

Craig Silva:

Welcome to the Libro FM podcast, a monthly series where we talk to authors, narrators, booksellers, and more. This month, we're launching an extra episode in support of banned books week.

Karen Farmer:

Yes, we have four guests this week. We're very excited to introduce them. So we'll get to the introductions and the interview in just a moment, but before we do that, Craig and I wanted to give all of you just a little bit of background on what banned books week is. It's an annual event that celebrates the freedom to read. And Craig, I don't know if you knew this but I recently learned this started in 1982. So it's been going on for quite a while.

Craig Silva:

I did not know that. And I did not know many of the other things that come up in this episode. So thank God we had tons of amazing guests here who bring a bunch of different perspectives together to teach us.

Karen Farmer:

Yes, it was very valuable for both of us and hopefully for all of you as well. And just so you all know if you want to participate in any way banned books week this year is taking place September 18th through the 24th. And the theme this year is books unite us, censorship divides us.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. And if you don't have a membership yet, if you use promo code LIBROPODCAST, you can get two banned books for the price of one. So go do that. And with that, why don't we just start the interview? Thanks everyone.

Karen Farmer:

All right, welcome everyone. It's time to meet our four awesome guests today. I know you're all excited to hear from them. And so we'll have each person introduce themselves. We would love for each of you to tell us a little bit about the work that you do in the world of books. And also maybe just a quick teaser about why the efforts against censorship are so important to you; important enough that you wanted to come talk to us about it today. Traci, maybe we could start with you.

Traci Thomas:

I was hoping you weren't going to pick me first.

Karen Farmer:

I'm so sorry. It's okay. It's okay. It's good to be uncomfortable.

Traci Thomas:

I'm Traci Thomas; I'm the host and creator of The Stacks, which is a podcast all about books and the people who read them. It's a weekly show every Wednesday. And what was the rest? That's me.

Karen Farmer:

I love it. What is censorship and the efforts around that? What does this mean for you? Why is it important to you?

Traci Thomas:

I mean, what does it mean? I mean, it's a lot, I mean, it's like, that's such a big question. I feel like it's terrifying to me as a person who loves books and more broadly the arts and creativity and expression. And also as a person who is a parent, it is scary to me. And I did a banned books week, not unofficial banned books week earlier this year. And I talked to librarians and authors and students, and after hearing from so many different people on their perspective, I think that this issue is not only scary, but it's also really wide ranging and really cynical. And so, I think that there's a lot to talk about that doesn't get talked about when we talk about banned books. So, I mean, I think that's why I'm excited to be here with all of you.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome! Thank you so much. Martha, would you like to introduce yourself next?

Martha Hickson:

I sure would. I'm Martha Hickson. I am a high school librarian in New Jersey. I have been so for 18 years. And, I think censorship is important because the ability to read freely and think freely is a gift. And I resent the fact that people are trying to take that gift away. Not only from me, but from my students. In the last two years, I have been involved in multiple censorship battles involving six books and I'm thankful to say that all have been retained.

Karen Farmer:

Amazing! Thank you Martha. Kiese, would you like to go next?

Kiese Laymon:

My name is Kiese Layman. I'm a writer and professor at Rice University. I just started there a few weeks ago. This conversation is important to me because I'm a reader and I write books that have been banned. So I want to talk about that a bit more

Craig Silva:

Congratulations on the new job by the way.

Karen Farmer:

And last but not least. Of course Nicole, we'd love for you to introduce yourself.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah. So my name's Nicole Lintemuth. I own an Indie bookstore in Lowell Michigan which is a tiny little town in West Michigan. And I talk about banned books a lot on TikTok because I'm a queer owned bookstore that likes to all of the books that I really like are banned. And so I'm really passionate about making sure people have access to them. And I'm an activist in my community. So it seems like I'm dealing with this a lot lately.

Craig Silva:

Awesome! Well thank you for the intro everyone. I really appreciate it and I'm super excited to get to know all of you over the next hour. So as Karen and I mentioned in the intro, banned books week is an effort to bring together the entire bookish community around this idea of banning books and what it means and why it's not great. We really love that each of you plays such a different role in the world of books. We are so super excited to have this conversation with you all. I want to start with you, Martha. You mentioned you're a librarian at a high school, and you've actually dealt with a lot of battles in this realm over the past couple of years with you know, school committees and parents getting upset around books such as *Gender Queer* and *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson among others. I think you said like four more as well. I am so super excited to know that they're all still on the shelves. We'd love if you could tell us a little bit about that experience. You know, how did it first come to your attention and how did that all go?

Martha Hickson:

I think for simplicity's sake, I'll deal with the most recent situation, which also involves the most books. And it's almost a year ago to the day on September 28th, 2021. As I was reading the *New York Times* book review while eating my lunch at my desk, my principal walked into my office to tell me that he had heard a rumor, that there was going to be an objection to a book at that evening's board meeting. I asked which book? He told me, *Gender Queer*. I immediately pulled up and printed out the reviews for *Gender Queer* which of course were glowing. And I provided him with a copy of our materials reconsideration form and printed copies of our policies, our selection policy, and our complaint policy. And I reminded him that a complaint at a board meeting is not the process we use to complain about a book. And he walked away and I thought that matter was well in hand.

