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West Bend couple circulate petitions to remove library books they consider obscene - JSOnline

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Date: Wed, 1 Apr 2009 15:38:19 -0700

Subject: Re: West Bend couple circulate petitions to remove library books they consider obscene -

JSOnline

From: [REDACTED]

To: [REDACTED]

Hi Michael:

Nice to talk to you today. Thanks again for your help and support!

Here's the essay I banged out for the local newspaper:

It's hard not to take it personally when someone wants to ban your book.

A group of folks in West Bend have made a varying list of demands regarding my 2003 teen novel, *Geography Club*: ban it, put a warning label on it, put it somewhere where teenagers can't get it without permission from their parents, or buy books to "balance" it that show what a horrible, immoral "lifestyle" being gay is.

My book has been out for more than six years, sold tens of thousands of copies, received almost unanimously good reviews, won many honors, and is currently being adapted for the movies.

But truthfully, this is not the first time that some people, often with the backing of national conservative Christian activist groups, have tried to ban the book. Libraries are, of course, about open access to information, and there's really not much more fundamental in America than the right to decide for ourselves what we want to read, and what we want our kids to read.

These activists, on the other hand, want to make the decision for the rest of us. So they make ridiculous assertions, based on the inclusion of a few swear words in my book, that it's "pornographic."

Oftentimes their demands sound reasonable. Why not put a sticker on a book that some find offensive? But who decides what's "offensive"? Trust me: there is something in every book that someone somewhere doesn't like. Should a twelve-year-old go into the woods alone with a loaded gun? One does in *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Should kids always show respect to their parents? They don't in Roald Dahl's *Motilda*.

Why not put "controversial" books in a special section where the books require parental approval to be checked out? Again, who decides what's "controversial"? And for the record, the real point of this strategy isn't to give parents "choice"; it's to drive down circulations, which is what libraries use to determine their collections, making it so they can't justify buying similar books.

Why not buy "anti-gay" books to satisfy people who feel that homosexuality is a horrible, immoral

lifestyle? Every librarian I've ever met tries hard to satisfy the needs of their own community and to have a broad, diverse collection. But while I know it's an article of faith among some that homosexuality is a "choice" and that the "media" are burying the "truth" about how horrible the "gay lifestyle" is, these are not the books that respected authors and educators are writing; few of these books exist and even fewer are published and reviewed by respected sources because they're mostly based on falsehoods and misrepresentations.

Once you are the subject of these book debates a number of times, as I have been, you quickly realize something: some people really dislike, and even fear, gay people and their inclusion in our communities.

Ironically, anti-gay prejudice is part of the reason why I wrote my book in the first place.

I wish everyone who thinks my books are not "appropriate" for teenagers could read my mail for one single week -- the avalanche of touching emails I receive from lonely or harassed gay and lesbian teens and their friends, so grateful to see gay characters portrayed accurately and with dignity, not merely stereotypes or the punchline of jokes.

And let it be noted: plenty of parents want their kids reading my books. I frequently hear from parents who've read my books with their teens. In one of the most flattering emails I've ever received, one teenager said, "I gave my parents your book and said, 'Please read this. This is how I feel.'"

So I think my critics really miss the point.

In every teen book I've ever written, gay-themed or not, there is a moment when the main character has to choose between moving beyond his or her own little bubble -- doing what would make him or her momentarily happy or comfortable -- and putting those selfish prejudices and concerns aside, and committing to a larger cause, a greater good. In my mind, that's the choice every teen confronts, again and again, because it's the difference between a child and an adult.

Do books with that message have a place in libraries and in the hands of teenagers and their parents?

Absolutely. In fact, there might be a few adults in West Bend who could benefit from reading books like that too.

Brent Hartinger is the author of Geography Club and many other books. He lives in Washington State. His website is: www.brenthartinger.com