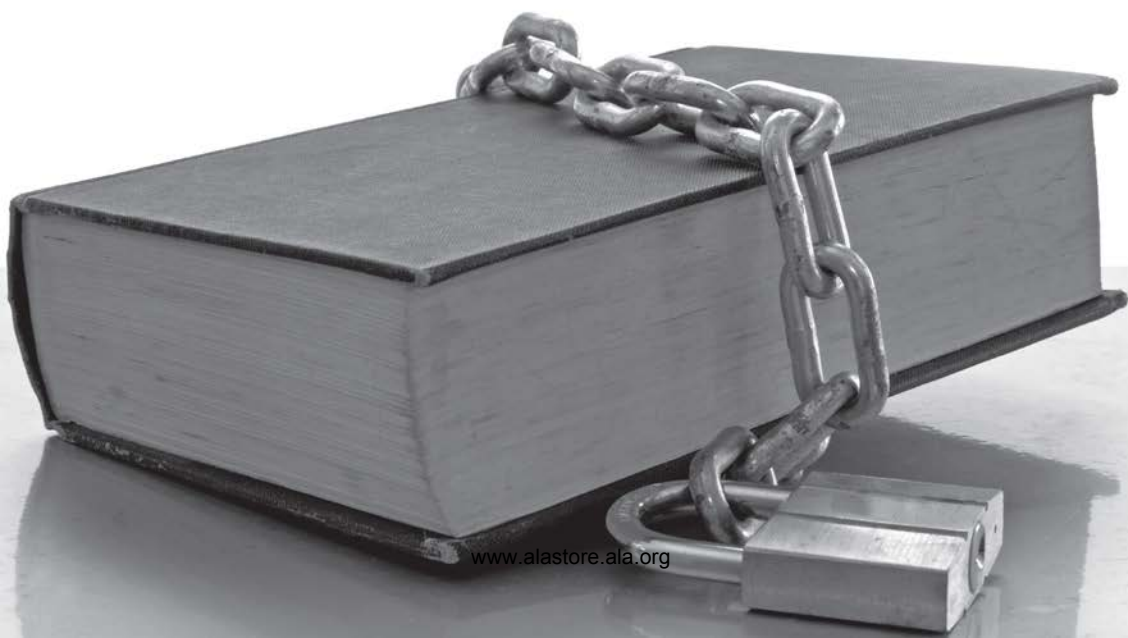


Edited by Valerie Nye and Kathy Barco

# True Stories of **Censorship Battles** in America's Libraries



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## FOREWORD

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I DIDN'T start my first novel, *Crank*, expecting publication. Writing the semiautobiographical book was, for me, catharsis. However, as I wrote about this straight-A teen with ambitious dreams, who takes a wrong turn and ends up addicted to crystal meth, I realized the story was bigger than my daughter's—and mine. The story belonged to all those who have been touched by this monster drug, or any addiction, really. The book found a publisher easily, and an editor who believed in the power of the tale. Still, I never expected *Crank* to become the word-of-mouth sensation that it did, eventually becoming a *New York Times* best seller. Nor did I ever dream it would catapult me into the upper echelon of today's YA writers. Neither did I ever expect to receive e-mails like this one (reproduced here verbatim):

Dear Ellen,

First I would like to say that I am a 19-year-old girl named Kimber. I read all of your books but I really need to thank you for *Crank* and *Glass*. I read both of them when I was 17 and I thought they were wonderful.

I had lived that life, I did crystal meth when I was 13 after the suicide of my best friend. Your book was the first book I read that had to do with drugs since I had stopped doing them when I was 16, and it was a rather odd experience to step back into that life and see how self destructive I was.

I know that I am two years late in writing this but I had just got done packing my things to go to college and I found your books. So I re-read them, and it is still an odd experience re-entering that world, but I still want to thank you. I know that sometimes life gets hard, people die, and burdens get hard to bear, but your book is a constant reminder that the things that I had experienced while I did meth, I never want to go through again.

Books like yours can save someone's life, even the people who have gone through those issues. Your books have saved me from myself more times than I can think of and even though I never told you before, I felt you should know.



The thing about books that the small group of people who would prefer that no one reads your books is that books give people a chance to try on other lives. They give people a chance to know what comes with doing drugs without having to do drugs.

Thank you, for everything you have done for me and all your readers. You are appreciated.

Love,  
Kimber

E-mails. Snail mail. MySpace. Facebook. Twitter. Various other social networking venues. Between them, I receive hundreds of messages every day from my readers. Some simply thank me for my books, or tell me they were never readers until they found my novels. Others credit me with inspiring their own muses (and often they ask for critique or information on how to publish). But many, many are like Kimber's. They thank me for insight into their own addictions, or the addictions of those close to them. They thank me for veering them away from the path to addiction or suicide. They thank me for letting them know they're not alone, they're not crazy, they are okay. They thank me for literally saving their lives.

It's a heady responsibility, one I don't take lightly. I have a relationship with the Creator and believe my family's pain was given meaning by my ability to help others in need, through my words. So when my books are challenged, I feel it's my duty to push back. Fight back if I have to. Because no one person should be allowed to speak for everyone else. Not for their community, their state, their country. No one person has the right to decide what everyone else can or can't read.

Truthfully, I never expected to become a vocal champion for keeping books on bookshelves. But in September 2009, a challenge to my novel *Glass* (the sequel to *Crank*) gave me no other choice. I had donated a school visit to a charity auction, the proceeds of which were to benefit a bookseller who had insurmountable hospital bills. At this point in my career, the day is worth \$3,000, plus travel expenses. The librarian who made the winning bid worked at a middle school in Norman, Oklahoma, a suburb of Oklahoma City. The day was set, the travel paid for, and I was on my way.

