

The Power of Story

Using Personal Anecdotes to Counter Challenges

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At my high school library, I have a student who became an avid reader after I recommended Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Saenz to him. He returned soon after checking it out to tell me that this was the first time ever that he completely related to a character as a gay Hispanic teenager. This book ignited his passion for reading, and he devoured my recommendations from then on. He couldn't wait to tell me the day he found out there was going to be a sequel. He reminded me once a week to make sure I ordered it for the library.

Imagine my complete and utter delight when I got my hands on an ARC of Aristotle and Dante Dive into the Waters of the World a full month before it was going to be released. The next day, I surprised him with the copy—and I had to pull him out of class because he burst into tears at the excitement of being able to read it so much earlier than he expected. It is life-changing to be able to see yourself in the characters and stories that you read. I am honored to be able to give that to my students.

High School Librarian in Dayton, Ohio

That personal anecdote shows that books, quite possibly, can change and even save someone's life; that's the power of libraries. We as librarians know that well, but over the past year, many school and public libraries have seen an intense increase in the number of book challenges to their collections.

According to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom from Sept. 1 to Dec. 1, 2021, there were more than three hundred thirty distinct book challenges.¹ That number is greater than the number of book challenges in the entire 2020/2021 school year.

Several state legislatures are considering bills that would supersede material selection processes already in place for school and public libraries. Iowa is considering a bill where teachers and librarians could be charged with a crime if they hand a book to a child that the parent deems pornographic.

An informal assessment shows that most of the books being challenged or removed from libraries are written by black authors addressing racism in our current society or are books affirming the perspective and experiences of people who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Often, it is a very vocal minority requesting that these books be removed or made illegal to hand to students. As librarians that strive to uphold the Library Bill of Rights, we believe that most parents and patrons support everyone's freedom to read. Parents or caregivers have the power to determine which books are appropriate for their children. That shouldn't be determined by any one individual for all the children in a particular school or city.

It's crucial that libraries rally our supporters to speak up and counter these attempts at censorship, whether that be at school board meetings or by writing to state and federal representatives when bills challenging current collection development standards are introduced.

Using Personal Anecdotes

One of the most effective tools in doing this is the use of the personal anecdote. How did a book about or by a marginalized section of our society touch a child's life? How did it make them feel seen or experience true empathy for another person's story? These stories can help our stakeholders go from citizens who believe in the abstract idea of a person's freedom to read to an emotionally attached advocate. I asked members of the Public Awareness and Advocacy Committee as well as other colleagues I have met through my twelve years of librarianship to share some sample stories. Hopefully these examples will remind you of stories of your own, but feel free to use some of these in your attempts to gain local support.

My daughter's partner has a son who loves to wear nail polish and always admires the glittery tops he sees when they go shopping. I found a copy of Sparkle Boy by Leslea Newman and gave it to my daughter to share with him. When I talked to my daughter shortly after, she told me that this was his favorite book because it is the first one in which he had truly seen himself in the story. A year later, the son has worn out that first copy, but still loves it so much they have had to replace it.

Retired Children's Librarian in Ohio

I did a preschool story time with the book Goin' Someplace Special by Patricia C. McKissack and talked with the children about segregation. A white mom came up to me a week or so later and mentioned how much she appreciated the story and how they had read and discussed the book many times. They have cousins who are mixed race, and this was an important discussion for them to have as a family. They were unsure how to even talk about this with their white children. This book gave them an important opportunity to talk about social justice and their family values.

Children's Librarian in the Suburbs of Seattle

There was a challenge to Drama by Raina Telgemeier in an elementary school. Before the challenge even came up, a fourth-grade boy approached me with the book in his hands. He was very cautious that no one would overhear and spoke in a whisper. He thanked me for the book and was hoping there might be another book with "someone like me" in it.

School Librarian in Pennsylvania &

Reference

1. Tracie D. Hall, "ALA Executive Director's Report to ALA Executive Board & Council," 2022 ALA Virtual January Meeting, January 8, 2022, page 56, <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/ALA%20CD%2023%20Executive%20Director%20Report%20and%20EDISJ%20Inventory.pdf>.