

Challenged Materials Committee Notes

Material Being Challenged:

Library Book: *It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* by Theresa Thorn

Date of Challenge Committee Meeting: 12/21/22 & 3/15/22

Regulation 6241 outlines that the Challenged Materials Committee shall:

- Examine and/or read the challenged resource
- Determine professional acceptance by reading critical reviews of the resource
- Weigh positives and negatives and form opinions based on the material as a whole rather than on passages or sections taken out of context
- Discuss the challenged resource in the context of the educational program
- Prepare a written report which states the decision, rationale for the decision, and the official vote (without identifying votes of individual members of the committee)
- Recommend that the questioned materials be retained without restriction, retained with restriction or not retained

Agenda:

1. Norms and meeting operation
2. Parent concerns over the material
3. Library policy and procedures
4. Value of the material
5. Committee decision

Library Media Information Shared with the Committee

The Rockwood School District believes inclusive library media services and access for all students and staff will raise levels of student performance. Therefore, the Rockwood Library Media Program strives to provide welcoming library spaces, robust collections of materials, and dynamic library media instruction that will empower students to become critical thinkers, ethical users of information, responsible and engaged citizens, and lifelong learners and readers.

- page 3 of *The RSD Library Media Handbook*

Professional Reviews & Awards Regarding This Material

- School Library Journal Starred, 08/01/2019
- Booklist Starred Reviews, 04/15/2019
- Publishers Weekly Starred, 04/01/2019
- Kirkus Reviews Starred, 03/15/2019
- Missouri Dogwood Award List K-2, 2021

School Library Journal Starred, 08/01/2019

K-Gr 2-This elegant picture book is a welcome addition to the world of LGBTQ+ publications for young readers. Thorn explains the concepts of cisgender, transgender, and non-binary in simple, accessible language. Thorn depicts each of these gender identities with realistically diverse examples, including a non-binary child who identifies as both a boy and a girl and a non-binary child who identifies as neither. When Ruthie, a transgender girl, tells her family that she is really a girl, they hug her. The text below the heartwarming illustration says: "Oops! Ruthie was a girl all along—they just didn't know it at first." The well-written story is enhanced by illustrations rendered in watercolor, gouache, and ink. Grigni seizes every opportunity for detail and uses colors that are vibrant and summery with jewel-toned greens, teals, magentas, and purples. A glossary expands on some of the terms explained throughout the book and brings in new ones, such as sex assigned at birth and intersex. The author includes a note about pronouns and resources for kids and adults. With its captivating illustrations and simple language with word repetition, this book would be an exceptional read-aloud for classrooms or storytime, or for an adult reading one-on-one with a child. A must-have for all libraries serving children.-Shira Pilarski, Farmington Community Library, MI

Booklist Starred Reviews, 04/15/2019

Grades 1-3 - *Starred Review* Ruthie, a transgender girl, and her cisgender brother, Xavier, are the first two characters readers meet in this ambitious book for the youngest readers about gender identity. Next up is Alex, who is both a boy and a girl; and here comes JJ, who is neither. Together, these four kids epitomize the sometimes bewildering multiplicity of gender identities kids may encounter in their real lives, for, as Thorn writes, "There are a never-ending number of ways to be yourself in the world." Thorn does a generally good job of dealing with these, er, thorny concepts, though—for full clarity—the book begs adult involvement in the reading experience. The adults will be helped by the presence of an appended glossary, an additional resource list, and a note on pronouns; speaking of which, the character JJ employs the gender-nonspecific they and them. Grigni's boldly outlined but rather flat pictures—executed in watercolor, gouache, and ink—will help kids conceptualize the terms they're encountering. The illustrators also expand the text by depicting gay and lesbian characters, boys wearing skirts, mixed-race couples, a character in a wheelchair, and an assortment of races and ethnicities. Obviously, as the song has it, we're living in a big, wide wonderful world. And this book is a welcome addition to it, as it fills a large gap in the literature.

