
No Longer Safe: West Bend, Young Adult Literature, and Conservative Library Activism

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ABSTRACT

The West Bend library controversy of 2009 was part of a larger conservative movement critical of Young Adult (YA) literature and the American Library Association. Organizations such as Family Friendly Libraries and the American Family Association leveraged community and parental fears about teens' reading to target public library policies supporting intellectual freedom for youth. Ginny Maziarka and her husband Jim participated in conservative library activism by drawing information and resources from other organizations and by serving as an inspiration to would-be library activists. Their critiques of YA literature and of ALA policies defending youth access propelled them into a community battle contesting the purpose and mission of the public library.

In 2009, Ginny and Jim Maziarka wrote a letter protesting a list of GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer) titles for teens featured on the West Bend Community Memorial Library's website, and later formally challenged thirty-seven books, most of them Young Adult (YA) fiction (Pekoll, 2009). As part of the materials-reconsideration process, the Maziarkas met with YA librarian Kristin Pekoll, who had prepared for the event with positive reviews of the challenged books. However, the Maziarkas were not interested in discussing individual titles; rather, they wished to discuss "the general concept of homosexual books for youth." Self-described conservative Ginny Maziarka later complained on her blog, *WISSUP=Wisconsin Speaks Up*, that Pekoll's attention to youth requests was unfair because "children do not pay taxes, so obviously their requests and desires do not trump the taxpayers [*sic*]." She went on to accuse Pekoll of bias and even censorship, claiming she was "censoring books for our young adults according to her personal belief system." Maziarka ended

her post by declaring that “we expect our public library to protect children and empower parents to decide what their children can read” (Maziarka, 2009e).

Maziarka’s challenge and the rhetoric she used to describe it were not unique. The West Bend controversy was part of a larger network of conservative library activist challenges that targeted library policies rather than individual titles, wielding principles of access and diversity in support of an alternate vision of the public library as a “safe” and protectionist institution. From the early 1990s to the present day, organizations such as Family Friendly Libraries, the American Family Association, and Focus on the Family have leveraged popular anxiety about teen readers and their literature to critique the American Library Association and its commitment to intellectual freedom for all ages and all types of media (Gaffney, 2012, pp. 1–2). This critique has resulted in increased challenges to YA literature. Deborah Caldwell-Stone, (then) Acting Director for the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, explained in 2009 that “the young adult section, in particular, is becoming a flashpoint in many local libraries. . . . This inclination to treat young adults as 5-year-olds who are not capable of handling materials that are more sophisticated is a real problem we are seeing in many communities” (Dorning, 2009). Caldwell-Stone later described such challenges as “ongoing efforts to make the YA section disappear” (Hogan, 2009).¹ These young adult literature challenges, along with challenges to gay and lesbian-themed youth materials and campaigns to mandate filtering software on public library computer terminals, represent a new wave of conservative library activism that counters the ALA and youth intellectual freedom with a vision of a “safe” library that serves the interests of conservative taxpayers and parents. The West Bend challenge is best understood within the context of this broader conservative social movement, within which activists and organizations at local, state, and national levels built networks, forged alliances, and shared resources with one another (Wilcox & Robinson, 2011).

This article contextualizes the West Bend challenge, linking its attacks on YA literature and teen readers to related material in conservative activist media. Examining West Bend’s key elements, including critiques of YA literature, attacks on teen intellectual freedom, and activists’ co-opting of ALA’s anticensorship rhetoric to defend book challenges, it analyzes the implications of teen reading as a conservative activist issue. Linking West Bend with the past, it also looks toward the next generation of library challenges and controversies and suggests how scholars, educators, and librarians might analyze future controversies.

During the 1990s, Family Friendly Libraries mounted a multipronged critique of the ALA that other organizations and individuals such as the American Family Association and radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessen-

ger later adopted (American Family Association, 1999; Schlessenger, 1999; Gaffney, 2013). They depicted the ALA as a malign force that had infiltrated every aspect of librarianship, controlling not just library policy but also library funding, the hiring of librarians, children's book awards, and library education. What was most striking, however, was FFL's attempt to attack the ALA on the basis of its own principles of anticensorship, diversity, and neutrality. They charged the ALA with promoting partisan, pro-gay rights material at the expense of achieving what they believed should be balanced collections, and accused it not simply of free speech absolutism, but of being itself a censor when not taking parental and citizen objections seriously. Among their complaints were attacks on YA literature and the ALA's role in defending it and promoting it to teen readers.

