

First Place - College

The Heroes and Villains in Censorship of Young Adult Literature

I wrote my first novel with certainty that it would be censored in my hometown. As a queer writer from an insular town in Texas, I began writing LGBTQ+ literature with a mission to create characters to whom queer teenagers could relate. I wanted to feature normalized same-sex relationships in genres like fantasy, historical fiction, and science fiction where marginalized identities are often overlooked. I was driven by the desire to give queer youth the chance to see themselves in literary heroines and heroes, something I deeply desired but never had access to as a young adult.

As I wrote my first novel, the community around me began to champion a censorship crusade with the combined power of local leaders, authoritative religious groups, and lawmakers. It started quietly in the libraries. As I sat among the shelves, crafting queer heroes, books began to disappear. The first to go was a graphic novel titled *Maus*, which depicted the violence of the Holocaust. It was said to be unfit for young and sensitive eyes, illustrating the realities of historical atrocities. Next, a picture book was removed. Its title page espoused *Everyone has a Butt!* This message was deemed hardly appropriate for budding minds. Then *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel that described police brutality, went missing. It was said by local leaders to corrupt the youth with stories promoting a harmful political ideology. And, finally, the books that included same-sex relationships disappeared. Advocates claimed these books propelled messaging associated with a “harmful lifestyle” and had no place in a community library. Anything that diverged from the values of a select few was censored in a space meant to serve the needs of a diverse community. As I sent my queer characters on noble quests and harrowing adventures, members of my community supported a narrative that there could only be queer

villains. These villains lurked in neighborhoods and public spaces, corrupting children and youth through obscene books that must be removed. In response to these perceived threats, the libraries, once a safe space for openly queer and closeted youth alike, sent their message loud and clear. With every empty space on the shelves, the libraries repeated to queer patrons, “this space does not belong to you. These stories are not yours.”

Removing books from the libraries wasn't enough for the censorship crusaders. There was still more work to be done. As I finished my novel's second draft, the censorship spread like a silent plague into the public schools. Suddenly titles like *All Boys Aren't Blue* disappeared from school shelves. Queer students, already facing stigmatization in the classroom, could no longer seek solace in likeminded characters. Questioning youth could no longer turn to literature to explore facets of identity they struggled to discuss with family and friends. The message to queer students from administrators and school boards was clear: “the work of your community is not welcome here.”

The censorship was supported by mobs of angry parents concerned about the brainwashing of their children. They arrived at PTA meetings and after-school programs; righteous indignation was heard in their battle-cries. Perhaps they were driven by fear that powerful gay characters would reach through the pages and strangle their children. Maybe they were worried that the presence of positive queer representation would undermine centuries of homophobic conditioning, causing ethical crises to ripple through the schools. No matter why, it was not long before the school my younger siblings attended was cleansed of anything that resembled my budding novel. And it was not long before the censorship spread past public buildings to the neighborhoods and residences, reaching its tendrils of repression through windows and doors and wrapping itself around the minds of parents and caretakers.

As I began the final draft of my novel, the television in my family home became infected by the frantic voices of censors. Pundits and “experts” discussed day and night the dangers of polluting young minds with obscenity. They touted the narrative that communities were in the midst of a war, and books, their opposition’s weapon of choice, threatened the tranquility of life as they knew it. They painted a horrifying picture of queer villains infiltrating libraries and schools, planting appalling thoughts in the minds of children through books and curriculum. My parents parroted these talking points, eagerly exchanging them with other community members at dinner parties and bible study groups. As my family’s dinner conversation turned to books like mine, corrupting novels that had been hidden away from impressionable minds, I kept my mouth shut and eyes down. I channeled the anger that rose in my chest at the mention of the spreading censorship into my writing, pushing aside the sinking feeling that my words, too, would be subjected to the fate of the rest. I worked in secret, under the cover of night, coaxing my protagonists out of hiding, heartening them to be brave. But even they, in their strength and bravery, were stifled by the messaging that surrounded them. The constant barrage of accusations that they were not fit to be heroes infiltrated their minds like the rest of my hometown and sent them into hiding. It was at that time I realized that censorship could extend to thoughts. When I reached inside of myself for the words I hoped to share, I came up empty. Why should I write stories if no one will read them? Why create characters who will be berated and silenced? Why invite stigma for myself and my family in an unforgiving community?

After months of writer’s block and anxiety, I left my hometown for a new semester of college. I sat on my campus in Austin, far from the echo chamber of my hometown, allowing the hope that accompanied distance to wash over me. With each day came new ideas, ideas that were not criticized or suppressed by those around me. I was able to slowly shake off the shackles of

censorship. My writing was revived and my characters crawled out of hiding, spurred on by the freer environment. On campus, censorship was openly condemned, and members of marginalized communities were vocally welcomed and encouraged to share their ideas. My words flowed quickly, and my peers rallied around them. My friends and professors read my manuscript, and discussed my characters as though they had value for their unique experiences and identities.

When I finished my novel, enveloped in my university's supportive ring of advocates, I began searching for literary agents to represent my work to publishers. I searched for agents who had spoken out against censorship. I sought self-proclaimed allies who hoped to work with marginalized authors writing on controversial topics. I researched carefully to identify the perfect person with whom I could entrust my work. I needed to ensure my heroes and heroines were in good hands. After all they had been through, I owed them a fighting chance in the cutthroat world of publishing.

