

Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode
ALA President Emily Drabinski

Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We're your hosts, Dorothy and Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. Unfortunately, Marian was not able to join us today. We would love for you to participate in our discussion, though. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at [@roguelibrarianspod](https://www.instagram.com/roguelibrarianspod).

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Today, we are excited to share our interview with the 2023 to 2024 President of the American Library Association, Emily Drabinski. Emily spoke with us about the upcoming Library Learning Experience Conference, some of her experiences as president, the ALA's efforts to fight censorship, and the importance of investing in libraries and other public institutions. We loved talking with her. It was so interesting to hear her perspective and to learn more about what librarians across the country have been dealing with recently and also what they're trying to do to improve things in the future. What did you think, Dorothy?

Oh, yeah, it was a fascinating conversation. And I definitely learned a lot about sort of what the ALA is all about. You know, and I already know a lot. So it was great to get sort of the inside scoop on that. But anyhow, I loved just hearing about her travels. I'm really looking forward to the documentary that she's working on.

Yeah, sounds fascinating about libraries across the country.

Yeah, traveling to different libraries across the country and just knowing the stories. I love the way that she focused on how every library is different. Every community is different and the needs of each and everyone are different. unique to their communities.

Yeah, I love that too. And it was so interesting hearing about her own experiences with reading and libraries and how important they were to her growing up and how important libraries are within their communities and all of the services they provide to people, not just providing books. So I thought that was so valuable. Well, we're going to tell you a little bit more about Emily Drabinski before we get into our interview. In addition to being the 2023 to 2024 president of the ALA, Emily Drabinski is Associate Professor at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies. Drabinski has served as chair of the International Relations Committee, ALA counselor at large, and chair of the Association of College and Research Libraries Information

Literacy Frameworks and Standards Committee. She is co-chair of the ACRL President's Program Planning Committee and serves as reviews editor for college and research libraries. Jerminsky holds an MLIS from Syracuse University, a BA in political science from Columbia University, and an MA in Composition and Rhetoric from Long Island University, Brooklyn. To learn more about Emily Drabinski, please visit her website at www.emilydrabinski.com. Without further ado, here is our interview with Emily Drabinski.

Emily, thank you so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians today.

It's an honor to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

Thank you. We would like to start by asking you a few questions about your background. So could you please tell us what was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up and why?

It's a big question, right? All I did as a kid was read. I know we're not supposed to say we became librarians because we love to read, but I'll admit that was a little part of it for me. The first novel I remember reading from cover to cover as a child was Heidi. I don't know if either of you have read that book.

Yes, I love Heidi.

Yeah, and just the story of a girl and her pluckiness and her, you know, whole life that mattered to her and mattered to the rest of the world. And I remember sitting on my, on this wicker chair, my mother kept in the laundry room back in the back of our house growing up in Boise, Idaho, curling up in the, in that chair and reading that novel. So was it influential on me as like the content? I certainly didn't like move to Switzerland or whatever. But it, it, it, it's influential in that that's still what I love to do most is curl up with the book and read it. That's still how I spend a lot of my time.

That's wonderful. So you kind of mentioned that you loved to read and that's why you decided to become a librarian. But or not, there's probably a lot.

Yeah, that had something to do with it. I like to be around books, but yeah, not the whole reason.

So how did you decide to become a librarian?

I mean, I decided to become a librarian for very practical reasons that probably will resonate with a lot of your listeners. I needed a job, frankly. I was working in New York City and trying to become a writer. That's been my dream growing up in Idaho. I moved to the big city and become a writer, but I got here and found out that opportunities are unfairly distributed, right? Like in order to be a famous writer in New York, you kind of have to know some famous writers in New York. And so I kind of

wasn't making it as a fact checker working in magazines. And I thought, what could I do that would open opportunities anywhere? Like if I ended up leaving New York City, I wanted a job like a license that would get me a job anywhere. And I figured every town has a library, which I've come to find out is largely true. And we got to work to make sure that it stays true. And I applied for a job at the New York Public Library, kind of thought, maybe this is it. I don't like blood, right? I don't want to be a nurse. My father was a nurse when I was growing up. So I knew I didn't want to do that, but I knew I liked to read. I knew I liked to be inside of libraries. I'd been a librarian, library worker in college. And yeah, my very first class in library school is like, yes, this is amazing. We're going to take everything everybody ever wrote anywhere. We're going to collect it, describe it, preserve it, and make it possible for everybody to check it out and read it. It's just a marvelous project, the library, and was hooked from the word go.

