



MUSEUMS

Santa Fe, New Mexico

During a 2019 environmentally focused exhibition at the New Mexico Museum of Art (MOA), a poetry zine, which focused on the impact of fracking, was removed upon the recommendation of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) because it contained political commentary. The Arts Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) urged the MAO to take the incident as an opportunity to better develop artistic freedom upholding policies.

The zine, titled *The Social & Sublime: Land, Place, and Art*, focused on “issues of land use, expansion and border conflicts, and industrialization and the conservation of natural resources.” While these are certainly political issues as stated in the exhibition description, they are explored through lenses “ranging from the purely formal to the politically engaged.” As the NCAC stated, “A zine dedicated to poetry about the impact of fracking on the local community neatly fits within the parameters of the show. Indeed, many other works in the show also took political positions, as art often does.”

The DCA maintained that distributing the zine “would be considered using state property to support [a] political cause.” The DCA mistakenly referred to a governmental conduct act prohibiting “a public officer or employee from . . . using property belonging to a state agency or allowing its use for other than authorized purposes.” Contrary to what DCA asserts, exhibiting art with a political position does not constitute support of that position by the museum. Otherwise, no cultural institutions open to the public could provide space for any work that explores relevant political topics, including discussions of war,

immigration, climate change, public health, and economic disparities. This very exhibition would never have taken flight.

Evidently, the apprehension was not because the work reflected a particular political position, but rather, it was the nature of that position. As the NCAC report stated, “The zine is a condemnation of the devastating impact of the fossil fuel industry, and specifically fracking, on communities, ecological systems, and the climate within New Mexico. In a state highly dependent on the fossil fuel industry, this is a controversial position. But a publicly funded institution cannot discriminate against specific political positions, no matter how unpopular: such discrimination would violate the First Amendment.”

Though the zine was later included as a resource in the museum, that does not change that the removal took place, and “does not provide any clarity as to [the] MOA’s exhibition policy.” Therefore, the NCAC urged the MOA, in collaboration with the DCA, “to adopt a formal policy affirming artistic freedom, including the right of artists to voice political opinions without fear of being silenced. The museum should also make it clear that exhibiting political artwork does not mean that the institution itself endorses specific political positions. This is the only way [the] MOA can remain a site of encounter with new and radical ideas, a site where social and political dialogue happens, not become a place of pure entertainment governed by political censorship.”

The NCAC offered to assist the MOA with the development of a new policy.

Reported by: National Coalition Against Censorship, March 17, 2020.

PUBLISHERS

New York, New York

On March 6, 2020, a day after Hachette Book Group’s (HBG) employees protested the publisher’s deal with filmmaker Woody Allen, the plans to publish his autobiography were cancelled. All rights were returned to Allen.

“The decision to cancel Mr. Allen’s book was a difficult one,” a spokesperson for the publisher said in a statement. “We take our relationships with authors very seriously, and do not cancel books lightly. We have published and will continue to publish many challenging books. As publishers, we make sure every day in our work that different voices and conflicting points of views can be heard.”

The spokesperson added, however, that after discussing the matter with their employees, Hachette executives said that they “came to the conclusion that moving forward with publication would not be feasible for HBG.”

Letty Aronson, Allen’s sister and producer, declined to comment.

Hachette announced the book deal on March 2, 2020, stating that its Grand Central Publishing imprint would release Allen’s autobiography *Apropos of Nothing* on April 7, 2020. It described the book as “a comprehensive account of his life, both personal and professional,” and said it would include Allen’s writing on “his relationships with family, friends, and the loves of his life.”

In an early March 2020 email exchange, journalist Ronan Farrow, whose book *Catch and Kill* was published by another Hachette imprint, criticized HBG, calling its decision to publish Allen’s book a betrayal. “Your policy of editorial independence among your imprints does not relieve you of your moral and professional obligations as the publisher of *Catch and Kill*, and as the leader of a company



being asked to assist in efforts by abusive men to whitewash their crimes,” wrote Farrow in an email to HBG Chief Executive Michael Pietsch.

