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A burnin' hunk of love for libraries

The Lost Albatross

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Monday, June 8, 2009

[A burnin' hunk of love for libraries](#)



Last week, it was [brought to my attention](#) that a few lost souls over in West Bend, Wisconsin had been insisting they be allowed to burn a few books in their library's collection. Area residents Ginny and Jim Maziarka, you see, had deemed certain of the works in the young adult section as being "sexually explicit."

Thankfully, the library's trustees voted unanimously to maintain the collection and effectively tell the Maziarkas to piss off, but I still couldn't help but think: Book burning? *Really?* We're still doing that?

That the idea of burning tomes you happen to find personally disagreeable doesn't immediately conjure up images of history's most oppressive and violent regimes is incredibly baffling to me (and apparently I'm [not alone](#)).

The story gets all the more strange, however, when you [delve a bit deeper](#):

Milwaukee-area citizen Robert C. Braun of the Christian Civil Liberties Union (CCLU) distributed at the meeting copies of a claim for damages he and three other plaintiffs filed April 28 with the city; the complainants seek the right to publicly burn or destroy by another means the library's copy of *Baby Be-Bop*. The claim also demands \$120,000 in compensatory damages (\$30,000 per plaintiff) for being exposed to the book in a library display, and the resignation of West Bend Mayor Kristine Deiss for "allow[ing] this book to be viewed by the public."

The first thing that jumped out at me was that these people were seeking damages for merely *seeing* the book displayed. I suppose it shouldn't come as a surprise that they apparently haven't actually *read* the work in question.

But then, I have a sneaking suspicion that what they did read was a series of talking points, handed out by one extreme right-wing group or another (perhaps Braun's CCLU? Or maybe they just took a cue from some of the [other attempts](#) to ban the book), describing the contents and themes of *Baby Be-Bop*. The highly acclaimed YA novel by [Francesca Lia Block](#), you see, is about a young man coming to terms with being gay, seeking acceptance, and finding a way to be true to himself.

If you have them, now's the time to clutch your pearls.

Again, I shouldn't be shocked. This whole controversy, couched in claims of protecting children from "sexually explicit" content, is really about homophobia. Sadly, many people still find the very idea to be repellent and an unsuitable topic of discussion at any age. And many people also feel that simply mentioning homosexuality is "sexually explicit," even when nothing naughty ever happens.

Full disclosure: I have not had occasion to read *Baby Be-Bop* (though I'm deeply tempted now), though all of the reviews I've seen recommend a 12-and-up age limit for it. If there is a bit of bad language in the book, then that seems about right to me. But this idea that adolescents and teenagers should be coddled and kept away from material that deals with such subjects as sexuality in a frank and honest manner is both dangerous and patronizing.

And the idea, ridiculously still pervasive, that equates "gay" with "sex" is something we as a society have a lot to learn about. Even if that were the case, we can't go on trying to keep all sexual information away from our children. At least, not if we want them to live relatively happy, healthy lives.

In the meantime, how about we stop trying to destroy their books? And how about the likes of Braun and the Maziarkas get a new hobby, preferably one that doesn't involve infringing on the most basic rights of their fellow citizens.