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# Library Book Riles Small Wisconsin Town

June 19, 2009

By [ANNE-MARIE DORNING](#)

There are 174,000 books in the West Bend Community Memorial Library, but Robert Braun, 74, of West Allis, Wis., just wants to burn one -- "Baby Be-Bop," by Francesca Lia Block.

"We will have demonstrations if they don't remove it," he said. "It has to be out of the library. If that doesn't happen, I will be out there burning."

Braun and three fellow members of the Christian Civil Liberties Union have filed a claim against the West Bend Library for stocking "Baby Be-Bop" in its young adult section. The book, [which is about a teen struggling with his homosexuality](#), is "explicitly vulgar, racial and anti-Christian" and is "inappropriate for the elderly and their minor grandchildren, and degrades the community," according to the complaint.

Braun said he found the [homosexual content](#) particularly offensive. "They call one character 'faggot' with every swear word you can think of ... and they use the N-word," Braun said.

The complaint asks for "damages and demand for relief pursuant to Wisconsin Statute Section 893.80." Specifically, the plaintiffs, only one of whom lives in West Bend, are asking for \$120,000, and that West Bend Mayor Kristine Deiss resign and the "racist book be removed and publicly burned or destroyed as a deterrent to repeating this offensive conduct."

But one person's vulgar book is another's "lyrical tale of love, faith and self-acceptance." At least that's how Publisher's Weekly described "Baby Be-Bop." The story centers on an adolescent boy named Dirk, who [struggles with the knowledge that he is gay](#).

"This is a book about the pain that homophobia can inflict on a young person's life," said Larry Siems, director of the Freedom to Write Program at New York City-based PEN American Center, which advocates for free expression.

"This is a particular kind of theater to ask the courts to sanction a book burning. ... I think their position is so fundamentally un-American. [This is not a country that burns books](#). The plaintiffs in this suit are elderly and they were probably alive in World War II when the Nazis were burning books. Our country emphatically rejects book burning."

## Not the First Complaint in West Bend

The American Library Association has a voluntary reporting system that records challenges to library books. So far, there have been 518 actual challenges to library books this year. That number is up from around 490 last year. The young adult section, in particular, is becoming a flashpoint in many local libraries, according to Deborah Caldwell-Stone, acting director for Intellectual Freedom at the ALA.

The vast majority of complaints come from parents raising concerns about things like witchcraft in the Harry Potter series or sexual issues in young adult fiction. Within those complaints, Caldwell-Stone sees what she calls a troubling trend.

"This inclination to treat young adults as 5-year-olds who are not capable of handling materials that are more sophisticated is a real problem that we are seeing in many communities," she said.

In West Bend, for example, the demand to burn a book is just the latest action brought against the library in recent months. In February, a group called West Bend Citizens for Safe Libraries, led by Ginny Maziarka, complained about four books in the young adult section, two focused on coming-of-age gay characters and two others dealing with sex education.

Maziarka said she first learned about sexually explicit teen literature by looking at the library's Web site. "I couldn't understand why we were recommending books on sex to teens ... and we're not talking about hickies; these are crude and raunchy books."

Maziarka said she is not in favor of book burning or banning but would like several books, including "Baby Be-Bop," moved to a separate section in the library and be clearly identified with a warning label indicating the book is "sexually explicit." She said her organization has nothing to do with the Christian Civil Liberties Union.

West Bend Library Director Michael Tyree has been at the 62,000-square-foot facility for 15 years. Until recently, his library meetings have been placid affairs, sparsely attended by the public. But lately, Tyree has had standing-room-only crowds in excess of 300, all clamoring for a chance to speak.

Meetings are now regularly posted on YouTube, and tensions run high. "I heard one city council member say we are a porn shop," Tyree said. "People go to church now and hear we have a porn pit here ... you know many of these people making the accusations don't even have library cards."

### **Bury It, Rip It Up or Shred It**

As the father of twin 16-year-old boys, Tyree thinks the protestors and the book-burners are missing the point. "My son, Josh, said, 'Dad, nobody our age reads anymore.'"

Tyree said his son wonders why people are so worried about a book that will take three hours to plow through because kids in study hall can get to explicit sex sites in 20 seconds on their phones. "Reading is not where kids get information about sex acts these days," Tyree said.

The author at the center of this literary firestorm, Francesca Lia Block, has published dozens of books for young adults and adults. Block is upset by the calls to publicly burn her book and defends her work.

In an e-mail message, Block said the themes in her books cover "equal rights, self-expression and the healing power of art and love."

Block added, "I am certainly not anti-Christian in any way and respect true Christianity."

Braun said the library board has three months to act on his claim, which was confirmed by city officials. The city of West Bend's insurance company is looking into the matter.

In an apparent attempt to soften his complaint, Braun did say that fire codes may prevent any actual burning of the book, so he would be satisfied if the library "buried it, ripped it up, or shredded it."