Teen literature and its readers had come under fire by conservative activists in part because conservative library activism gained its momentum alongside what YA literature scholar Michael Cart called a "golden age" for YA literature (Goodnow, 2007). The 1990s and 2000s were marked by an explosion of YA literature in a variety of genres and subgenres and were characterized by increased diversity of teen protagonists. Forays into difficult topics such as dating violence, cutting, eating disorders, and suicide were accompanied by greater openness to portraying the diversity of teen experience, including the lives of gay and lesbian (and later, bisexual and transgendered) teenagers (Wickens, 2011).² By 2009, YA literature had inspired many popular films, topped the bestseller lists, and even crossed over to adult audiences. It had also, however, drawn criticism from a number of corners for being too frank about teen problems and for portraying GLBTQ characters and issues in positive ways. In fact, conservative activists tended not to see YA literature as literature at all but as either propaganda intended to indoctrinate impressionable youth or as pornography designed to titillate them. They also routinely lumped teen and child readers together, emphasized the younger end of recommended age ranges, and argued that teenagers were not "young adults" but children.

Despite increasing critical acclaim and attention, including the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA)'s Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, YA literature received little respect among many conservative critics, who held a dim view of its quality. Family Friendly Libraries damned YA literature not simply for its "objectionable" content but for usurping the rightful place of "time-tested classics" (Gounaud, 1998). Heritage Foundation columnist Rebecca Hagelin (2005), author of *Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture That's Gone Stark Raving Mad*, characterized YA literature as frivolous "garbage" that "today's educators pass off as great literature for our children." Blogger Erin Manning (2009) also dismisses YA literature as "lousy, substandard second-rate writing . . . euphemized as 'dark' or 'edgy' by the sort of pre-teen who thinks angsty, brooding, sparkly vampires are a good idea." The main

complaint, however, was the content of some YA books. Arkansas activist Laurie Taylor, founder of Parents Protecting the Minds of Children, challenged many books in her school district, including “shelves teeming with ‘young adult novels’ like [Judy] Blume’s but far more explicit, sexually violent, and disturbing” (“Mothers Challenge Assignment of Bad Books,” 2007). An article in Phyllis Schlafly’s *Education Reporter* supporting Taylor claimed, “The category of literature now known as ‘young adult fiction’ is filled with some of the most graphic sexuality to be found in contemporary literature” (Mohler, 2005).³

In addition to objectionable content, conservative activists found fault with the label “Young Adult,” believing it to be a specious one that allowed the ALA to “push pornography” on children. Family Friendly Libraries argued that YA was an “ALA euphemism for 12-18” (Gounaud, “Parents and Librarians,” n.d.). Among the ALA-related problems FFL believed faced public libraries was “the trend to place books with gratuitous sexually explicit and graphic violent content in what is deceptively called the ‘young adult’ section, but which actually serves children ages 12 and up” (Family Friendly Libraries, n.d.). By the 2000s, FFL’s critique was commonplace in the conservative media. In an article for *the American Family Association Journal*, Jason Collum (2004) attacked literature “intended for children” that includes “homosexuality, bestiality, horror, and suicide,” but some of the titles he cites are YA fiction.⁴ John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*, the 2006 Printz Award winner, came under fire by anti-ALA activist Dan Kleinman. Though Green (2008) later explained to would-be censors that an oral sex scene was intended to be awkward and off-putting rather than titillating, Kleinman interpreted the book’s award as an ALA-endorsement of oral sex for 12-year-olds. After listing 281 words and phrases that he claimed “most people, except ALA librarians, think are inappropriate for 12-year-olds,” he wrote on his blog, *Safelibraries*, that the book’s Printz Award would “ensur[e] 12-year-olds will read hard core pornography” (Kleinman, 2006).

