Statements from Authors

St. Francis Area Schools' Library Materials policy 606.5

March 24, 2025

Authors Against Book Bans

PEN AMERICA

Jodi Picoult is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of twenty-nine novels, including most recently the #1 bestseller BY ANY OTHER NAME. Her landmark novel 19 MINUTES was recently deemed the most banned book in the Unites States in a recent report conducted by PEN America.

March 24, 2025

Dear Members of the St. Francis Area Schools Board of Education,

My name is Jodi Picoult. I am a NYT #1 bestselling author of more than twenty-five novels, one of which — NINETEEN MINUTES - has been challenged and removed by school boards across the US, including St. Francis Area Schools.

The books being banned at school districts in this country tend to fall into three categories: those with sexual content, those written by BIPOC authors, those written by LGBTQ authors. In most school districts where my book has been challenged, those doing the challenging have not even read the books. They did what you did - used a list of titles from others in other communities who express “concern” for what children are being exposed to – in your case, from a deeply problematic “ratings” website run by anonymous individuals.

Make no mistake —what children are being exposed to are ideas and lives different from their own, which creates compassion and empathy. Or, in some cases, children are being exposed to ideas and lives EXACTLY like their own, which provides representation and validity and a sense of belonging. The books on these lists are not salacious or revolutionary. They are just the kind of books that help kids learn to think for themselves…which is the point of an educational system, and which is also terrifying to a certain small subset of Americans right now.

In fact, what we know is that kids who feel marginalized and read books with characters that are like themselves wind up feeling less marginalized. Kids who have never encountered someone different from them get to do so in the safe space of a book, and it leads to understanding. Books bridge divides between people. Book bans create them.

For those who have challenged my own novel without bothering to read it, let me give you a synopsis. NINETEEN MINUTES is about a school shooting, and the effects of bullying. Yet the reason it is banned is usually because of a single page that depicts a date rape, and uses anatomically correct words for the human body. It is not a gratuitous scene and it is not salacious. Yet those who challenge it call it “porn.” To be fair, if that’s your definition of porn, I feel kind of sorry for you. But I also believe that there’s nothing on that page a middle or high school kid has not read or heard before. More to the point — what does it say about our world when we are willing to yank a book about school shootings off a shelf because it has a word for genitalia in it…but we don’t regulate the guns that cause those real-life shootings. I have spoken out at countless schools across this country and have received thousands of letters and emails and there have been hundreds — HUNDREDS - of kids who said that NINETEEN MINUTES was the

reason they DIDN'T bring a gun to school and start shooting. Instead, the novel made them realize they weren't the only ones who felt so isolated.

That is what books do. They help kids see themselves in a different way; they help kids see the world in a different way. Removing books from a library or labeling them as problematic is the first step on a very slippery slope. We've already seen school districts next starting to cancel school drama productions they deem problematic. We've had challenges to curriculum by people who do not have degrees in education.

I know, as do many of my writer friends who wind up on these lists, that it is the work of a select few who are championing book challenges. What we hear most often is "Oh, that's just gonna drive up sales!" Trust me, none of us want that. What we want is for kids to be able to read what they want to read, instead of being told what they should read. We want the great majority of folks in communities who support the freedom to read to be just as loud as those select few who are making so much noise against it. We want you to stand in solidarity with us, the writers who create windows through which kids can escape and mirrors in which they can find themselves. Because we've seen what the next chapter looks like, historically, when we don't speak out against book challenges…and it's not pretty.

Best,
Jodi Picoult
#1 NYT bestselling author

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and moved to the United States in 1980. He is the author of the New York Times bestsellers The Kite Runner, A Thousand Splendid Suns, and And the Mountains Echoed. Hosseini is also a U.S. Goodwill Envoy to the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and the founder of The Khaled Hosseini Foundation, a nonprofit that provides humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

March 24, 2025

To the St. Francis Area Schools Board of Education:

Thank you for this opportunity to offer some thoughts on my book *The Kite Runner*, which as I understand, has been removed from the district libraries due to a “rating” from an anonymous website based in Florida. This is deeply concerning to me, to fellow writers, teachers, and librarians. The website lacks the basic transparency and professional editorial standards needed to holistically evaluate books like mine. It dismisses the professional expertise of librarians and educators and instead uses subjective opinion, based on narrow ideological litmus tests, to flag so-called ‘objectionable content’, often free of any context. What a terrible disservice this is to the district’s students.