Farrow, who helped propel the #MeToo movement by reporting on accusations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein and other powerful men, is Allen’s son with actress Mia Farrow. Ronan Farrow and his adopted sister, Dylan Farrow, have long accused Allen of molesting her when she was a child, allegations he has denied. Two investigations ensued; Allen was not charged.

In an interview on March 3, 2020, Pietsch defended the decision to publish Allen’s book, saying that the company’s imprints do not engage in editorial interference with each other. “Grand Central Publishing believes strongly that there’s a large audience that wants to hear the story of Woody Allen’s life as told by Woody Allen himself,” he said. “That’s what they’ve chosen to publish.”

On March 5, 2020, Hachette employees staged a walkout to protest their company’s plans, resulting in HBG having “a fuller discussion” with its staff members.

Following the announcement of the book’s cancellation on March 6, Suzanne Nossel, the chief executive of the free-speech nonprofit PEN America, called the situation “something of a perfect storm.”

This incident, she said in a statement, “involved not just a controversial book, but a publisher that was working with individuals on both sides of a longstanding and traumatic familial rupture. This presented unique circumstances that clearly colored the positions staked out and decisions taken. If the end result here is that this book, regardless of its merits, disappears without a trace, readers will be denied the opportunity to read it and render their own judgments.”

The French arm of Hachette, Éditions Stock, said it planned to proceed with publishing Allen’s book. The imprint’s director, Manuel Carcassonne, expressed his support for the project in an interview with the magazine *Le Point* published on March 7.

“The American situation is not ours,” Carcassonne said. “Woody Allen is a great artist, director and writer, and his New York Jewish humor is evident in each line of this memoir, in its self-mockery, its modesty, its ability to dress up tragedy as comedy. Including at his expense. It’s unfortunate that this decision was made—unfortunate for freedom of expression but perfectly understandable in the American context.”

Note: *Apropos of Nothing* was released by Arcade Publishing on March 23, 2020.

Reported in: *New York Times*, March 6, 2020, updated March 9, 2020.

SCHOOLS Ludlow, Massachusetts

Sex may be a funny word according to award-winning children’s author and sex educator Cory Silverberg, but some parents of students at Baird Middle School in Ludlow, Massachusetts, were not amused.

Silverberg’s *Sex is a Funny Word* (2015) has won awards in the US and Canada and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and the *School Library Journal*, as well as praise from *Kirkus Reviews*. It also landed on the American Library Association’s Top 10 Most Challenged Books lists for 2017 and 2019—and now, according to Superintendent Todd H. Gazda, is at the center of an ongoing controversy in the Ludlow Public School District over what books should remain on the shelves at the Baird Middle School.

Sex is a Funny Word is a comic-style book designed as an educational

guide for children ages eight to ten as well as their parents and caregivers. It explores changing bodies, gender, and sexuality.

“There are illustrations, for instance of a penis and a vagina, which are anatomically correct . . . but there are also discussions about negative, private touching, which is a very important lesson these kids should learn,” Gazda said.

Sex is a Funny Word is the third title this academic year to raise the ire of parents, he added. The first was *A Court of Wings and Ruin*, the third in a fantasy series by Sarah J. Maas; the second title was the graphic novel *Sacred Heart* by Liz Suburbia, which came in with a large batch of donated books to the library.

“The librarian can’t read every single book in the library,” Gazda said. “They rely on reviews and recommendations.”

When the first two books were flagged by parents, the school principal and librarian readily agreed they didn’t belong in a middle school library. That, Gazda said, is the first step in an established process the school district has in place to vet the appropriateness of library books: first, contact the school principal and librarian; second, if those two don’t feel comfortable making unilateral decisions to remove the book, parents are asked to fill out a short form and submit it to a subcommittee comprised of two Ludlow School Committee members, two teachers, and a librarian.