Martha Hickson:

Well think again Martha, because that night I went home and instead of watching *Jeopardy* as we usually do at seven o'clock. My husband and I tuned into the live stream of the board meeting where I was shocked. I guess that's the best way to put it. When a small group of parents launched the best way to describe it is a protest performance. Where they stood up and read out of context passages not just from *Gender Queer* but also *Lawnboy* and in the process of doing so, they also labeled me by name as a pornographer, pedophile and groomer of children. The board sat there in silence and sadly they continued to maintain that silence for the next five months. That allegation stayed on my head. In the ensuing weeks that objection to two books grew to five.

Martha Hickson:

Fun Home, *This Book is Gay*, and *All Boys Aren't Blue* were thrown on the heap as well. I started to get hate mail. I was trolled on social media. This group of parents even went to the local police department and prosecutor's office attempting to get charges filed. They were not successful. Along the way, a reconsideration committee was formed to evaluate the books. And while that work was underway, I was marshaling support among the community and most importantly, for this effort among our students. We are a two high school district. So I reached out to the GSAs at both schools and to anybody who is going through something similar. My advice is let readers be leaders. The kids are your secret weapon. So the next two board meetings, October, November massive turnout from the community. The protestors were dwarfed in numbers by the community members who said, yeah, no, not at our school. You're not banning books. And ultimately in January, the reconsideration committee issued its report and they recommended that the board retain four of the books, but they wanted to remove *This Book is Gay*. Their rationale for that was they didn't think that there were enough citations for the sources.

Martha Hickson:

And they said that this is not the way we teach sex education. That was on a Friday afternoon. Their report came out and I was like, I am not letting this happen. So David Levithan wrote the introduction to the North American edition of that book. And I know that David is from New Jersey, works in Manhattan and I'm thinking somebody in my librarian crew must know David and can get me in touch with him. So on a Saturday morning, I sent out the bat signal to my librarian network and within two hours, David and I were emailing back and forth. He wrote a statement and he asked, only that a student read it at the January board meeting. I organized a slate of speakers, including alumni because it was held via Zoom, geography didn't matter. I had an alumnus call in from Boston and we made terrible sports analogies, but I'll say it was a hail Mary pass. And the board ended up rejecting the reconsideration committee's recommendation regarding *This Book is Gay* and they voted to retain all five books. So that's the story.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. I was having a hard time not clapping as well. Traci I was like, that's an amazing story. Thank you for going so above and beyond and fighting the good fight. I think any school would be lucky to have you as a librarian.

Martha Hickson:

Oh, thank you.

Craig Silva:

So an amazing amazing story. Anyone can answer this question but obviously Martha chime in as it kind of relates to what you were just talking about, but obviously you know you were getting personal attacks and you were still getting up there and fighting to keep these books on the shelves. When you very easily could have just been like, eh, it's five books, you know what I mean? And you didn't do that. Even at personal risk. And I guess my question is what effect do you think removing these books would have on students? Obviously you and this again, for anyone, you care so deeply to fight for these. So obviously you must be scared of what would happen if you did remove them. So I would love just to hear about why, why that is so important.

Martha Hickson:

I don't have to guess about that because the kids and the alumni have told me themselves. But I can tell you when I see these books challenged; I'm not thinking about a book cuz really, I don't know how book sellers feel about it. You might feel differently but as a librarian, there does come a point when you realize you can't get too precious about the books. They're paper, ink, and glue. But when you're challenging a book, I'm not thinking about the book as an object any longer. I am thinking about the reader and I knew individual kids who had checked out each of those books. So when you tell me you wanna cancel a book, you're telling me you wanna cancel a reader and that's how the kids feel about it too. They feel like they are being pushed off to the side. Like they're being marginalized, that their representation does not matter.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah. I hear so often from the students in my community that when they hear community members railing against books that are most often queer is what the, my community is mad about, They're not hearing them complain about a book. They're hearing them say that these kids are horrible and inappropriate and shouldn't be allowed in school and shouldn't be this. The kids just hear that. And I mean, the kids today are amazing and they're so resilient and they're so strong in their identity and who they are. But it's like death by a thousand paper cuts to hear people in your community who are supposed to support you. Who are, you know, parents and leaders and teachers and all of these people who are now saying like, you are a terrible thing that shouldn't be allowed in school. And that just no matter how self-assured you are. And no matter how confident you are in your identity, I'm 30, almost 35 years old. And even I start being

like, like, oh my gosh, like, wow, now I know how y'all really feel about us. And so it's just the kids don't hear the book being the bad thing. They hear them being the bad thing.

Karen Farmer:

So Traci and Nicole, this is kind of a great segue. You both have large online presences where you talk about books and book related issues and have lots of followers. I am a follower of both of you and have learned a lot from you. Can you tell us a little bit more about what the conversations have looked like around banned books and censorship on your platforms? Over the course of the last couple of years, how has it evolved? Anything interesting that's cropped up.

Traci Thomas:

I mean for me, so I started the show and the Instagram page in 2018 and it wasn't really something that came up that much. Not that it's a new idea or a new phenomenon by any means, but it wasn't something that was in the cultural zeitgeist. It wasn't on television in the way that it is. I think Martha probably can speak to this, that the book challenging was happening in schools. But it wasn't happening in these like public performance type of ways. And so just the conversation itself has become something that keeps getting brought up to me that I keep hearing about. And so for me, it just felt like something that needed to be talked about. I just keep seeing it and obviously as a lover of books and I really focus a lot on books by Black authors, authors of color, queer authors, disabled authors, marginalized voices essentially.

