



Access to LGBTQ-Themed Children's Materials

A Recent History of Their Censorship

Author _ Jennifer Elaine Steele (jennifer.e.steele@usm.edu), Assistant Professor, The University of Southern Mississippi.

Whether in school or public libraries, children and young adults are often denied access to materials that contain gay or transgender themes. However, it is the librarian and information professional's job to make sure that the public has equal access to information for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. With the current rise in censorship attempts targeting the community, librarians and information professionals can learn from how prior censorship attempts were handled. The following essay contains a recent history and discussion of the censorship of LGBTQ books and materials for children.

Censorship is an issue that has been plaguing libraries for decades (Steele 2020a; Steele 2020b). Not only does censorship come in the form of book banning and book burning, censorship can also be weaponized by parents, community leaders, and even librarians themselves. Self-censorship has become more rampant in recent years, with many librarians choosing to self-censor in order to avoid conflict (Downey 2013; Moody 2005; Whelan 2009). However, according to Article III of the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*, "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (ALA 2021, p. 19, Article III). The *Library Bill of Rights* is the American Library Association's statement expressing the rights of library users to intellectual freedom and the expectations the association places on libraries to support those rights. The American Library Association promotes the freedom to choose as well as the freedom to express one's opinions, even if that opinion might be considered unorthodox or unpopular, and stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those viewpoints to all who wish to read and access them.



Currently, a population that is often the target of censorship is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community. Forty-one percent of all books banned by school districts from July 2021 to June 2022 were about LGBTQ characters. That includes 671 titles that explicitly address LGBTQ themes or feature protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are part of the LGBTQ community. About nine percent of these bans—or 145 titles—targeted transgender characters and their stories (Pendharkar 2022). While it may not be the top cited reason (ALA 2023d), homosexuality was still cited as a reason for censorship in many analyses of censorship trends over the last several decades (Doyle 2000; Foerstel 2002; Harer and Harris 1994; Karolides, Bald, and Sova 2005; Sova 1998; Woods 1979). In addition, there are even examples of state legislatures that limit state funding for libraries that do not agree to restrictions on certain controversial LGBTQ materials (Barack 2005; Oder 2006).

In addition to state funding, some public libraries have had city funding threatened if they provide access to LGBTQ materials, with one example taking place in Ridgeland, Mississippi. According to Tonja Johnson, Executive Director of the Madison County Library System in Madison County, Mississippi, in January 2022 the Mayor of Ridgeland, Mississippi, Gene McGee said he would withhold \$110,000 from one of the system's branches, Ridgeland Library, because he received citizen complaints about books that depicted members of the LGBTQ community (AP 2022). According to Johnson, "Funding for this year was being withheld until we removed what he called 'homosexual material' from the library. . . . His reasoning that he gave was that, as a Christian, he could not support that, and that he would not release funding until we remove the material" (AP 2022, para. 7). The library did end up receiving payment, and in August of that year the Madison County Library System signed a standalone contract with the City of Ridgeland, avoiding a library shutdown (Judin 2022).

For people who wish to censor the LGBTQ community, their desire to exercise power over them through censorship can often be linked to homophobia. Naidoo (2012) writes that homophobia "is the societal belief that individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning are demented, evil, harmful to society, disgraceful, perverse, and otherwise unfit to live in society" (p. 10). Homophobia can stem from a variety of different causes. It can often stem from some irrational fear, whether it is fear of something different or unknown, or even from an individual's fear of being identified as gay themselves. Religious beliefs are yet another common root of homophobia. This homophobic societal belief is often what leads to censorship.

Censorship of LGBTQ-Themed Children's Literature

Much of the controversy surrounding LGBTQ-themed materials deals with their dissemination to children (Naidoo 2012; Steele 2022). Kidd (2009) writes how the "censorship of children's books has accelerated in the twentieth century, as the censorship of adult materials became less acceptable and as childhood was imagined more and more as a time of great innocence and vulnerability" (p. 199). In regards to LGBTQ-themed materials, DePalma and Atkinson (2006) write how oftentimes children are considered to be innocent asexual beings, and therefore must be "protected from the dangerous knowledge of homosexuality" (DePalma and Atkinson 2006, p. 339). Parents frequently challenge books with LGBTQ themes, claiming they are not suitable for the child's age group. This makes it difficult for families with LGBTQ members to access these materials. Materials with LGBTQ themes being difficult to find at the library is certainly not a new problem, with Wolf stating in 1989:

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. (Wolf 1989, p. 52)

In the history of children's literature and its connection to the LGBTQ community, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, children's book authors were not able to include any outward form of a same-sex marriage or relationship. These would often be hidden, such as in *Frog and Toad*, a series of four picture books by Arnold Lobel that were originally published between 1970 and 1979 and tell the story of a frog and toad, both male, who are best friends. Not until the late 1980s and early 1990s did LGBTQ children's literature as it is known today, with outward examples of same-sex couples, start to become public (Green 2019).