Except, three days before the planned visit, a parent challenged content in *Glass* (ostensibly because, while scanning the book, she noticed the f-bomb). So, okay, I understand challenges lead to a review process, as this one did. The book was pulled from the middle school bookshelves until there was a resolution. Meanwhile, however, the parent complained that

she didn't want her child to see the author (me . . . me!) speak. When informed that there was an opt-out, she said that she didn't want *any* child to see me speak. I don't know who she was, or why she had such power, but the school superintendent agreed. My visit was canceled.

Okay, I said, if you don't want me in the middle school, how about a high school? No. Ellen Hopkins was officially banned from district schools. Sheesh. Without a review, even. Because, as anyone who has seen one of my talks will tell you, the takeaway is how choices teens make can and will affect them for the rest of their lives. That even the best of kids can make a bad decision that will change everything for them. Just like one bad choice did for my beautiful daughter.

Karin Perry, the fabulous middle school librarian, did arrange for me to speak to the community at the Hillsdale Baptist Freewill College. I invited the concerned parent, the superintendent, and the review committee to come listen. Not one of them did. Even so, that might have been the end of it, except that a newsperson from a local television station decided to get involved, offering his "My Two Cents" on-camera op-ed piece. I watched a video clip in which he admitted that he hadn't actually read *Glass*, but "in scanning it" he found the dreaded naughty word. Much too mature for middle school readers, he said, and now that the book was off middle school shelves, the next step was excising it from the high schools.

Okay, now I was pissed. First of all, though the book may be too mature for *some* middle school readers, I can show you letters like Kimber's, telling me they started using drugs at age twelve or thirteen, and some even younger. Or that they experienced childhood sexual abuse, beginning when they were six. Or that they were raped at age ten. These middle school children need books that can help them know they're not alone. They're not crazy. They're okay. By high school, well, if they haven't heard the f-word, they've been raised in a complete vacuum.

I guess I could have been quietly pissed. Instead, I did what any upstanding YA author would do. I organized an e-mail campaign among over 20,000 of my closest MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter friends. Asked them to respectfully (although I suspect many were less than respectful) message both the television station and the superintendent's office, telling them why my books were important to have in their libraries.

After we tied up their servers for a very long time, the newscaster did another opinion piece. *Glass* was, in his opinion, still too mature for middle school readers. But "Ellen Hopkins has a lot of friends," and he had decided that my message was a good one. The book, post-challenge, remains on middle and high school shelves in Norman, Oklahoma, thanks to strong-willed librarians and a fair review committee.

Had that parent understood how famous she was going to make me, she likely would have kept her mouth shut. The story of Ellen Hopkins being banned in Oklahoma got picked up by the Associated Press and was carried in newspapers nationwide. The UK *Guardian* told the story in England. I was in *School Library Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and even on the *Conservatives for Palin* website. Kid you not. My name and the dreaded S.P., in the same sentence? The irony is luscious.

See, I wrote this poem for Banned Books Week. (More irony, actually. The Norman thing was the same week!) Simon and Schuster produced my “Manifesto” as a broadside and distributed it to booksellers and libraries around the country. The Sarah Palin blogger happened to see a Banned Books Week display featuring “Manifesto,” side by side with a story about S.P. questioning a Wasilla librarian about how she would proceed if a book was challenged. The blogger was soooooooooooooooooooooo offended! Okay, to be fair, the poem talks about “zealots and bigots and false patriots.” Just saying.

Here’s where the irony goes really wrong. The same month I was banned in Norman, several other authors experienced school visit cancellations and preemptive pulls increased. This was right after President Obama was banned from classrooms, due to potential “brainwashing.” His videotaped message: work hard, stay in school, give back. The uber-conservative base was emboldened. In Michigan, a number of supposedly offensive YA books were stripped from shelves and burned in the street. Books. Burned. You see what can happen when one entity decides for everyone?

The year 2010 brought new challenges. In Stockton, Missouri, by a 7–0 vote of the school board, Sherman Alexie’s brilliant *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was pulled from bookshelves. In another corner of Missouri, a university professor complained about “dirty young adult literature,” likening Laurie Halse Anderson’s hugely important book, *Speak*, to soft porn. My own book *Identical* was also called pornographic. The two deal with rape and childhood sexual abuse. Sad to think some people might get turned on, reading about such things.

I also had another, even more public “dis-invitation,” this time from a Houston-area teen book festival. And this time it was a librarian who initiated the problem, apparently “fearing for the safety” of her middle school students. She enlisted the aid of a couple of parents, who went to the school board. The superintendent, “not wanting controversy,” told the organizers to remove me from the roster.

I almost let this one go, except that the superintendent said two things: that he hadn’t read my books but rather relied on Internet research (a site

that rates content . . . grrrrr); and “There are more authors out there than we could ever have at our festivals.” The last remark I took personally (hey, I’m not just “any author”). But the first is all too often the case when it comes to censorship. I organized a boycott by my readers and let the other authors know I’d done so. One by one, five of the seven remaining authors (Pete Hautman, Melissa de la Cruz, Matt de la Pena, Tera Lynn Childs, and Brian Meehl) withdrew, as a unified stand against censorship.

If the superintendent didn’t want controversy, it didn’t work out so well. This story went even bigger than Norman. In an interview, Hautman talked about “not doing anything” the times he had been uninvited from speaking, and how he later regretted it. De la Cruz blogged about growing up in the Philippines, where a dictator decided what people could and couldn’t read. Unfortunately, the festival was canceled. And in the wake of that, my motives were questioned (“she’s only out for money/fame/publicity”). I was called “disgusting” and “sick” (for writing about the subjects I do). Those words hurt. But if I’ve helped keep a spotlight trained on censorship, helped people remember the importance of every reader’s right to have access to the book he or she most needs, it was worth every hurtful comment.