Traci Thomas:

It feels and it felt like important for me to talk about it because so many of the people that follow me follow me because they don't know where to find a book by a Black author, or they don't know where to find a book by a queer author. And so it really feels, it would feel, you know, dishonest to ignore these attacks on the books that I love and that I am constantly, you know, screaming about. So that's sort of how it's impacted me. And eventually it led me to do that series on banned books which was really interesting for me. I mean, just hearing Martha tell her story, I'm like, right. We don't get to hear enough from the people who are really impacted by this. Whether it's the librarians, the students, the parents, the local politicians who are, you know, trying to stop the censorship, the activists on the ground, like so much of it is just about, we hate Tony Morrison or we hate George M. Johnson and it's not like, how does this impact people? So that was something else that I really wanted to be able to talk about.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah, for me I'm an all ages, all genre shop. But when I started doing TikTok, there wasn't anybody talking about kids' books really that I was finding. And I know a lot of my friends and a lot of people in my community want to have these books that we didn't have access to as kids. They wanna see their experiences or their friends' experiences or their communities' experiences. So they can share that with their kids and fill that knowledge gap for them. So they don't have to unlearn or learn things when they become adults like we've had to. And so I just

started talking about kids books that I love, cause I'm very passionate about kids' literature. And in 2021 during banned books week, I talked about banned books week and stuff and it did okay. But it wasn't, it didn't blow up or anything.

Nicole Lintemuth:

And then this year, it was no. I guess it was probably like, I don't know, time has no meaning anymore. I was just looking for something to do for a TikTok. And I just grabbed a bunch of books that I knew were banned or challenged. And I just did a short video of books you should read because they don't want you to. And people really responded to it because either they had read these books and had loved them, or they had never heard of books being banned. And it just kept kind of growing and I've done a bunch of them now. And I think one of them had like a million views and I was like, what is happening right now? Like this is wild. And so kind of the biggest thing that I hear from people is they don't understand.

Nicole Lintemuth:

They'll be like, but I read that book when I was in school or that it's not a problem here. And so it's been a really great opportunity to educate people on the importance of local politics and being involved and paying attention to school board meetings and all of these things, because these happen individually in little pockets and as one succeeds, another goes, oh, well, they did it. So we should do it. And it just kind of grows. So if they want to continue to have these books available in their school, they need to be paying attention because every school district, every library, every community, small town, big town, you know, liberal, progressive, conservative, all of them are having challenges right now. And we need to be paying attention to them. And so it's been really great to be able to kind of give people that information of not just like, oh, here's all the terrible people who are trying to ban books and whatever, but also like here's what you can do to stop that. Here's how you can support your libraries and your schools and how you can show up and how you can be a voice. So that the few loud, angry people are not the only ones at the microphone.

Traci Thomas:

Can I just add one quick thing to what I said also, cuz Nicole made me think of something. I think that I got a lot of followers once I started talking about banned books. I'm from California. I lived in New York City for a long time. I'm back in California and a lot of people would come to me and be like, well, you know, it's so terrible what's happening in Texas. And I'm like, it's literally happening 10 miles from where I live in Los Angeles. And I think that, that was a thing that was really eye opening for me that made me wanna keep talking about it was like, you can say, oh, Alabama is so backward, but like it's happening in New York City or New York state and near and in New York City, it's happening in LA, it's happening in the bay area, it's happening in Chicago and it's happening within a quick drive or bus ride or train ride from wherever you are listening to us talk right now. And I think that that was really important for me to understand. And for me to try to get back out to people is like, it's not, it's not Mississippi. It's the entire country. It's everywhere.

Martha Hickson:

I consider it like a paper pandemic. It's so well organized and it's the same talking points, the same titles, the same tactics going from town to town to town. My challenge last year in September was fairly early in the process and I kept kicking myself like, why didn't I anticipate this? Well, as I said fairly early, but when I started researching it, *Lawnboy* and *Gender Queer* were a strange pair of titles to come up together. The same books had been challenged in Texas and Fairfax, Virginia the week before. And when I watched the videos, exact same words, exact same ambush of a board meeting, it's like a script.

Nicole Lintemuth:

They're exactly using a script. Here in west Michigan, there's a college called Hillsdale College and they're very connected to dark money packs. All of these organizations and it's literally where these scripts are coming from. It's incredibly well funded, you know, Moms for Liberty and all of these groups are literally following the exact same script, everywhere that they go. And as one succeeds, they just keep passing it on and it's like virus and viral is absolutely how it works here. Like as they go, it's just dominoes and they keep falling.

Craig Silva:

You mentioned you know as they succeed and Martha, you, yours did not, but the one happening at your school did not succeed. Do any of you have an idea of how likely the percentage of all these attacks happen, like, you know, 50% of them work and 50% don't or is like, is there like a statistic like that out there that you're aware of like how successful these campaigns are?

Nicole Lintemuth:

So I happen to know, but I'm sure Martha does too. But the organization that tracks them, the ALA, they only know about 10% of the challenges and bans that happen in the country. And so they're 90% of them are either like shadow bans where books are getting pulled back or held behind a counter or the calls coming from inside the house. And it's either trustees of a library or teachers or principals who are just, I don't wanna deal with any conflict. Let's just pull these off now. And a lot of things like that. So we have no idea of exact numbers of what's happening.

