

Finding Representation

Four percent of authors are Asian. About 2,532 books were banned in America last year, predominantly those about diversity. Whenever I find a book about Asians or by an Asian author, I immediately reach for it. "Finding Junie Kim" by Ellen Oh is a great example of a book by an Asian author that should be in Vermont libraries because it helps students like me feel represented.

I understand that some may wish to ban "Finding Junie Kim" because this book contains racial slurs, used as examples of bullying. Some may want to ban it because it encourages and empowers youth to speak up against racism in conservative communities, and to make change. But, in order to better our future, youth must stand up to inequity as Junie does, while learning about Korean heritage from her grandparents. In response to the challenge, I believe our school should have a meeting with those who want to ban "Finding Junie Kim." We would have an important, somewhat uncomfortable conversation (most influential ones are), with the hope of convincing those who want to ban it, that it should remain in our libraries.

This is an appropriate response because it reminds others of the importance of representation for kids like me. In this majority White state, filled with White culture, White art, and White stories, I often find myself grappling for where I belong. Books centering diversity have a special place in my heart, as I'm mixed Filipino, White and Native American. I'm seldom sure where I fit in, but books are a way to enter a whole new world of imagination, and I tend to choose books I feel culturally connected to. If books like "Finding Junie Kim" were taken out of my library, I'd feel even more marginalized.

This is also an appropriate response because Oh's writing empowers us to speak against injustice, which is necessary, particularly in Vermont, where I've witnessed racism during my day-to-day life as a BIPOC youth. Books like this provide some comfort for kids of color, bringing cultural awareness to miseducated youth.

If we take this action, we may feel more heard, understanding that our voices and narratives are valid and important. We'd read books about cultures that we connect with. We often read the classics in school, written by White men that have passed away. The BIPOC of Vermont need more representation, and White folks need to see that we are here. Some children grow up here, hardly ever seeing a face of color and when they do, they are shocked. They may end up (purposely or accidentally) acting prejudiced, and this ends up harming the community and our world.

"Finding Junie Kim" is a timely, yet timeless story that educates the reader as we follow Junie's journey of learning not to stay silent. While learning about her culture, she speaks up and leads protests against racism. This is an inspiring and empowering book that I passionately wish to stay on school library shelves.

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Parental Permission Slips for Safer Communities

By Oonagh Guyer

Censorship should not be tolerated in our schools. Banning books from our libraries is a form of censorship and it should not be allowed. In the words of the best-selling young adult author Judy Blume, “I believe that censorship grows out of fear, and because fear is contagious, some parents are easily swayed. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children’s lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don’t read about it, their children won’t know about it. And if they don’t know about it, it won’t happen.”¹ Instead of banning books, middle-grade libraries should require parental permission for kids to read these books.

The New York Times best-selling book *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher centers on a freshman in high school, Hannah Baker, and the thirteen reasons that led her to suicide.² This book may be concerning for parents because of its difficult content and the fear that parents might have about it. If parents have to sign permission slips, this would encourage parents to engage in what their children are reading. As Judy Blume suggests, parents are afraid that if their children read about suicide they will act upon them. The reality is that books create perfect opportunities to start a dialogue with their kids, although it may be awkward. Most importantly, these conversations create a space to hear what kids have to say. In contrast to what many people think, having these hard conversations can help prevent suicide.³ Signed permission slips would help create these dialogues.

The other reason why having a parent permission slip is beneficial is that it allows parents to feel like they are part of the decision-making in what their kids will read and learn about. This helps parents feel more involved and part of their children’s education. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, along with many other young adult literature books, describe difficult and uncomfortable topics, but taking them out of our libraries isn’t going to protect kids from the real world and very hard subjects. Kids have access to the internet; they can access any content online. Banning books doesn’t protect children from getting information. Permission slips at least can appease parents’ “need to feel in control of their children’s lives”.

The potential long-term impact of having parental permission slips for controversial books is that it will help foster more meaningful relationships and connections between students and their parents. Through these conversations, families have opportunities to discuss their personal feelings about challenging content and listen to one another. Open and honest communication can bring people together and improve our collective mental health. This can create lasting improved relationships and healthier communities for all of us.

Endnotes

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²"Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists", American Library Association, March 26, 2013. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10> (Accessed February 11, 2023) Document ID: 8417fa9e-ceff-4512-aca9-9fbc81b8bd81 <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

³ "The Myths and Facts of Youth Suicide." suicideprevention.nv.gov, The Official State of Nevada Website, 2021 <https://suicideprevention.nv.gov/Youth/Myths/>

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A Perspective on the Censorship of *New Kid*

Across the country, numerous books have been challenged and continue to be for their content. Among these censored titles is Newbery award winning graphic novel, *New Kid* by Jerry Craft. This book follows the experience of a black seventh grader as he enters a new school. The plot centers on his struggles fitting in as one of the few minority students and the prejudices that he faces daily. An argument has been made against *New Kid*, citing that it teaches Critical Race Theory.¹ Parents and teachers have voiced a fear that white students may feel negatively about themselves when reading about the discrimination against African Americans in society.