Bottom line. No book is right for every reader. So fine. Don’t read my books if they offend you or you hate poetry or need a fairy-tale ending. If you don’t want your own children to read them, tell them they can’t (and see what happens). But don’t make that decision without reading them first. Don’t scan for offenses. Read in context. You might decide the messages they carry are positive, if strong. You might even find a way to open communication with your kids. Words can’t damage them. But ignorance surely can.

Librarians and teachers, and other gatekeepers, please remember that every child’s experience is different, and so is their need for reading materials. Recently a young man in small-town Kentucky asked his school librarian for books with gay characters. Because, of course, he is gay and needs to know that he’s not alone. Not crazy. That he’s okay. The librarian told him such books were “inappropriate.” That young man, Brent Taylor, could have skulked away. Instead he went public, and his story appeared in newspapers and online journals from California to New York.

If people like Brent Taylor and Ellen Hopkins and others like us don’t stand up to would-be censors, this country will regress. Plenty of people would be happy to see that happen. But books are knowledge. And knowledge is power. And only by empowering future generations will they understand, individually and en masse, that they’re not alone. They’re not crazy. They’re okay.

And here, for those who haven't seen it, is "Manifesto."

### **Manifesto**

To you zealots and bigots and false  
 patriots who live in fear of discourse.  
 You screamers and banners and burners  
 who would force books  
 off shelves in your brand name  
 of greater good.  
 You say you're afraid for children,  
 innocents ripe for corruption  
 by perversion or sorcery on the page.  
 But sticks and stones do break  
 bones, and ignorance is no armor.  
 You do not speak for me,  
 and will not deny my kids magic  
 in favor of miracles.  
 You say you're afraid for America,  
 the red, white and blue corroded  
 by terrorists, socialists, the sexually  
 confused. But we are a vast quilt  
 of patchwork cultures and multi-gendered  
 identities. You cannot speak for those  
 whose ancestors braved  
 different seas.  
 You say you're afraid for God,  
 the living word eroded by Muhammed  
 and Darwin and Magdalene.  
 But the omnipotent sculptor of heaven  
 and earth designed intelligence.  
 Surely you dare not speak  
 for the father, who opens  
 his arms to all.  
 A word to the unwise.  
 Torch every book.  
 Char every page.  
 Burn every word to ash.  
 Ideas are incombustible.  
 And therein lies your real fear.

*Ellen Hopkins*

## INTRODUCTION

---

**LOOKING BACK**, it seems inevitable that we would produce a book about librarians' experiences with banned books. After all, we've been giving our presentation, *Banned Books Exposed*, for several years for library staff members, church and community groups, and librarians at state and regional library conferences. Val provides a brief history of banned books and talks about the American Library Association's role in documenting challenges and supporting librarians who are faced with demands for censoring library material. Kathy gives booktalks on several books that have been banned or challenged. The booktalks never call attention to the books' controversial aspects but are designed simply to entice the audience to want to read them. Invariably, people come up to us afterward to confess and tell stories about books that have been saved. The librarians who confess often tell us that they have dealt with a difficult challenge in their library by quietly removing the book from the collection. We are also fortunate to hear fascinating stories of bravery when librarians have vocally protected the inclusion of a controversial book in their communities.

In 2009, Judy Blume was being honored at the University of Southern Mississippi's Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival. Confident that our *Banned Books Exposed* presentation was a natural fit for the festival, we submitted a proposal and were invited to attend as presenters. Both times we gave our presentation during the three-day event, we heard stories of challenges. It wasn't until we were standing in Judy Blume's incredibly long book-signing queue that an incident—we later realized—became the catalyst for this book.

From our very first presentation to the presentations we give today, we always wear our banned books T-shirts. As we stood in Judy Blume's line, a woman behind us suddenly said, "I was at your presentation yesterday. I own a banned books T-shirt. I wore it to my school once on the first day of Banned Books Week. My principal made me go home and change clothes. I think I might try wearing it again next time Banned Books Week rolls around."

Later that evening, sharing a plate of fried green tomatoes at a Hattiesburg restaurant, we talked about the woman and her banned books T-shirt. Reflecting on some of the tales we had been told, we realized that experiencing a challenge to library materials might be the most frightening

professional experience a librarian encounters, especially when he or she is a solo librarian or feels a lack of professional support. We also knew that stories of victories in saving library material, especially in the face of vocal opposition, might lend strength to librarians who initially felt threatened when experiencing a challenge.

From that moment on, we found ourselves on the journey to publication. We knew our first step would be to find a publisher. Aiming high, we submitted a proposal to ALA Editions. We were thrilled to be given the green light, and the real trip began. It turns out we've been en route to writing this book all along; we just hadn't noticed all the road signs. There have been some amazing coincidences and a lot of luck.

Once we signed our ALA contract, we put out the call for submissions. Searching far and wide, we contacted library associations in every state and sought out librarians we read about in the news to see if they would be interested in submitting a story. Even before querying ALA Editions, we knew we would be giving the Banned Books Exposed presentation at the 2010 Mountain Plains Library Association conference in Oklahoma City. We planned to blitz conference goers with information about our book. To that end we designed special business cards, conference bag inserts, and buttons. When we got to the conference, we weren't shy about trying to get folks to jump on our "banned wagon." In the elevator of the hotel: "Hi, I'm Kathy. Have you ever experienced a book challenge?" On the bus to the Western Heritage Museum and Cowboy Hall of Fame: "Hi, I'm Valerie. Has anyone tried to ban a book from your library?"