Martha Hickson:

And Penn America issued a report recently I think it's called Banned in America. And I don't recall that they have a statistic regarding success, but the interesting statistic that I do remember from that report is that 98% of the challenges that Penn America tracked involved some sort of failure to conform to best practices or policies regarding challenges. And that's the other part of the problem. Libraries and schools have policies in place for dealing with these kinds of situations and they are just being run right over. And to that, I say, boards of education have some responsibility to play here too. They've gotta, you know, grow a set and stand up to

these people and not let them, you know, take their hostage at their meetings, follow the policies.

Nicole Lintemuth:

And what we're seeing is kind of the effects of the defunding of schools, because a lot of positions that get cut when schools are losing money are media center specialists. So many school districts don't have a librarian who's trained to understand what rights do they have to push back against challenges, or they don't have a policy at all. So when these people come in challenging, they're like I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. We've never had to deal with this before. And we're seeing that like, Ooh, this is what we get for cutting all those positions.

Martha Hickson:

Right. Traci, were you gonna say something?

Traci Thomas:

I was just gonna say that I also think that the success and failure rate of these challenges isn't necessarily the important part for a lot of the organizations that are challenging books. It's getting these conversations in the public. It's the same thing that we saw with all the CRT stuff. Wasn't actually about critical race theory practices and pedagogy. It was about saying the N word in a different way. You know it was about the public conversation around these things and making people feel like Nicole was saying, and like Martha saying, making young people, making all people feel like they are under attack and that they are not worthy and all of that. And so I think that the big thing for these groups is not like, maybe you, maybe you don't get the book pulled, but now every parent in your community is aware of Martha's a bad person. You know, like it becomes this whole other, not that you are Martha, but you know I'm acting, I went to a theater school, sorry.

Craig Silva:

I was like, damn.

Traci Thomas:

But you know, that's what it's about. It's about making these conversations. It's about planting these seeds. And so whether or not a book ends up getting pulled from the library. Yeah. That sucks. But the end goal is having everyone in the community, talking about it and spreading these ideas to other places as everyone had mentioned before.

Martha Hickson:

And it's also about creating a climate of fear within the school building because the big end game is to dismantle public education. So the more fear they can inject in the classroom, the

better as far as they are concerned. So you're absolutely right. The success or failure doesn't matter.

Craig Silva:

That's a good point. And you mentioned the ALA and how they track these challenges. And you know, as we were preparing for this episode, we saw that there were 729 challenges in 2021 alone. Which is the highest figures that they've seen since they've been compiling for 20 years. So this is the highest numbers in 20 years. So the next question we wanted to start with you Kiese, so you've, you know, written a lot of books for multiple ages. And I think you mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, some of your books have actually been banned or been trying to be banned. And one, I wanted to hear more about that and what that experience was like as an author. And then also if you could speak to why you think or you know, why, you know, why these challenges have been growing steadily over the past, like five, 10 years, like, you know, more now than ever.

Kiese Laymon:

Yeah, I'll be pretty brief I don't think that I think it's important to say that. I mean, I don't think these challenges are necessarily attempting to dismantle public education as much as they're attempting to further dismantle public education. I think the most important part of it to me is that a lot of us wrote our books because education and public education necessarily failed. You know what I'm saying? Like I wrote a book called *Heavy* because there were things in that book that I didn't see on bookshelves when I was a kid. I think the same holds, true for *Gender Queer* which I love George's book, I think the same might hold true. So I think you know, like we're out here trying to sort of write to ourselves and write to younger people now. And the hurtful part is like when you create this art, that is an attempt to talk to yourself when you were younger and being written out in narratives, and then they use that text to pummel younger versions of yourself now.

Kiese Laymon:

So it's right. You're so right. It's not about the book. And we do not want our books being used to pummel the exact people that we wrote those books to necessarily connect with. Not necessarily not just protect but connect right? And so yeah, my experience of being banned is, it's sort of paradoxical cuz you know, I do expect the worst from these people. My friend Damon Young wrote this incredible piece about how he wishes his book would've been banned. So you know, and when your book is in any sort of list with Toni Morrison, you like, okay, I'll take it. But the hurtful humiliating part is that they're literally using these titles, I think to punish principles that we have been trying to fight for since some of us were 20, 21 or so.

Craig Silva:

You've been in it for a while, you know!

Kiese Laymon:

I've been in it since 21. But yeah, you just, I, you just don't want to be used, you know, and you know, they don't give a fuck about us. They don't give a fuck about the books. I don't think they care about their own children, but you know, don't use our books to hurt your children or principles that we are fighting for because we're actually fighting for your children to have access to a healthier choice than they had access to previously, right? Like, you know, we're not trying to be like, you need to say have, this as your favorite book, but we are saying that like, there might be some things in here that actually could help you talk to that parent. Who's trying to ban a book that they don't want you to read. And I just don't want to be part of pummeling that young person.

Craig Silva:

That for me is one of the biggest issues about this is that a lot of these kids who are going into their school libraries might not have supportive parents of, you know, their gender identity or of their pronouns or of their sexuality. So these books are a place where they can feel seen and see that they're not alone and it's so important for those books to be available. Because either they don't know how to access them otherwise, if they don't have a bookstore in their community or they don't have money. So it's so important that those books exist.

