

Rogue Librarians, Episode 25 Flamer (Part 1: Why It's Banned)

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Welcome to the Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, and Alanna.

And we are the Rogue Librarians.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion.

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Today, we will be discussing Flamer by Mike Curato.

Emily Drabinski, the ALA president, told us that she loved this book, and we're so glad that we finally read it.

It is incredibly powerful and beautiful and deals with some really tough things in such a hopeful, meaningful way.

First published in 2020, this graphic novel received a Lambda Literary Award, which recognizes excellent LGBTQ plus literature, in 2021, as well as several other awards and honors.

Flamer was also fourth on the ALA's list of the most challenged books in America in 2022, and it tied Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir, Gender Queer, for the most banned book in the fall of 2022 in PEN America's index of school book bans.

Common Sense Media recommends the book for those 15 and older, and Amazon recommends it for those 14 and older.

Thanks for that, Alanna.

It definitely is a beautiful book.

And to be clear, we had this book on our to read list for the podcast already, and it was after the interview with Emily Drabinski that we just moved it right up to the top and decided to dive right in.

But we also wanted to offer to our listeners a trigger warning that we will be talking about some tough issues in this book, especially suicidal ideation in our discussion today.

Dorothy, do you have a summary of the book for us?

All right, yes.

So Flamer is about a boy named Aidan who is in his last week or so of summer camp.

And he loves summer camp because home life is not great.

There's some issues there.

But he has a little problem with bullying.

He's worried about going to high school and whether or not he'll be bullied there.

But he's a boy scout, it's a boy scout camp.

And so we kind of get to see through his daily life where he is having a good time and where he's being bullied and his is a special relationship with his cabin mate, really enjoys company.

And it becomes clear as you read the book that he has a crush on his cabin mate.

I don't think he even really realizes it.

So it's his journey to sort of understanding who he is at the same time as working out some personal issues.

And things get pretty bad towards the end.

But we come out on top.

I don't wanna spoil it for you just yet.

We can wait till the next episode for that.

And it's just a real slice of life kind of book.

Oh, and if we didn't say it, it's a graphic novel.

Yeah, great.

Thanks, Dorothy.

And just to add one thing, it takes place in 1995.

That is right.

So the technology they have is older, of course, and some of the references too.

You would understand if you were a little bit better if you were alive in the mid-90s.

Yes, yes.

And it is based on his personal experiences being a scout when he was that age.

It's very much him trying to understand himself.

So it's a very self-reflective book.

Yeah, it reminded me a bit of, or the motivation for the author Mike Curato for writing this story reminded me a bit of what we got from Juno Dawson in *This Book is Gay*, which is the wish that a book like this had been available as he was growing up and trying to sort through many difficult things in prepubescence and the pubescent period.

So I think there's a theme there that everyone needs to see themselves in a book, in more than one book, actually.

And that's a big motivation for writing some of these stories.

Yeah, definitely.

And we'll come back to that a little bit more later when we get into the historical context.

So thanks for mentioning that, Marion.

I thought we should talk a little bit more about why it is banned first.

And according to the ALA, *Flamer* has been challenged or banned for its LGBTQ plus content and for being considered sexually explicit.

Additionally, Common Sense Media warns parents about its language and depictions of violence, bullying and suicidal ideation.

And Marian, do you mind going into a little more detail about what Common Sense Media said?

Oh, I'd be happy to.

Thanks, Alanna.

So according to Common Sense Media, in addition to including a lot of swear words and some painful homophobic slurs, the book has bullying and sexist talk about girls.

Physical violence includes two scenes of physical assault.

One of them is in a fiery vision with flaming arrows.

And then there's a shower scene in which a boy gets an erection.

And the shower scene, of course this is a graphic novel, includes partial nudity, which includes barebacks, the top of buttocks, a side profile, but absolutely nothing explicit.

There's also probably what I felt was most traumatic in the story or maybe most problematic.

There's a shared masturbation scene with no genitals shown, but lots and lots of talk about sex.

Characters talk about suicidal ideation and end pages in the book refer to some mental health resources for readers.

The book does emphasize positive messages about family support and how we're not as alone as we think we are and stresses the importance of compassion and empathy, which we need so much more of in this world.

So take that for what you will, readers.

Dorothy, how about some historical context?

All right, so in an interview with PEN America, Mike Curato mentioned that he was anxious about the book's reception when it first appeared, but nothing happened for the first year and a half.