Being pushy paid off in a big way. We met several people who agreed to submit their stories. Other folks gave us leads to colleagues who might be interested in writing about their experiences. The most exciting suggestion of all came from a "dine-around dinner companion" who described Oklahoma's recent "Ellen Hopkins incident." Before we even returned home from the conference, we knew things had gone more than okay in OK.

The banned wagon picked up speed quickly after that. We were able to recruit Ellen Hopkins to write the foreword. We tracked down the librarian, Karin Perry, at the epicenter of the Hopkins incident, who agreed to tell her story. We had seen Susan Patron, librarian and author of the Newbery-winning *Higher Power of Lucky*, speak at a Mountain Plains Library Association conference in Salt Lake City in 2008. She graciously offered to submit something.

We've received some amazing contributions for this book. It has been an adventure to travel vicariously on the banned wagon as librarians share their experiences with censorship. Not every excursion has a happy ending, but we have found inspiration in every single journey.

We believe these stories contain several recurring themes that can offer strength to librarians before and after a challenge. The most important lesson we hear repeated in these essays is a call for each library to have a collection development policy and a materials reconsideration policy in place before a challenge occurs. The collection development policy describes the community and the material a library will and will not collect. Collection development policies often include the ALA Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read Statement. The materials reconsideration policy provides information about how a complaint about library material will be handled. It outlines the specific responsibilities of the person challenging the library material and the specific responsibilities of the library staff and the library's governing body. These documents are essential and provide the road map for moving forward even against the most precarious roadblocks endured during a difficult public challenge.

Another common theme in these essays is that challenges to library materials occur frequently and in all types of libraries: school, academic, public, and special libraries. These challenges can come from anyone at any time, including people on a library's staff. As several stories in this volume illustrate, perhaps the most common form of censorship—silent censorship—occurs when a librarian decides quietly to withdraw a book from a library's collection. And there are stories of librarians acting even more silently still, when a selector doesn't order a book because it might cause a controversy.

Finally, there is an ongoing theme of brave librarians who are willing to stand up for their communities' rights to have access to all types of material. They are vocal in the face of controversy, enduring verbal personal attacks and stressful confrontations. We hope that this book provides insight into how librarians protect the First Amendment in their communities. We hope this book encourages librarians to create thoughtful and strong collection development policies and reconsideration policies. Most important, we hope the stories in this book demonstrate the personal perspective that is necessary to support and strengthen library employees who must tirelessly defend even the most controversial material.



# Well-Intentioned Censorship Is Still Censorship

## *The Challenge of Public Library Employees*

RON CRITCHFIELD AND DAVID M. POWELL

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**THE DIFFERENCES** between personal values and professional ethics often cause a struggle within oneself. In the case of our library, the Jessamine County Public Library (JCPL) in Nicholasville, Kentucky, this type of struggle began within our walls and eventually extended into the community we serve. The facts presented below were made public during the latter part of 2009 by news coverage and literature distributed in our community concerning two former JCPL employees who decided a library book was inappropriate for minors.

Our story begins with a book perceived to be obscene by a library employee working as a circulation associate at JCPL. The employee brought the item to the attention of David Powell, circulation manager, who listened to her concerns and instructed her to submit an official request for reconsideration of the book. Subsequently, the employee submitted the request to the collection development committee.

The book in question was *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Kevin O'Neill. The staff member found the book to be pornographic in nature and as such inappropriate for circulation by the library. After reading the book and literature about the book, the committee members ruled to retain the challenged item in the collection because it met all criteria outlined in JCPL's collection development policy. The committee also cited a variety of supportive factors:

- Moore, a highly respected author of graphic novels (e.g., *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *Swamp Thing*)
- listed #2 in the 2007 Top Ten Graphic Novels, by *Time* magazine
- listed #2 in DC Comics' "30 Essential Graphic Novels"
- won the 2007 Eagle Award for "Favourite Original Graphic Novel"
- well reviewed by *Booklist* and *Publisher's Weekly* (starred review)
- in more than a thousand library collections, including at least twelve other Kentucky libraries
- could be purchased in nearby Lexington bookstores such as Joseph-Beth Booksellers, Comic Interlude, Barnes and Noble Booksellers, and Borders

Unsatisfied with the results from the review committee, the employee decided to check out the book and keep it in her work locker so that no other person could have the item. In an attempt to keep the book from others, this employee set in motion a cycle of checkouts and renewals that followed standard circulation procedures. She checked out the item, renewed it twice, checked in the item, then again checked it out and continued this process. When the library director, Ron Critchfield, learned of this practice, it seemed odd to him that the person who previously wanted the item removed from the collection now had checked it out more than any other customer. Uncertain exactly what was going on, Critchfield discussed the issue with Powell, and they decided Powell would check on the item's status every now and then.

Months passed and someone placed a hold on the book. Powell monitored the status of the item as its due date approached to make sure it was returned. It is the library's policy that once an item with a hold on it is returned, the library computer system immediately reserves the book for the customer who requested the hold. Unfortunately, the item was not returned. As a result, the person who placed the hold request on the item never got the chance to access the book. Powell brought this news to Critchfield's attention and explained that another employee, also then a circulation associate, removed the hold from the item being monitored, and then the employee who initially challenged the item checked out the book again. Something was odd . . . nay, wrong. The employment of the two employees was terminated for exercising censorship and restricting the freedom of others on the basis of their personal beliefs.

The former employees then crafted, or found themselves placed in, a narrative focused on the valiant stand made by two Christian women to protect the children of the community from pornographic materials

distributed at JCPL—because parents have busy lives and need help parenting their children. Given this biblical story around which to rally, the media fire ignited, setting ablaze the first anti-library narrative.

