



## RIGHT TO READ

Robert **Bittner**  
with  
Angel Daniel **Matos**



# Fear of the Other:

Exploring the Ties between Gender, Sexuality, and Self-Censorship in the Classroom

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**T**his issue of *The ALAN Review*, broadly speaking, considers the role of “the normal” in young adult literature. Young adult literature possesses the potential to push readers—young and old—to think critically about alternate ways of being and existing in the world. While we have seen the development of exciting literature that represents new and unprecedented ways of thinking about race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and nationality, we have also seen a rise of authority figures, institutions, and readers who attempt to control and limit access to these narratives.

This is especially true when considering how much discussion of trigger warnings and other forms of self-censorship has proliferated in our contemporary milieu. After all, it was only last year that a group of students at Duke protested the placement of Alison Bechdel’s (2006) *Fun Home* on the advanced summer reading list on the grounds of the graphic novel being “pornographic.” As a scholar and an educator of queer young adult fiction (and editor of this column), I cannot help but wonder if any of my students might react similarly to some of the novels that I assign. Would they, for instance, refuse to read a queer young adult novel due to its depiction of sexuality or its explicit sexual content? If so, I wonder, how can students

think critically about a queer novel’s political stance on sexuality if they refuse to read it? Even more so, could I get into trouble for assigning such a novel to my students in the first place?

These concerns are addressed in this edition of “Right to Read,” where I have asked my friend and colleague Robert Bittner to share his perspectives and research on the complicated enmeshment of identity, censorship, and young adult literature. In particular, Robert and I discussed the possibility of focusing this column on the responsibilities that educators and librarians have in proliferating narratives that will assist young readers to challenge normativity in contemporary society. Robert is an expert on LGBTQ young adult literature who has taught courses at the university level, served on various literary awards committees (including the 2016 Michael L. Printz Award), and worked closely with the American Library Association, thus enabling him to share a unique perspective on identity and censorship in young adult texts. In the following column, he shares a compelling discussion that asks readers to think carefully about the ethical and cultural issues that arise during acts of self-censorship in our professional practices. Robert not only paints a portrait of the broad issues of gender and sexual identity that lead librarians, teachers, and scholars to engage in acts of self-censorship, he also makes a persuasive imploration for us to let young readers know that texts with emancipatory and groundbreaking representations of sexual and gender identity *do* exist.

## Censorship and “Normal”: Aren’t They Mutually Exclusive?

Robert Bittner

“It’s sort of a soft, quiet, very insidious censorship, where nobody is raising a stink, nobody is complaining, nobody is burning books. [. . .] They’re just quietly making sure it doesn’t get out there [says Barry Lyga].”

—Whelan, 2009, n.p.

I have been working with topics related to censorship for a number of years. I have kept tabs on the banning and challenging of picturebooks and young adult (YA) fiction throughout various institutions in North America, and one thing remains constant in all of these instances: people often threaten the right of young people to read books that are challenging and culturally relevant. Reasons range from keeping children innocent to finger-pointing at various sociopolitical institutions for attempting to advance a “nefarious agenda.” Much of my research on specific instances of book challenges in North America draws from second-hand stories and other sources, such as the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF). Having recently started teaching literature for undergraduate students, topics of censorship suddenly became real and close to home. I am glad to say that my choices for literature and other forms of media have not been challenged as of yet, but I understand that I am likely to encounter resistance at some point in the future. But why does this type of resistance feel inevitable? Should censorship in any form be considered a “normal” part of the process of education?

The purpose of this column is to consider approaches to the “normal,” particularly as they relate to justifications for acts of censorship. Unfortunately, fear is becoming a habitual part of education, whether it be in primary, secondary, or post-secondary educational institutions. In various fields of study in the humanities and social sciences, students, staff, administrators, and other faculty members regularly question the selection of secondary sources, such as fiction, film, biography, or images of any kind. While designing my first Introduction to Sexuality Studies course in 2015, I was struck by how often I ended

up thinking to myself, “Will this material get me in trouble?” And then I would think, “But I’m supposed to be expanding students’ minds and their faculties of critical thought/reasoning. Why is fear of retaliation making such a large impact on my media and literature choices?” Regrettably, we now live in an educational culture of fear. I am not one to simplistically blame movements aimed at helping vulnerable individuals, but trigger warnings and self-censorship are powerful and terrifying concepts that are responsible for shaping curricula and causing teachers to pull their punches out of fear of parental, student, or administrative retaliation.