Kiese Laymon :

And can I just say one more thing? And this is, I mean, people have already been saying this but again, like, you know, Traci and I talked like, I think Traci was really great in like, you know, there's I come to this like sentimentally, like there's a part of me that wants to come. Like, oh, if you take a book out of a library, like all the kids are gonna suffer right? But what you just said is so, so, so important, correct? Because like yeah, people might not know what *Gender Queer* is as a book, but they know that there's a school board who actually does not want that book in place, which means they know that they're fucking adults who don't want you to be *Gender Queer* right? It's just like, why use us that way? It's just, that's the fucked up part about it. If that book were called something else who knows if it would've been fucking bad right?

Craig Silva:

Absolutely! Yeah.

Traci Thomas:

And I think I just wanna add to this because a lot of the time I hear people talk about like, oh, you know, these banned book clubs or like these kids when the book gets banned, these kids are gonna go out and they're gonna go get the book. And that might be true for a very small handful of young people, but we cannot rely on 10, 12, 15 year olds who are living at home with their parents who are uncomfortable with these books, hate these books, hate these people to feel comfortable enough or have access to the money. The ability to go to a bookstore, obviously if it's not at their school library or the public library. And so I think that also is a big

issue and people want to believe like the kids are gonna be fine. And I do think the kids are gonna be fine because the kids are great.

Traci Thomas:

Right? This is not a thing about the kids. But if I couldn't drive and I didn't have a job and I'm 13 years old, how am I getting to Barnes and Noble? How am I getting to the local indie? Maybe there's not even a local indie within 60 miles of where I live. I don't have, I'm gonna go on my parents Amazon and order the book. Like I just think that we have to be serious about how this means that these kids are not getting these books. There is no access, there's zero access for some children. It's not like you an adult at home. That's like, okay, I'm gonna order this because fuck those people like, no, you don't have that.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah. Even when we talk about how like the Brooklyn Public Library gave access to kids, to their digital collection, that's great. You still have to have internet. You still have to have the ability to download those books. You still have to be able to know that that exists

Traci Thomas:

And your parents can't be monitoring your device.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Exactly! A lot of parents do.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Especially these parents. Yeah. There's just so many blind spots that people don't think about. And I hear that part, especially 'cause people like, oh, you probably just like this, cuz you sell a lot of books now, anytime they ban them. And I'm like, I mean, yes, I do like selling books. That's my job. But I want kids to have this. I want them to be able to access it. And for a lot of kids, they may not even know that they need this book. Like if they don't see it, they don't know that it's there. They don't know that it exists. Maybe it's that fact of stumbling upon it in their school library and being like, oh God, I'm not the only person. Oh my gosh, this is just like my, like I thought I was alone in this. And if they didn't know that it exists, they don't know to even go look for it at a bookstore or to travel to another library. And that's what's so damaging about pulling these out of libraries and especially school libraries, because even public libraries, there's still a level of access of being able to get to and all of these things, but you have to be at school. So what, having them there is so important.

Karen Farmer:

Nicole, one of the terms you just used pop something into my mind you use the phrase blind spots. And this is something we talk about and think about all the time at Libro FM, when we are

curating playlists that we release to the public and our monthly ALC list that we put together. We're just constantly asking ourselves how can we do better when it comes to amplifying marginalized voices, amplifying literature that isn't getting the exposure that it should. But inevitably there are blind spots and there are things that we're learning and this is something that I really love about the banned books week effort. And the point that Craig made about, you know, we're not for this week specifically, we're not operating in silo, we have librarians and book sellers and authors and podcasters coming together to see what we can do collectively to tackle this problem. So all of that being said, very basic question coming at you. But if you had advice for our listeners, if you had advice for Libro FM for anyone who is now incited to be involved in this, what would you say is something that people can do to get involved?

Nicole Lintemuth:

Show up, go to library board meetings, go to school board meetings, go to city council and township board meetings. 90% of the time they're gonna be boring as hell, but that 10% of the time you're gonna wish you had popcorn because it gets dramatic. I mean, like it is wild.

Nicole Lintemuth:

I was like, okay, I don't have children. I have my, you know, I own my own business. I have a lot of ability to be able to go to these things and to speak up because I don't have to deal with after school sports or feeding other humans or anything else like that. So I'm able to go to these things. So anybody else, who's also in a similar position, you should still show up. Even if you don't have kids and you're never gonna have kids. So what does it matter? It matters you should show up and you have that ability to speak for them and to do these things for them. And it's literally as simple as showing up. And if you're nervous about speaking at these things, be there for two meetings and the word salads that you will hear people speak during public comment, you will suddenly feel way more confident about your public speaking skills.

Craig Silva:

I've never heard that term word salads before we use it a lot. It's my new favorite term.

Nicole Lintemuth:

I take notes at our meetings and then share them with our Facebook group. So that way the people who can't go can know what happened and I do a lot of like parentheses with my personal thoughts of what people are saying, as they're saying it. So I've gotten lots of weird and fun phrases like that.

Craig Silva:

This question kind of flips the script a little bit. Obviously this whole episode, we've been talking about why you shouldn't ban books and why banning books is so bad but we wanna ask you is if there is ever a book or a scenario in which banning books is actually potentially a good thing

and the book that comes to mind and Nicole, I think you actually made a TikTok video about this. I hate to say this and maybe I'll bleep it out but the

Nicole Lintemuth:

I know exactly which one you're talking about

Craig Silva:

Yeah. So, I mean, I'm sure most of you are probably familiar with it, but the book *Irreversible Damage* comes to mind as a book that I could see someone banning. You know now I don't know that book.