I would like to say a few more words about why the district’s decision to use this website as gatekeeper, *against the advice of its own attorney*, is so misguided. Over a span of more than 20 years, I have collected stacks of manilla envelopes, each filled with letters sent to me from all across the country, letters written, not by ‘concerned parents’, but by high school students in their own words. In these writings, students share with me often quite poignantly what impact reading *The Kite Runner* has had on them. For some, the book is a clarion call to stand up to bullies and defy intolerance. Other students - perhaps inspired by the book’s tagline, *there is a way to be good again* - write me of their desire to volunteer, to meet people of different cultures, to be more tolerant, to mend broken ties, to muster the courage to do the right thing, the *just* thing, no matter how difficult.

For many students, **both** those who write me **and** the countless I have personally met at high schools across the country, *The Kite Runner* is their first window into Afghan culture. Many openly admit they knew very little about the country outside its media depiction as a violent, unhappy land perpetually wracked by cycles of war and political strife. But students find in the story of Amir and Hassan resonant parallels to their own lives -around friendship, family, love, courage, cowardice. Consequently, Afghanistan becomes a ‘real’ place for

them. They gain a more nuanced and compassionate perspective on the country and its people. And almost always, *almost always*, students express *gratitude* to the novel for this.

Perhaps the most recurring word I read in these letters is 'empathy.' It isn't surprising. Studies have shown that reading fiction improves the ability to intuit and understand the feelings of other human beings. For students, books like *The Kite Runner* can be formidable teachers of empathy. They can remind students of our immutable connections as a species despite cultural differences. They can open the world to students. They can inspire them to act and make a difference. This is an immeasurable gift. By limiting our children's access to this gift, we *shrink* their world when we should be *expanding* it.

Hearing from high school students for two decades has convinced me that they are more than sophisticated and mature enough to digest and contextualize the themes raised by *The Kite Runner*. They are appropriately and constructively challenged by the book. And they are more than up to the task, asking critical questions and learning valuable lessons about injustice, discrimination, tyranny, **and** the perils of religious extremism.

I have raised two children of my own. I understand the parental impulse to safeguard one's child from harm. But using "ratings" by an anonymous website to deny access to books like *The Kite Runner* doesn't protect our students at all. It betrays them. It robs our children of something vital that we owe them as parents and instructors: the chance to broaden their human community, to foster empathy, to challenge their pre-conceived ideas, and allow them to take a step toward becoming fuller, wiser, richer versions of themselves. I respectfully ask the district to heed the advice of its own legal team and reverse its decision to rely on an anonymous website with no professional library credentials to curate its students' education.

Sincerely,

Khaled Hosseini

Ashley Hope Pérez is a literary scholar, novelist, youth advocate, and educator. As one of the most frequently banned writers in the United States since 2021, Pérez uses her insights and experiences to advocate for students and their right to learn, grow, and access diverse literature. Her anthology *Banned Together: Our Fight for Readers' Rights* (2025) brings together banned writers to share their experiences, inform readers about the works of literature disappearing from library shelves, and empower them with ways to fight back.

March 24, 2025

Dear St. Francis School Board Leaders:

My name is Ashley Hope Pérez, and I am the author of *Out of Darkness*, one of the books you recently voted to remove from high school libraries in your district. I am also a real person—a mom, a literature professor at The Ohio State University, and a former high school English teacher with a heart for serving students.

Because literature engages with the world and the world is often an ugly place, passages from virtually any book can be made to sound “inappropriate” when pulled out of context or described in sensational terms.

What if I told you about a book with many pages of erotic poetry, a book with graphic descriptions of male genitalia, a book where a father consents to his daughter being gang raped while he enjoys an evening with guests?

All of these descriptions of the Bible are factually true (I know; I've read it closely). But they are also incomplete and misleading, and they do not do justice to the Bible’s complexity or value. In the same way, challenges to my book and others have disregarded the intentions and merits of each book as a whole. They ignore the messages of hope, moral courage, repair, and connection that accompany the hard realities we examine.