I realize that this is a rather broad discussion, and so for this particular column, I focus on self-censorship<sup>1</sup> in the classroom and connections to non-normative gender and sexual identities in YA literature, both fiction and nonfiction.

## Gender Policing, Sexuality, and Self-Censorship

In a cultural moment brimming with discussions of insider/outsider authorship and racial disparity in literature as well as moments often overshadowed by fear around how to approach contentious situations—the potentially triggering, the unknown—teachers are often left in a difficult position of deciding what is appropriate to teach without incurring the wrath of parents and administrators. Unfortunately, the very institutions of education that we inhabit as teachers are not exactly open to examinations of the Other. As McEntarfer (2016) notes in *Navigating Gender and Sexuality in the Classroom*, “Far from being neutral, schools actively reproduce dominant gender norms” (p. 7). She adds that “teacher candidates must be encouraged to think critically about that role and to consider how they can disrupt those norms and the systems that create them” (p. 7). The institution itself is so entrenched in a binary understanding of “normal” when it comes to gender and sexuality (male/

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female, queer/straight) that undermining these assumptions can only occur through proactive education on such topics and through the inclusion of non-normative gender and sexual representations earlier on in the education process.

This is easier said than done, as the culture of fear produced through gender policing of “safe” spaces often discourages teachers from engaging in the controversial nature of such situations. Fear and anger associated with public, over-policed spaces

such as bathrooms and locker rooms are all the more explosive in school spaces where some believe that anything outside the norm disrupts learning and “normal” development. The fact that simple acts such as going to the restroom or changing for gym class can cause legal battles, physical violence, community disruption, and other similar reactions creates a landscape of fear in school spaces. In 2013, Jody Herman of The Williams Institute out of UCLA released a study noting that “roughly 70% of trans people have reported being denied entrance, assaulted or harassed while trying to use a restroom.” In November of 2015, a transgender student in Oregon filed a lawsuit just to be able to

use the locker room that he feels matches his gender identity and expression (Parks, 2015). There are many instances of legal battles around the right of trans youth and adults to use gender-specific restrooms and locker rooms, and this type of everyday discrimination should make one pause and consider ways in which we, as educators, treat gender within institutional settings. Classrooms are especially vulnerable spaces due to stringent policing of content in curricula by parents, school boards, and conservative groups.

Further complicating this situation is the lack of education for students and new and practicing teachers as well as the lack of understanding at higher administrative levels; the result is that schools remain hotbeds of homophobia and transphobia. Children and youth learn about social norms in classrooms. If non-normative genders and sexualities are continually avoided or erased in curricula, young people may continue to see gender variant and non-heteronormative identities as aberrant, dangerous, and/or predatory. In such a climate, not only do bullies learn that they will unlikely see any consequences for their actions, but those who do feel “different” will unlikely feel comfortable being themselves within classroom situations. According to Haskell and Burtch (2010), “Children learn early on that violating gender norms can result in stigmatization, hostility and isolation” (p. 30). What is needed, they say, is education on gendered difference. What better way to do that than in the classroom using fiction—*I am J* (Beam, 2011), *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012), *George* (Gino, 2015), and *If I Was Your Girl* (Russo, 2016)—or nonfiction/memoir—*Some Assembly Required* (Andrews, 2014) or *Rethinking Normal* (Hill, 2014)?

Within the current North American cultural climate of fear and given repeated unwillingness to celebrate diversity of gender and sexuality, the YA novel is possibly one of the most effective complementary sources of information related to tolerance, navigating queer/trans life, and gender and sexual diversity—both for trans/queer teens who wish to find books they can relate to and for non-queer/trans teens who wish to see depictions of what their peers experience in life. A significant barrier to using YA works is the fear around bringing such texts directly into any formal curricula, which means teachers need to get creative about how to expose students to such materials. Perhaps this can be achieved by creating a classroom library or verbally suggesting recommended texts when teaching certain topics. Or school librarians might add gender-diverse titles to book displays that encourage students to pick up certain titles, such as those noted earlier. Further strategies for engaging critically with texts in the classroom can be found in Sanders and Mathis’s (2013) *Gay and Lesbian Literature in the Classroom*, in which the authors encourage teachers to find texts where LGBT themes saturate the

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narrative so they are unable to be extracted or ignored in classroom discussion (pp. 1–2). The argument put forth by these scholars is that the inclusion of such texts can help to counter the heteronormative trajectory of so much secondary education in North America currently.