Which, you know, that's something that we see a lot.

But he was both shocked and not shocked at how people have responded since then.

And he has been upset at how the book has been lied about and how he has been called a pedophile and groomer and has received death threats.

Yeah.

In that same article, when asked why he read the book, he said, quote, I wrote Flamer because when I was Aidan's age, that's the main character of the book, he's 14, I didn't have a book like this to sort of validate who I am.

I didn't have anyone in TV or film that looked like me, sounded like me, that had the same experiences that I had.

I was a chubby, mixed Filipino-Irish Catholic kid.

Who did I have to look up to?

I wrote this book because I want to help young people who are in the vulnerable place that I was in when I was their age.

I think something that's not often talked about during the banning of this book is that it's not a book about sex.

There are a few pages with sexual leaning content, but there are hundreds of other pages, and it's focused on identity and self-preservation.

What doesn't get spoken about in these PTA meetings, in the school board meetings, what's not spoken about by these government officials who are pointing at this and calling it pornography is that this is a book about suicide prevention.

End quote.

That is very powerful.

The author Mike Curato does continue later in the article to say, quote, and I think most people haven't read the full book because then they would know, I'm trying to help someone.

I'm trying to stop someone from taking drastic measures of self harm or suicide.

And so that's the shocking thing for me is that they're basically telling queer youth, we don't care about you.

We don't care if you hate yourself and we're just fine if you decide to end things because we're more concerned about shaming you, about your sexuality, shaming you about masturbation.

That just right there makes me pause, that was by the way, the end quote.

And but it just, it makes me pause that so many, we've discussed this before in our podcast, that so many of the people that are the book banners, the 11 that we've talked about before, who are reading hundreds of books and banning hundreds of books and encouraging people to ban together and ban these books.

They're all, they're mostly identifying as very conservative right wing Christians who claim to love God and love people, but what they're really saying if they're saying these things that we don't care about you if you're gay is that we only love people who look like us and agree with what we agree.

So I just throw that out there.

Mike Curato goes on with his quote.

There are some taboo themes that I addressed in this book that I'm sure some parents are uncomfortable with, but these are experiences that most teenagers go through.

Some parents would prefer their children read about uncomfortable topics in a book because it's a very safe place to learn.

They can digest it at their own pace.

They can put the book down if they want to.

And then I think there are some parents that would rather just uphold a taboo and not talk about anything.

And all that does is just perpetuate this cycle of shame.

End quote.

And so, you know, I just wanted to add in here that I had we had looked at many different sources to pull together our research for this episode.

And, you know, Mike Curato has gone on record also in saying, quote, I think any LGBTQ-themed book is automatically going to be stigmatized as sexual because queer people are sexualized in this country and not seen as three-dimensional people.

End quote.

And I think that goes, you know, back to the point of, hey, they don't care about queer people, they just want queer people to go ahead and off themselves.

So it's just a very intense divide that we have in this country where the book banners are, as we've said many times, going after all the LGBTQ plus books.

And it's something to be concerned about and something to be aware of.

And in my mind, we are all humans and everyone has a right to live and we shouldn't be encouraging anyone to kill themselves or to not feel accepted or loved.

So, Alana, I want to pass it on to you if you have some more that you wanted to say about it.

Yeah, thank you so much, Marian.

So, since Mike Curato aimed to help people who were considering self-harm and suicide, we thought we would talk a little bit more about those topics in other young adult books.

We discussed this a little bit in terms of how young adult books address death and grief when we read John Green's *Looking for Alaska*.

But we're going to talk a little more specifically about suicide now.

So when I was doing this research, I found an article from 1986 called *Suicide in Young Adult Literature* by Paula S.

Berger.

And in this article, she discussed how suicide had recently become the subject of several YA novels.

And as far as I can tell, that seems to be the first time that it's being discussed in several novels.

She wrote, quote, teenage suicide has reached epidemic proportions in the United States and is therefore an important issue in contemporary society.

Since many contemporary novelists have incorporated current thinking and research findings on suicide into their novels, their work serve as a useful device for the discussion and understanding of this problem by teenagers who are the primary victims of this self-destructive act.

And she talks more about how novels can be useful for teenagers who are considering suicide.

And that goes along with what Marion was talking about as a book being a safe place for people to see these issues brought up and how to avoid deciding to go through with it.