In October 2009, WTVQ-36 in Lexington, Kentucky, ran a television news report titled “Librarians Won’t Give Child ‘Porn’ Book.”<sup>1</sup> The media was invited to JCPL by those crafting the anti-JCPL narrative. In this report both former circulation associates provided statements and began publicizing their cause. The reporter noted, “The two women say they were fired last month when they wouldn’t let a young girl check out a book from The League of Extraordinary Gentleman series. Now, both women say they’re less concerned with their jobs and more concerned with keeping material like this out of children’s hands.” One of the former employees had this to say about the removal of the hold from the item: “My friend . . . had brought it to me on Wednesday, and she said ‘look at this book, it’s filthy and it’s on hold for an eleven-year-old girl,’ and I said well okay, let’s take it off hold.” The reporter concluded by stating, “The women say parents these days are swamped and it’s far too easy for a child to check out a book without them ever knowing. The women hope the library will reconsider their policies to make sure children aren’t checking out inappropriate materials.”

In addition to the television reporting of the anti-JCPL narrative, a flyer from the group was distributed around the county. The vast majority of information contained in the flyer was misinformation.

The widely circulated narrative in opposition to the library began: “On Sep 23, 2009, two library employees were let go from the Jessamine County Public Library (JCPL) for refusing to allow an eleven year old girl access to the book *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*, a graphic novel which contains lewd pictures of men and women in sexual situations.” One can see the use of emotive argument here to portray the former library employees as champions and not censors—to portray them as justified, righteous, and concerned citizens “let go” by JCPL for “doing right.”

Another aspect of the narrative was that graphic novels are synonymous with things pornographic: “Books located in the graphic novel section of the library contain pornographic material including pictures of nude men and women in sexual situations. These items can be checked out by juveniles on their own accounts, without parental consent or knowledge.” This juxtaposition of graphic novels with pornographic material sent a false understanding to the minds of those unfamiliar with graphic novels and led to these items being associated with pornography. Also, the latter sentence was a misleading statement presented as fact. At

JCPL parents must sign for juveniles seventeen and under to have a card, and parents have complete monitoring privileges.

The flyer ended the narrative in the same way the initial news report concluded: “We urge residents of Jessamine County to get involved in letting the library know that such material being available to minors is not acceptable in this community. We need to protect children from adult obscene material.” It is important to note that there is no statutory authority in Kentucky for public libraries to act in place of parents. In fact, public libraries open themselves to lawsuits if they try to act in loco parentis. It is JCPL’s position, and should be the position of any public library, that parents know best what is acceptable for their children, and that any limits should be set by the parents—not by the library staff.

In November 2009, more than one hundred citizens attended the library’s monthly board meeting to provide comments regarding the situation. Each speaker was given two minutes to share her or his opinions with the members of the library board and library management. The opinions expressed were evenly divided in support of and opposed to JCPL’s position against censorship. Anti-library comments ranged from an evangelist yelling about the library shelving pornography to a teenager wanting the library to protect her and others from harmful materials. Library supporters included a woman recounting how limitations at her childhood library stifled her growth as a reader and another person sharing her minister father’s strong belief in the First Amendment and urging others to stand up for it.

One speaker presented a petition calling for the removal of not only *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* but also Chuck Palahniuk and Ron White’s comedy CD *You Can’t Fix Stupid*. In the months that followed, some people who signed the petition contacted the library and said they regretted signing it before becoming fully informed about the issue.

The most disappointing and troubling occurrences were the personal attacks on the library director and other library employees. These assaults came via persons physically coming to the library, written letters to the library and local papers, e-mails, and phone calls. JCPL librarians were accused of becoming desensitized to harmful material and even of being pedophiles looking to identify children who might be susceptible to sexual advances. One angry community member went as far as to confront the library director and threaten physical violence.

Faced with a vocal minority speaking out against the library, and an onslaught of reporters seeking a story, JCPL management communicated the following guidelines to JCPL employees for dealing with these internal situations:

*Speak with one voice, with one spokesperson:* When you receive inquiries outside the realm of your job duties, such as questions about library customers, library staff, former library staff, or the management and direction of the library, you are not to respond. All such outside inquiries should be readdressed to the director. Offer the inquirer the director's business card and let anyone know that they can feel free to come and knock on the director's door, or e-mail, or send a letter, or call the director. Speaking only to the director removes the awkwardness for employees and eliminates potentially detrimental situations in which employees might say something inappropriate or counter to the mission of the library.

*Emphasize library confidentiality:* As an employee of the library you must not improperly disclose confidential information about library customers, employees, or library business at any time.

Given the inaccurate information spread about the library within the community, we managed the external misinformation situation with the following guidelines:

*Allow only one spokesperson:* As previously mentioned, this removed the multiplicity of voices saying who knows what.

*Publicity:* A public awareness blitz emphasized community assets of the public library. We spent money on posters and advertisements to show the importance of the public library.

*Spread the truth:* The local newspaper published an opinion article by the director concerning intellectual freedom. JCPL created a brochure with the facts about parental knowledge, consent, and monitoring privileges—highly effective in educating those misled by the opposing narrative.

*Do not be drawn in—remain above the fray:* Do not argue, do not offer point-counterpoint debate, do not enter the online discussions. Be courteous to all callers (in person, on the phone, via e-mail), offer copies of your policies, and thank them for their feedback.

If we can stress only one point, it is the last one: do not be drawn in—remain above the fray. Although it is difficult not to defend yourself and your library by publicly arguing against your accusers, such action only fuels the fires, excites the media, and brings you down to the same level as those circulating misinformation. Take a deep breath and smile. Then show the community how great your library is and leave the arguing to others.

