

Challenged Materials Committee Report

Material Being Challenged:

Library Book: *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson

Date of Challenge Committee Meeting: 12/7/21

Regulation 6241 outlines that the Challenged Materials Committee shall:

- Examine and/or read the challenged resource
- Determine professional acceptance by reading critical review 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. Committee Discussion of the Value of the material
5. Committee consensus

Library Media Information Shared with the Committee

Library Mission Statement from the Rockwood Library Handbook

- 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

Intellectual Freedom

- Intellectual freedom, as guaranteed by the First Amendment, is a core value of the library media profession and a basic right in our democratic society. The school library media program in the Rockwood School District will play a role in the promotion of intellectual freedom and serve as a point of voluntary access and offer opportunities for all students to learn in an atmosphere of free inquiry. Every student regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual orientation shall be given equal access to library media resources.

-page 4 of The RSD Library Media Handbook

Collection Development

- In managing the library collection, the library media specialist shall be mindful of the objectives listed in Regulation 6310. In addition, the library media specialist shall also:
 - Consider the importance of diverse literary representation. The collection should provide literature that serves as both mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors so students are exposed to books and characters that reflect their own experiences as well as experiences of others.
 - Consider the degree of user appeal as measured by reviews in professional library journals and

inclusion on award lists, including but not limited to the Missouri Association of School Librarians Readers' Awards lists, the Young Adult Library Services Association Awards lists, and the Association for Library Services to Children Awards lists.

- page 6 of The RSD Library Media Handbook

Professional Reviews & Awards Regarding This Material

Awards:

- ALA Teens' Top 10 2021
- Chicago Public Library Best Teen Titles 2020
- Booklist, 3/1/2020
- Kirkus Reviews Starred, 2/15/2020
- Publishers Weekly, 4/20/2020
- School Library Journal, 5/2020
- New Jersey - New Jersey Garden State Teen Book Award Nominees 2022: Nonfiction Grades 6-12
- Texas - Texas Topaz Nonfiction Reading List 2021

Professional Reviews:

- **School Library Journal, 05/01/2020**
Gr 9 Up—Journalist and activist Johnson takes readers through his life from childhood through young adulthood, reflecting on how his identity as a queer Black boy was shaped, refracted, and often suppressed for his own safety. Growing up in New Jersey, Johnson recounts becoming aware of his "difference" and how it necessitated choices between who he was and who he felt pressured to be. Part memoir and part manifesto, the text infuses personal reflections with observations about white supremacy, toxic masculinity, homophobia, and how these concepts affected him, whether as a boy forced to choose football over double dutch at recess or as a fraternity pledge struggling to come out on campus. Separated into acts, the book describes different members of his community (family, teenagers, friends)—a stylistic demonstration of his valuable support system that occasionally makes the narrative choppy. Still, the various tangents don't detract from the book's power, and the conversational tone will leave readers feeling like they are sitting with an insightful friend. There are a few detailed depictions of sexual situations and an incident of sexual abuse by a family member. Johnson handles the painful, complicated feelings around this experience with an honesty and tone appropriate for the intended audience. VERDICT This young adult memoir is a contemporary hallmark of the blossoming genre. Johnson anchors the text with encouragement and realistic guidance for queer Black youth. Recommended for YA nonfiction collections where autobiographical and social justice titles are popular.—Ashleigh Williams, School Library Journal
- **Publishers Weekly, 04/20/2020**
Billed as a "memoir-manifesto," Johnson's debut is a collection of heartfelt personal essays revolving around themes of identity and family. Growing up black and queer in New Jersey and Virginia, Johnson feels a tension between these two identities, even before he's fully conceptualized what makes him stand out from others in his close-knit family. The loving Elder/Johnson clan, led by witty matriarch Nanny (whose take on familial loyalty and intimacy is "You might have to wipe my ass one day"), includes Johnson's cousin Hope, a trans woman who models pride and self-determination. Johnson makes impassioned declarations about the importance of community and inclusive sex education, and the freedom to define oneself outside of society's conditioning. Though at first glance the book lacks the synthesizing call to action that "manifesto" would imply, its "be yourself" message remains a radical stance for doubly marginalized individuals. Johnson's writing is a stylistic hodgepodge of anecdotes ("story time," he periodically declares) and letters to relatives. In a publishing landscape in need of queer black voices, readers who are sorting through similar concepts will be grateful to join him on the journey. 14-up.