Out of Darkness takes place in 1937 and sheds light on an important but little-known event in East Texas history, the New London school explosion. It invites readers to engage with the hardships others have faced. It depicts young people struggling for dignity, joy, and respect in a difficult time.

After all, 1937 was a time in Texas history when segregation, terrorization, & lynchings were part of non-White Americans’ daily experience. Boys did sometimes speak crudely about women—especially women of color. Black Americans faced harsh discrimination and exclusion from opportunities, as was the case in New London, where Black kids could not attend the New London School.

I write about those historical realities to show the depths of harm they caused. I portray friendship, loving family, community, & healthy relationships because they, too, are part of my characters' world.

I wrote *Out of Darkness* because I believe that silence about painful issues causes harm. This was true for the survivors of the explosion, many of whom suffered in silence for decades before coming together to talk about their experiences. It is also true for women who experience sexual assault, like the main character in the novel and me.

I wrote *Out of Darkness* to put at the center of the story those who are often pushed to the edges, like the students I used to teach.

I wrote *Out of Darkness* to show that drawing beauty out of suffering is one way we transform our world.

The book removal efforts of the last few years criticize books like mine for doing what literature does: exploring the whole range of human experience and inviting readers to imagine the humanity of people different from themselves. Sometimes that means going to painful places.

We each exercise discretion by what we choose to read or not read. But please do not let a handful of folks limit access to a work of literature because they dislike it. This interferes with a core function of libraries, which is to create a space for choice and exploration.

Instead, leaders can respond to sincere parent concerns about what their kids and teens are reading without disrupting other students' learning or access to books. There are many excellent resources that help adults talk with their young people about what they're reading, so that books become an opportunity for sharing values and talking about difficult situations.

Certainly my novel isn't for *everyone*—no book is. But a library book need not be a fit for *all* readers to be of importance to some. This is why we collect such a wide range of materials for students to access. I know that *Out of Darkness* matters to *someone* in your community because I hear from readers all the time with this message--with accounts of how their thinking about the world expanded, how they reflected on the characters' choices, how they got excited about reading. For someone, *Out of Darkness* is the book that will make history come to life. For someone, it is the book that inspires deepened care and engagement in the community. That "someone" deserves to be able to find it in your high school libraries. This is equally true for the other books you have removed.

From 2015 until 2021, *Out of Darkness* was on library shelves without a single complaint anywhere in the country. It received major awards and was featured on high school reading lists in many states. The book hasn't changed.

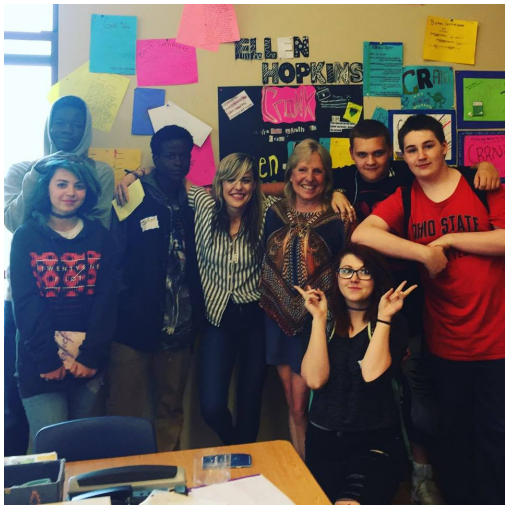
Whatever has motivated book removals in your community is *not about the books*. It is certainly not about students or their safety. If you are sincere in your interest in student well-being, talk to students about what they need. Listen to educational researchers on the devastating educational impact of declining literacy rates. Learn from university professors like me about what students need to be prepared for college.

Please put students first and return our books to your libraries.

I would be happy to speak to any of you via video-conference. It would be my pleasure to answer any questions you might have about my book, why it and other removed books should be returned, how else leaders can work with families to address their concerns, or any other concern.

Sincerely,

Ashley Hope Pérez



Ellen Hopkins is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of fifteen young adult novels, two middle grade novels, and four novels for adult readers. She has been called the bestselling living poet in the country by Media Bistro.