Publishers Weekly Starred, 04/01/2019

Thorn offers an inclusive primer about gender that integrates vocabulary words and definitions into the text ("Non-binary is a helpful word that can describe a kid who doesn't feel exactly like a boy or a girl"). Illustrations feature gender-expansive individuals going to school, making art, and spending time with family, normalizing the expressions. With heavy lines and textured forms, the images by #OwnVoices illustrator Grigni are a blend of jewel-toned shapes with textured lines reminiscent of block prints. The spirit of free expression and creativity infuses every spread of this inclusive exploration. Ages 4-8. (May)

Kirkus Reviews Starred, 03/15/2019

This expansive, straightforward framing of gender emphasizes curiosity, joy, and positive self-expression. In Thorn's uplifting picture-book debut, young readers meet four children: Ruthie, a thin, transgender girl with light brown skin; Xavier, Ruthie's cisgender brother, who also has brown skin; Alex, a pale-skinned, round-bodied kid who is "both a boy and a girl"; and JJ, a brown-skinned child who uses a wheelchair and who is "neither a boy nor a girl." Through plain, intentional language, Thorn normalizes each child's gender identity and skillfully introduces the multifaceted concept of nonbinary gender: "Just like there are many different ways to be a boy or a girl, there are many different ways to be non-binary—too many to fit in a book!" As the main characters move through their vibrant neighborhood, families and children are portrayed with a prismatic array of gender expressions, skin colors, and physical features. Nonbinary illustrator Grigni's full-bleed images are

magical in their jewel-toned palette. Among gender-centered picture books, this one stands out for its dazzling #ownvoices art and its simple yet nuanced phrasing—particularly when Ruthie shares her true gender with her family, and her parents (an interracial couple) respond with a loving group hug. “Oops! Ruthie was a girl all along—they just didn’t know it at first.” Giving kids and adults a hopeful model for discussing (and embracing) one another’s gender is just one of the gifts offered by this valuable narrative. Exceptional. (glossary, resources, note on pronouns, author’s note, illustrator’s note) (Picture book. 3-9)

Concerns the Challenger Shared Regarding the Book *It Feels Good to Be Yourself; A Book About Gender Identity* by Theresa Thorn

- This book is geared toward elementary students as young as Kindergarten and Preschool.
- This book deals with gender identity, a topic that is complex and should be taught at home with parents and medical professionals.
- This book is colorful, making it appealing to many kids who are reading to pick it up and read it.
- The book discusses sexuality and private parts.
- These topics should be a parent’s decision as to how, if and when we discuss it.
- Why is there a book about gender identity in the school? This is a topic for a pediatrician or endocrinologist.
- There is no guidance for children who may pick up this book.
- This could open up discussions that a parent may not be ready to have.

Committee’s Comments on the Value of This Material

1st Discussion Comments - December 21, 2021

- The author does a good job of taking a complex topic for children and explaining it with simplicity.
- There is a great deal of diversity in the book—skin tone, body types, etc.
- This book serves a purpose for students who need mirrors on this topic.
- The book is welcoming as a whole.
- The illustrations are high quality and appealing to kids.
- This book encourages dialogue and discussion that is supported by a glossary and resources.
- The book takes away the stereotypes of boy vs. girl.
- The book provides a jumping start to talk with kids.
- The challenger said something about private body parts. This book does not discuss genitalia or body parts at all. It sticks to gender identity, not sexual orientation.

Note: The group determined that they did not want to remove the book, but weren’t sure what the final decision should be. They wanted time to process their thoughts and seek opinions from additional elementary staff who work with students including counselors and administrators. They wanted to reconvene after Winter Break to reach a final recommendation.

2nd Discussion Comments - March 15, 2022

- The discussion from the previous meeting was reviewed. The group verified that no one wanted to ban the book. The discussion is what do we do with the book and where do we put the book.
- Three elementary counselors were asked for their thoughts on the book, and they wanted to make sure students had access to the book.
- Two elementary administrators were asked for their thoughts on the book, and they felt that kids could have supported conversation with the right adults if the book was available in the library and a student chose to check it out.
- It was shared that in some buildings, kindergartners can check three books out at a time, but only take one home so it’s possible this would be the book not going home and parents not seeing it.
- Others said they wanted it available, but they wanted to make sure students had adult support.