Another thing to remember is that public libraries serve *all* members of a community, and it is important to listen to every citizen's concerns. The Jessamine County residents who expressed displeasure over the materials in the collection or the dismissal of the library employees were a minority of the county's total population, but we listened to their concerns and sug-

gestions. Many of the concerns involved the shelf placement of the graphic novels. After researching how other libraries shelve graphic novels and after careful deliberation, the library management decided to relocate the graphic novels to the adult and young adult nonfiction sections.

As in most situations involving censorship of library materials, the persons bringing the challenge are acting on what they feel is right and socially responsible. The library employees who were terminated did not intentionally challenge First Amendment rights in their quest to protect children from harmful materials. It is logical to conclude that their actions took place because they believed their ideas were right. It is unclear, though, if they really understood what role libraries serve in a community and what First Amendment liberties they denied to others through their actions.

Public libraries exist to provide access to ideas, information, and cultural opportunities essential to a literate and educated society. Foundational to this mission are the concepts of free access and user privacy. Library users must feel safe to seek out and explore library resources without barriers. Those working in the library must facilitate such information seeking by assisting users without judgment and by assuring privacy in their transactions. Library employees must be able to separate their personal convictions from their professional duty to safeguard and respect the freedoms of *every* library user. Although a library employee may be a well-intentioned citizen who wishes to protect users from material he or she deems harmful, such an employee becomes a censor when restricting access to library material. No matter the justification, well-intentioned censorship is still censorship.

#### NOTE

1. Cate Slattery, "Librarians Won't Give Child 'Porn' Book," ABC 36, [www.wtvq.com/news/672-librarians-wont-give-child-porn-book](http://www.wtvq.com/news/672-librarians-wont-give-child-porn-book).

# Clue-less in Portland

NATASHA FORRESTER

---

**MY MOST** frustrating and simultaneously funny censorship challenge experience involved the book *Minerva Clark Gets a Clue* by Karen Karbo.

I'm a youth librarian in a neighborhood branch of the Multnomah County Library System in Portland, Oregon. I co-coordinate an after-school book group for fourth through eighth grades with a local private school. The school librarian and I select books that will work for the whole group (which realistically is made up of fourth- through sixth-graders) or for two age groups, fourth and fifth grades and sixth through eighth grades. After reading *Minerva Clark Gets a Clue*, we selected it because it was a high-interest book and had good reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Horn Book*, and *Booklist*. Additionally, the author is local and agreed to do a visit with the group, either by phone or in person. The book is even set in Portland.

A week or so after the book was given out, the school librarian called to let me know she'd received a complaint from the parent of one of the fifth-grade students. The mother had objected to several things in the book. In one scene, the main character's older "wild girl" cousin and her friends are portrayed as smoking, and the main character tells them cigarettes will kill them. The mother thought that showing characters smoking would make more of an impact on the readers than the main character's message. She also thought that the book mocks the magazine *American Girl*. Finally, the book has the main character saying "the f-word" (the character does not actually say "f\*ck," she says "the f-word"). The mother wanted us to stop using the book with the book group and to be sure it was not available through the school library.

It was explained to the parent that she could choose to not have her child read the book for the month, and the child would not attend the meeting

at which the book was discussed. The book was retained in the school library (the mother didn't actually challenge it in the public library), and a permission slip was created for all parents to sign in which they either gave permission for their child to read books beyond their grade level (per the book's MARC record) or restricted them to read-only books that had their grade level or below listed in the book's MARC record. Most parents gave permission, with only two parents choosing to restrict their child's reading to grade level provided in the book's MARC record.

The author came to the school and gave a school-wide assembly. According to the school librarian, the parent did not object to having her child attend the assembly. The student did in fact attend, with no problems or comments from the parent about the appropriateness of the book to the author during the visit. There were no further issues with that parent, because she pulled her child from the book group.

We don't actually use the permission slip any more; we just used it that one year, but we do make sure the book's MARC record labels indicate the book's grade level.



# Sweet Movie

SYDNE DEAN

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**THE PIKES** Peak Library District serves a conservative Colorado community. The region is home to more than fifty religious organizations, including the very prominent Focus on the Family. The local newspaper helped to pit Focus on the Family and the library against one another in a 1992 preemptive challenge made to Madonna's book *Sex*. The adverse publicity the library endured for ordering the book (it was never received), as well as the backlash when the book was not added to the collection, was one factor in the loss of a mill levy election that year. That incident is always on our minds when we encounter a difficult challenge.

The Pikes Peak Library District does not receive an unusually high number of challenges. In 2009 we received four. Four to seven challenge or reclassification requests each year is normal for the library. But we do get "high-profile" challenges at times. In 1993, Howard Stern's book *Private Parts* came to the attention of the Colorado Springs chapter of the American Family Association (AFA). The group did not challenge the book formally, but they did alert the media, and individuals from the group wrote to me as the library's associate director. The person who led the local AFA was a self-described minister who called to talk to me and wrote to protest the book. At some point I had to call him to tell him that members of the group had written threatening letters to me personally and had labeled me a pornographer. I was not so much afraid as angry at this kind of behavior from a group professing family values. He assured me that he would stop the threats immediately, and he did. Soon after that we were invited to appear together on a radio program to discuss Stern's book.

The two of us were seated together at a table at the radio station as we waited to go on the air. We had not met in person prior to this interview.

Despite being assertive, though always polite with me in conversations on the telephone, he did not make eye contact with me when we met in person. I spoke to him first and we just chit chatted. "Nice to meet you in person." The radio host joined us and said to me, "You don't look like a pornographer." I thanked him, and we were on the air.