The West Bend challenge followed in the footsteps of these earlier critiques and challenges to YA literature. On her blog, Maziarka eventually shifted from objections to individual books to challenge the value of YA literature and the library’s YA Zone collection. West Bend Community Memorial Library’s suggested age range for YA books was 11–17, but Maziarka made a point of emphasizing the younger end of the range, reporting on her blog that “children as young as 11 years old have free access to propaganda type reading material (I hesitate to call it literature, thanks) that glamorizes and encourages homosexual activity” (Maziarka, 2009d). After holding a town meeting about their issues with the library, the Maziarkas demanded that the library reclassify all “youth-targeted pornographic literature” for the adult section (Maziarka, 2009c). Young readers themselves—and their ability to exercise judgment in selecting their own

reading—also came under attack. Maziarka critiqued Pekoll for making selection decisions “based on what children tell her, nothing more.” She blamed the ALA for taking the “once safe” public library and making it hazardous to youth readers. “We all have always thought the library is this wonderful safe place and, unfortunately, the American Library Association has instilled in librarians today that the policy of all materials for all ages is the right thing to do, and we don’t agree with that” (Butts, 2009).

Maziarka also joined other conservative activists in doubting the discernment of teen readers in making judgments about their reading choices. She dismissed the very notion of intellectual freedom for teen readers in a sidebar that remains a feature of *WISSUP=Wisconsin Speaks Up*. Maziarka described the YA Zone as the “Yes to All Zone” and advised parents to “stay with your child and read each book he/she checks out to assure they are not entering [it].” She stated that “young adults are children ages 11 through 17. (Be sure to address your 11 year old in a manner apropos).” Intellectual freedom policies protecting youth access were lampooned as “true loyalty to the many children they serve. After all, we would not want to restrict freedom of speech to those young’uns!” (Maziarka, n.d.). Ironically, Maziarka, along with other conservative activists, would end up appropriating the ALA’s discourses of intellectual freedom and anticensorship to support her own library challenge.

The Maziarkas’ protest of GLBTQ materials in the YA Collection was framed in terms of lack of balance on the issues and evidence of librarians’ partisanship in favor of gay rights. Though the ALA did not endorse “balanced collections,” its critics often employed that phrase to advance their own agendas. In their view, any GLBTQ content in YA literature was propaganda aimed at indoctrinating youth with the view that homosexuality was normal, whereas the “other side” claiming homosexuality was a deviant “lifestyle” that people could leave was not represented. Their challenge to the YA titles included a letter that referenced the ALA in order to demand that the library “provide equal access to all information, including ex-gay books. According to the American Library Association, libraries cannot support censorship and a librarian’s professional code requires them [*sic*] to seek out books that represent a wide range of viewpoints” (*West Bend Community Memorial Library*, 2009). As Maziarka later remarked, “All the books in the young-adult zone that deal with homosexuality are gay-affirming. That’s not balance” (Hanna, 2009).

Like her predecessors in conservative library activism, Maziarka also objected to the “censor” label in conjunction with her objections to the library’s collection, calling it a case of “verbal gymnastics.” Attacking librarians’ professionalism and attempting to gain rhetorical ground, she questioned why librarians could make judgments about adding to or subtracting from the collection without being called “censors” while community members exercising similar judgments were tarred with the brush of

censorship. “When librarians decide what will be in the collection—it’s called selective review. . . . When citizens/taxpayers decide to have or not have books/materials in the library—it’s called censorship” (Maziarka, 2009a). In a later post, Maziarka goes on to distinguish “real” censorship from its use as “a political bludgeon in a case where it does not, in reality, exist. . . . MORE information is being asked for, not less . . . no books will be banned. No books will be burned.” (Maziarka, 2009b). Indeed, when a group dubbed the Christian Civil Liberties Union came forward at the end of the West Bend battle demanding that YA novel *Baby Be-Bop* (1995), by F. L. Block, be burned, Maziarka and her allies publicly distanced themselves from the protestors. Book burning is not a common feature of conservative library activism, and most activists resent any suggestion that they are censoring. Manning (2009) accused the ALA of viewing parental challenges “as being somehow akin to book-burnings and government censorship, as if there were no legitimate reason why a group of parents might not want their children reading novels in which gratuitous and explicit sex, violence, drug use, and the like were major elements of the story.” Eschewing the “censor” label, conservative activists saw themselves as warriors *against* censorship. They believed the views of conservative parents and taxpayers were being ignored, and attempted to intimidate public libraries into serving solely their interests.

