



You Don't Want a Book Challenge, Do You?

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This article includes a compilation of three personal stories from the author's time as an elementary librarian at a K-12 private school in Atlanta, Georgia. While struggling with classroom management during her first year as a school librarian, she was surprised by anatomical language in a read-aloud that she had forgotten about after pre-reading the book. She had a split second to decide whether to read what was actually written. During her second year, she went through my library's reconsideration process when a parent challenged a book of scary stories. The worst part? She had used that book in a lesson with the entire third grade. And finally, throughout her time with this school, she fought for a book that was not being officially challenged, but voluntarily censored by her colleague. The author shares these stories with honesty about how she handled each situation, and with a little advice added.

Rattlesnakes

The summer before my first year as an elementary librarian at a K-12 private school, I read through the Georgia Children's Book Award nominees. I knew that our school participated in voting on the award and in the past the librarian had read aloud one of the nominated novels to the fourth-grade classes, and one to the fifth-grade classes.

I chose *We Can't All Be Rattlesnakes* by Patrick Jennings to read to the fourth grade. The main character and narrator is a gopher snake who has been captured by a boy and put in a terrarium in his room. Gopher snakes look like rattlesnakes but are non-venomous. I loved all the animal characters and thought it was a funny and thoughtful book.

I chose *Diamond Willow* by Helen Frost to read to the fifth grade because I liked how the story is told through a series of diamond-shaped poems.

In the week before school started, I was at the school for pre-planning and meetings. As I got to meet the teachers, several of them warned me about the fifth grade: "These

students have been difficult ever since they started back in kindergarten." "Fifth grade isn't usually like this." "Don't let them scare you off." "At least you only have them for one year." I was a little scared, but I also thought "How bad can the fifth grade be?"

A couple of weeks in, there was one day I had a fifth-grade class in the library. After we got done with the lesson, they had time to check out books. Three of the boys, instead of looking for books, were chasing each other around the library, slapping each other with necklaces. I caught up to them and told them to cut it out. Then, out of curiosity, I asked them, "What's up with the necklaces?" One of the boys told me, "They have this copper wire in them that gives you energy. They're good for athletes." I thought about how they had just been running and slapping. "Yeah, I don't think you need any more energy."

Another day, as a fifth-grade class was coming into the library, one of the girls picked up a banana from the box of fruit in the hallway and immediately cracked it open. I had to



tell her, "I'm sorry, there's no food in the library. Since you've already opened it, I don't think you can save it. Please throw the banana away." As I walked up to the front of our library classroom, she walked over to the waste basket. It was only later in the day when I threw some paper away that I noticed this girl had raked her fingers through the banana and then smeared banana goo all over the blinds above the waste basket. The fifth grade was difficult.

The fourth grade, in contrast, was angelic. All four of the fourth-grade classes listened attentively, participated in lessons, and checked out books enthusiastically. They were delightful. I admit, I had a favorite class that year: Mrs. Byrd's fourth-grade class. I saw them on a day in the rotation on which I had two fifth-grade classes and then Mrs. Byrd's class. They were my reward for surviving until the end of the day. And I'll admit, I had a favorite student: Alec from Mrs. Byrd's class. He got along well with his classmates, and he stayed after class to talk to me about books. Just delightful.

We got to the part of the year where we were reading the Georgia Book Award Nominees. I started reading *Diamond Willow* to the fifth-grade classes and they seemed to like it well enough. But also, I learned that first year that I could use my peripheral vision to walk around the classroom while reading aloud. You may have figured out by now that classroom management was not my strong suit. Also, I hated to interrupt a story to fuss at kids who were misbehaving, but proximity is a strong deterrent. I'd start out class at the front of the classroom and I might see some kids whispering at one of the back tables. I'd drift over there while continuing to read. The whispering would stop. Then another table might start flicking a paper football. I'd drift over there while continuing to read and the paper football would disappear.

I was able to stay at the front of the classroom for all the fourth-grade classes. They were loving *We Can't All Be Rattlesnakes* as much as I was. Then, a couple of days into the book with my first class of the rotation, I started coming up on a passage I had forgotten after pre-reading the book that summer. It's a scene in which the boy has some friends over and he's showing off his collection of animals, especially his new gopher snake. He keeps referring to the snake as a boy and one of the friends asks how he decided the snake was male. Then another friend asks, "How do you tell a guy snake from a girl snake?" And the first friend says, "You look at the hemipenis."