One of the first pieces of LGBTQ children's literature to garner broad attention was *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman (1989). 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 American Library Association's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade (ALA 2023a). It dropped off the list for the 2000 to 2009 decade (ALA 2023b), but returned at number 87 for the 2010 to 2019 list (ALA 2023c).



Another early children's book to address the subject of homosexuality was *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990). 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 American Library Association listed *Daddy's Roommate* at number two on their list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 1990 to 1999 decade (ALA 2023a).

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). In this case, city residents of Wichita Falls, Texas, who were members of a church sought removal of the two books because they disapproved of the books' depiction of homosexuality. The City of Wichita Falls City Council then passed a resolution to restrict access to the books if a petition was able to get 300 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 (Steele 2017; Steele 2018; Steele 2019).

The children's book that has been one of the most frequently challenged books in recent years is *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell 2005). The book tells 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 American Library Association, *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 (ALA 2023d). *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 (ALA 2023b), and at number six for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One example of librarians having to fight censorship challenges of *And Tango Makes Three* took place in Loudoun County, Virginia. 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 was put together to review the book. The group deemed it acceptable, and the anonymous parent made an appeal. Another committee of administrators,

librarians and parents reviewed the book, and that committee also 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 (Chandler 2008).

The authors of *And Tango Makes Three* have taken the challenges in stride, although do believe them to be unfounded. Speaking to the *New York Times* in 2005, one of the authors, Justin Richardson, stated, "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" (Miller 2005, para. 23).

Another LGBTQ children's book that has been frequently challenged in recent years is *Prince and Knight* by Daniel Haack (2018). The book tells the story of a young prince who falls in love with a knight after the two work together to battle a dragon threatening the kingdom. At the conclusion of the book, the two wed. *Prince and Knight* made the American Library Association's list of Top 10 Most Challenged Books at number five in 2019 (ALA 2022d). The book was also listed at number 91 on the ALA's Top 100 Most Challenged Books of the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2022c).

One challenge to *Prince and Knight* occurred in 2019 in Loudoun County, Virginia. 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 (Schmidt 2019). Specifically, *Heather has Two Mommies*, *My Princess Boy*, and *Prince and Knight* received the most requests for reconsideration by parents and citizens, according to internal district documents, with *Prince and Knight* having been moved to the school counseling office while under reconsideration (Van Slooten 2019).

Censorship of Transgender-Themed Children's Literature

One subcategory of LGBTQ-themed literature that is important to note is transgender-themed literature. Like other LGBTQ-themed literature, a major issue deals with its availability to children. Flanagan (2007) discusses books such as *Princess Max* (Stiller 2001), in which children are introduced to the idea that cross-dressing is wrong, and then reinterpret that message as an expression of individuality and normalcy. This is also clearly evident in the picture book *Jesse's Dream Skirt* (Mack 1979) in which a preschool boy



wants to wear a skirt to school, is ridiculed by his classmates, and then eventually embraced for his individuality. Books with similar stories include *My Princess Boy* (Kilodavis 2009) and *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman and Hoffman 2014). Another example is *What a Year!* (dePaola 2002), in which author and illustrator Tomie dePaola writes of his own childhood exploits, including dressing up as Snow White for Halloween and being a bride at his brother's birthday party. In the book, young Tomie is never ridiculed for his cross-dressing, and his behavior is treated as a non-issue.

While male cross-dressing is commonly viewed as taboo, female cross-dressing is typically not regarded with the same level of concern (Naidoo 2012, p. 39). In books such as *Rough Tough Charley* (Kay 2007), the female character spends her entire adult life as a man and is a successful entrepreneur. When her cross-dressing is discovered, condemnation is not as forthcoming as it would have been if she had been a man dressed as a woman. Similarly, Tunks and McGee (2006) point out that children and educators embrace the female character in *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman 1991) for taking on the role of Peter Pan in a school play; however, these same educators and children, because of social conditioning would balk at the idea of a male character dressing up as Tinkerbell or Wendy in the same school play.