A later chapter by Michelle Falcoff, this was published in 2022, and this chapter was called Suicide in Young Adult Novels, explained, quote, Teen readers have had have long had an interest in reading novels about suicide, but their interest has increased substantially since the publication of Jay Asher's 13 Reasons Why in 2007.

And she mentions in the chapter that there are some books that talk about suicide in a way that is helpful for vulnerable readers, and some books talk about it in a way that actually may prove harmful for vulnerable readers.

So it really depends on how suicide or suicidal ideation is presented in these books and how people will respond to them.

And I wanted to mention a couple of other things to think about is, as you may know, the first time a book was claimed to cause other people to die by suicide was the 1774 novel by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther.

And in the book, the hero kills himself when the woman he loves rejects him.

And apparently several young men decided to copy him.

And this was later called the Werther Effect.

That term was coined in 1974.

And that's the name for the phenomenon in which cases of suicide seem to increase after the news of a suicide, especially a celebrity suicide.

And it's also called copycat suicide.

And we wanted to briefly mention 13 Reasons Why a little bit more.

According to a 2017 study in JAMA Internal Medicine, the series 13 Reasons Why, not the book, but as you may remember, they turned it into a series on TV.

Apparently, after that came out, it led to a 26% increase in searches of how to commit suicide, an 18% increase for commit suicide, and 9% increase in how to kill yourself.

And in 2019, JAMA Psychiatry suggested that in the three months following its release, there was an increase in the number of suicides of 10 to 19-year-olds in the United States, although some other studies have rejected that idea.

So it seems like certain media is still blamed for leading to an increase in copycat suicides, and it seems like perhaps television shows and other media that students are watching is more likely to do that than a book.

But I think it's worth remembering for this book that there is no graphic depiction of suicide.

There is very little thinking about suicide before he starts having these suicidal thoughts.

And so you can see where it comes from, but it's not like he spends the entire book thinking about it.

And we don't want to exactly spoil what happens, but it does have a hopeful ending.

So I think how books and other forms of media present it is really important.

And when I looked at lists of YA books about suicidal ideation, I did not see Flamer on any of these lists.

Thirteen Reasons Why certainly showed up a lot as in Looking for Alaska.

But I think the fact that this book is only a few years old and there's been a lot of backlash for how it discusses other taboo topics and maybe just not as well known or as popular as some of these other books at this point that discuss suicidal ideation.

So I think it would be a great idea to include this book on lists of books that discuss suicidal ideation in a realistic yet hopeful way, because I think it would really benefit kids who are thinking about some of these issues.

Yeah.

So yeah, what do the two of you think about these topics?

Well, so many thoughts just jumped into my head as you were talking about 13 Reasons Why and the Virta effect.

So they're pulling out this research, and they're saying this research coincided with the book specifically 13 Reasons Why being published or the online streaming series 13 Reasons Why.

I mean, I can tell you that I read the book, and it was heartbreaking and exceedingly informative and would have been a great book to do as a discussion in a high school English class.

However, when I tried to watch the series many years later, I found the series much, much harder to get through because there is a separation and a chance to digest information more when you read a book.

And as a reader, you know, as you mentioned, Alana, you can put the book down if it's not the book for you, or if you're not ready for that discussion, or if you just need some time to digest, or if you want to look some other information up.

But when you're seeing it up close and personal, the way the series was filmed, it's your mind is digesting all this information instantaneously.

And, you know, if you're in a sad place at the time that you're reading it, I could also see just the reaction of, you know, what is being depicted on screen with these characters that, you know, you've become familiar with over the course of many episodes, that it just would be much more devastating and have much more of maybe a spontaneous effect on people.

And I guess that's what I want my point to be here, is that media, television and movies and what is streamed on the Internet is so powerful.

And not just the fictionalized stuff, but, you know, you talked about the the further effect in the copycat issues.

I mean, the news is so depressing that I have felt personally so saddened by the news that I have chosen to stop watching it or to being bombarded by it.

What causes people to feel hopeless and depressed in the world?

I don't think that it's all a result of reading a book.

So I apologize.

I just went on a range, a rant.

Dorothy, did you have some thoughts you wanted to add in there?

Yeah, yeah, I did.

You know, I remember being, I think it was in middle school when we often discussed the idea of suicide.

Not that anybody was saying that they wanted to do it.

They were all just being like, is that something you would ever consider?