My mind started racing. Could I say "hemipenis" in front of a fourth-grade class? Should I skip part of the text to avoid saying "hemipenis?" Should I say something else, like "You look at the privates?" Maybe I could say it. It's the correct anatomical term. The fourth-graders were so good. I remembered that after the one friend says "You look at the hemipenis" the other friend says "The *what?*" And that might be the reaction

the kids would want to have and the character and I were having the reaction for them which might cut the tension. I got to the passage and read it faithfully. No one said a peep. I read that passage in all four fourth-grade classes and not a single student made a comment about it.

The next week I kept reading. Now, I liked to start class by making sure the students remembered where we were. I had learned from my language arts colleagues that I could ask better questions than, "Who remembers what happened last time?" I asked instead what students predicted would happen next. I asked what connections they could make between what we had read and other books or real life. I asked what they had learned. I started each class with these questions and continued reading *We Can't All Be Rattlesnakes*. Then I got to my favorite, Mrs. Byrd's class. I started out by asking them what they predicted or what connections they could make or what they had learned. And Alec, my favorite student, raised his hand.

I said, "Yes, Alec?"

He said, "I learned that snakes have a hemipenis."

You know, another librarian might not have chosen this book as a read-aloud. Another librarian, if they did choose this book as a read-aloud, might have found some way to avoid saying "hemipenis" in four fourth-grade classes. And another librarian, if they did say "hemipenis" in four fourth-grade classes, might not have honestly believed that no one would say a peep about it. But we can't all be rattlesnakes.

Postscript. I believe in intellectual freedom. I also think there is a difference between making a book available to anyone who wants it and reading a book aloud to a captive audience. I'm being honest here about a real moment of doubt I had as a new school librarian. Ultimately, my students could handle a brief mention of reptile genitalia and I'm glad I took the risk. I ended up using *We Can't All Be Rattlesnakes* as a read-aloud for the fourth grade again a couple of years later, not as a Georgia Book Award Nominee, but just for fun. I knew what I was getting into then, and those classes handled it fine too.

Urban Legends

It was mid-spring of my second year as an elementary librarian at the K-12 private school and I was already having a bad week. I had made a mistake that had left some of my colleagues irritated with me and all I wanted to do was keep my head down, keep my mouth shut, and stay out of trouble for the rest of the school year. That's when I got the email from the principal: "Can you help me with this? See forwarded message below."

I scrolled down to see an email from the mother of one of our third-grade students. Her daughter had checked out



a book from our school library that the mother didn't think was appropriate for her. Or for third-grade students. Or for elementary students in general. She wanted it removed from the library.

This was a book called *Creepy Urban Legends* by Tim O'Shei. If you are not familiar with urban legends, they are stories that sound like they could be true, but aren't and the person telling the story usually swears that it happened to a friend of a friend. For example: "My mom's best friend's cousin, back when she was in college, she came back to her dorm room late one night and didn't want to wake up her roommate, so she got changed and climbed into bed in the dark. When she woke up in the morning, with the light coming through the window, she looked across the room and saw her roommate lying murdered in her bed and written on the wall in blood were the words 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the light?'" A version of this story is actually in that book.

I wrote back to the principal and told her that I had used *Creepy Urban Legends* in a lesson with all of the third-grade classes back at the beginning of the school year. I did a mini-unit on folklore. During the first lesson I had read aloud and told fairy and folk tales. For the second lesson, I wanted to show students how folklore still travels by word of mouth today, so we talked about jokes and urban legends. I read aloud a couple of the stories from the *Creepy Urban Legends* book. The stories I read really weren't very scary, because I know scary stories aren't for everyone. Then we ended class by telling jokes, so no one left the library scared that day.

About half of the third grade wanted to know which stories were too scary for me to read aloud and the book hadn't been back on the shelf since. It had gone directly from one third-grade student who had a hold on it to the next. I never tried to stop any of the students from checking the book out because some kids love scary stories. In fact, those books of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (by Alvin Schwartz) were some of our best-circulating books. In my experience, if a kid did check out a book that was too scary for them, they just stopped reading it and brought it back.

I told the principal that if this mother was really serious about wanting the book removed, we had a policy about that and a procedure she would have to follow. She would have to read the entire book and fill out a form making her request. The request would go before a committee made up of parents, teachers, and librarians. The committee would decide what to do with the book and the committee's decision would be final.