That's great. So, how did you decide to run for president of the American Library Association and What do you hope to accomplish during your tenure as president?

You know, I asked that question of myself all the time. What was I thinking? But I was thinking that I love libraries and I love librarians and I think if we had more libraries in the world we could solve a lot of the problems that bother me, right? So I'm a librarian, but I also care about people. I care about the public. I care about the public good. And I saw what happened to a lot of my colleagues and what happened to a lot of libraries during the pandemic and how we were named as essential services in so many cases, crucial to our communities, but then not supported in the ways that I think are not. But if you want to rely on libraries as sort of the way that we produce literacy in our communities, as the institutions that preserve memory, as the site of broadband internet access for the most vulnerable, for like there isn't any other institution that we have where people can just walk in and ask a question and get some help, right? There's no no other institution like that. And so I think when the pandemic hit and we were all, you know, a lot of us at least pressed back into service before we had vaccines, I think I was struck by how we could both be essential but not compensated or supported as such. And so I thought if I could run for president of the ALA, it would give me an opportunity to be part of the storytelling project of American Libraries that I think what the task is for the ALA president is to make a clear public case for the value of libraries, school, public, and academic, as well as special libraries and to tell that story in as many places as possible. So that was sort of why I decided to run, and I also wanted to just really highlight the value of library workers and how you don't have a library unless you have library workers and our working conditions are our students learning conditions and are the, you know, the conditions of literacy in our communities and neighborhoods. So that's why I decided to run. What I hope to accomplish is to tell that story. And so my, the sort of capstone of my presidential year will be a library tour. We're going to take a car and a filmmaker and some podcasting sound equipment. We're going to drive from Rhode Island in Cranston, the home of our

Senate champion, Senator Jack Reed, across the country, ending in San Diego in time for ALA annual, where we will be telling the stories of big libraries, small libraries, libraries in small communities and trying to do what I can to make sure that everybody sees the value of libraries by the time I'm done.

That sounds wonderful. Yeah.

We saw that the ALA is hosting the Library Learning Experience from January 19th to 22nd, 2024 in Baltimore, Maryland. Would you mind telling our listeners what this event focus is on?

Yeah. I'm so excited about it, because the thing that I think that associates do best in American Library Association being the biggest and oldest library association in the world, what we do best is we convene library practitioners, library scholars, activists, policymakers together to solve the sort of naughty problems of our field. And I think when you look back at the, we're 147 years old this year, we're looking at our 150th anniversary coming up and when you look at what we we, what sort of has stayed the same throughout that time, and thankfully many things have changed, right? The American Library Association is not as patriarchal as it was, even though we still deal with those problems. It's not as sort of, is not ruled by a dominant narrative in the same way. But what hasn't changed is that we convene together to talk to one another about what's happened in American libraries. And so that's what we'll be part of what we'll be doing in Baltimore this winter. And I'm really excited about it. It's an event that is a little different from our annual conference in that it's smaller and it's really focused on active learning and ensuring that people are engaged in the program. So we'll be engaging folks in education programs where we have thought leaders from the field. featured speakers, famous authors, and immersive events. So things where you're not just sitting and listening, but you're actually learning some tools to do good work back at your own library. My own presidential program is featuring a handful of librarians who work really hard to make community work. So I think, you know, I love libraries for reading, but I also love libraries for the ways that we produce public and we bring people together. And so that'll be the focus of my presidential program this year is the role that libraries play in building community.

Excellent. Would you mind telling us a little bit more about some of the parts you're most excited about? You've already touched on this a little bit.

Well, it's definitely hanging out with my friends. Like hanging out with people that I know. I think that's like, you know, we come for the educational program. I mean, but we also, come for the interactions in the hallway and the, you know, the dinners that we have and that kind of thing. As the president of the association, my focus is really on facilitating the democratic, deliberative decision-making process of our ALA council. So I'm excited about the governance elements. We'll be reviewing a new set of core values that a lot of our members have worked really hard on to make sure that the

association has a strong sense of its own values and the things that we care about as a community.

