board voted six to one to keep the book in general circulation.¹⁸

While *And Tango Makes Three* has been challenged many times across the United States, challenges have occurred in other countries as well. In July 2014, Singapore's National Library Board (NLB) announced they would be destroying copies of *And Tango Makes Three* as well as two other LGBTQ children's books. Singapore is a conservative city-state, where gay sex between men is illegal, punishable by up to two years in jail.¹⁹ After an extreme amount of criticism, the NLB ended up overturning the decision to destroy the books. However, they were taken out of the children's section.²⁰

Speaking to *The New York Times* in 2005, co-author Richardson, said, "We wrote the book to help parents teach children about same-sex parent families. It's no more an argument in favor of human gay relationships than it is a call for children to swallow their fish whole or sleep on rocks."²¹

Uncle Bobby's Wedding (2008)

Uncle Bobby's Wedding by Sarah S. Brannen is the story of young Chloe,²² who shares a special bond with her favorite uncle, Uncle Bobby. Uncle Bobby announces that he is marrying his male friend Jamie, and Chloe worries that Uncle Bobby won't have time for her anymore. However, after spending time with Uncle Bobby and Jamie, Chloe ultimately decides that having two uncles is better than one. *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number eight in 2008. The book was also listed at number 99 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One example of *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* being challenged occurred in 2012 in the St. Louis suburb of Brentwood, MO. A resident challenged the book's presence in the children's section of the Brentwood Public Library, claiming that its purpose is "to glorify homosexual marriage" and that it could "open the door to library books advocating other interests such as white supremacy or pedophilia."²³ Library Director Vicky Wood refused to remove the book, but invited the complainant to take his grievance to the board, which he did. On Oct. 25, 2012, the library's Board of Trustees voted unanimously to keep *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* in the collection.²⁴

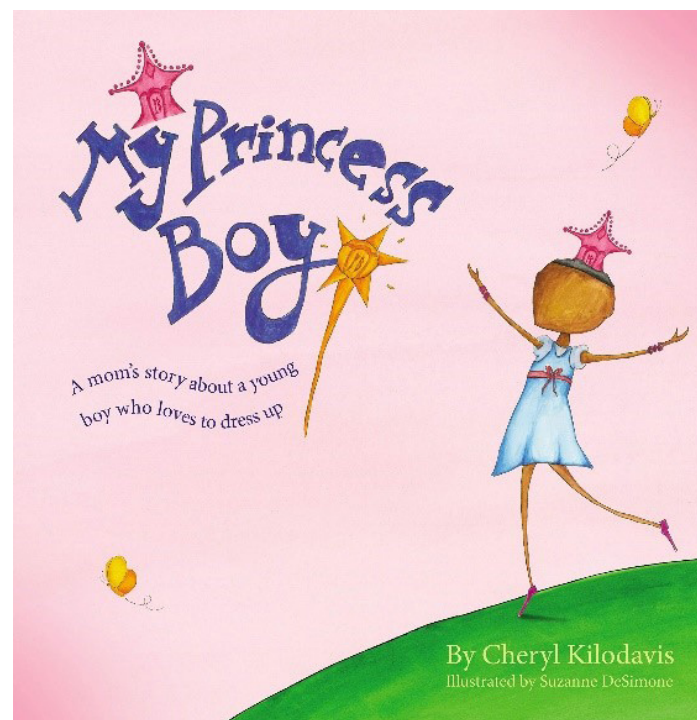
My Princess Boy (2009)

My Princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis is the story of a boy who likes "pretty things" and prefers to wear tiaras and "girly dresses."²⁵ Despite getting a lot of attention for his appearance, the Princess Boy always has the love and support of his family. *My Princess Boy* was listed at number 90 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One example of a challenge of *My Princess Boy* occurred in 2015, when fifty-two citizens in Granbury, TX, challenged the inclusion of the book in Hood County Library's collection. When the library's director, Courtney Kincaid, defended the book's inclusion, objectors took their complaint to the commissioners' court, the county's governing body. The court effectively upheld Kincaid's decision by declining to vote on the matter.²⁶

Another controversy occurred later that same year in Minnesota. In October 2015, the principal at Nova Classical Academy in St. Paul, informed parents that the school would be supporting a student who was gender non-conforming. In an email, the principal asked for kindergarten parents to talk with their children about appropriate and respectful conduct when engaging with gender non-conforming identities.

