



## LIBRARIES Warsaw, Indiana

The Warsaw (Indiana) Community Public Library Board supported librarians' decision to retain *Jacob's Room to Choose* (2019) by Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman, a picture book that deals with transgender bathroom issues, in the children's section of the library.

At a board meeting on November 18, 2019, Board Vice President Jill Beehler inquired about a complaint after reading about it in documentation provided by the Warsaw Public Library for the board meeting.

Director Ann Zydek said the proper paperwork was submitted by the person who complained, and the library decided not to remove the book.

There is a form a person has to fill out to get the library to consider removing a book, Zydek said. One of the requirements for the book to be considered for removal is the person has to have read the book.

Assistant Director Joni Brookins said what people complain about goes in cycles, and most people do not go past complaining at the circulation desk once they find out the process of getting the book reviewed.

Zydek said that after the library looks at a complaint, books that are complained about may be moved.

Brookins said a book has never been put behind the circulation desk because of a complaint made against it. Reported in: *Times Union*, November 18, 2019.

## SCHOOLS Ocala, Florida

The Marion County School Board on August 24, 2019, voted 4-1 to support Superintendent Heidi Maier's decision to retain nine books that the Florida Citizens' Alliance and a group called "It's Your Tea Party"

had advocated removing from school libraries. Their complaint, sent to the county school superintendent in February 2019, claimed that the books included graphic sexual content that bordered on obscenity and pornography, as well as racial slurs and other provocative content (see JIFP, *Summer 2019*, page 13).

The challenged books are:

- *Almost Perfect* (2009) by Brian Katcher
- *Angela's Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt
- *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin
- *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison
- *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison
- *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) by Anthony Burgess
- *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina Garcia
- *Killing Mr. Griffin* (1978) by Lois Duncan
- *The Women of Brewster's Place* (1980) by Gloria Naylor.

A special committee composed of parents and district and school staff vetted the books. The panel recommended all nine books remain in high schools, and about half should stay in middle schools. Maier slightly disagreed. She accepted the findings on the high schools, and believed *Angela's Ashes* and *Killing Mr. Griffin* should remain in middle schools. But she endorsed pulling three books from middle schools: *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Over the critics' objections, the school board backed Maier's recommendations. Member Nancy Stacy dissented, declaring that all of the books ought to be pulled from all of the schools. Reported in: *Ocala Star-Banner*, August 25, 2019.

## Kalamazoo, Michigan

Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) in December 2019 reversed a controversial decision to drop LGBTQ-centered books out of a reading initiative focusing on diversity.

Among the books named during the controversy were *George* (2015) by Alex Gino, a novel about a child who's born male but wants to play Charlotte in the school play, "Charlotte's Web," and *Julián is a Mermaid* (2018) by Jessica Love, a picture book about a little boy who dresses up as a mermaid.

On December 17, KPS officials released a statement that said, "The Diverse Classroom Libraries project had a narrow focus to increase the racial and ethnic diversity represented in books in the classroom." It added that the book about a transgender character read by a teacher to a third-grade class "was not included in the classroom libraries because it did not meet the basic criteria for that project—it was not written by nor was it about a person of color."

The district said the present program would focus only on racial and ethnic diversity, and would also leave out themes of disability and economic status.

The limited definition of diversity quickly drew condemnation from some parents, teachers, students, and other community members. At a packed board meeting on December 19, the district made it clear that its position had changed.

President Patti Sholler-Barber said KPS' initial statement was "poorly worded."

"On behalf of the Board of Education, I sincerely apologize. Heartfelt. Let me emphasize that. We sincerely apologize," she said.

At the meeting, which ran about three hours, roughly two dozen people



told the board they supported a more inclusive program. Some said that books with LGBTQ representation made all the difference to them, or would have made all the difference to them, when they were young. Several said that KPS' statement turned identity into a zero-sum game. Reported in: WMUK, December 17, 2019; BBC, December 17, December 20.

### Westwood, New Jersey

The Westwood (New Jersey) Regional School Board voted to accept school administrators' decision to retain *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher and *Boot Camp* (2006) and *Can't Get There from Here* (2004) by Todd Strasser at the board meeting on July 25, 2019—but the decision remained an issue in a subsequent school board election.

Michelle Sembler was one of a group of parents trying to get the three novels removed from the middle school. Another member of that group was Westwood Police Chief Michael Pontillo. The parents had said they should get permission slips sent home when a child requests mature or sensitive materials from the school library.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* is the story of a young high school student as she descends into despair brought on by betrayal and bullying, culminating with her suicide.