- **Booklist, 03/01/2020**

Grades 9-12 - With this title, Johnson offers his memoir-manifesto of growing up queer before he had the language to know exactly what that meant. Split into three parts, Johnson's book shares intimate stories of his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as he navigates family, friends, and the performance of masculinity. Discussion of his stories includes theory and statistical information that tie his ideas and struggles in with a larger intersectional identity. Johnson struggles with finding his YA voice. Though it's clear that his stories and experiences are formative to his identity as a Black queer boy (now man), they pour out with an intensity that may lead readers to feelings of confusion about the main point of the book. The severe lack of #OwnVoices books from Black queer men makes this title an absolute necessity, but it may fall to the wayside for cultural outsiders. Nevertheless, the personal stories and the healing and reconciliation of self in this title are all undeniably honest and relatable—a reminder of our shared imperfection and humanity.

- **Kirkus Reviews, 02/15/2020**

Centers the experiences, desires, and agency of a queer black boy navigating his evolving selfhood and the challenges of society's conditional love for his truthful existence. Queer black existence has been here forever, and yet rarely has that experience been spotlighted within literature aimed at black boyhood. This is the context in which this "memoir-manifesto" begins, as Johnson, a still relatively young 33-year-old journalist and activist, debuts his unfolding life story within a vacuum of representation. These stories wrestle with "joy and pain...triumph and tragedy" across many heavy topics—gender policing, sexual abuse, institutional violence—but with a view to freedom on the horizon. Through the witnessing of Johnson's intimate accounts, beginning with his middle-class New Jersey childhood and continuing through his attendance at a historically black university in Virginia, readers are invited on their own paths to healing, self-care, and living one's truth. Those who see themselves outside the standpoint of being black and queer are called in toward accountability, clarifying an understanding of the history, language, and actions needed to transform the world—not in pity for the oppressed but in the liberation of themselves. This title opens new doors, as the author insists that we don't have to anchor stories such as his to tragic ends: "Many of us are still here. Still living and waiting for our stories to be told—to tell them ourselves." A critical, captivating, merciful mirror for growing up black and queer today. (Memoir. 14-adult)

Concerns the Challenger Shared Regarding The Book *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson

- Authors inclusion of explicit sex scenes are a concern.
- Detailed description of explicit sex acts, positions, molestation (encounter goes on for three full pages , 271), sodomy, incest, sex abuse with an older cousin are a concern.
- Challenger read Page 266: "He reached his hand down and pulled out my dick. He quickly went to giving me head...watch your teeth. I slowed down and got into a good rhythm. I did my best to act like my favorite porn star. His body felt great in my mouth."
- Challenger read Page 271: "Nervous and drunk, I listened and got on my stomach. He got on top and slowly inserted himself into me. It was the worst pain I think I had ever felt in my life. He then added more lube and tried again."
- Page 267: "For the first few minutes, we dry humped and grinded."
- Other passages of concern that were shared on the Challenge form: pages 201 and 204.
- I understand that it's in the library's best interest that we are seeing all perspectives. I'm ok with that. Surely there are books that can have that perspective without the sex scenes. Not good for readers and could make them biased.
- The issue is not with the author, it's the sex scenes. This book has been removed in eight different states.
- This is not about banning books, but what is inappropriate at school. Students can get this book elsewhere, but I am questioning it because it is at school. We trust that these types of books are not

available at the school.