March 24, 2025

Dear Members of the St. Francis Area Schools Board of Education,

What many in favor of book removals fail to understand is, every kid's life is different. Since I've been writing YA, more than two decades now, I've heard from literally tens of thousands of readers, most in their teens or just beyond, who've thanked me for representing them, or someone they know and care about, in my books. They've thanked me for insight and understanding. They've thanked me for showing them there is light beyond all darkness. They've thanked me for saving their lives, in the most literal sense. And then they've shared their own stories. I've heard stories of physical and sexual abuse, beginning when they were very small. I've heard of assaults. Addiction. Bullying. Harassment. Thoughts of suicide. These things are as common, and deserve recognition. Those going through them deserve to know they can be all right on the far side. All my books provide resources to find help.

That includes TRICKS. I became interested in the subject of child sex trafficking when the FBI did a sting in Reno, where we lived at the time. They removed 120 kids who'd been shuttled around the country for that purpose. Their AVERAGE age was 12. I wanted to know why and how that could be. The book, which is a #1 NY Times bestseller, is highly researched. I worked with Las Vegas Vice, and talked to kids working the streets. Every character in the book is inspired by a real person. My goal was to show teens how easily recruitment can happen, and to dismiss any idea of the life being something they might ever want. And, yes, to hopefully gain empathy for those already mired there. If kids as young as nine or ten can be trafficked, certainly older teens are capable of reading about it.

Despite the heavy content, TRICKS is far from "pornography." It is written with a young adult audience in mind. I wish more adults would open their eyes to the world our young people are maneuvering. Perspective is vital, and you can't arm kids with ignorance.

Ellen Hopkins

My name is Elana K Arnold. I am a bestselling and award-winning author of books for and about children and teens. Among other honors, my books have won the Sydney Taylor Book award and the National Jewish Book Award; have been California Book Award finalists three times; have been named as a Michael L. Printz Honor winner; and have been a finalist for the National Book Award. These award-winning books have all been frequent names on banning lists.

I'm not the only author, obviously, whose work is being defamed. The most frequently targeted books are those that feature LGBTQ characters and characters of color—and books whose authors share those identities—as well as books that deal with the subjects of gender and sexual experiences, including books like mine that interrogate patriarchy, misogyny, and sexual violence through a feminist lens.

Often, my books are accused of being "obscene" and "pornographic." Scary words. But also, words with clear legal meaning. Materials are considered obscene if they fail to meet the Miller Test. The Miller Test is the legal test for determining whether expression – like literature – constitutes obscenity. It is named after the US Supreme Court's decision in Miller V. California (1973). For a work to qualify as obscene, it must fit all three prongs in the Miller Test: 1) the average person applying contemporary community standards would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; 2) the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and 3) the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

Let me be clear: My work and the work of my fellow authors on these lists are neither obscene nor pornographic. My books and the others that have been targeted all have significant literary value. No serious person can argue otherwise. And attempts to call these books obscene or pornographic by taking specific lines out of context, claiming they represent the works as a whole, is either ignorant, intellectually dishonest, or both.

Book bans harm the very children and teens they purport to protect. Literature gives us stories and information so that we might understand ourselves and the wider world. A reader is in a powerful place with a book: with a book in their hands, they are in charge. They can read it if they choose; equally, they have the power to set it down and walk away. When someone makes that choice for readers by banning a book that has been included in a library's collection by an educated, trained library professional, they rob readers of their freedom. And they cheat them of an opportunity to engage safely with information and art. Armed and empowered by experiences and information they encounter in books, those same readers will have the language to understand what's happening in the great big world outside of them, and inside of themselves, as well.

Readers deserve free access to books. They have a first amendment right to freedom of press. Those who aim to take away their books, who are stripping their libraries and book collections, are thieves of art, culture, information, and liberty. I stand in solidarity with the librarians, teachers, parents, and educators who acknowledge that our duty is to the freedom of information, the art of literature, and the protection of young people's access to the full library collections to which they are entitled.