*Boot Camp* is about a boy who is subjected to physical and psychological abuse when his parents send him to a boot camp.

*Can't Get There from Here* is a look at teen homelessness, complete with abuse, abandonment, cold, hunger, and constant danger.

After the board accepted the middle school administrators' judgment that the books are part of a vetted range of materials that overall are suitable for the age group—and also the judgment that parents should get

more information (via the school's Genesis Parent Access portal) about all the books kids have at hand—Semblor and Pontillo both ran for seats on the school board in a November 5 election.

Campaigning to make it easier for parents to get books removed from school libraries and classrooms, Sembler, who is an electrical contractor vice president, a mother of three, and a former teacher, won a seat on the board. Pontillo lost.

Board member Roberta Hanlon—who won reelection in the same November 5 election—said at the July 25 meeting that the administration's plan was sound: "Having a list such as this is a great tool for the parents." Hanlon, who is an independent banking professional as well as a local crossing guard and former Westwood councilwoman, is chair of the board's committees on finance and facilities and negotiations. Reported in: *Passack Press*, August 6, 2019; www.nj.com, November 7.

### Cornelius, North Carolina

*All American Boys* (2015) by Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds, a young adult novel that looks at the repercussions of an act of police brutality, was challenged at Bailey Middle School in Cornelius, North Carolina, by two parents, one of whom is a police officer. High ranking local police officers were included in the review process, which decided in September 2019 to keep the book as assigned reading in a new eighth-grade unit focusing on social injustice.

The school is part of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, which has a policy of involving faculty members and community members in the review process when an objection is raised about a book. In this instance, not only were police officers included in the review, but also the school will

"invite police officers to participate in the classroom conversations" when the book is taught, Bailey Middle School principal Chad Thomas wrote when announcing the decision to retain the book.

Board members at their monthly meeting on September 24 agreed with the review decision.

"It deals with contemporary issues that students may face," said board member Carol Sawyer. "The book presents lots of different viewpoints."

Board members and school leaders said the book opens eighth-graders' minds to start thinking about topics of social injustice just before they enter high school.

The district says at any point in time that the district uses an outside text, there is a permission slip that goes home with the student, and a parent can sign that and say they want their child to opt out of reading that text. The district says they then will supply the student with a secondary text and secondary assignment that goes along with it. Reported in: WBTV-3, September 25, 2019.

### Marietta, Ohio

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood narrowly survived a challenge to be removed from the Marietta City Schools curriculum on August 27, 2019.

The novel depicts a world in which religious leaders have absolute authority and women are, for the most, relegated to roles of servitude and reproduction. It includes strong language and disturbing scenes of oppression and sexual violence. The book has seen a resurgence in public attention because of contemporary events, a recent television series, and a sequel.

Inclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale* in a new curriculum for juniors and seniors at Marietta High School came under fire from two members of the



public, both former school district employees, at the regular August school board meeting. The new curriculum, written by teachers, replaced the long-standing junior and senior English textbooks with an array of eleven one-semester courses based on specific works or types of writing. A study of *The Handmaid's Tale* was one of the courses, but students also have other options, including the lesser known works of Shakespeare, creative writing, the works of Stephen King, and the poetry of Bruce Springsteen.

Board president Doug Mallett, who brought the matter before the board, said part of his concern is that teaching the book might amount to an endorsement of it.

"I appreciate your mission," he told the teachers, "but I'm concerned about the vulgarity. It might be real, but people may get the impression that we think that's OK. I like that it's thought-provoking, but I'm not feeling real good about this."

Board member Mark Duckworth also expressed opposition to teaching a course that involved the book.

"Profanity isn't needed to make people think," he said. "There's got to be a better way than this."

Taking the opposite side, board member Russ Garrison said, "We live in a profane world, and that might not be reflected in our houses, but I don't think we can clean up literature that makes us uncomfortable and have it keep its meaning."

District curriculum director Jona Hall urged the board to look past the complaints and view the value of the book as an entirety and as an asset for teaching.

"This is a book that elicits conversations, about what happens when the government takes this kind of control, that is the purpose of this book," she said. "It was popular in the 1980s because of the rise of feminism . . .

she didn't write about anything that hasn't already happened."

English language arts teachers Meradeth Bidwell and Joe Rabbene spoke to the board about their choices in developing the curriculum.

"We give students choice; these are elective courses. Dystopian literature really appeals to adolescents. The point of it is, how does an ideal society go wrong?" Bidwell said.

