



COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES New Orleans, Louisiana

Tulane University's School of Liberal Arts postponed an August 6, 2020, discussion with National Book Award winner Edward Ball, author of *Life of a Klansman: A Family History in White Supremacy* (2020). In *Klansman*, Ball tells the story of a racist great-grandfather who joins the Ku Klux Klan. Students called for the event to be canceled, arguing that it would center a racist family legacy in a discussion about anti-racism rather than a Black person's perspective and experience.

NPR called the book "resonant and important." The *New Republic*, a progressive magazine, wrote that Ball "builds a psychological portrait of white supremacy, which then radiates outward and across time, to explain the motives and historical background behind racist violence."

Many Tulane University students disagreed, with one student writing on Instagram that "the last thing we need to do is allow someone who is even reflecting on the hatred of their ancestors to speak about white supremacy, even if their efforts come from a place of accountability."

"There is nothing that a book on white supremacy written by the descendant of a Klansman can do to promote or influence an anti-racism atmosphere," wrote another.

But this wasn't just random students leaving comments. In a letter to the administration "on behalf of the entire student body," Undergraduate Student Government Vice President Ingeborg Hyde and Liberal Arts Student Government President Amanda Krantz demanded the event's cancellation. They did not mince words, stating that the event would be "antithetical to the anti-racist work" of students, faculty, and staff members

at the university, and they argued the college should rather "prioritize uplifting Black voices."

The university apology came in a statement posted to social media platforms.

Tulane's statement defended Ball's work, stating that the book "addresses painful truths of America's racist past and present and serves as a history of white supremacy in Louisiana" and that the author had engaged in discussion with renowned anti-racism scholars such as Ibram X. Kendi.

"We understand, however, that the event, as planned, has caused distress for many in our community, and we apologize," said the statement, posted on the School of Liberal Arts Facebook and Instagram pages. "Tulane is fully committed to fostering an environment that is equitable, inclusive, and just. Going forward, difficult discussions such as this will be important since, as we know, the work of dismantling racism is layered and complex."

Tulane agreed to postpone the event, and it has not yet been rescheduled.

Reported by: Reason, August 6, 2020; Inside Higher Ed, August 10, 2020.

SCHOOLS Burbank, California

In a letter sent to the Burbank Unified School District (USD), the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) urged the school district to retain several books in their curriculum and allow teachers to teach the books while they are under review. The challenged books include Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Theodore Taylor's *The Cay* (1969), and Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976).

"Burbank USD policy states that, when a book is challenged, the book should remain in use while the challenge is pending. The District has apparently violated its own regulations by instructing teachers to stop using the books while it assesses the merits of the challenge. Parents who file complaints are permitted to ask for alternative assignments for their own students, but should not dictate what all students in the District are allowed to read," stated NCAC.

The books in question grapple with complicated and difficult realities of America's past and present. But curricula have been developed that make it possible to teach the books with sensitivity and compassion.

Both *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are included on the Library of Congress list of "Books That Shaped America" and have been taught in schools throughout the country for many years. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* was awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1977. *The Cay* is an award-winning young adult novel that tells the powerful story of how an 11-year-old boy learns to reject the racist views of his upbringing and to recognize the humanity of those normally deemed the "other" by society.

Reported by: NCAC, September 17, 2020.

Las Vegas, Nevada

In September 2020, the principal of Palo Verde High School removed *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel from the junior English honors reading list immediately upon receipt of a complaint, despite district policy mandating the formation of a review committee to address book challenges. The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and five co-signing organizations strongly urged its reinstatement.



“Somehow teachers thought it was appropriate to give pornography to my child,” said parent Kim Bennett. The term “pornography” usually refers to material that is designed to sexually excite readers; that is not the case with *Fun Home*, a memoir about Bechdel’s relationship with her closeted gay father.

Although *Fun Home* deals with mature themes, it had been appropriately assigned to mature sophomores at Palo Verde High under the guidance of trained educators, stated NCAC in its letter. District regulations permit parents who object to the book to request that their children be assigned other works.

The Clark County School District released a statement confirming the book had been banned from Palo Verde High School, saying, “As soon as the school administration received information about the inappropriate material being included in a reading list of one of CCSD’s high schools, the school immediately removed the inappropriate content from the reading list, addressed the concerns with parents and staff, and is investigating the matter at the school level.”

Critics have praised *Fun Home* as an exemplar of how effectively the graphic novel can advance narrative, as well as its introduction of themes which had previously been largely neglected in LGBTQ literature. The book became the basis for a musical play that was a finalist for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and won the Tony Award for Best Musical the following year. In 2019, the book was ranked 33rd on *The Guardian’s* list of the 100 best books of the 21st century.

This removal follows a trend of assaults on LGBTQ stories in schools and libraries. Earlier in 2020, NCAC released a statement signed by more than 40 national organizations condemning nationwide attempts to

block young people from accessing LGBTQ stories. Eight of the ten most banned and challenged books of 2019—a list compiled by the American Library Association—were challenged because of LGBTQ content.

Reported by: NCAC, September 23, 2020; Kirkus Reviews, September 11, 2020.

Signal Mountain, Tennessee

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015) and *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (1999), two books that feature police violence and racial discrimination, were removed from the Finding Perspective book club reading list for Signal Mountain Middle-High School after parents raised concerns, officials say.

On September 4, 2020, the school’s seventh-grade literature teacher emailed parents telling them not to purchase the books, both of which have African American males as protagonists.