- If the book remains in Destiny, all adults can access Destiny to know what books are available. A committee member asked whether the group could decide to put the book somewhere else and keep it in Destiny, but students would need to ask for the book. At this point, committee members who hadn't spoken were asked to share their thoughts on this recommendation.
 - Can the book be marked that it is restricted and keep it in a different location, like behind a desk, but still say it's available? (Yes - we could put a location other than the open shelves.)
 - Can that location be in the counselor's office? That would solve the problem of parents seeing it, but not on the shelf. However, there may be other parents who say why isn't this book available?
 - The book could be in the reserved section.
 - You can't make everybody happy.
 - We could say a parent can call and tell a counselor to send it home with their child.
 - If the parent did not want their child to read it, would they be able to put that on their child's account? (Yes. It is district practice that any parent can ask the parent to note on their child's account that their child cannot check out a book or type of books.)
 - It was noted that the district now has the ability to send a daily email to parents wishing to know what their child(ren) have checked out.
- The committee continued with their conversation and shared these thoughts.
 - I would feel more comfortable deciding that if a parent wants access to know what their child is reading, they can request that from the librarian. I do not feel comfortable putting it on a reserved shelf. My daughter, who is more conservative, said she would just read it and ask questions. I feel like we are trying to pretend that things don't exist.
 - I am not comfortable restricting the book, but am comfortable letting parents add their names to a list to receive daily reminders of what their child has checked out.
 - There are children out there whose parents are not ready to have this conversation, but the child may have questions. Ask a child when they check out the book, let me know if you want to discuss.
 - Restricting the book would be going down a slippery slope saying this one's ok, but this one is not. Are we going to restrict every book that mentions more than two genders?
 - If we keep the book in the counselor's office, librarians are going to say why am I buying this book if they are not available in the library? Let the counselor's office buy the book.
 - Our school had a father who was transitioning to be a woman. His child could have used this book to help him understand. Other children could read the book and understand as students were making fun. We can't shield our kids from everything. This book may have made it more understanding for this child and the other children.

Committee members who had not spoken at this point were asked for their thoughts.

- I tend to go with what is being said. If my kids want to read this book, then they should read the book, and it should be available in the library.
- We shouldn't restrict the book if we have the ability to tell parents their child's daily check out, and they can specify that they don't want their child checking out this book.
- Parents tell the librarian that their child can check out this book, can the librarian see if they want to talk about it?
- Is there a way to flag a book so counselors know who to talk to? We have a list of kids whose parents don't want them to read certain books. We take the books away from these children without bringing attention to it.
- Can we put a note in Destiny saying an adult needs to follow up with the student when they are scanned out? (Yes, we can even have it pop up on the screen to bring attention to the librarian.) That way it's still accessible, they don't have to search by name. Parents can put restrictions on what they don't want their child to read, but still make sure there is a trusted adult who knows they are checking out these types of books.
- Putting a note on the book to have follow-up with an adult is putting a lot of pressure on our librarians and counselors. If we are saying every time a book like this is checked out, somebody needs to follow up with them. Makes me nervous. What if a child needs it, and somebody else has it checked out?

- Feedback from guidance is a good resource for them to refer to. Our feelings jump to beyond fact. What does it look like beyond. Three students were transgender on a recent Smokey Mountain trip and each one was completely unique and needed different things. There are a lot of feelings. It is a great resource, we just need to know where to house and how it's used depending on each unique situation.
- I feel like what you said about the three students that identify as transgender and their unique needs, supports the reason this book is needed. As a librarian, this would not be putting too much pressure on us.
- Transgender books have only been checked out once here and there. Kids are not banging down doors to get the books. They are being checked out by those who are needing them.