The principal cut and pasted from my email to respond to the mother. This mother did decide to formally challenge the book and agreed to go through our procedure. The head elementary librarian let me know that the last time a book

had been challenged had been about 20 years earlier and it had been a book about what Santa Claus does on his day off. A teacher had complained about the book because it had a picture of Santa on the toilet and a picture of Santa drinking a glass of sherry.

The mother also wanted to come in and talk to the principal in person. When the principal was telling me and the other librarians about this, she said she thought it was a good idea. The mother just wanted to be heard. But the principal had no intention of going to this meeting by herself. A meeting was set up with both parents, the principal, me, the head elementary librarian, and the head of all school libraries. Leading up to this meeting, I told myself that the parents just wanted to be heard. I needed to keep my head down, keep my mouth shut, and stay out of trouble.

We all went into the conference room off of the main office, and as soon as the parents sat down they started talking about protecting their child: "We watch the news every night and we see all the horrible things that are going on in the world. And we don't let our daughter watch the news because she is too young, she is too innocent, she is not ready to know about the horrible things going on in the world. And we never dreamed that she would check out a book from our school library that would tell her about the horrible things going on in the world. That story about the girl in the dorm room, we saw that on the news a few years ago. And the story about the woman who had a man break into her house and she only found out about it because her dog was choking on the guy's fingers he had bitten off, we saw that on the news a few years ago. And the story about a woman who had a man hiding in the back seat of her car, and someone kept flashing their headlights trying to warn her, we saw that on the news a few years ago . . ."

As the parents talked, it quickly became apparent to me that they believed the stories in this book were true, and that was their main objection. I looked up at them and said, "Excuse me. I know that this book lives in the nonfiction section of the library, but this call number, 398.2, is for folklore. This is also where fairy tales are shelved. This is a book of urban legends. They are stories that sound like they could be true, but they aren't. None of the stories in this book are true, and I made sure the kids knew that when I taught the folklore lesson."

The parents mumbled, "Well, things like that have happened." And they continued on for a few more minutes until they ran out of steam. Then they shook hands with all of us and left, having been heard.

The book challenge committee decided to keep *Creepy Urban Legends* in the collection and the parents instructed their daughter not to check out any more scary books. I



would like to tell you that I was always this eloquent and effective when handling a challenge and that the administration always had the library's back, but that would be an urban legend.

Tango

I noticed it right away. It was my first day as an elementary librarian at the K-12 private school. What I noticed was the book *And Tango Makes Three*. What I noticed was that it was on a shelf behind the head elementary librarian's desk in our office instead of in the collection where students could find it and check it out. So, I asked her, "Hey, what's going on with *Tango*?"

She said, "Oh, you don't want to deal with a book challenge, do you?"

And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell is a delightful children's picture book based on a true story about two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo who built a nest and hatched an adopted egg together. The other librarian thought it would be challenged because it has been at numerous other schools and libraries. Parents have complained and tried to get the book removed. In fact, *Tango* has been one of the most banned books each year, since it was published in 2005.

What the other librarian didn't know about me was that I was game for a book challenge. In library school, they taught us to be warriors for intellectual freedom, to serve our communities no matter what. I graduated assuming I would have at least one book challenge during my career. My new colleague felt differently, and it was my first day on the job. I thought perhaps I should take some time to build relationships and prove myself, and then try to make changes. As the least senior librarian in the elementary library and at the K-12 school, I had no power to move *Tango* without the agreement of at least the more senior elementary librarian.

Year one. A perfect opportunity to argue for *Tango* came up during that first year. One afternoon I was in the library office with the head elementary librarian and our part time assistant. Both of these ladies were nearing retirement and had a long history with the school. They were reminiscing about when one of the second-grade teachers had been hired. He happened to be a gay man and many parents tried to get their children moved out of his classroom. But by the end of his first year it was apparent that he was one of the best teachers in the school and since then parents have tried to get their children into his class. They told this story with an attitude of "Can you believe the parents would behave like this?"

I let them finish and then I said, "You know, we can't really claim to support our gay teachers and our gay parents

and our gay students and not have *Tango* available for checkout."

The other librarian looked at me and said, "You're right."

But she didn't put *Tango* back into circulation. It had never occurred to me that it could go this way. I could make my case, she would agree with me, and then she would still decline to move *Tango*. I needed some more time to plan my next move.