Upon learning that the non-conforming student was in kindergarten, many parents became concerned with the issue of gender identity being imposed onto their young children. Furthermore, several parents became increasingly apprehensive about the inclusion of *My Princess Boy* in the curriculum. There was a significant drop-off in applications and increase in declined offers of enrollment for the 2016–2017 school year. The school later went on to replace *My Princess*



Boy with poems depicting similar themes.²⁷

Jacob's New Dress (2014)

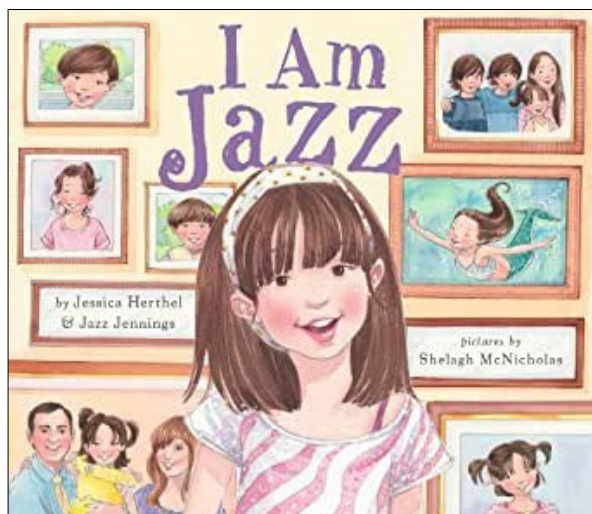
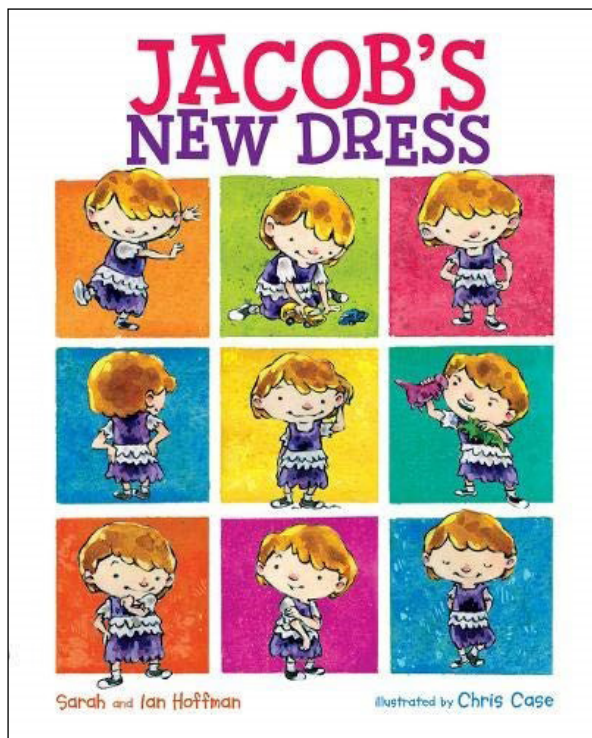
Jacob's New Dress by Sarah and Ian Hoffman is the story of a boy who loves to play dress-up, where he can be anything he wants to be.²⁸ Some kids at school say he can't wear "girl" clothes, but Jacob wants to wear a dress to school. The book speaks to the unique challenges faced by boys who don't identify with traditional gender roles. *Jacob's New Dress* was listed at number 72 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One challenge occurred in 2017 in a North Carolina school district when Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Schools removed and replaced a book it had been using in a lesson for first graders to help them recognize harassment and bullying.²⁹ The NC Values Coalition claimed that *Jacob's New Dress* was "a tool of indoctrination to normalize transgender behavior" and started a petition to stop political correctness.³⁰ The school removed the book from the lesson and replaced it with Michael Hall's *Red: A Crayon's Story*,³¹ a book about a blue crayon with a red label.

This Day in June (2014)

This Day in June by Gayle E. Pitman brings children along to a pride celebration, incorporates historical facts about the LGBTQ movement,³² and also includes a Note to Parents and Caregivers with information on how to talk to children about sexual orientation and gender identity in age-appropriate ways. The book made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number ten in 2018 and was listed at number 42 on the Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One example of a challenge involving the book occurred in 2015 at Hood County Library in Granbury, Texas. *This Day in June*, along with *My Princess Boy*, received more than fifty "challenge forms," raising concerns about the two picture books.³³ Courtney Kincaid, the director of the library, said she "moved *This Day in June* to the nonfiction section but declined to remove the books outright."³⁴ The Hood County library board



also voted to keep both books in the library stacks.