Any kind of media attention makes me very nervous. It is unsettling to represent the library live on the radio while discussing a difficult subject. Furthermore, Howard Stern is not someone I admire in any way. Obviously, his book had received enormous publicity, and people were interested in reading it. My argument was that patrons were free to check the book out or not, return it unread, or avoid it completely, because Stern's reputation and the contents of this book were well known. The opinions of the callers to the station probably were not changed by anything we said, but they were civil and I was grateful. The Colorado Springs chapter of the AFA is still in the area, but we have not had another incident with them.

In 2001, I was working with my third library director at the Pikes Peak Library District and had been in charge of the materials reconsideration process for more than ten years. During this director's tenure, the library had already weathered several difficult materials challenges, including against the films *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; *In the Realm of the Senses*; *Walkabout*; and *Sweet Movie*. These were all foreign films. In addition, we had handled challenges on books including *Modern Sex Magick: Secrets of Erotic Spirituality* by Donald Craig, *Mommy Laid an Egg* by Babette Cole, and *Tommy Stands Alone* by Gloria Velasquez. We were seasoned, but *Sweet Movie* was the most difficult challenge during that director's tenure with the library.

The Pikes Peak Library District purchased *Sweet Movie*, directed by Dusan Makavejev, in videocassette format in May 2001 when it was distributed by Facets in a set of six Makavejev films. The movie was initially released in 1974. The library's selector was aware of the prominent and controversial Yugoslavian director and the fact that his films had been unavailable on video since 1989. She was not familiar, however, with all of the titles in the set. The library was developing a foreign film collection at the time, but the arrival of *Sweet Movie* turned out to be anything but sweet.

The library district has a good materials review process that was put in place in 2001 and is still employed. When a patron objects to material in the library, the patron submits a form requesting the reconsideration of library material. The item is reviewed by the librarian who purchased the item and one other librarian. The associate director collects the librarians' reviews, reviews the item, and makes a recommendation to the library director. The director reviews the item and notifies the patron of the deci-

sion. A patron who is not satisfied by the decision may appeal to the board of trustees. In such cases, the trustees appoint a committee of three board members to review the item. To date, patrons have yet to request that the board reconsider an item the board has reviewed.

*Sweet Movie* was challenged by a patron in September 2001. The patron suggested that the movie was suitable for someone “post mortem.” He called the movie pornographic, citing graphic sexual content including genitalia and pedophilia. He had watched only twenty minutes, did not search for reviews, and thought it had no artistic justification though he wrote that it had some inane symbolism. He suggested that the committee review the film and that the library put a warning label on the film or just take it off the shelves. The patron filled out the reconsideration form and gave it to a staff person working at the desk. The form was forwarded to the associate director’s office. Staff members did not discuss the complaint with the patron at that time. Actually, no one ever spoke directly to this patron.

When an item is challenged, its circulation history is reviewed, professional reviews of the item are read, and staff members check to see what other libraries own the item. The reconsideration process can take a few months as library reviewers complete their reports. The time taken for reviews seems to give patrons time to decompress a little about their concerns; by the time we respond, the issue is often not so emotional. Usually, the Pikes Peak Library District, which has a popular materials collection emphasis, is mainstream in its collection, and several hundred other public libraries own an item under review. In the case of *Sweet Movie*, however, only fifteen public libraries owned the 2001 cassette. We looked to see how many libraries owned a 1989 distribution of the cassette on video tape, and there were forty holding that item, most of them academic libraries. Our library had two copies of *Sweet Movie* on cassette, and they had circulated fifty-one times from June to early September. The circulation turnover of the copies was very good—over twenty-five circulations in just a few months. The circulation record indicated that we did have a patronage that was interested in edgy foreign films. While dealing with this challenge, we removed one copy from circulation for the librarians to review, and the second copy continued to circulate.

There were many professional reviews of the movie and a lot of information about Makavejev. Adjectives used by reviewers to describe the movie included “jarring and unsettling,” “taboo-busting,” “audacious,” “sometimes repellent,” “anarchistic,” “provocative,” “subversive,” and “not fare for normal moviegoers.” Roger Ebert called the move “an experience to defy criticism . . . one of the most challenging, shocking and provocative films of recent years.”<sup>1</sup>

Makavejev was a Belgrade native who left Yugoslavia after his film *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* was banned by Communist authorities. A 2001 *New York Times* article about Makavejev and the Facets release of his films states that he is “one of the boldest, most anarchic filmmakers around, an honest purveyor of cinematic treatises that explore taboo topics in the political, social, psychological and sexual arenas.”<sup>2</sup>

The two librarians reviewed the film and their recommendations were opposite: one recommended retention, the other disposal. Both librarians were offended by the content of the movie. The librarian recommending retention cited Makavejev’s body of work and the fact that the movie had been shown at the Cannes Film Festival and on the Sundance channel. The librarian recommending that the film be discarded cited full frontal nudity, no plot, sexual content, and violence. District librarians do an excellent and thorough job of reviewing items. They understand and support the ALA Library Bill of Rights, and once they make their recommendations they do not stew over the final decision.

As associate director, I reviewed the item after the two librarians. My recommendation was to retain the movie. The movie case did have a “mature audiences only” statement on it. Because *Sweet Movie* is a foreign film, there was no Motion Picture Association of America rating. The film was disturbing to watch. It would take a lot of study to figure out what the social statements were. That capitalism and communism are corrupt systems was apparent; beyond that, deciphering the images would be great for academic film study classes.

The library’s director watched the movie. Normally, according to our policy, at this point he would write a letter with the decision to the patron based upon all of the information he received. He could agree with my recommendation or overturn it. But he was still very uncomfortable with *Sweet Movie*. He went outside of the policy and asked a library board member to watch the movie and weigh in. The normal process works well, and it annoyed me that we were circumventing it by going to a board member. The trustee watched the movie and stated that, although it was not a movie he would normally watch, he would not want to keep others from seeing it. We have been fortunate for many years to have board members who are strong in supporting intellectual freedom. The director was still uncomfortable with a retention decision.