Different from cross-dressing, some transgender individuals fully identify with the gender other than the one assigned to them at birth and truly believe they were born in the wrong body. An example of this is Jazz Jennings, a transgender female who was 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* (Herthel and Jennings 2014), a children's picture book about her experience as a transgender child. Since then, Jazz has grown a popular YouTube channel, starred in a reality TV series, and published a memoir, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen* (Jennings 2016). *I am Jazz* made the American Library Association'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 (ALA 2023d). The book was also listed at number 13 on ALA's list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One significant occurrence of censorship regarding *I Am Jazz* took place in Wisconsin. On November 23, 2015, a reading of *I Am Jazz* was scheduled at the Mount Horeb Primary Center, a public elementary school in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, where a student had recently transitioned from boy to girl like the main character in *I Am Jazz* (Gomez 2015). School staff had scheduled the reading to "support gender-variant students and their families" (Gomez 2015, para.

2). After learning about the event, the Liberty Counsel, a conservative Christian nonprofit headquartered in Florida, threatened to sue Mount Horeb Area 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" (Liberty Counsel 2015, para. 4). Upon threat of a lawsuit, the school district canceled the scheduled reading (Gomez 2015).

The children's book *George* by Alex Gino (2015) is another example of a children's book centering on a transgender child as the main character. In the book, the main character George was assigned male at birth but identifies as a girl. She wants to play Charlotte in the class play *Charlotte's Web*, but the teacher says she cannot play the part because she is a boy (Gino 2015). Beginning in April 2022, the book began to be published under the title *Melissa*. According to the American Library Association, *George* was number three on its Top 10 Most Challenged Books List in 2016, number five in 2017, and number one in both 2018, 2019, and 2020 (ALA 2023d). The book was also listed at number five on ALA's list of Top 100 Most Challenged Books for the 2010 to 2019 decade (ALA 2023c).

One particular controversy surrounding *George* involved the Wichita, Kansas, public school system and its decision to ban the book from its district libraries in 2017 (Gomez 2017). The justification used for this banning was that the book included "sexual references and language considered to be inappropriate for children" (Gomez 2017, para. 2). The district's supervisor of library media at the time, Gail Becker, obstructed district librarians' efforts to include the book in their collections by withholding funds intended to purchase the book. In response to this challenge, author Alex Gino organized a Twitter campaign intended to raise money to purchase enough copies of their book so that each of the district's 57 elementary and K-8 school libraries could have one (Gomez 2017). Another incident occurred a year later in King City, Oregon, this time involving the Tigard-Tualatin School District and its decision to consider requiring a signed permission slip from parents before letting its elementary school students read Gino's *George* (Marshall Libraries 2021).

According to Beemyn and Rankin (2011), learning about and meeting other transgender individuals is an important milestone in transgender development. Children in particular often desire to read books with characters they can relate to and they feel are like them. This makes it highly important for transgender children to have access to books and materials that feature positive portrayals of transgender characters in order to support a positive identity development. However, picture books and chapter books for children that



present transgender children in this positive light are few, and they rarely make their way into classrooms and onto library shelves (Naidoo 2012, p. 39).

Conclusion

For centuries, censorship has been a tactic used for one group of people to exploit power over another. Censors are attempting to use their power to control society and the information that is accessible to them. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) defines power as “not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p. 93). Foucault (1978) goes on to discuss how in the seventeenth century, sexuality had become something forbidden and unmentionable and was not talked about in society. Furthermore, sex was seen as a private and practical matter that should only take place between husband and wife. Sex outside of these boundaries was not only prohibited, but it had also been repressed. A gay or lesbian couple in a sexual relationship would have been kept secret and unheard of. This era of silence can be translated to today, when censorship attempts of books and materials containing such themes as gay or lesbian relationships are still all too common.

By denying individuals access to these LGBTQ-themed books and materials, society as a whole is trying to show dominance over a particular group, in this case the LGBTQ

community. As McKerrow (1989) states, “power functions to keep people ‘in their place’ as that status is defined and . . . may deflect attention from the existence of multiple classes, groups, or even individuals with varying degrees of power over others” (p. 96). Not carrying these materials on library shelves is society’s way of exercising power and keeping LGBTQ individuals “in their place” and out of the library. When LGBTQ materials are kept out of the library, parents and other censors are able to “deflect attention” from the fact that this community exists.

Alvin M. Schrader’s (2009) article, *Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship, Building Resilience: LGBTQ Services and Collections in Public, School and Post-Secondary Libraries*, discusses the importance of including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) materials in libraries so that young people can turn to these materials for support. Schrader (2009) explains that librarians are avoiding building these collections and are claiming that their libraries do not serve people who need, or want, LGBTQ materials or that the library cannot afford to purchase those materials (p. 107). Schrader (2009) challenges librarian to “foster diversity and resilience. They can create safe places. They can turn pain into opportunity, tolerance into celebration, despair into hope,” (p. 109). This message should encourage librarians to uphold professional standards and resist the pressure to censor LGBTQ-themed materials in their libraries.

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