“In an effort to maintain our safe classroom community, I will be removing *All American Boys* and *Monster* from the book club list,” wrote the teacher in an email. “If you have already purchased either book, I apologize for the hassle this has caused you. Both books contain mature content that not every student will be comfortable reading.”

The email went on to suggest that books with such content might be suitable for students elsewhere in Hamilton County but not in Signal Mountain.

“Generally, Hamilton County gives us texts that are blanket texts for all students in our schools. While the reading level of the book is accessible to seventh-grade students, the content in the books may be inappropriate for some of our students,” the email said. “While a shock to us, the books may

be relatable and important to other students in our county.”

Continuing, the teacher wrote, “I want to keep the environment in our classroom safe and enjoyable for all students. Please have your student choose one of the other books from the list, or they can suggest a good book that is written from the perspectives of multiple characters. Again, I apologize and will be closely monitoring all books given to us by Hamilton County from here on out.”

Then she cautioned parents that “If you are still interested in having your child read either book, I would HIGHLY suggest you read reviews on goodreads.com and commonsensemedia.com beforehand.”

According to US Census data, Signal Mountain is 97.9 percent White and 0.4 percent Black. Hamilton County as a whole is 76 percent White and 19.3 percent Black.

Shane Harwood, executive principal at Signal Mountain, told the *Times Free Press* that the teacher’s book club decision was made due to the books’ language and content.

“The teacher had received some parent concerns regarding the language in a couple of the books and some of the mature content,” Harwood said by email. “The teacher was not completely familiar with the content of all of the books, and after reviewing them, the teacher herself was not comfortable with the language and mature content in a couple of the selections. As such, the teacher decided to not make those required selections, but instead gave parents the option of having their children continue reading them even with the language and mature content. One of the books—*All American Boys*—was cautioned due to mature language, and *Monster* was cautioned because of the mature content.”



Harwood went on to say that “in communications with her parents, the teacher provided options for the students to read or not read the book(s) while providing caution of the language and mature content. The teacher shared about *All American Boys* that ‘the book has a message that is current and allows the reader to think deeper about how our lives influence our perspectives’ and ‘This is a great book based on very current conflicts.’”

At the Hamilton County Schools district office, officials said they were not part of the decision, as the book club is at the school level.

Reported in: *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, September 9, 2020; *Channel 9 News, Chattanooga*, September 10, 2020.

Springfield, Vermont

After parents objected to the use of *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story About Racial Injustice* (2018) by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard, the Springfield School District is determining whether to ban the book, which aspires to help children to better comprehend systemic racism and injustice. Jeremy and Christine Desjardins, parents of a third grader, filed a formal grievance to superintendent Zach McLaughlin and Union Street School principal David Cohn after they became aware that their son’s teacher presented the book to his class.

Following the recent concerns about police brutality, the school’s librarian offered the book as an option for teachers. *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story About Racial Injustice* follows two families—one White, one Black—as they discuss a police shooting of an unarmed Black man within their community.

According to a redacted email sent to McLaughlin on June 1, 2020—the day of the remote learning class session in question—and the formal grievance submitted to Cohn on June 3, the parents felt that the book was not suitable for their son. Mr. Desjardins, a law enforcement officer, alleges that during the remote instruction the educator, who has not been identified, singled out a student of color and asked the rest of the class, “we want to protect the student from the police, right kids?”

“I find this highly offensive that the school and teachers are presenting this topic [redacted] and had no concern for my son whose father is a police officer,” wrote Jeremy Desjardins. “This is not appropriate for this age group, nor an appropriate forum to have in this online learning. . . . As a law enforcement officer, my wife and children have to be extra cautious right now and I cannot believe this would intentionally be brought up as a topic by the teacher when few kids ever understood or knew what was going on when asked.”

Published in 2018 by three psychologists at Emory University’s School of Medicine, the book provides caregivers and educators with tips on how to discuss specific themes in the book, such as bias, discrimination, injustice, and race.

“Further, the dialog[ue] which I expect will be reviewed, created an environment where children at this impressionable age may develop a negative bias against police officers and fear they may get angry and hurt them,” the Desjardins wrote.

Both parents expanded on their comments made in their formal complaint at the Springfield School Board’s virtual meeting, where a dozen concerned citizens added their opinions on what the best course of

action would be for the benefit of the students.

Maresa Nielson, a second-grade teacher at the Elm Hill School in Springfield and member of the school district equity study group, echoed that while further communication between schools and parents during remote learning is essential and remains of utmost importance, this book would undoubtedly remain as part of her classroom.

“I’m completely for hearing about having an open relationship with parents and hoping that we can continue as we do this hybrid remote option,” Nielson said. “But I also just want to say that the equity study group of the school district is working on evaluating our classroom libraries. . . . Most of the things that we’re evaluating are things that are racist, that have bias, and that book would not be one of them that I would take off my shelf in a second-grade classroom.”

Nielson also said that the book would not be left out for her students to browse through independently.

Riccardo Dorcelly, whose three biracial daughters have faced and dealt with acts of racism during all their years in the Springfield School District, encouraged moving forward in the best way possible and to prevent such incidents from occurring by using the available resources to facilitate these difficult conversations.

“It was not our goal to get a book banned,” said Jeremy Desjardins. “That was never our intent. However, the imagery of the book for that age group and the way it was portrayed to our child’s classroom was not appropriate and why we brought it to this forum.”

Reported in: *The Eagle Times*, August 19, 2020.