“Everyone reads the book and they decide whether the book should stay on the shelves,” said longtime Ludlow School Committee member James “Chip” Harrington, who is not a member of that subcommittee. “Everyone has a different definition of what inappropriate or obscene is . . . so I think our message as a body



has been ‘We hear you. We get it. Please just follow the policy.’”

Some parents who spoke about library book concerns at a February 25 Ludlow School Committee meeting said they believe the district should be more proactive about pulling what they perceive as unsuitable reading material.

“Why is this being put on us, as parents, to find all these books that we believe are inappropriate for our children? When . . . we had nothing to do with these books being brought into the school,” one mother told the panel during the meeting, according to a public access channel broadcast. “You guys should be doing something to be proactive. Go through the library. See what’s in there.”

“Our kids are being poisoned with this stuff in the meantime,” one father said.

Another father said, “None of these books here are gonna get kids into the Ivy Leagues, I can tell you that.”

A middle school staffer flagged *Sex is a Funny Word* for review, Gazda said. The book survived the subcommittee’s vetting and remains on the shelves at Baird Middle School.

A description by the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom stated, “This 2015 informational children’s book written by a certified sex educator was challenged because it addresses sex education and is believed to lead children to ‘want to have sex or ask questions about sex.’”

Gazda added that he believes the controversy is being stoked by social media. In some cases, he said the dialogue has devolved to include personal attacks on school personnel. He and officials from the teachers’ union addressed the issue in a statement to parents and guardians in February.

“Gossip, hearsay, untrue statements, and personal attacks, such as

those occurring now, inflame emotions and are counterproductive to working together,” the statement read.

Gazda also laments that the most vocal parents have refused to follow the district’s process to bring scrutiny to library books they feel are unsuitable for certain age groups.

“This has been going on for weeks and I haven’t received one form,” he said. “I can’t just walk into a building and start pulling books off the shelves myself.”

Reported in: MassLive Media, February 28, 2020.

Columbus, Wisconsin

10,000 Dresses (2008), written by Marcus Ewert and illustrated by Rex Ray, about a transgender girl who loves dresses, will likely remain on library shelves in the Columbus (WI) Elementary School library, after a ruling by a district committee.

10,000 Dresses, which has been in the school library’s collection since March 2016, gained attention after Nathan Pollnow’s six-year-old daughter brought the book home from school. Pollnow filed a complaint with the district on January 20, 2020, saying the book is inappropriate for a kindergartener.

On February 28, 2020, a school district committee voted unanimously to keep *10,000 Dresses* in the school district. That recommendation now moves on to the school district’s superintendent.

“Not against transgenders, man. It’s your thing, do whatever you want. But I think it’s a time and a place and parents need to make that argument, or [have] that discussion,” Pollnow told NBC15 News. “They don’t need the school district unpacking things for them.”

“You are either a boy or you are a girl. That is the way you are born,” he said. “Until you are of age, you really

shouldn’t have to know there’s a difference. That’s health class in high school, maybe earlier in junior high. But definitely not kindergarten.”

Pollnow told the *Columbus Journal* that he read the book and said, “The entire book is about cross-dressing in young males. My objection to this is not about homosexuality but on the appropriateness of the subject matter, particularly for children under eight years of age. Young children have an innocence they cannot regain when exposed to such material. This book not only encourages cross-dressing, it undermines the authority of parents by making the neighbor the hero when parents objected. I want to thank you for considering my suggestion; remember being politically correct is not always right.”

At the first meeting on February 21, 2020, which was not open to the public, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Becky Schmidt provided to each committee member a copy of the book, the district’s policies on library instructional materials, and a packet from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center in Madison, reviewing the book’s contents.

“We want to make sure that when we’re putting a committee together, that we’re doing it appropriately and a good job of putting the team together, the committee together. And that we’re going to do a good job by responding to the parents’ concern,” said Annette Deuman, superintendent of the Columbus School District.

That committee had until February 28 to review the book, district policies, and the Cooperative Children’s Book Center reviews.