I Am Jazz (2014)

Jazz Jennings is a transgender female assigned male at birth. She began to identify as a female at a young age and has since become a well-known advocate for the transgender community. In 2014, she co-authored *I Am Jazz* about her experiences.³⁵ Since then, she has grown a popular YouTube channel, starred in a reality TV series, and published a memoir, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*.³⁶ *I Am Jazz* made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number three in 2015, number four in 2016, number ten in 2017, and number six in 2019. The book was also listed at number 13 on ALA's list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books for the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One significant challenge took place in 2015, when a reading of *I Am Jazz* was scheduled at the Mount Horeb (WI) Primary Center, a public elementary school. A student had recently transitioned from boy to girl. School staff scheduled the reading to "support gender-variant students and their families."³⁷ After learning about the event, the Liberty Counsel, a conservative Christian nonprofit headquartered in Florida, threatened

to sue the school district. The Liberty Counsel claimed that the school district's decision to read *I Am Jazz* "substitutes the beliefs of the principal and school psychologist for those of parents."³⁸ Upon threat of a lawsuit, the school district cancelled the scheduled reading.

Two weeks after the originally scheduled event was to take place, members of Mount Horeb High School's Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA), as well as two hundred community supporters, gathered around the school's flagpole to read *I Am Jazz*. Later that week, nearly six hundred people gathered at the area's public library for a reading by co-author Jessica Herthel.³⁹

Following the event, the district's school board released a statement that said, "Let the word go forth here and now

that this board will stand united and we will not be intimidated and we will teach tolerance and will be accepting to everyone."⁴⁰

A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo (2018)

A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo by Jill Twiss is about a fictional day in the life of the real-life pet rabbit of former Vice President of the United States Mike Pence and details a romance between two male rabbits.⁴¹ It is a loose parody of *Marlon Bundo's A Day in the Life of the Vice President*, another children's book featuring Marlon Bundo written by Charlotte Pence and illustrated by Karen Pence.⁴² *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number two in 2018 and number three in 2019. The book was also listed at number 19 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One challenge occurred in June 2018 at the Riter C. Hulsey Public Library in Terrell, TX. The book was challenged by a patron who stopped reading the book to her 8-year-old granddaughter when they got to the part about two male bunnies getting married to each other. The patron objected on religious grounds, believing the book "encouraged her granddaughter to accept a lifestyle the Bible called sinful."⁴³ After a public presentation to the library's advisory board, the board decided to retain the title, citing the Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read statement.

Prince & Knight (2018)

Prince & Knight by Daniel Haack tells the story of a young prince who falls in love with, and later marries, a knight after the two work together to battle a dragon.⁴⁴ *Prince & Knight* made the ALA's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number five in 2019. The book was also listed at number 91 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade.

One challenge occurred in 2019 when the Upshur County (WV) Public Library removed the book after a Calvary Chapel Mountain Highlands pastor met with library officials to voice his opposition to the book.⁴⁵ The National Coalition Against Censorship, the ALA OIF, and West Virginia Library Association all urged Upshur County to return the book to circulation.⁴⁶ According to the *New York Times*, the book "was temporarily removed from the library, but later returned."⁴⁷

That same year, another challenge took place in Loudoun County, VA. The local school district faced several challenges to pieces of literature that were instated as a component of



a "diverse classroom libraries" initiative for elementary and high school classrooms. Most challenges centered on the LGBTQ pieces of literature, despite constituting only five percent of designated texts for the program.⁴⁸ Specifically, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *My Princess Boy*, and *Prince & Knight* received the most requests for reconsideration by parents and citizens, according to internal district documents, with *Prince & Knight* having been moved to the school counseling office while under reconsideration.⁴⁹

Censorship is a centuries-old issue in the United States.⁵⁰ Since 1990, the ALA's OIF has collected data regarding banned and challenged books in the U.S., with children's picture books featuring LGBTQ themes or depicting LGBTQ families being common targets of these challenges.

Many parents may want to censor information about same-sex parent families from their children, but that will not keep them from coming in contact with children from same-sex parent families. Judith Krug, former director of the ALA's OIF, explained, "We fight to keep these books on the shelves. People who complain about *And Tango Makes Three* really believe that homosexuality is wrong, that it's against God's commandments, that it's harming society. The problem is that these children are growing up in a society where some of their classmates are going to come from same-sex couples."⁵¹

Too often, adults fixate on the sexual aspect of LGBTQ parents, queer children, and children in LGBTQ families and object to young children learning about sexuality and sexual relationships.⁵² However, Gelnaw and Brickley observe, "Learning about a gay/lesbian-headed family is no more about sexuality than learning about a heterosexual-headed family is. Children's interest in family has to do with who loves them—not the sexual life of the family's adults."⁵³ &

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