To address the challenge to this book, the best course of action for the school is to consult the American Library Association's (ALA) "Library Bill of Rights." Several of its principles offer guidelines focusing on the school's responsibility to challenge censorship. Additionally, another principle recommends cooperation between the challengers and the school.² A meeting should be held in which the school would present topics such as Intellectual Freedom and the importance of diverse viewpoints in literature. This meeting between the parties provides a constructive way to reach common ground.

There are many benefits for the school to advocate for *New Kid* at the meeting. One being that this book offers a meaningful perspective that the community should have access to. Especially in a predominantly white school, stories from diverse backgrounds are crucial as they provide insight into experiences of others' lives. In a respectful meeting, the school would present this idea, thus illustrating the reason *New Kid* is an asset and not to be banned.

Along with the previous assertion, Intellectual Freedom can be used to defend *New Kid's* place on the shelves. The ALA defines Intellectual Freedom as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction."³ This can apply to any book being challenged as censorship essentially inhibits the seeking and receiving of information. As stated previously, the main concern over *New Kid* is the fact that it is told through the eyes of a black student whose experiences may make some students feel uncomfortable. A ban on this book goes against Intellectual Freedom as it would restrict information from a specific point of view.

As a result of the school's response, the hopeful outcome would be for *New Kid* to remain available for all to read. It has great potential to educate, bridge differences, and enable a better understanding of others' lives. In a time of turmoil in the country, having the next generation be accepting of each other is vital; and this book gives people perspective on differences. *New Kid* is a valuable resource that all students should have access to and the school needs to do everything it can to protect it.

Endnotes

¹ Galvan, Pilar, et al. "Banned Books: Author Jerry Craft on Telling Stories All Kids Can Identify With." *NPR*, NPR, 28 Dec. 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/28/1144458555/banned-books-author-jerry-craft-new-kid>

² "Library Bill of Rights." *Advocacy, Legislation & Issues*, American Library Association, 7 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>

³ "Challenge Support." *Tools, Publications & Resources*, American Library Association, 14 July 2022, <https://www.ala.org/tools/node/513/>

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“Censorship’s Ongoing Deceit”

Censorship is, without a doubt, complex. When I read Maus after the request to ban it from our classroom, I saw multiple reasons why someone would challenge the book. Among them are violence, suicide, language, the biases of the author and storyteller themselves, as well as nudity. Regardless, I firmly believe our class should keep Maus on our shelves, though anyone who decides to read it should be debriefed by a teacher on its subject matter. As for the concerned parents, a conference with the involved faculty to address specific concerns is the appropriate course of action. I recommend these steps both out of regard for the innate parental desire to protect their children and the need for education on the tragedies of the Holocaust.

One of the many reasons Maus shouldn’t be banned is that comfort shouldn’t take precedence over truth. Censoring due to the idea adolescents can’t handle negative emotions is just that; letting comfort zones dictate what should and shouldn’t be learned. By removing or diluting disturbing aspects of Maus, the message fades. From a neurological standpoint, strong emotions (like the ones we experience from upsetting subjects) help the amygdala boost memory retention¹. Censorship for comfort damages a child’s education. Genocide is horrific; Maus can and should reflect that. In 2020 a nationwide study was released on Holocaust knowledge among people under 40- over 1 in 10 surveyed can’t recall hearing the word Holocaust². These people are the future; they weren’t educated on basic world history and therefore denied knowledge. In the words of George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it³.” The Holocaust MUST become common knowledge; humanity's future could be at stake.

Additionally, reading sad books is beneficial not just for others but for ourselves. Reading builds empathy for the experiences of others **and** helps us understand our feelings⁴. By not being exposed to sorrowful material, tragedy becomes harder to understand. The truth may hurt, but it’s good for us. Here we are at a crossroads; ban the book, allowing children to happen upon its lessons alone, or give them guidance with the topics Maus presents. School-age children hear swearing. They suffer due to racism. In terms of violence and suicide, I don’t blame parents for being scared; however, banning this book is the wrong response to that fear. I am in no way trying to diminish the horrors in the pages of Maus, but people will learn somehow. This book offers the opportunity for “somehow” to be in an educational context, with adult guidance.

In the long term keeping Maus in our classroom sets a precedent of encouraging the acquisition of knowledge. By debriefing students on the book, they can make the most of a tragic story. In an ideal world, the interaction between parents and faculty regarding the request to ban will establish a lasting atmosphere of mutual respect. We read harder books to become better readers; we read sadder books to become better people.

¹ "What makes memories stronger? - Queensland Brain Institute."
<https://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain-basics/memory/what-makes-memories-stronger>.

² Ramgopal, Kit. "Survey finds 'shocking' lack of Holocaust knowledge among" 16 Sep. 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/survey-finds-shocking-lack-holocaust-knowledge-among-millennials-gen-z-n1240031>.

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⁴ Sheldon-Dean, Hannah. "Why Is It Important to Read to Your Child? - Child Mind Institute." 19 Jan. 2023, <https://childmind.org/article/why-is-it-important-to-read-to-your-child/>.

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