You know, it became a topic of interest in that age group.

But, you know, much like I don't believe that anybody who isn't already gay is going to read a book about someone who realizes they're gay and then be gay, right?

My gut instinct says the kids who are reading these books about suicide were already having these thoughts or interested in this topic.

And everybody takes something different from what they read.

But I think that the good far outweighs the harm that anything like this could do.

You can make statistics say anything you want, so that's just my gut reaction.

I did want to mention, as I always have to reference a podcast I've been listening to, Hidden Brain, and just last night, listened to one called What We Have In Common, US 2.0.

What this particular show was about was the stories that we create in our brains, the way that everybody in an incident feels like the victim and like they are the ones in the right.

And everybody is still also coming from a place of safety, of wanting to keep someone or something or themselves safe.

So people who are worried about these books, I think, are legitimately trying to keep teens safe.

And those of us who think the books are important for kids to read are legitimately trying to keep the teens safe.

So we're all coming from the same motivation.

It just looks very different from wherever we're standing.

So I just thought that was an interesting addition to the discussion, because you can make an impassioned argument either way.

But we all want the same thing, which is to help kids.

That's a really good point, Dorothy.

Thank you.

I highly recommend to listen.

It's part of a series they're doing, so I'm looking forward to more.

I just want to say that in terms of the suicidal epidemic that is happening in our teens, and particularly in teens identifying as LGBTQ+, or pre-teens, that connection is what saves lives, not divisiveness, not isolation.

And we need to really think about what are the ways that we can pay better attention to our loved ones and connect with them and help them to understand that we love them and they're not alone and we're going to walk through this difficult time with them and make them feel special, which is inevitably, again,

not to be a spoiler, but there are some sweet moments in this book where our main character, Aidan, realizes he's not alone and that there are lots of reasons to live.

Beautifully put, Marion.

Thank you.

Here we go.

Are we ready to move on to the pros and cons?

Yes.

Yes.

All right, then.

I will start by talking about the pros of the book, and I feel there are many.

And I'm just gonna start with, it's just an incredibly moving story based on the author's personal experience as a gay, biracial boy scout.

And the things that happen are very, even the uncomfortable things, like they're happening to these young people.

So it may be hard for us to look at sometimes, but not having it in a book does not make it not so.

But it's a very moving story.

And halfway through, I was like, this is good, but not my favorite.

By the time I got to the end, I was just, it had such an impact.

So it was very moving and beautiful.

Yep, I completely agree, Dorothy.

And part of what makes it so moving and beautiful is the fact that it is a graphic novel with stunning illustrations.

And they're done in a really interesting way.

Most of the drawings are in black and white, but he uses red, orange and yellow in really emotional situations.

And apparently he did the black and white and the color separately, and then would use Photoshop to put the color on top of it, if I understand it correctly.

And the result is just really effective when you're in those emotional moments, especially.

And the illustrations themselves are, he went for sort of a rough texture to them, so they look like they're painted kind of quickly sometimes.

But then there are certain frames or pages that are just gorgeous in the detail they include.

Like there's one moment where he and his best friend, Brand Elias speak out at night to canoe on the water and just enjoy being on the water and looking at the stars.

And there's just this beautiful two page spread of them on the water and the gorgeous stars above them.

And I just love that moment too.

So the illustrations add a lot to the book.

And if it weren't a graphic novel, I'm guessing people wouldn't have quite so many issues with it as we discussed with Gender Queer.

But the graphic novel element of it, I think adds to its depth.

And we can see Aidan's reactions to things he's hearing around him really clearly on his face.

And it just adds so much more to the book to be depicted this way.

Yeah, that's absolutely true, Alana.

And yeah, gosh, what you just said about seeing the image, the facial expressions.

I mean, if it were written in text and there were no illustrations there, that would be imagining in our head, right?

But it does add an additional emotional level to it to see the reaction.

I don't know, to me, it just brought out such a level of compassion in me.

And I really do think that is intentional by Mike Curato.

The pro, definitely a pro, that I'd like to talk about is the discussion of religion and shame in the book.

And of course, Aidan is Catholic and has gone through eight years, I presume, of Catholic schooling at a school, Fetishist school called St.

Michael's.

And he's been exceedingly involved in the church.

He's been an altar boy for, I believe, four years.

And that really resonated with me, because I also went to Catholic school for I guess it was 11 years.

I started in second grade.