"The fundamental question is, what is the purpose of teaching literature?" Rabbene said. "It's the human conversation, what binds us as a society, to get kids to think about themselves, their relationships to others and to society."

Superintendent Will Hampton added a warning before the vote was taken: "If we select this on the basis of profanity, then that opens a door, and we don't know what else might be behind it," Hampton said. Earlier conversation had alluded to other books that included discomfiting language, such as *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck.

The vote ended in a 2-2 tie, and the book remains part of the curriculum. Reported in: *Marietta Times*, August 28, 2019.

## BOOK PUBLISHING Washington, D.C.

On November 4, 2019, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) sent a letter demanding that Hachette Book Group not publish *A Warning* without first providing evidence that the book's author—an unnamed senior Trump administration official—did not violate a nondisclosure agreement and did not have access to classified information. Hachette refused to back down, indicating that it would still publish the book in November 2019 and would protect the author's anonymity.

The unidentified author first made headlines in September 2018 when the *New York Times* published the author's op-ed, entitled, "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," anonymously.

In its response to the Justice Department, Hachette reaffirmed its commitment to the author and said it is not aware of any nondisclosure agreements the author has with the US government. The statement continues, "Please be assured that Hachette takes its legal responsibilities seriously and, accordingly, Hachette respectfully declines to provide you with the information your letter seeks."

In the letter to Hachette, Assistant Attorney General Joseph Hunt asked Hachette to provide evidence that the author neither signed a nondisclosure agreement nor had access to classified information. "If you cannot make those representations we ask that you immediately provide either the nondisclosure agreements the author signed or the dates of the author's service and the agencies where the author was employed, so that we may determine the terms of the author's nondisclosure agreements and ensure that they have been followed," the letter adds.

If the anonymous author did sign a nondisclosure agreement, "such agreements typically require that any written work potentially containing protected information be submitted for pre-publication review," Hunt's letter cautioned.

Commenting on the DOJ warning, David Grogan, director of the American Booksellers for Free Expression said, "We firmly support Hachette in publishing *A Warning*, written by an anonymous senior official in the Trump administration. The right of someone to publish under a pseudonym or anonymously is crucial in any free and democratic society."



Grogan went on to explain that the United States has a long history of authors publishing anonymously. The US Supreme Court has upheld the right of an author to remain anonymous, he said, pointing to *Talley v. California*.

Grogan also characterized the DOJ's actions as unwarranted. "The Department of Justice's demand that Hachette provide details about the author is a clear overreach. It would potentially intimidate the author into not publishing what could be very important information about the actions and policies of a sitting president and that president's administration. It should be up to the public to decide whether *A Warning* is worthy as a book—not the government." Reported in: [bookweb.org](http://bookweb.org), November 6, 2019.

## INTERNATIONAL Ankara, Turkey

Political cartoonists Musa Kart and four of his colleagues at the *Cumhuriyet* [the Turkish word for "Republic"] daily newspaper were freed from prison by Turkey's highest Court of Appeals on September 12,

2019—142 days after turning themselves in on fabricated charges.

In total, fourteen staff members had been charged after a failed coup d'état in Turkey, which the paper had nothing to do with. The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund wrote, "It was the independent nature of the *Cumhuriyet* as well as their critical pieces about Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that landed everyone in jail, surprising no one, as Turkey is listed as one of the worst countries in freedom of the press year after year."

Cartoonists Rights Network International (CRNI) and Cartooning for Peace released a joint statement after the news came out:

CRNI and Cartooning For Peace are relieved, gratified and overjoyed to hear that Musa Kart has been released from prison after a Supreme Court decision overturned his criminal conviction for "support of a terrorist organization without being a member." The process of his acquittal is not yet fully complete—the original criminal court must formally quash their verdict—but in effect his innocence has been restored in the eyes of the law.

The imprisonment came at the end of three years of persecution. After their initial set of appeals failed, Kart and his colleagues were alerted to the arrest warrant issued for them. To avoid giving the Turkish authorities a chance to claim they weren't cooperating, they handed themselves over. As Kart walked into jail almost five months ago, he was reported to have said,

I believe people will see the injustice that is being done here. Several brave reporters have recently summarized what's happening in Turkey: People who punch the leader of a major political party are permitted to go free while those who draw cartoons or report the news are put in prison. We look forward to the day when journalists need not make proclamations such as these in front of prison gates.

Many cartoonists around the world wrote, draw, and spoke about the imprisonment, and #FreeMusaKart became a rallying cry against the censorship of political cartoonists. Reported in: [cblfd.org](http://cblfd.org), September 16, 2019.