Elana K. Arnold

Elana K. Arnold

A children's book author and entrepreneur, Shelly Breen is no stranger to perseverance. She is a staunch advocate for equity in sports, a trauma survivor and on a mission to help all children feel seen. Born and raised in northern MN, Shelly grew up with aspirations of playing professional sports. She spent countless hours on the basketball court, neighborhood hockey rinks and local golf courses. With a B.A. in Physical Education and an M.S. in Leadership, she started out teaching and coached college and high school basketball and tennis. She then worked with the Minnesota Timberwolves and Lynx organization and later moved into a sales consulting role for the WNBA including the 10th Anniversary WNBA All-Star Game at Madison Square Garden.

March 24, 2025

Dear St. Francis Area Schools Board Of Education

As a children's book author, I am opposed to book bans. I created the Shelly Bean series out of need-a gap in children's literature. Personally, I was negatively impacted as a child by the lack of diversity in characters which delayed my interest in reading. Now, hundreds of children have found a love of reading at an earlier age because they connected with the Shelly Bean characters and stories.

Stories help humans relate to one another. Stories help us learn and generate creative and critical thinking. In America, we have the freedom to make decisions for ourselves and for our own children while raising them. I vehemently disagree with another adult choosing what books my children can or cannot read.

This movement is not about the best interests of our children, it is about controlling others from a place of fear. But there is far too much to gain, family values and choice to respect, expertise of librarians to honor, lessons to learn, people to love and creativity to embrace that gives life to us all, than to operate from that fear and control of others.

Our children need resources, security to grow in themselves, nurturing, nourishment and protection of expression. Let's focus on things that are far more important than this. Let's focus on love, compassion, freedom and true democracy.

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Shaun was born in West Palm Beach, Florida on the first of May 1978. He was a bad student who enjoyed sleeping through class, debate, theater, and being a pain in the ass. In college, he studied medieval and renaissance literature before abandoning his degree to work in I.T. doing database design. Shaun is now a full-time author living in Seattle. For more information, check out shaundavidhutchinson.com.

March 24, 2025

Dear St. Francis Area Schools Board of Education

Preventing young people from reading books that speak to who they are won't prevent them from being gay or transgender. It won't prevent them from having questions about sex. It won't prevent them from having mental health issues. What censorship *can* do is prevent young people from having access to knowledge that can help them understand that who they are is okay and that they're not alone.

Not having books like We Are the Ants when I was growing up and coming to terms with my sexuality in the 90s led me to attempt suicide. Everything and everyone around me, from books to movies to church leaders, told me that there was something wrong with me. I was lucky that I survived my attempted suicide and was able to understand that I wasn't broken and that I was exactly who I was meant to be. And I want kids today to know they're not broken either.

My goal with every single book I write is to be the voice that I needed as a young person and to make readers feel safe and accepted.

Banning *We Are the Ants* and other books for queer youth won't stop gay kids from being who they are. It might make them ashamed of who they are, it might make them afraid to tell you who they are, it might make them try to hide who they are, but it won't change them.

Your kids don't need protection from books. They need to know you support them. They need you to accept them. And most of all, they need to know you love them for who they are.

Shaun David Hutchinson

Daniel Mauleón is a comics writer based in Minnesota. With a focus on graphic novels, he has written over twenty-five titles, including an original book based on the Nickelodeon show The Casagrandes. He holds a master's in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University. See danielmauleon.com for more information.

March 24, 2025

Dear St. Francis Areas Schools Board of Education

My name is Daniel Cole Mauleon. I am a resident of Minneapolis and am a children's book author of 25 books.

These days we are all pulled in many directions, so thank you for taking the time to be here tonight.

I initially ignored the request for authors to speak tonight.

I didn't feel like the right person and didn't feel I had time. It would require me to take time from my day job, as well as from my writing hours in the evening.

But if I'm honest with myself, I would not have spent tonight writing. It would have gone to some other task. You know wash dishes, fold clothes. The bathroom sink in my bathroom has been leaking on and off. Oh and who could forget it's tax season? My week is packed, and I don't even have kids. My brother's do.

