

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 6 | Number 1
August 2024

I Will Not Be Silent

Amanda Jones
Independent Scholar

<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl>

Recommended Citation: Jones, Amanda. "I Will Not Be Silent," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2024.

It seems like every time I blink I hear about a new attempt at censorship somewhere in the United States, and the story is the same no matter the location. Extremists are showing up at public library board and school board meetings declaring the indoctrination of pornography and Critical Race Theory by librarians. Somehow, I must have missed the college class that taught me how to indoctrinate children, but those claims have been leveled at me personally, and I have been vilified and ostracized in my rural Louisiana town. In July of 2022, I spoke out against censorship at a public library board meeting. Since then, people have called me names, used Bible verses as weapons against me, threatened me with physical harm, and told lies about me on social media so intense that they took a physical and emotional toll on me to the point that I had to go on medical leave from my job as a school librarian.

What I've noticed is that those who villainize librarians will not hesitate to label anyone who stands against censorship as a pedophile, a groomer, or some other harmful term no matter how untrue. They have no qualms about making up lies to further their agenda to great effect. People I have known most of my life have seen me in town and refused to speak to me, all for the crime of speaking out against censorship. At this point, I might as well wear a giant L for librarian on my shirt, reminiscent of Hester Prynne's giant red A from *The Scarlet Letter*. I never imagined a world where librarians could be treated so poorly for standing up for intellectual freedom. To me, though, it is not just about doing our jobs of defending intellectual freedom, but about being empathetic, just, and broad-minded human beings who are capable of understanding that we are not all the same and that is okay.

I am concerned about what these book challenges and bans are doing to our society. The people pushing censorship will tell you they are "protecting the children," but what they don't say out loud is that they really don't want their white, straight children to learn about other

cultures, races, religions, and sexual identities. White Christian nationalists will say there is pornographic content in children's literature, but this is a false flag to ban books by or about the LGBTQIA+ community. Some will announce at board meetings that there are adult books in the children's section of libraries, but upon closer look at the titles, the lists contain picture books like *Julián is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love or middle grade books like *New Kid* by Jerry Craft, both of which do not contain a single piece of adult or sexual content. Not even Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry has been able to identify book titles in the children's section that would be considered pornographic by Louisiana law, but that didn't stop him from creating a reporting portal. This reporting portal, dubbed The Snitch Line by Louisiana residents, was created so that concerned citizens could report educators, librarians, school board members, and library supervisors for using tax-payer money for the sexualization of children. What a way to instill fear and sow the seeds of doubt about people who have devoted their lives to literature and public service.

To me, these lies, censorship attempts, and smear campaigns are unacceptable. All children deserve to see themselves and their families represented in the books they read and deserve the chance to explore other cultures and worlds. Librarians and educators should be able to do their jobs without worrying about the possibility of being defamed or attacked. I am tired of us being used as a political pawn for politicians pandering for votes. The fear instilled leads to soft censorship. I hear from librarians all the time who are scared to order books due to fear of losing their jobs or having their reputations smeared. What is happening is damaging to our collections, which in turn is damaging to our students and patrons.

I refuse to sit back and idly watch the coordinated censorship attempts of extremists to relocate and remove books that target historically marginalized communities in my state. I show

up to board meetings and defend books and library policies, I give interviews to media outlets whenever I am asked, and I speak out against the name-calling and bullying tactics being used. If the extremists want me to be silent, I will do the opposite and I will roar. That's why I founded the Livingston Parish Library Alliance (LPLA), a group of citizens who strive to educate our community on collection development, the effects of harmful rhetoric, and how censorship attempts almost always target books by or about the LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities.

As president of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians, I created an online censorship toolkit for school and public librarians, and I also joined forces with Lynette Mejia and Melanie Brevis, of Lafayette, to create Louisiana Citizens Against Censorship (LaCAC). Through LaCAC, we hope to encourage citizens of other parishes to create their own library alliances, and we hope to unite all 64 parishes by providing monthly newsletters, articles, toolkits, and resources to help combat the bigotry-fueled censorship we are seeing pop up all over our state. What the book challenges and bans boil down to is a concerted effort to further exclude historically marginalized communities; by neglecting to tell their stories, and even worse, ban their stories, our society is sending a message that they do not matter. We must make a collaborative effort to unite and stop them, because the extremists will not stop until they have passed legislation to further harm our communities, changed the rules of library boards, and stopped the funding of our libraries.

One of the biggest challenges I have seen is finding people who are not afraid to speak out. This is where public and school librarians must work together. Oftentimes, public librarians are limited from speaking freely as a civil servant at public library board meetings. Those rules don't apply to them speaking as parents and concerned citizens at school board meetings. School librarians can sometimes fear retaliation from speaking against their school systems at school

board meetings, but on the flip side, they cannot be penalized for speaking as a parent or concerned citizen at a public library board meeting. Now, more than ever, unification and working together are the key. Our jobs as librarians are to protect intellectual freedom; we owe it to our children and communities to show that every member of our society is invaluable, and that we will fight to provide them with the resources to help them prosper.