But it's done so beautifully with such reverence and respect to religion, and specifically Catholicism, as it's formed our main character, Aidan.

And the discussion in the book adds many questions about how religion, at least the way it's described in this book, doesn't necessarily have as of any gray areas.

It's black or it's white.

And Aidan refers to all the rules of Catholicism that he has learned as he's grown up in this schooling situation.

And the more he's learned the rules, the more he's learned to feel shame that in his past, he's broken these rules, but he didn't know they were rules at the time.

And like I said, there's a reverence here for religion without...

I mean, there's no indication of religions are bad in any way, shape or form, but it makes you think as a reader who identifies with having grown up in a religious family with rules, that what is the experience like for a young person who is growing up and believes in God and believes in their religious doctrine and practices?

And I mean, so much so that at one point Aidan wants to, you know, he's thinking about he should become a priest, but he doesn't think he's good enough because he can't live up to the perfection that he perceives is required of him as a rule following practicing Catholic.

So it's it just opens your mind to thinking about a lot of a lot of the experiences that that young people have with growing up in a very tight knit religious family and and you know that it can have very positive effects on you in terms of forming your values, but it can also have some, you know, detrimental effects in terms of, you know, if you really are a perfectionist and you take that very seriously and at face value and start to question, you know, well, maybe I'm just a terrible person.

So it to me, that's a great conversation to have coming out of this book.

I like the way that that plays together with I mean, it's a book about a kid who's gay, but it's also not because he does not understand that he's gay at no point in the book does he go, Oh, I must be gay.

Right.

He says, but he literally says, but I'm not gay.

While he's, you know, having thoughts about about men and or his roommates, you know, so it just kind of shows that internal like conversation that is so confusing, I think, for young people.

Yeah.

So I like that.

And which brings me to the next pro, which is that it deals with topics like it's in is biracial.

Aidan has gotten the message that he's overweight from, you know, families and doctors, and maybe a little shorter than the average 14 year old.

And he's bullied for all of those reasons and for being effeminate.

And we don't even really see his being effeminate until fairly late in the book, you know, whenever he has a moment where he's just trying to be himself, people will be like, you know, you're you're othering yourself, you're making yourself seem different, you're acting gay, you know.

And so I just really liked the way all of that was just sort of mixed in with, I don't know, just it was it was not about one thing, and it was kind of just about the the bullying culture, particularly I can't imagine never been to a girl scout camp, much less a boy scout camp.

But it really does seem to be a culture of of bullying that is happening there, and that's how a lot of young people interact with each other.

So I think it's a good conversation to have.

Well, yeah, I think in in this case, the amount of bullying to so many kids, not just Aiden, but he seems especially picked on is just really hard to see.

I went to Girl Scout camp for several years in elementary school and I had a fabulous time.

I was not aware of any bullying.

We just had fun doing arts and crafts and there was hiking and orienteering and horseback riding and things like that.

And for me, it was just a very pleasant experience.

So I'm sure bullying happens there too, but it was not as obvious if it was there as it was in this case.

But I think that goes along with my next point of the fact that even though this story deals with a lot of really heavy topics, it does so with humor.

There are some lighter moments throughout the book.

And a couple that I especially appreciated is you get to see them having fun, too.

So singing around the campfire together.

And they sang a couple of the songs that I sang at camp when I was little, like a boom chicka boom, where you sing it in different voices.

And Aiden gets in trouble at first with a couple of the boys for singing it in Valley Girl style.

And that was definitely something we did when I was a kid.

At the same time, you know, in the mid 90s.

So it was just fun to relive those moments for me, even though that particular moment was also a little hard for him.

But just seeing all the smiles on their faces while they're singing together is really sweet.

And you see him interact with some of his friends and fun ways too.

And in one case, he's with his friend David making what's supposed to be baskets.

They're learning how to do basket weaving.

And his David is just terrible and Aiden kind of pokes fun at it a little bit.

And they laugh at it together.

So you get to see him having some fun too and becoming friends with some of these other boys.

So I really appreciate those moments too.

And it's not relentless bullying, you know, which could be hard to read.

There's bullying and some kids will stand up for him.

And then there's nice moments in between.

And it's true, Dorothy.

I really loved those moments when other kids tried to defend Aiden, because you don't always see that.

And those kids should get credit too, even though they weren't always on his side.

But they tried to defend him from the other bullies.

Yeah.