Nicole Lintemuth:

I'm sorry. It's awful.

Craig Silva:

As the person that made the talk about it maybe do you wanna give us the like 30 second version of what it is?

Nicole Lintemuth:

So in this book they use quack science to basically state that trans men especially before their age 18 don't know what they're doing and can't understand and we need to protect them from themselves and not allow them to do this. Parents shouldn't allow them to transition even socially. And that it's just a fad. They're just like jumping on a bandwagon. Just awful. It's just awful. And so I guess I'll start. I hate that book with a passion. I don't think there's a book that I hate more than that book. I literally took the copy that the publisher sent to us and I cut it apart and I sent all the pages to artists to have them turn it into something beautiful. I will still walk into my library and say, this book shouldn't be here. And it's in my library.

Nicole Lintemuth:

And it is what it is. And if people wanna read it, they should be able to read it in a public library because public libraries and government entities should never tell people what they can and cannot read. And when we just let them die on their own, it's always a better option. As soon as we give them the attention that they want, because they want us to freak out. They want us to be cancel culture and all of these things, cuz then they can just keep promoting it instead. Just let it fade away. Nah, that's always what I choose to tell people because people ask me that all the time

Martha Hickson:

On the morning of September 28th, the day that my whole nightmare started, the first kid who walked through the door wanted *Mein Kampf*. I showed the kid how to look it up on the catalog. I

walked him down to the shelf. I put *Mein Kampf* in his hands and then I also showed him some Hitler biography. So he would have some secondary sources to put that in context. Do I endorse Hitler's views? Absolutely not. But *Mein Kampf* is a primary source document that scholars who are studying Hitler and for whatever reason, teenage boys are always fascinated with it. It deserves a place in the library. Nobody has to read it. Now, are there some books that need to be removed from time to time? Yes. I recall a librarian colleague telling me about an elementary book that was way old on fire safety. And the protocols for fire safety had changed since this book was published.

Martha Hickson:

What this book was recommending was dangerous. Well, if any responsible librarian who was managing their collection is going to remove books that have aged out of usefulness like that, that is not banning. The book is no longer useful. It is superseded by better materials. So yes, we remove books from libraries all the time, not because of the viewpoints they contain, but about the usability of the information or perhaps the condition of the books. I really can't think in a school library, especially if you're following the processes of a school library, why it would be necessary to ban any book.

Kiese Laymon:

I mean, I guess I could throw a wrench in it. Maybe if we need that or we can go, I, no, we go to other questions. Okay. So, you know I published with Simon & Schuster, I mean with script news on, by Simon & Schuster and Simon & Schuster during the shoot published Mike Pence's memoir. And I had a lot to say to the head of Simon & Schuster about this decision and my problem with it was that they'd made the decision that they would not publish a memoir by Donald Trump. And I said, well, you need to talk to me about what distinction you're making between Trump and Pence and why and how. So I'm saying like, while I think Pence's memoir, Trump's memoir, whatever definitely deserved to be in every library in the country is someone who, you know, is on a corporate imprint. I'm gonna do everything I can to encourage my people not to publish books by folks who are encouraging people, you know, the depths of millions of people, right? Like I'm not. So I think that's different than like libraries, but like I'm not gonna be here in front and say like I've definitely discouraged the publishing of books from Simon & Schuster, but I wanted all those books to be in libraries. So I don't even know if that's a wrench, but...

Nicole Lintemuth:

And I think that that's actually like a great point of just because you can do something doesn't mean there's not gonna be consequences for it just because you wanna write a book does not mean you're automatically entitled to having a publisher, want to publish it. And that's the beauty of free choice and comp like capitalism. Like that's how it's supposed to work. And if there's not a market for a thing, and there's not, you know, people who wanna do it, that's not banning, that's not canceling that's you wrote a crappy book and nobody wants to read it sucks to suck.

And I think that's the beauty of it and that's how it's supposed to work. I think it's how it's supposed to be.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. I think the comment about the library versus bookstore thing is the main point for me. I agree. I don't think books should be banned from the libraries just because I don't agree with their viewpoint, even if I see their viewpoint as harmful and dangerous but I think independent bookstores absolutely totally different ballgame. If I own a bookstore and I don't wanna carry a book because I absolutely can't stand the author, I think the material is dangerous. Then I think that is totally my choice. Go shop at a different bookstore, but a library where it's taxpayer funded and government and you know, it's a source of knowledge, I think is a different ball game to go back to the sport metaphors.

Traci Thomas:

Yes, but also I think we have to be careful because libraries are curated as well. So there are choices being made in libraries. And I think that like that there's more choices that are easier to stand behind if you own a private bookstore, right? Like that's an easy thing to say, this is the mission of our bookstore, whatever. Yeah. But Martha, you know, you can have every book in the world in your school library. And so there are choices being made every single day by librarians and the teams that they work with and the rules that are set in place for them and all of that. And I think that, like one of the things we talked about earlier that I wanted to say, but then I didn't wanna interrupt because you guys are so much smarter than me, is that we talk a lot about how like librarians are protecting these books and this and that, and that's true when you have Martha, but there are also librarians who believe these books gotta go too. That believe that some of these books shouldn't be in schools and so maybe the book is never banned or challenge, but like that's

Nicole Lintemuth:

On the shelf

Traci Thomas:

It's like, oh, well we don't need *Gender Queer*. And George M Johnson's books, like

Nicole Lintemuth:

We've already got one gay book. We're

Traci Thomas:

Yeah! Exactly

Craig Silva:

Checks the box. Yeah.