Community members were invited to attend the February 28 meeting. Dozens came forward in support of the book.

“I have a fundamental dislike of banning books, period. And I also



have a fundamental value that kids have to learn from an early age on core values, so that they stay with them for their whole life,” said Tessie Sharrow of Columbus. “And this is not about anything other than a child that has a different idea of how to dress.”

Nikole Neidlinger, a mother of a six-year-old child in Monona, had a different reaction to the book’s presence in school libraries. Neidlinger contacted the *Columbus Journal* via email after reading the online version of this story.

“My six-year-old son breathes easier by reading books such as this one, and by knowing there are ‘kids like him’ surviving and thriving,” Neidlinger said. “Your story is so important, but only illustrated one side of the ‘debate.’”

Neidlinger recently moved to the Madison area from San Francisco. She was initially worried about coming to Wisconsin, fearing communities might not be as accepting of her child.

“If we don’t talk about these important issues, things will never change,” Neidlinger said. “My then five-year-old son came to me so sure about his gender identity, that I concluded this level of commitment made it literally impossible for it to have been culturally/family or ‘reading the wrong books’ induced. It was consistent, insistent, and persistent. He was five then, and had no idea about the cultural ramifications of being ‘gender expansive’ in today’s world. As a parent all we want is for the world to be kind to our babies. Hearing these parents that think my baby’s a freak breaks my adult heart. Please consider that these are small children. We all want the same things for our kids. We’re all much more alike than we are different.”

Pollnow disagrees with the committee’s ruling.

“I believe they didn’t even listen to me today. That’s really what I feel. I watched them. I believe four out of the six that were there already had speeches written. They knew they were going to give opinions. They didn’t give credence to anything I said,” he told NBC15 News after the meeting on February 28.

The committee has 30 business days to submit a formal recommendation to Superintendent Deuman. “I’ll make the determination based on the committee, and how they have gone through,” said Deuman. “So I’ll take the process. My personal opinion has to stay out, just like the committee really looked at their personal opinions. They reviewed it based on the criteria.”

Reported in: *Columbus Journal*, February 24, 2020, updated February 26, 2020; *NBC15 News* (WMTV, Madison), February 28, 2020.

Colton, California

A book published fifty years ago by a Pulitzer- and Nobel Prize-winning author is stirring up controversy at Colton High School, where teachers were banned from discussing the book with their students. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was banned from Colton (CA) Joint Unified School District’s core and extended reading list for AP English Literature classes due to sexually explicit content, but later reinstated. *The Bluest Eye* is about an African American girl growing up during the Great Depression. In the book, the girl is raped by her drunk father.

The Bluest Eye, which previously had been on the district’s approved reading list, was the only book removed from the district’s nearly

500-item catalog of literature up for review.

“It’s awful. It’s awful what the protagonist goes through, yet important to talk about,” said Lucy Leyva, a teacher at Colton High School.

Teachers like Leyva are not talking about the book anymore, after a handful of parents at another school in the district complained.

“I’m upset and hurt that they cannot trust what we as teachers know is best for our students,” Leyva said.

The school district says parents are notified whenever there is a controversial book, and parents are given the choice of opting out. Still, some parents complained. The school board then voted 4-2 to stop teachers from teaching the book.

“A lot of these problems with racism and what have you are in there, and they still follow us to this very day, so to have that taken away from us, it’s like we’re trying to pretend the problem doesn’t exist when it really does,” said student Isaiah Enriquez. “We need to have this opportunity as students, as educators to sit down and understand this is how life is.”

“There are dozens of books on the list that deal with controversial issues,” said Dan Flores, a Colton school board member who opposed the removal. “Yet, the only one being removed is by Toni Morrison, one of the most prominent Black female authors of recent time. Her literature speaks to the African American experience in America and I could not personally support removing one of her books from our reading list altogether.”

Reported in: *The Mercury News* (San Jose, California), February 12, 2020; *Eyewitness News* (ABC 7, Los Angeles, California), February 20, 2020.