We had spent a lot of time by this point discussing the movie. We talked about the ugly American theme, the obsessions attributed to capitalist Americans, and Marxism as an obvious subject of the film—illustrated by the use of a gigantic mask of Lenin on the prow of a boat. What did the river symbolize? We could not figure out much of the symbolism

but, as the reviewers stated, we were not alone. The more we talked, the more I began to appreciate the movie and its untold number of nuances. One afternoon, the library director asked me to look with him at the one scene that was most disturbing to all of us—the apparent seduction of a young boy (about ten years old) by an older woman who is not fully clothed. As we watched, I told the director, “We better stop looking at this together or one of us will have to sue the other.”

The scene with the boy, though disturbing, was not explicit. I would like to think that I swayed the director’s thinking when I said, “Look at all of the time we have spent discussing this movie—what political statements are being made, what underlies the scenes, what was going on in Yugoslavia, etc. The fact that you can have hours of discussion about a twenty-seven-year-old movie defends retaining it.”

On December 12, 2001, the director prepared the letter to the patron informing him of our decision to retain the item. In the letter he included the circulation statistics; the “mature audiences only” warning; information about the internationally recognized director, Makavejev; and the themes of Makavejev’s movies, which are rooted in Yugoslavia’s painful postwar experiences.

The patron accepted the decision. In the next year or so another patron challenged the movie. As a matter of policy, the library does not review items again until five years have passed from the original challenge. The second patron was sent all of the materials from the first challenge plus an updated circulation number. She also accepted the decision. And that was the last we heard of *Sweet Movie*.

Looking back, I think we were almost courageous to recommend retaining the film. Incidentally, at about the same time we were also defending Michael A. Bellesiles’s *Arming America*, which was challenged by the National Rifle Association and its local chapter. Recent challenges at the Pikes Peak Library District have been routine.

Some of these challenges really test the principles of intellectual freedom. During the flap over Madonna’s book *Sex*, patrons came to the library to confront me and “take my job.” One patron took the opportunity during all of the coverage about Madonna to complain about the library’s statue of Orpheus, which had bothered her for years. Who wants to be put through that kind of wringer again? Although some residents would come to our defense as they did with Madonna’s book and with the Stern book, the majority did not and probably still would not have in 2001, and we could expect the media to keep the heat on us for some time, just as they had in 1992. Could we convince our community that this disturbing film met community standards and was tax money well spent when we

also struggled with the movie? Could we stand up to media skewering of our decision? We decided that we could defend it in the public arena, if necessary.

Today the videocassette copies of *Sweet Movie* are gone—probably worn out at some point. The film is now thirty-six years old. When I searched online to prepare for this account, there were several blogs listing disturbing films. *Sweet Movie*, not surprisingly, was number eighteen on the GreenCine list of twenty-five “most disturbing movies.” It is now available on DVD with new updated reviews. The Pikes Peak Library District does not own the DVD version.

As I reflect from my current perspective, I believe it was easy for me to be steadfast and black and white about reconsideration decisions. The directors, though, had the library, its staff, community support, and funding to think about, and that can be a considerable burden. Nevertheless, all five of the executive directors I have worked for have been strong in their defense of intellectual freedom, and it has been a pleasure to work with them in that arena.

#### NOTES

1. Roger Ebert, “Movie Reviews, Sweet Movie,” *Chicago Sun Times*, January 1, 1975, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>.
2. “From Yugoslavia, a Seductive Subversive,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2001, 226.

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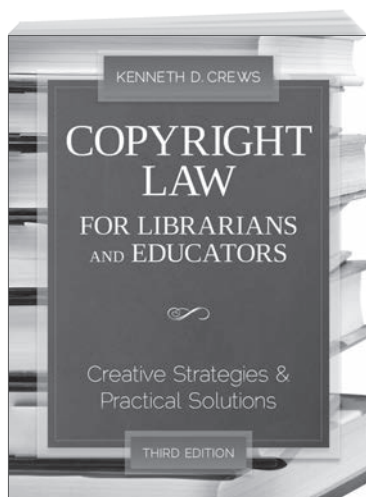
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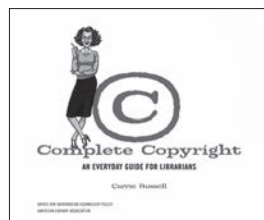
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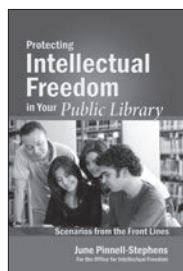
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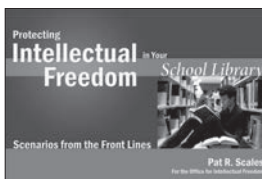
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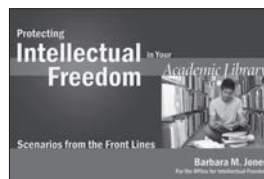
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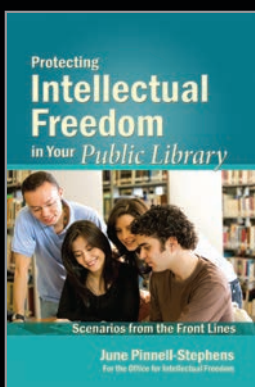
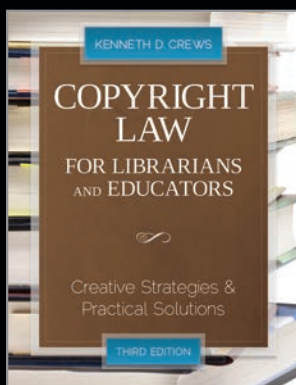
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