- It is up to parents to determine what their children can read. The only way to assure that is to remove these types of books from the library.
- How do these books get into the library in the first place? I emailed the high school librarians and nobody answered this question. However, it is not possible for the librarians to read all the books. If you read the summary of these books, there is no way to tell what is in the book. Online reviews help, but some other way is warranted.
- Categorizing the books would help a lot. For example, rate like movies for language, violence, sexual content.
- These books are not kept behind the counter to keep kids from looking through the pages.

Committee's Comments on the Value of This Material

- The author's note at the very beginning says it all about the value of the book (a committee member read parts of it). In it, the author shares his purpose in writing the book was to tell his story to help those who may have to navigate some of the same experiences that he had.
- Pages 11 and 12: "I lived in that isolation for all those years in high school. I saw snippets of queer representation in small television roles. They were rarely played by people who looked like me. But it was never to the extent that I ever gained the confidence to be that person."
- Page 13: "I remember being nervous about writing a book like this. I wasn't sure it was my story to tell. In writing this, though, I realized that I wasn't just telling my story. I was telling the story of millions of queer people who never got a chance to tell theirs."
- Page 295: "There were no books for me to read in order to understand what I was going through as a kid. I released the deepest and darkest things about my past in the hopes that someone might see a reflection of themselves in the words and know that they are not alone, and they too can grow and thrive." Book has a lot of value to black, gay men and the value is that there are not many of these books out there.
- The author's own words explaining why he wrote the book show that this book is important.
- Page 212: The challenger talked about the abuse, but the disclaimer on this page makes it clear that it was wrong: "I want to reiterate his actions were wrong, and I was a victim.... Make it a requirement to hold your abuser accountable."
- Page 212 : "I'm now okay with ending this part of the past on this page. I can only hope this story frees someone else who may be holding guilt from an encounter with an abuser."
- This book spoke to me even though I am the opposite of a gay male. I never considered that perspective, and I learned things from this book. This was a really well-balanced voice.
- Page 212: There is a disclaimer at the end concerning the rape in which he says "Make it a requirement to hold your abuser accountable." There are probably students who have been abused and blame themselves, so this statement is very important to help understand what someone goes through.
- I loved the Book! My children are going to be encouraged to read it. Even though I did not experience any of these things in my life, I would encourage every teen to read this book because of the insight into somebody else's life and for those who did experience it to give them a voice. Those who lived this may need to feel seen and not alone. Suicide rates are currently so high because people feel alone.
- Page 85: "You sometimes don't know you exist until you realize someone like you existed before". That message was constant throughout the book. It reflected representation and to help the reader become more understanding. It gives everyone a sense of what it's like to be this person.

Questions the Committee Asked

How did the challenger learn

The challenger heard about it from other parents.

about this book?	
What does “retain with restriction” mean?	Retain without restriction means a student could only check it out with parental permission. The book would not be kept on the shelf, but behind the desk. They would need to come and ask for it. In the library world having restricted books is not considered a best practice.
Are there any high school library books that are currently kept behind the desk (restricted)?	No.

Committee’s Rationale and the Decision	
Rationale and Discussion Points the Committee Shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I feel like this book may save someone’s life at some point. Even though I’m not like him, I still felt connected. ● I am not a black, gay man but felt very connected while reading as we all struggle one way or another. Even though he has a loving family, he still felt all alone with no one to talk to. Just because stories are painful doesn’t mean they should be wiped from the record. We learn from pain. ● Page 297: “Whether this book is a bestseller or a flop, if one person is helped by my story, then it was all worth it.” We have kids in our school that might need this book. ● Though I wish everyone could read this to help them understand, I do not agree that this would make somebody biased against this person. ● I am puzzled by the statement about the book possibly making the reader biased. Objection about this book reinforcing or creating prejudice is not an argument. According to recent research queer black males are less likely to receive mental health care. This ties into the problem that this book is available elsewhere. There are kids who do not have the infrastructure to get this book.
Consensus of the committee	The committee decided to retain the book as a library book without restriction.
How does the decision impact the accessibility of the material moving forward?	The book will remain in the school’s library as a choice for students to check out. Parents may contact the librarian if they want to restrict access to this book for their child.