And I love the fact that because it is Boy Scout Camp and it is a camp that he's gone to before, that Aiden's gone to before.

These are his friends.

He doesn't live life with them every single day because they don't necessarily go to his school or maybe even come from the same town.

But they're predictable people that he's gotten, developed a relationship with since he's been going to this camp.

And so they know each other well and beyond the surface, I guess, going through these experiences together.

So they have trouble and they bully him a little bit with some of his differentness because they're also trying to figure things out as they're going through puberty and they're trying to understand.

But they actually, because they have that relationship, the previous relationship, they bully, but then they come back when they realize how sad they've made him.

And they're like, hey, man, I'm just trying to help you out.

Why are you so different?

Why do you do these things?

And don't act gay if you're not gay.

And that's in their language, their teen language or their preteen languages, because they don't really understand.

They just know that they're uncomfortable, but they like him because he's been their friend for so long.

So it's bullying, I don't know, with like a sweetness, like with a sense of, hey dude, we care about you.

We're trying to help you out.

For some of them, not all of them, I would say.

Right, true.

I would say that's a discussion we could definitely have in the next episode.

I have a lot of thoughts about that dynamic of, you know, trying to help him not be himself.

But I think we could dig into that in our close reading.

Well, cool.

Then maybe we'll just settle and do that later.

We'll just put it aside for now.

But I did want to go on to another pro, which is I think, you know, just going back to Mike Curato and his experience growing up in 1995 and putting that in a book.

And he talks about it in an interview that he did with NPR with Juanita Giles or Giles, I'm not sure how you say her name, in October of 2020.

And in her book review, Giles quotes, being a teenage boy looks hard.

It looks brutish.

It looks intimidating.

It looks confusing.

It looks vulgar.

It looks, well, really uncomfortable.

Not that being a teenage girl isn't all of those things too, but in my experience, at least, there isn't nearly as much, how shall I say it?

How do I describe the absolutely unabashed preoccupation with body parts and functions and how that preoccupation is the lens for everything?

What is it?

Whatever it is, Mike Curato knows.

He knows it like Judy Blume knows a teenage girl, and that's quite a bit.

And so later on in that same interview, Mike Curato, she goes on to quote again about Mike Curato that this is a big pro for why this book is out there and important for the readers who need to read it.

Quote, Mike Curato does write by every kid or adult who has ever had those moments.

There are no promises of rosy skies and sunflowers for Aiden.

No redemptive story of bullies turning into pussycats.

What Curato does give Aiden is much more valuable.

Hard knowledge and acceptance of himself with pinpricks of light in the form of a thumbs up from a friend, a letter from a pen pal, and a moment of tranquility.

What Curato gives Aiden is not a pithy storybook ending.

There is no boyfriend waiting at the end of the rainbow.

No magic way to deal with his parents or school.

But there is endurance and hope.

Aiden does not emerge from the flames unscathed, but he does emerge stronger and accepting himself.

And to me, that may be the biggest pro of all.

Yeah, I completely agree, Marion.

And I think the only thing I would add is, I don't think she interviewed him for this story, but it was her review of the book.

Yeah.

And the fact that it's not a perfect, like everything is going to be perfect in his life from now on.

He's still dealing with difficult things at home and with friends.

But as you said, there is endurance and hope, and he's accepting himself.

Yeah, for sure.

That brings us to the ever difficult cons.

Bearing in mind that we're reading books that have won awards here, so we often really just have to dig to decide what's a pro, what's a con.

True.

And this, the last quote about boys, teenage boys, and what it means to be one, is where the one concern that I had when I was reading the book.

Yeah, there are frames in the book which just show boys making, I don't know what I would call homoerotic jokes, you know, like, oh, who wants a hot dog?

And then someone else sticking the bun between his legs and say, put it in my buns.

You know, it's just ill, you know, like, and they're laughing hilariously.

They're not pointing this anti-gay sentiment at anyone in particular, but it just permeates everything.

And then, of course, there's the masturbation scene.

And I don't think these are problems for the kid that this book is meant for.

These kids have seen this stuff, heard this stuff, been disgusted by this stuff, felt uncomfortable around it, because, I mean, the truth is that not all boys are like that, although a lot of them seem to be.

So my con is, and bearing in mind that I come from middle school background, so if this book were to be in a middle school library, I would be concerned about those kids that are being depicted, finding the book, finding those things hilarious, and pointing them out around, you know, to other kids, therefore sort of perpetuating that circle of anti-gay feeling, and, you know, bullying against gays without even a target.

