

“YOU’RE LETTING MY CHILD READ *WHAT?!*”

By **Robert Bittner**

What Adults Often Fear When Their Children Read About Gender and Sexual Diversity

PEOPLE OFTEN SUGGEST TO ME, BECAUSE I’M AN EDUCATOR OF post-secondary students, that talking with my classes about gender and sexuality must be easier than it would be at a grade school or high school. Sometimes it is. But in my course on children’s and young-adult (YA) literature—an introductory course for potential elementary and secondary schoolteachers—I am often confronted by my students, who have a sudden desire to screen literature through a filter of childhood innocence and asexuality. Books that my students read through lenses of queer and trans theories are suddenly “too mature” or “inappropriate” for potential or current students in their own classrooms. But what are the underlying fears that lead adults to challenge books with LGBTQ content? And what actions result? Let’s explore!

Each year, the American Library Association (ALA) lists the 10 most banned and challenged books in the United States according to reported challenges and publicly noted instances from media sources. In 2016, the top five were children’s or YA books that contained LGBTQ content. While the ALA’s top 10 lists are usually populated by children’s and YA books, and LGBTQ content is consistently part of the list, this is the first time that the percentage has been so high.

In Canada, children’s and YA books about gender and sexual diversity, especially picture books, are regularly challenged. The *2016 Annual Challenges Survey*, conducted by Alvin M. Schrader and Donna Bowman and supported by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations–Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèques, notes 36 book challenges. One in 10 challenges were due to LGBTQ content. Participation in the survey is voluntary, so it’s impossible to know how many books with LGBTQ content are challenged or how many libraries exclude LGBTQ materials from their collections because they anticipate challenges. Survey results and reported challenges, however, do offer insights over time, and they can lead to a better understanding of long-term trends.

In one instance, a patron asked that labels be placed on books with age-inappropriate content such as Erin Bow’s *The Scorpion Rules*, which includes “a bi-sexual sex scene not alluded to on the cover.” Another patron

requested that the “queer lit” category be removed from the teen summer-reading program, stating that the category went beyond respecting differences into the realm of propaganda, encouraging teens to enter the gay lifestyle. In another instance, a patron requested that books with LGBTQ content be labelled to prevent children from accidentally encountering such content.

In May 2016, Christine Baldacchino’s picture book *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* was challenged in the Forest Hills Public School District in Michigan. The father of a third-grade student complained that the book presents an abnormal approach to gender in daily life. But Baldacchino said that the story allows children to step into Morris’s shoes and see that there is nothing wrong or abnormal about wearing whatever clothes one feels comfortable in.

The concern was that children would be exposed to non-normative sexualities and genders and could be persuaded to “become gay.” What interests me, though, especially in the *Morris Micklewhite* scenario, is the fact that questions were already coming up in class and the children themselves were pointing out similarities between Morris’s experiences and their own. When using *Morris Micklewhite* in my classroom with college students, I bring up these examples and ask, “Why do you think the father is so concerned about a boy wearing a dress? What do you think this reveals about gendered expectations in our society?”

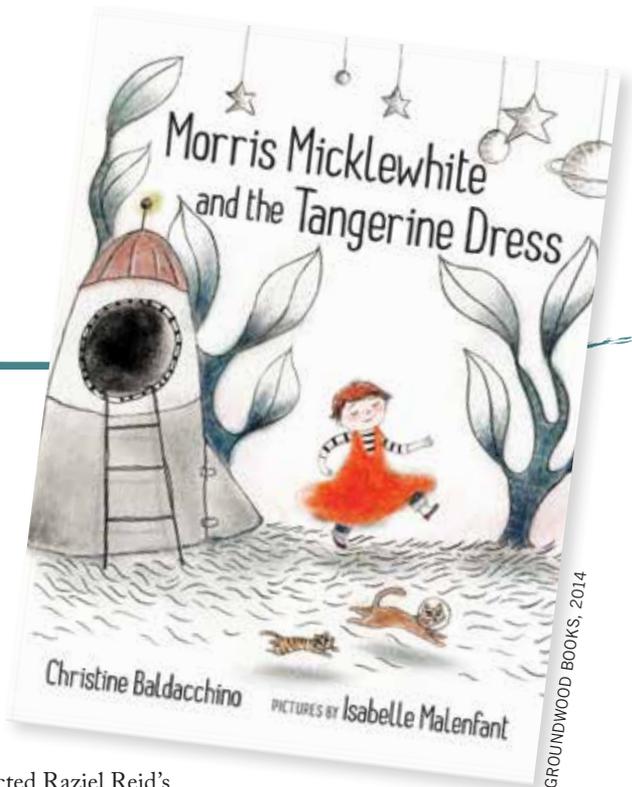
These questions have complex answers, but I will attempt to unpack them here.