Unlike my hometown, on my university's campus, I had access to an active and proud community of queer students with whom I could provide and receive mutual support. With access to all the literature and resources a university had to offer, I set out to read each of the books that had been banned from Texas public schools and libraries. I furiously consumed censored work, searching for the danger in it, seeking the malicious content which supposedly threatened Texas youth. I sat in my university's library amid shelves bustling with controversial titles, pouring over the silenced stories. My university's library was an unending and unrestricted fountain of knowledge, and I was eager to explore its contents. After scouring lists of censored material and reading voraciously for months, I came up empty and confused. I could not find a single book worth the backlash it faced. I could not identify a single idea worth the fear and

retaliation it inspired. I shared these novels with my friends and peers, and they too were perplexed. Our book club of banned literature thrived, creating discourse around controversial topics. We discussed the censorship we'd all heard about, and found that it was booming not only in small towns in Texas, but across the country. We rallied around the idea of spreading silenced narratives and welcomed anyone who cared to learn about controversial novels into our unofficial book club.

In Austin, my characters thrived. They were less cautious and more certain of their permanence. Their adventures grew in scope and their relationships blossomed in number and strength. With kind advice from agents and thoughtful critiques from open-minded peers, my novel took its final form, flourishing in the freedom it was given to simply exist in the minds of the people around me. In the environment of college, I found people who responded to censorship with vocal skepticism and disapproval. On campus it was easy to find people who were passionate about the freedom of expression, who worked diligently to fight censorship's quiet encroachment.

But when I thought the conflict had ended, when the climax of my own story stretched ahead for me to discover, an obstacle arose that sent me and my characters back into hiding. On the day I signed with a literary agent – a lovely woman who promised to champion my novel to publishers across the country – my mother called me to discuss a sermon she had heard at our local church. With my life-changing news eagerly waiting to be shared, she again discussed the villains, villains who looked nearly identical to my heroes. She recounted their danger, their threat to the community and the youth, the harm they would create for my younger siblings. She mentioned the victories my hometown had won in removing dangerous books from libraries and schools. My good news grew sour in my mouth as censorship reared its ugly head, twisting and

writhing through the phone, fighting to infect anyone who would listen. That night my characters mourned, and I cried alongside them. What made them so unworthy of readership was not their qualities or plotlines, but the identities they could not change. To some, they would always be inherently dangerous, unfit for inclusion in libraries and schools. If stripped of their sexualities, they might one day grace the shelves of every library in Texas. But if they remained true to their identities, their opposition would be unrelenting. The censorship had successfully taken over. It had wormed its way into every nook and cranny of my hometown, forcing people like me to the edges of a community we once loved.

After months of editing and revising, today my agent and I are in submission to publishers. We are braving the process of pitching my novel to editors, and I remain hopeful for the book deal of my dreams. But this dream is bittersweet, and the future is bleak. There is a strong chance that, if my work is published, my family will never read or even have access to the books I write. The odds of seeing my work in the libraries of my hometown is close to zero. The discussions I have with my family about my writing career are veiled in generalities, and although my work has not yet had the chance to face the local powers of my hometown, I, and other members of my community, have been censored in other ways.

The repression of my youth stretches into adulthood. Amid homophobic messaging from my community, I avoid my childhood home. I do not discuss my identity or relationships with my parents or siblings. I do not share the writing I pour my soul into with my relatives or high school friends I was once close to. I do not know if this means that the censors have won in my personal life, but it is a reality I cope with through hope for my characters.

I am now working on my second book, unwilling to abandon my cause. In the summers, I split my time between the community that drains me and the characters that fill me with purpose

and joy. In my hometown, I remain silent when topics of censorship arise, aware that my opinion alienates me from the people I grew up around. But during the semesters on campus, I am free to speak, read, and write as I please. As a member of a university that condemns censorship and celebrates differences of belief, identity, and opinion, my thoughts have no limits. It is in that environment where my characters and novels thrive.

This story does not have a happy ending in sight. So long as diversity is censored in my hometown, branded villainous and dangerous to the community, I do not see an end to the plague that has become so deeply ingrained in daily life. As state and national legislatures support the suppression of certain voices in literature, education, and media, casting them as villains in a collective narrative, I cannot be hopeful for the future. As political leaders spread poisonous lies about the danger of certain communities and silence those communities' responses, it is no wonder that certain stories are deemed too dangerous for consumption.

In my plea to the communities affected by censorship, I do not speak to the censors. Those with the power to silence certain voices know what they are doing and refuse to relent. I do not believe they will easily put down their weapons in this battle of words. Instead, my hope is in the library-goers, the students, and the parents who seek to support the next generation of free-thinkers. To them I say, find for yourself your own heroes and villains. Seek out the ideas of every community you can. If there are certain stories kept from you, question why you are not trusted with consuming those narratives. Find the voices that are censored, and, if they speak to your experience or sensibilities, amplify them.

Reading banned books is your greatest power. Fighting for the existence of silenced literature is a fight worth undertaking. Read the novels your library threatens to remove from the

shelves and share the books your school condemns. Determine who are the true heroes and villains in your own story and fight alongside the heroes with all your might.