Martha Hickson:

So I feel that's what Nicole was alluding to earlier when she said, you know, ALA counted this number of challenges but all of that kind of stuff where someone makes a conscious decision not to purchase because they object to the content of a book, none of that ever gets counted. That's completely silent. I remember during this dispute, I've had a number of run-ins with my principal regarding books. And in each case he has said to me, why are we the only library that has this book? Well, first of all, buddy, we're not the only library.

Martha Hickson:

And I said to him last year, you know, you're asking the wrong question. You wanna be asking those other libraries and librarians, why they don't have all five of these award-winning books that you are lucky enough to have in your collection and I think what we're, you know, talking about is, I don't know whether it's laziness or they weren't aware of these titles or perhaps they were afraid to purchase them cuz they didn't wanna end up in my shoes. I don't know.

Nicole Lintemuth:

And I think that's another thing that people can do. Libraries have finite resources and finite space. They're going to base their purchases off of their policies as well as what their community wants. So if you have a library go and request these books, if they don't have them say, "Hey, why don't you have *Gender Queer* here? Like, I'd love to read it. I've heard a lot about it. You should get it." And if they have 200 requests for *Gender Queer* and one request for *Irreversible Damage*, and they've only got so much money to spend, they're gonna go for the one that everybody wants to read.

Karen Farmer:

Mm.

Traci Thomas:

I just wanna go on record about the banned book question because everyone else did. And I don't wanna leave you guys. I feel very complicated about this and I don't have a good answer. And I don't know if there's a book that I think should be banned. I'm just gonna be super honest. I can't think of one off the top of my head, but that doesn't mean that there might not be one that I think should be banned. However, I'm not gonna enforce my opinion on someone else. That's the difference between me and a lot of other people. It might be banned in my house. My kids might not be able to check it out. They're gonna have to deal with the fact that their mom is a monster down the road in therapy, but I, I'm not gonna tell your kids that they can't read about it.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Exactly how it's supposed to be.

Traci Thomas:

So like, but I don't wanna sit here and say that no book should ever be banned because I just don't know that I feel comfortable saying that because there might be a book that I haven't read yet or that I'm like, this does not deserve to be in the world. So I just wanna be transparent that I'm a flawed human being.

Traci Thomas:

I love books but I might hate some.

Karen Farmer:

Oh, thank you all so much for this conversation. I will speak for Craig preemptively but I know my mind is blown. I'm sure Craig's is too. You all are incredible so thank you for sharing your experience and perspectives with us. Before we leave you, our coworkers will never speak to us again if we don't ask each of you this question but could you tell us the name of a book that you have read and enjoyed recently? Something you'd like to recommend? It can be a banned book. It doesn't have to be but any recommendations

Kiese Laymon:

I have a recommendation but can I first thank y'all for inviting us but also I just want to thank, Martha, obviously Traci, you know how much I love you. Thank you. I wanna thank Nicole for just sorta, you know, you put these books out there and then literally people have to fight for the book in order for the book to get into people's hands. So thank y'all for fighting for the book and in a book that I think that it is it's called *The Black Period* by Hafizah Augustus Geter, *The Black Period*. It comes out next week. I think. Incredible, incredible. It's absolutely incredible stunning, stunning book.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome!

Martha Hickson:

I'm just pulling up my Goodreads cuz people ask me this all the time and I just, I read so many things. I'm like I don't have one of those baseball card mines, you know, where I can just rattle it all.

Craig Silva:

So many sport metaphors.

Martha Hickson:

But one I just read and really, really loved was *The 100 Years of Lenni and Margo* by Marianne Cronin and I just loved the world of that book and the character of Lenni reminded me so much of one of my students. So I just kept seeing Jude, anytime Lenni opened her mouth. It's just a lovely book about a friendship between a 17 year old and an 83 year old.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Oh lovely.

Traci Thomas:

Okay. I'm recommending a book that's not out yet, but it's what I'm currently reading. I think it's good because Kiese also loved it. So I feel safe recommending it, but it's called and it speaks to this conversation. It's called *Brown and Gay in LA* by Anthony Christian Ocampo and it's about second generation sons of immigrants. All people who identify as male, all people who identify as queer who live or are from, or have lived in Los Angeles and their experiences with being gay men in Los Angeles. It's phenomenal. But one of the things, one of the reasons I'm recommending it is because talking about what you all were saying about how it diminishes the reader, it diminishes the child. There's so many examples early on in this book about the little things that were said around these men when they were boys and how it made them feel about their family or the world or their community. And it just, I didn't quite realize how traumatizing these little offhanded comments can be. And because Anthony is a sociologist, it's like an academic text, but it's written in this beautiful way. So highly recommend it's out September. It's not on a Tuesday. It's like September 19th. It's a weird day. NYU press is doing something weird.

Martha Hickson:

We'll put it in the show notes. Yeah. Perfect.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Uh, I hate when people ask this question, because my mind immediately goes blank and I go books, what are books? I know I've read some, what are they?

Martha Hickson:

Rectangles?