In the introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley note that people get panicky when child sexuality is discussed and especially when queer sexuality and gender expression come into play. Adults often become uncomfortable with the idea that children are anything but non-sexual beings. When children display traits that adults believe are not normal, parents such as the father in Michigan fear for the child’s “normal”—heterosexual, cisgender—future.

Children’s books rarely engage the topic of sexuality but do play with concepts of gender expression and sometimes gender identity. (Such is the case in *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray.) Fear of sexual difference often comes from a mistaken link between gender expression and sexuality; because Morris wears a dress, he is coded as possibly gay or transgender by many adult readers. But, as Baldacchino noted, “He’s a boy expressing himself, and that’s all we know and should care about.”

Challenges frequently target books about same-sex relationships. One of the more famous backlashes against children’s materials featuring LGBTQ content in Canada occurred in 1997 when the Surrey School Board in B.C. tried to remove *Asha’s Mums*, *Belinda’s Bouquet* and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* from its schools. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court of Canada, where the book ban was overturned in 2002. (The court noted that “tolerance is always age-appropriate.”) Over the following years, books such as *And Tango Makes Three*, *Daddy’s Roommate*, *Donovan’s Big Day* and *10,000 Dresses* faced challenges and were noted yearly in the Canadian Library Association’s surveys which began in 2006.

One of Canada’s highest-profile challenges to a book with queer content



affected Raziel Reid's *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*.

Although it won the 2014 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature, the novel's graphic content caused an uproar. (The controversy prompted the awards program to change the category name to Young People's Literature.) People petitioned to have Reid return the award but also discussed what should be "allowed" in literature for young readers. For some, the issue was the book's frank discussion of masturbation, pedophilia and explicit sexual acts; for others, it was the overt flamboyance and queer sexuality of the protagonist. Whatever their reasoning, adult readers and critics found themselves increasingly uncomfortable with the overt queerness of the text.

Set the moral panic about Reid's work aside. There is not a long list of Canadian challenges to LGBTQ works for young adults. Many challenges repeat, affecting a few titles (such as *Baby Be-Bop* by Francesca Lia Block and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky) in multiple years. In some cases, a library policy or an author, instead of a particular book, is targeted. In 2007, Susan Juby discussed the reaction against her novel *Another Kind of Cowboy* and how the gay content led to a backlash against her appearance at Wordfest, a literary festival in Calgary. In 2017, Robin Stevenson wrote about the trouble she had with a school that wanted her to visit but did not want her to mention *Pride*, her non-fiction book about celebrating diversity and community, to students.

I don't believe there is an easy answer here—except for perhaps a class on the meaning of education for parents whose children are just beginning their own education—but what I do know is that succumbing to challenges and restricting access to books is *not* the answer. Books give young readers a space where they can explore new ways of being, identifying and expressing themselves without social consequences. We need more books, more authors and more diversity now than ever before, and if that leads to another boy wearing a tangerine dress to school, then I think we're on our way to a brighter future. 📖

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5 TIPS FOR TEACHERS

The world is diverse and so are classrooms, so it's important for educators to provide inclusive reading materials. Students may be afraid to ask questions or tell you what they want or need to know. Including LGBTQ content in your classroom can help ensure that all students' needs are met.

1 Review your school's and school board's policies and procedures for classroom resources, equity and inclusion, and—if they're available—policies on protecting LGBTQ students.

2 Refer to these policies when you write a letter to parents, explaining your selection criteria and introducing parents to the books you plan to include. Encourage parents to read the books and ask questions. Building a relationship with parents will pay off in the long run.

3 Find support from other teachers, librarians and administrators in your school, district and community. They can help educate students, parents and colleagues if someone challenges your literature choices.

4 If someone challenges a book, speak respectfully with the complainant. Explain why you feel it's important to make the book available. This tactic may be enough to ease concerns.

5 Celebrate Freedom to Read Week each February. Talk to students and parents about intellectual freedom and censorship.

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