The acknowledgement or discussion of consequences related to homophobic and/or transphobic bullying can give a new perspective to those guilty of such bullying. This is essential, as “[e]nabling students to construct positive sexual and gender identities requires that transphobia and homophobia be acknowledged and addressed in the thick of conflict in high schools” (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 11). Education about stereotypes and the dangers of assumptions is also necessary, as such attitudes only lead to more fear, misunderstanding, and false accusation:

Persistent, negative stereotypes about the sexual promiscuity of LGBTQ people may lead students to be wary of others they “suspect” of being queer in change rooms. Stereotypes equating sexual predation and homosexuality cause people to fear victimization unnecessarily and to police spaces where they feel vulnerable. Lack of adult oversight can increase feelings of vulnerability. (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 39)

While this previous passage provides a relatively practical discussion about bullying and other actionable situations taking place in schools, the place of censorship of literary materials should not be forgotten or misunderstood. According to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, one of the main reasons for books to be challenged or banned in institutions throughout North America is the inclusion of “homosexuality” and “sexually explicit” content. How does this relate to my previous discussion of gender, gendered assumptions, and homophobic/transphobic bullying? Gendered behaviors are often conflated with sexuality, as “People make stereotypical assumptions about one’s sexuality based on gender expression. . . . Gender plays a large role in what is often deemed homophobic harassment, and these events are not just about sexual orientation; discomfort with gender nonconformity is also likely a factor” (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 13).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2004) “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” brings to light some of the troubling reasons why societies struggle to allow children to express non-normative gender identities. The defini-

tion of gender identity disorder of childhood<sup>2</sup> assumes that there is something inherently female (or at least not male) about dressing or acting a certain way. I

bring this up to give a concrete explanation for why there is such fear around certain types of gendered behaviors, emphasizing the need for increased education on the subject. Psychologically and culturally speaking, these assumptions mean that a boy only needs to desire wearing a dress to be suddenly considered strange at best and suffering from a

psychological disorder at worst. A boy’s desire to wear a dress or a girl’s desire to wear her hair in a “boy” cut go against the grain of normative benchmarks of development. Because these benchmarks have become so integral in North American society, any form of opposition to regulatory assumptions of development is met with fear and suspicion, and schools are rife with such fears. Gender and sexuality are conflated, giving a false impression to adults who fear that homosexuality is being pushed on their teens and children. Gender expression gets easily associated with sexual identity, thus causing unnecessary concern from peers and adults. That being said, one need only pick up *Parrotfish* (Wittlinger, 2007), *I Am J* (Beam, 2011), or any number of YA texts with trans or gender-nonconforming themes to see that this conflation is refuted routinely in youth literature.

I am hopeful that within the next decade or so, the findings of professionals in the medical and psychology communities will trickle down to the general population. In time, society at large will ideally internalize the difference between gender and sexuality, helping to eliminate, or at least reduce, panic in those who currently fear non-normative gender expression. Until such time as these topics become cultural “commonsense” knowledge, however, we are at least beginning to see the emergence of queer texts for young people in the form of transgender and genderqueer fictional and nonfictional protagonists. These representations can (and should) be used in classrooms, or should at least be made available for young people to

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access within classroom or school libraries in order to expand their understanding of contemporary perspectives on gender and sexuality.

## Queer Texts and Non-normative Representations

As can be expected, queer texts are the very texts that are often subject to challenges and larger acts of censorship. The children's book *10,000 Dresses*,

written by Marcus Ewert (2008) and illustrated by Rex Ray, for instance, "has been challenged by some socially conservative organizations for its depiction of a male-bodied child who wears dresses and who the narrative refers to with female pronouns. In 2011 the book was banned in Texas schools" (NCAC, 2014). Granted, this is a children's book, and many concerns are directly related to young children, especially where almost any talk of non-normative gender and sexuality is met with panic, but even YA books with gender nonconforming protagonists have been challenged officially with increasing frequency. In 2004, Julie Anne Peters's book *Luna* (2004)—one of the first YA

novels to feature an explicitly trans character—was challenged by Audie Murphy Middle School (ACLU, 2006). These are not universal cases, and, perhaps more importantly, are not indicative of the more insidious instances of self-censorship that occur much more commonly but in a much less publicly acknowledged way.