One of my brothers moved to Minnesota last year to take a job teaching law at the U of M, he has two kids, a toddler, and a newborn. His days are packed with writing and delivering lectures as well as caring for his two kids. In the windows of free time he does have, he's busy fixing up the home they purchased last year.

And as if that wasn't enough, his doctor just put him on vocal rest for at least a week. No speaking, not even whispering. Because he severely injured his vocal cords trying to suppress a cough while putting his youngest to bed.

Many of you are or know of a parent whose story is like this. People in this very room, pulled in so many directions, who don't have the time to read a book for their own pleasure much less to check if the content is appropriate for their children. We simply don't have enough time.

And so it's no surprise the BookLooks approach is appealing. Quick, at a glance ratings of books. Let someone else handle it.

But who is handling it?

In fact, you likely know more about me than any of the people working on sites like this. And I haven't introduced myself yet.

I'm a former English teacher and hold a master's in writing for children and young adults. These skills have helped me as an author, but also as an uncle. I love choosing books for my family that they will love and that match their reading and maturity levels. It's going so well, that my 15-year-old nephew is an avid reader and he talks to me about what he's been reading: the memoirs of his favorite musicians. So for the first time, I didn't buy him a book for his last birthday. I got him a gift card to Guitar Center.[TM1]

As an informed reader, I know the quick rating system that Book Looks uses is at best misguided and at worst purposefully manipulative. When you tear the most provocative passages from books and remove their context, you are not helping parents you are scaring them.

And they want you scared because when we are scared we are easier to be deceived.

They want you scared, so you don't realize you're trusting strangers on the internet to make decisions for your children.

They want you scared so that you forget we already have existing resources and sensible rating systems that parents, teachers, and librarians have used for decades, back when we were in school.

But then we defunded library programs and overworked teachers.

We don't need policies that take away books – we need policies and funding to give time back to those who can best help our kids: Teachers and Librarians.

BookLooks wants to offer you an easy route on a shining platter. But nothing in life is free, or easy. And the children of this district deserve that you do the hard work.

Anne Ursu is the author of acclaimed novels *Not Quite a Ghost*, *The Troubled Girls of Dragomir Academy*, *The Lost Girl*, *Breadcrumbs*, and *The Real Boy*, among others. Her work has been selected as a National Book Award nominee, a *Kirkus* Prize finalist, and as a best book of the year by *Parents Magazine*, NPR, Bookshop.org, and *Publishers Weekly*. She lives in Minneapolis with her family and an unruly herd of cats.

March 24, 2025

Dear Members of the St. Francis Area Schools Board of Education,

My name is Anne Ursu, I live in Minneapolis, and I've been writing books for young readers for two decades. I chose this career because I was raised by children's books. I was a lonely weird kid and books gave me friends, helped me navigate the big, confusing world around me, and taught me resilience. As an author, my job is to write books that affirm kids and help them be in the world—every time I sit down to write, I work so hard to give them stories that are worthy of them.

In my job, I have the privilege of interacting with so many teachers and librarians, who all work so hard to put the right book in kids' hands, the one that might help them, affirm them, make them want to read more books. I am constantly astonished by and grateful for their unwavering commitment to their students. And it breaks my heart that they are under attack right now. And that's what this policy is; an attack on the educators of this school district, on their expertise, commitment, and care. It outsources the decisions on the books in classrooms and libraries from people who have devoted themselves to the students of this district to anonymous randos. Why would we let any outside group deny kids in this district's school access to the books they want to read? I guarantee that the teachers and librarians of this school district are far more invested in the education and well-being of your children than some random person in Florida who spends their days posting conspiracy theories on Facebook.

This policy means your educators have to spend their time and energy looking over their shoulder, worrying about books being ripped out of their hands, worrying about getting attacked like so many other educators across the country are. Let's not lose sight of where this leads: At a time when literacy is in crisis, teachers are having to remove all books from their classroom, and school libraries are closing. Now, there are efforts to criminalize teachers and librarians for providing students books?

Meanwhile, this public school district, like every other one in the country, is at risk right now of losing funding so billionaires can pay even lower taxes. We need to defend our schools and our educators with all we have right now. And I'd ask anyone here who is trying to undermine them—who does that serve? Certainly not the children of this community.

Anne Ursu

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