Year two. We had a book challenge, and it wasn't for *Tango*. It was over a book of scary stories. With the support of the administration, we followed our book challenge procedures and the book stayed in the collection. Although no one enjoyed the challenge, we all survived. I thought perhaps the reason my colleague was unwilling to risk *Tango* being challenged was that she didn't think the administration would support us in defending it. If I could prove somehow that the administration would support us, I was sure that would change her mind. It would be difficult, though, to find out how the administration felt, without looking like I was going over my supervisor's head.

Year three. Henry Cole came to our school. Each year, the other librarian and I each hired an author or illustrator to talk to the students. She hired Henry Cole. I didn't know much about him before his visit. He is best known as an illustrator but has also authored some books. I went to his first presentation of the day and he was so energetic and engaging and had the kids roaring with laughter. At the end of his presentation, he put up a slide with a picture of him in front of all of his books. Right there, front and center, as if it was the book he was most proud of, was *And Tango Makes Three*. Henry Cole is the illustrator.

I went back to our office, took *Tango* off the shelf behind the head elementary librarian's desk, and moved it to the table of books for Henry Cole to sign. After that we owned a signed copy of *Tango*—that the students still couldn't check out.

Year four. The guidance counselors started Diversity Book Club. Our rival school was doing it, so we had to do it, too. The way Diversity Book Club worked was that a teacher would sign up to read a diverse book with a group of fifth-grade students and then they would meet during lunch one day to discuss.

Diversity Book Club was very popular and I had teachers in the library every day asking for book recommendations. I gave them multicultural books and books with differently abled characters and immigrant characters and neurodivergent characters. Sometimes they would ask me, "Why aren't you doing Diversity Book Club?" Honestly, I already had a number of fifth-grade book clubs that met during lunch and I was a little hesitant to give up the few days I still got to eat with adults.



As I was shelving in the fiction section one day, a book caught my eye. I read the back cover and learned that in this book, the main character's parents get divorced and then her father comes out and starts dating men. I went straight to the guidance counselor's office and said, "I want to do Diversity Book Club, and I want to read this book." I handed the book to the counselor.

She looked at the front and the back. "Let me talk to the administration." And I thought, "Yes! Talk to the administration!" This was how I would prove that the administration would support us in standing up for *Tango* and books like it.

A couple of days later, the guidance counselor walked into the library and handed me the book. "The administration says we cannot do Diversity Book Club with this book. They think it will upset some of the parents."

I was devastated. I had my answer. The administration would not support us and without their support I didn't think I could ever get *Tango* back in the collection. I was furious at my colleagues. I knew that the other librarian, the guidance counselor, the administrators, none of them had a problem with *Tango*, but they were too cowardly to fight for it. And then I thought that really, I wasn't any better. I could have fought harder for *Tango*. I could have. But I was afraid of making a nuisance of myself and alienating everyone I had to work with every day.

Then I looked down at the book in my hand. I couldn't do Diversity Book Club with this book, but it was in the collection, available for checkout. When *And Tango Makes Three* first came out, it got a lot of publicity. People knew about it. People who wanted to complain about it knew to look for it in their libraries. But the book in my hand? No one had heard of it, and that's exactly why it was in our collection. This gave me an idea.

I went back to our office and poured over the book review publications. I circled every LGBTQ+ book that got a positive review and I added them all to the order. When those boxes arrived I tore them open and took out those beautiful new books. Instead of interfiling them with the rest of the collection, I put them all on display on top of the shelves where students might see them and decide to check them out.

At the end of that year, I decided not to renew my contract. I went back to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science. Now I teach future school librarians. I train them to be warriors for intellectual freedom and to serve their communities no matter what. I'm also honest with them that it isn't always easy, and if they find they've lost the battle, they should fight harder to win the war.

Postscript. If other librarians find themselves in a similar situation, I suggest the following: (1) Do what I did and purchase other books that meet the needs of your community. (2) Make sure you have a solid reconsideration policy signed off on by the principal and school board so that if a book is challenged it is difficult for other employees of the school or district to remove the book without going through the agreed-upon procedures. (3) Keep being persistent about including a book that is being voluntarily censored even if you are not initially successful. I was discouraged by the lack of support from my fellow librarian and the administration, but perhaps I could have worn them down eventually. I also could have outlasted them if I had stayed a few extra years and waited for them to retire. (4) Finally, reach out to other school librarians for advice and moral support. We can get through these difficult situations together.

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