The committee members were then asked whether someone would like to propose a recommendation for this book. A committee member then proposed: Keep the book in Destiny, but move to the counseling office - can we all live with this option? Committee comments:

- Yes, this is a reasonable solution.
- How will this look in terms of the ACLU? The American Library association will say it is censorship. Not sure what the ACLU will say or where they will fall.
- I don't love that option. Can I live with it, maybe, but I really don't like it. I have a kindergartner and a 4th grader. The 4th grader read it and just kinda said ok. The kindergartner read it, said I'm a boy and then went to play. There is nothing wrong with letting them read it.
- Does every kid know how to find it in Destiny? How are they going to know what to search for if it's not on a shelf? Most kids default to doing a keyword search. Some kids are not going to know what to type in when they are questioning themselves. It's not going to pop up what they need. Not the easiest to find unless you know exactly what to say.
- Could I live with this option? Yes. But, do I think it's the best choice, no. These books are not being checked out on a regular basis. If they are not being checked out very often, then it is not putting too much on our counselors and librarians. Sounds like counselors and librarians would rather have to keep an eye on what students are checking out, then put it in another location.
- Maybe put it behind a counter, but where kids can still see it.
- Not talking about if it's right or wrong, just making sure the kids have the help they need.
- The book should be in general circulation, but put a flag or notification on it. Not judging with my situation, but thinking about kids who don't have the support.
- Should not be in restriction, but be available to everybody.
- More ideal to have accessible in general circulation.
- Kids might not know to go search for something like that. But the kids who need it, should have access to it.
- If parents feel strongly enough that they don't want their kids to have access, then they can put a restriction on their child's account.
- A good idea to be available, but someone would be available to help them out.

A Second proposal was then made by a committee member- Keep the book in circulation, note on the book for librarians to follow up with teacher, parent or counselor. Parents have the option to see what their child is reading and can request a daily email of what their child has checked out. They can also put a block on the book. Committee comments:

- What stops a child from picking up the book and just looking at it and not checking it out?
- Some kids linger and if they linger, the librarians keep an eye on them. The libraries keep a list of kids whose parents don't want them to look at certain books and they know to watch that child. Would need conversation with librarians, counselors and administration to make them aware.
- It would be more for the librarians to do if the book is kept behind the desk.
- It is censorship to put the book behind the desk or in the counselor's office.
- Most parents are not looking over their kids shoulder to know what they are doing online. Why should we take that approach with books?
- Most kids are not going to just pick up this book.
- I can live with this option. Making sure it is getting in the hands of the right person.

- Can we put more keywords in Destiny so it does pull up more books? (Yes, we can add those subject terms. That would help those that are looking for the book at the right time and will also help parents know which books they don't want their kids to read.)
- Need a better way to search for it with better words. This would benefit students and parents.
- It isn't any more important for a child to not see or have access to it. Each is equally important.
- The parents have an option to have their child not see it. Small chance that they will see the book.
- It does not talk about sex.
- If they are not aware of the situation, they are not going to understand it anyway.
- Librarians are always there helping students find the books they want. Our librarians are amazing and watch them.
- It is censorship and it's a huge red flag if we put it behind a counter.
- I think them picking up the book and thumbing through it is not going to hurt anything.

The committee was asked again if they all could live with the second proposal - Keep the book in circulation, note on the book for librarians to follow up with teacher, parent or counselor. Parents have the option to see what their child is reading and can request a daily email of what their child has checked out. They can also put a block on the book. Committee comments:

- There is another graphic novel that the committee deemed for 4th and 5th graders only. It is on the shelf, but only 4th and 5th graders can check it out.
- The message is to accept people for who they are.
- Genuinely, this is a positive book.
- Realistically it is a harmless book, but has a controversial subject.
- We should keep the book as is and follow up after checkout as needed.
- This book was written for a primary school audience.
- Our librarians are very good at steering children away from certain books. We have some students whose parents don't want them to read certain things, and it is marked in Destiny so librarians don't give them those books. These are the things that librarians do all day, this is their job. We navigate restrictions well and it wouldn't be anymore to ask them to watch another book.

The committee was asked one final time whether they could live with the second proposal.

- The majority of the committee members reached consensus and agreed to recommend that the book be retained in the library. A note will be placed on the book for librarians to follow up with the teacher, parent or counselor. Parents have the option to see what their child is reading and can request a daily email of what their child has checked out. They can also put a block on the book.
- One committee member did not indicate that they could live with this recommendation.

Committee Decision is to Retain the book in school libraries with a note in Destiny.

How does the decision impact the accessibility of the material moving forward?

The book will remain in circulation, but will have a flag in Destiny alerting the librarian to follow up with the teacher, counselor or parent to ensure a trusted adult is aware that the child may have questions or want to discuss the book.