But I also think that having it available to the kids that need to read it, who will read it and say, yes, I recognize this, and I am this kid who's sitting there uncomfortable at these jokes, whether they're gay or not, by the way.

I think it's more important that it be there for them than that we worry about the kids who are going to point and laugh.

Right.

I think that's true.

And I just want to, I have to jump in and just let our listeners know, this description that Dorothy just gave of the masturbation scene shows nothing graphic at all.

It's just talking.

It's just the concept.

It's just the concept.

They're, they're sitting in a very dark tent, so no one can see anybody else.

It's just, yeah, you know, it's, yeah, exactly.

It's the content.

And Aiden is uncomfortable and leaves, so we don't even know exactly what happens.

And it's actually not even ostracized for leaving, just, hey, I'm tired, I'm going to bed.

And they're like, okay, you know.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, exactly.

Well, and I agree, Dorothy, it was really hard to find cons in this book.

I think the only other thing I would mention is that because it takes place in 95, there are a few illusions or references that might be unfamiliar to some teenagers now.

I don't think that's a big problem.

But for example, the boys were discussing Lord of the Rings, which I'm sure a lot of kids still know now.

But then a few pages later, he has this dream in which it is clearly an illusion to a part near the end of Lord of the Rings.

And there are no words, it's just images.

So if you were someone who had no idea about Lord of the Rings, those couple of pages might be a little confusing, but that's okay, you can move on, and it won't affect your understanding of the book.

But there are a few moments like that where if you know those references, it adds to your understanding.

If you don't, you can move on and it's perfectly fine.

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, I think that's a really good point.

And I always feel like when I read a book, if there's a reference in the book that I don't know about, that's a great learning opportunity for me if I'm interested to go and do my own research.

So I feel like that's part of how books connect us and help us to learn more about parts of the world that maybe we weren't familiar with.

So I'm just going to turn that con right into a pro.

We have a way of doing that, don't we?

We kind of do.

I mean, it's a librarian thing.

You might consider this a con, but we're going to tell you why maybe it is.

Yeah.

And also, I mean...

There's not a lot of girls in the book.

That's another thing.

Well, it's Boy Scout Camp.

Well, and they also...

There are girls...

Spoken about.

There's the pen pal, there's the sisters and the mom.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Aidan's pen pal, Violet, who we'll talk about in the next episode, is his best friend.

So she has a large role in the book in a different way.

So yeah, yeah, for sure.

Shall we talk about why we think it's worth reading?

Okay, cool.

Yes.

So you can tell, you know, we are librarians.

We see the value of books and helping people to connect through books and to learn and to see themselves represented.

So all of those things are definitely true in this book.

But Mike Curato was asked in an interview, what do you hope readers will take away from Flamer?

And his answer, quote, I want queer slash questioning readers to know they are loved.

Loving yourself can be hard.

So if this book can step in and say, but I love you, that could be a source of hope.

We need more queer stories told by queer voices.

I also want non-queer identified people to get a taste of what it's like to be marginalized.

I hope Flamer brings people closer together and closer to themselves.

To me, that's why we should read this book.

And just to go back to the front cover of the book, if you have not looked at the front cover, just Google cover of Flamer and then just zoom in on the image.

At the very top, there is a quote from Jarrett J.

Krasuska.

God, I hope I said his name properly, because he's an awesome graphic novel author who's prolific, has written the Lunch Lady series among many, many others.

But it says in a decent size print across the top of the cover of the book, Flamer, quote, this book will save lives, end quote.

And I just can't think of any better praise than that.

And, you know, for all the people who are trying to have this book banned and claiming that it's pornography, you know, Mike Curato has said previously, and since we've referred to Judy Bloom, I want to just throw in one last little plug.

Curato says, quote, and it's an honest book, but there's nothing worse than what you'd find in a Judy Bloom book, period.

End quote.

And I just, I feel that that's absolutely true.

I feel like this book can be for people what the Judy Bloom books meant to me as a child growing up in the, oh, I'm not going to say the decade.

But I think that every generation, boy or girl or non-binary, needs to find the book that saves them and gives them the information they need.

All right, so please join us next time for a close reading of Flamer.

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Yes, that is I, my new hat, and other recent ones.

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Finally, thanks to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read.