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah! It's the thing. I'm obsessed with audio books. So I had to like pull up my Libro and be like, what have I listened to recently? *Fight Like Hell* by Kim Kelly, journeying book about the history

of labor unions in the United States and the way that she writes it, cuz she's a journalist. A lot of people don't like nonfiction. I personally do, but it's written in such a readable way that makes it so accessible for people who don't like nonfiction normally. Because she uses like themes to group things rather than just going chronologically with the history and it's, I can't get over it. And the audio book is phenomenal. The narrator is amazing and I'm just obsessed with it. Like I'm ready to listen to it again. And I just read it last month.

Traci Thomas:

Just added it to my Goodreads. Thanks.

Nicole Lintemuth:

It's so good. So good.

Craig Silva:

I'm gonna add it to my Storygraph, you know,

Traci Thomas:

Cut the part where I said Goodreads. I don't wanna get in trouble.

Craig Silva:

I'll just, I'll interject Storygraph.

Traci Thomas:

I'm gonna add it to my Storygraph right now.

Craig Silva:

That book sounds amazing. Oh actually all of them.

Nicole Lintemuth:

I know like wrote all of them down.

Craig Silva:

I've been writing all of them down as well but that union one specifically, I'm super interested in unions. My dad was in a union his whole entire career and it's just something I feel passionate about. And there's so much momentum around unions right now. So Karen, maybe we have a podcast episode in the making.

Karen Farmer:

Absolutely.

Traci Thomas:

Yes.

Martha Hickson:

And I am very thankful. I had a union behind me over the last year.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah. Such a difference. It makes such a difference. Our labor, our teacher's union has been phenomenal and we're just so y'all know. I live one town over from Betsy DeVos. So our teacher's union made t-shirts when she was the secretary of education that said, dear America, sorry about Betsy DeVos. Sincerely Michigan. It's my favorite shirt to this day. And I wear it to every single school board meeting.

Traci Thomas:

I also live in Michigan so I may need to send you my address so I can get it.

Craig Silva:

Lastly, because we love ending on a hopeful note, even though we just talked about so much hard stuff. We want to end on a hopeful note stuff and yeah, heavy like the book but we wanna end on a hopeful note and if there's anything in the world of books and this question can be for any of you, if there's anything happening in the world of books right now that you find particularly inspiring or uplifting, we'd love to hear about it.

Traci Thomas:

I have something Deisha Philia, Robert Jones Jr. and Kiese Laymon just launched this really awesome project called Lit 16. Where they're featuring 16 debut authors over the course of the year, every quarter, they're doing a chat with four authors and it's really cool because obviously we wanna support new authors. But also it's an example to me of how I wanna be in the world, which is uplifting the people who are around me who are doing the same thing as me. So shout out to Lit 16 and I wasn't just saying that, cuz Kiese is here because Deisha has been doing all the work. Okay. She's really,

Kiese Laymon:

It's Deisha's idea.

Traci Thomas:

Deisha is like one of my heroes but it's such a cool project. So check it out because these debut authors, if there's anything that I know from the work that I've been doing is that debut authors need our support from their debut forward. Not when they're already in the back list. We gotta support the authors who are doing good work when they step onto the scene, because that's gonna inform how they're able to move in the world, moving forward.

Craig Silva:

Love it. We will definitely check that out and put a link to it in the show notes and share it widely. That sounds amazing. I look forward to learning more about it. So unless anyone else has anything else that is all we had for today, which is, it is four o'clock on the dot by the way.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Well, I have one, but I'll be quick. I promise.

Karen Farmer:

No, we wanna hear it. This is great.

Nicole Lintemuth:

So every time I have gone to anything related to banned books, meetings, whatever. I've never been the only one there, there has always been people showing up and it makes such a difference. And we recently in our community had a library get defunded because of the fact that they had *Gender Queer* on the shelf and refused to pull it. And that part sucks. But the good part is that we were able to raise \$250,000 through a GoFundMe to keep the library open. Long enough to get their millage back on the ballot in November. And we are going to knock on every door and get every single person out there to vote, to keep them open long term. But so many people, literally thousands of people from all over the country donated to keep this really tiny library in a very tiny town in west Michigan open, including Nora Roberts who gave \$50,000 herself and said, if you need more, let me know. I'll write a check because she's amazing.

Nicole Lintemuth:

I wanna, I wanna be able to do that someday.

Karen Farmer:

Shout out to Nora Roberts. That's amazing.

Nicole Lintemuth:

Yeah. Yep. That's amazing. I was already a fan now. I'm a super fan.

Craig Silva:

Wow. Goosebumps?

Karen Farmer:

I have got a tear. I truly like I've had some like threatening this entire time and they've now burst for us.

Craig Silva:

Well, on that note, we just wanted to thank you all for the time. I know you all have so much going on between podcasts and writing and libraries and bookstores and everything. So thank you for all that you guys do for books and the community and taking the time to talk about this important topic with us. We really couldn't appreciate it more.

Karen Farmer:

Yes. And we, the holy road team will be cheering you all on.

Craig Silva:

Hello again, we hope you enjoyed that episode. If you're interested in learning more about banned books, head over to our website at libro.fm/banned, there you'll find all sorts of information, tons of books to explore and more.

Karen Farmer:

And just a reminder, if you haven't gotten to try Libro FM, yet you can use our special promo code Libro podcast and you'll get an extra free credit when you start your membership.

Craig Silva:

As always thank you for listening.