Though the West Bend library controversy drew from the conservative library challenges that preceded it, there were some aspects of the challenge that signaled a turning point in conservative library activism. The Maziarkas’s shift from challenging “pro-homosexual” books in the collection to challenging “sexually explicit” and “youth-targeted pornographic literature” suggests they recognized attacks on GLBTQ literature for its own sake were becoming less palatable to a more tolerant public. To illustrate the evolution of public opinion on gay rights, a Princeton Survey Research Associates study revealed that more than half of Americans approve of marriage equality, while a Public Religion Research Institute survey found that 51 percent of Evangelical Christians under thirty-five approve of gay marriage (Page, 2013; Public Religion Research Institute, 2013). The kind of language that Family Friendly Libraries used to stake out their definition of the “traditional family” in 1996—“mother and father married to each other with children”—would be ill advised in 2013 (Family Friendly Libraries, 1996). On the one hand, this is an indicator of progress for the gay rights movement, as increasing numbers of people distance themselves from overt hatred and discrimination towards GLBTQ people. On the other hand, the fight against gay rights has not gone away. *Focus on the Family Citizen* magazine still features stories like Candi Cushman’s “Parents Beware” (2010) claiming that antibullying initiatives in public school are really indoctrination tactics by gay rights activists. An American Family

Association fundraising caller asked this author for donations in order to fight the “liberal media” that the caller believed had already successfully indoctrinated children with “the gay agenda” (American Family Association, personal communication, March 15, 2013). Conservative activists will likely avoid overt antigay language in the future, but antigay activism is alive and well under other names.

Another factor in future challenges is the growing alliance between conservative Tea Party groups and the so-called “profamily” organizations. Though economic and social conservatives have not always agreed, publicly funded institutions such as schools and libraries bring these activists together to fight what they perceive to be common enemies—the federal government and the Obama administration. Tea Party groups like Truth in American Education and profamily groups such as Eagle Forum both object to the *Common Core State Standards*, which are scheduled for implementation in 2014 by most states (Eagle Forum, 2013; National Governors Association, 2010; Truth in American Education [<http://truthinamericaneducation.com>]). Both groups object to what they believe is federal overreach in educational standards, and cite the inclusion of “offensive” novels (such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* [1970]) in the *Standards*’ recommended reading lists. Tea Party groups have also gone after tax increases for public libraries in places like Troy, Michigan, and Pulaski County, Kentucky (Hilzinger, 2012; Morris 2013). Attacks on public library funding are likely to affect YA services in particular; in 2012, a survey of public libraries revealed that only one third had a dedicated YA librarian or librarians (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2013).

The importance of library collections and services for teens, particularly GLBTQ YA literature, cannot be underestimated, and young adults themselves are standing up for their own intellectual freedom rights. In response to the West Bend challenge, which singled out his book *Geography Club* (2003) for censure, Brent Hartinger (2009) reminded readers of the costs of censoring GLBTQ YA literature: “I wish everyone who thinks my books are not ‘appropriate’ for teenagers could read my mail for one single week—the avalanche of touching emails I receive from lonely or harassed gay and lesbian teens and their friends, so grateful to see gay characters portrayed accurately and with dignity, not merely stereotypes or the punch-lines of jokes.” From the high school students that protested the removal of *Persepolis* from Chicago Public School classrooms, to the Arizona teens that demonstrated against the censorship of the Tucson’s Mexican American Studies curriculum, young adults have shown that they are especially aware of the costs of censorship, and won’t cooperate with attacks on their freedom to read and learn. In future challenges, librarians and teachers defending YA literature in libraries may count on strong allies in teen readers themselves.

NOTES

1. See Robert Doyle's *Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read* (2010) for a list of YA titles that have been challenged and the circumstances of those challenges.
2. See Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins's *The Heart Has Its Reasons* for a discussion of notable GLBTQ YA literature.
3. Laurie Taylor's website, Parents Protecting the Minds of Children (<http://www.teachclean.com>), includes excerpts of the offending material accompanied by Taylor's commentary.
4. The YA titles Collum cites are David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*, Rebecca Fjelland Davis's *Jake Riley: Irreparably Damaged*, and Adam Rapp's *33 Snowfish*.

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