The very concept of self-censorship is a tricky thing. There is a fine line between what some consider common sense, what others find to be simple consideration for those who are a little more sensitive, and

what still others consider a form of censorship that keeps educational opportunities hidden from students. Some even go so far as to deny that self-censorship exists as a concept. Debra Lau Whelan (2009), writing for *School Library Journal*, discusses the devious nature of self-censorship and its often denied existence in school and library professions:

Self-censorship. It's a dirty secret that no one in the profession wants to talk about or admit practicing. Yet everyone knows some librarians [and teachers] bypass good books—those with literary merit or that fill a need in their collections. The reasons range from a book's sexual content and gay themes to its language and violence—and it happens in more public and K-12 libraries [and classrooms] than you think. (n.p.)

Sometimes these decisions are made to avoid any possibility of backlash from parents, and other times they happen because teachers or school librarians employ their own sense of morality on the development of collections and curricula. Within the last few years in particular, the rise of trigger warnings has influenced the ways in which materials are chosen for the classroom. In order to avoid confronting topics that might invoke strongly emotional reactions among students, teachers simply avoid using texts that cover those topics in any way.

In their *Atlantic* article, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2015) question the use of trigger warnings, suggesting that they serve only to coddle instead of challenge the next generation of thinkers and teachers: "The ultimate aim, it seems, is to turn campuses into 'safe spaces' where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable" (n.p.). Do trigger warnings help when so many who are gender nonconforming and queer have been and often continue to be subjected to real-life abuse and harassment? Does avoidance of challenging topics cause teachers to rethink necessary and controversial texts out of fear of retaliation from students, administration, and other teachers?

## Teaching Queer Texts and Non-normative Identities

In the fall of 1993, Elizabeth Noll (1994) found herself exceptionally troubled while listening to teachers in her community speak of fear of backlash from the community and its impact on their selection of texts

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for classroom use. In Noll's survey of teachers from seven states, she found that "nearly all of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have been questioned, challenged, or censored for their use of literature" (p. 60). She also notes that "those who have been personally involved or have had close ties to incidents were more likely to express uneasiness and even fear about the threat of censorship" (p. 60). A more recent example of this fear leading to self-censorship is noted in Whelan's (2009) *School Library Journal* article. Joel Shoemaker, a secondary school teacher, writes, "I literally think about it every day. . . . I've had friends who've lost their jobs, had their marriages destroyed, developed mental and physical illnesses due to the stress of having their collection-development decisions challenged" (n.p.).

Teachers become "caught in the middle between a desire to teach according to their beliefs on the one hand and pressures to conform and use 'safe' literature on the other" (Noll, 1994, p. 63). As teachers, however, it is also our responsibility to present new and challenging ideas to students to help normalize certain concepts, such as gender and sexual difference, so that they are no longer something to fear. I am in no way suggesting that this change will be easy or quick, but it is necessary. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) discuss the necessity of teaching critical thinking and avoiding self-censorship by purposefully teaching texts that just might invite backlash but may also simultaneously result in the challenging of social expectations of what is "normal." "Questioning sometimes leads to discomfort, and even to anger, on the way to understanding" (n.p.).

In catering to trigger warnings or caving to self-censorship, the learning that comes from moments of discomfort, anger, and frustration can never take place. By encouraging teens to read more widely and focus energy on reading uncomfortable texts, teachers can help young students overcome prior biases. As noted earlier, informal reading lists or classroom libraries can be good spaces through which to increase visibility of gender nonconforming fiction and teen memoir. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) concur, writing, "Rather than trying to protect students from words and ideas that they will inevitably encounter, [teachers] should do all they can to equip students to thrive in a world full of words and ideas that they cannot control" (n.p.).

Whether you decide to take a leap and teach a YA novel with themes of gender nonconformity in your classroom or more subtly build a classroom library that students can access on their own, it is incredibly important to consciously include content on gender and sexual difference so that fear of the Other becomes a thing of the past. It is our responsibility to let students know that such literature exists, too. Young people have a right to read, and we have a responsibility to give them a wide range of resources to choose from. After all, the right to read means nothing if those of us who can promote challenging and complex literature choose instead to hide it or avoid it out of fear.

### Endnotes

1. According to Hill (2010), "What distinguishes self-censorship from actual censorship is a librarian's fear that something might happen. Second-guessing is the motivating force behind surreptitious acts like removing or misplacing a book or even restricting its access" (p. 9).
2. [A] girl gets this pathologizing label [of gender identity disorder of childhood] only in the rare case in which she asserts that she actually is anatomically male, whereas a boy can be treated for gender identity disorder of childhood if he merely asserts "that it would be better not to have a penis," or, alternatively, if he displays a "preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls" (Sedgwick, 2004, p. 141).

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