So we're going to be reviewing those and it's also an opportunity for our members to bring issues that they care about to the front of our governing body. So looking forward to talking about the value of our school and academic library chapters as well as the sort of where the ALA stands on the important issues of the day. So I'm excited about that. I'm also really looking forward to the intimate opportunities for intimate connections with our speakers. I think given its size there are a lot more opportunities just for getting to talk to people, the speakers and the presenters. and really being engaged. We've got some great acclaimed names coming. Michelle Norris is opening our mainstage event. She'll be speaking about her Simon and Schuster novel, *Our Hidden Conversations: What Americans Really Think About Race*. And I can't imagine really a more important conversation to be having right now. We're also going to see Antonia Hylton, who's a co-host of the hit podcast Southlake. She'll be talking about her new book, *Madness: Race and Insanity in a Jim Crow Asylum*, one of the last segregated asylums in the country. So excited to hear her talk. And then the award ceremonies are always fun. It's an opportunity to really celebrate reading, which as I've said, something I care a lot about.

Sounds fascinating. Well, that brings us also to the next question, which is what are the awards that you'll be presenting?

Ooh, I'm so excited. What I'm most excited about because, you know, what I really care about is library workers and I don't want to miss any opportunity or any chance to celebrate what library workers do and the importance of supporting. And our library worker is both with material resources, but also with the agency that we need to make good decisions on behalf of our communities. So I'll be able to, I'll be joining the I Love My Librarian Awards, where we're going to be presenting awards to 10 librarians who have been nominated by their communities for this prestigious award and really looking forward to celebrating with those library workers at the event. Also the Youth Media Awards, which is as exciting an experience as I've ever had is attending those celebrations. You get to really hear from all of the authors or all of the jury award committees about the decisions they had to make. There's so much good work being put out, especially for young adults right now and middle grade readers and young readers and to be able to highlight and share the award winners as a real honor that I made. It's early in the morning, but I gotta tell you, it's worth getting up for, because you know what youth librarians have? A ton of energy, a ton of enthusiasm. And you know, I've been an academic librarian my whole career and my interactions with young people are limited to my 15 year old. So that's like a mix of feelings as any moms unfortunately to this might know. But I have learned so much about what youth librarians do for their communities and I've dragged my kid to the public library, I've made him go with me, took him with me, dragged him to a resume writing workshop at the Windsor Terrace branch of Brooklyn Public Library where I go. And this is, you know, he's a kid who doesn't want to go do anything, barely wants to speak to

me. You know, just, that's... normal. But I took him and he spent 45 minutes in the room with the librarian. He came out, he had a draft resume written.

Like I couldn't believe it. Like it was amazing. He had a handful of jobs that he wants to start applying for. And then we were walking home from the branch and he turned to me and he said, I'm glad I went. Oh, that's wonderful. And as a mom, right? Like as a mom, you're like, "I always want to hear that." And I hear it so rarely right now. And so, seeing the way that that youth librarian transformed him a little bit, it was extremely moving. And so, I'm excited to celebrate not just young adult authors, but with the youth librarians that will be at the conference in Baltimore.

That's so cool. And what a helpful and, as you said, moving thing to do for young adults is to help them create a resume.

Yeah. And then like to have another adult who's not your mom or your teacher like talking to you. It's really amazing. Yeah. Anyway, I could go on and on. It's wonderful.

So since our podcast focuses on reading banned books, we wanted to ask you a few questions about book banning. In May 2023, we spoke with the previous ALA President, Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada, about book banning efforts across the country. Would you mind updating us on what you've seen with respect to book banning since you took office in June?

I really want to be able to say that this nightmare is over. And I'm hopeful that next year, if you have another ALA President, here, she'll be able to share with you that we've won. Unfortunately, we continue to see book challenge numbers increase between January 1st and August 31st of 2023, which is the latest data that I have. The Office of Intellectual Freedom at the ALA reported 695 attempts to censor library materials and services. And the challenges were documented for 1,915 unique titles. And so the difference between this moment and other moments is that those challenges are often many, many books at the same time. So that represents a 20% increase from the same reporting period in 2022. And that reporting period saw the highest number of book challenges since the American Library Association began compiling the data. The difference also that we're seeing is where last year the challenges were mostly in school libraries, they've really jumped to public libraries this year. And so a large portion of the challenges were in public rather than school libraries. So one of the arguments people have made is we just want to keep the books out of the school library, you can always access them at the public library. But that's a disingenuous claim as the data suggests that, you know, they're coming after books in our public libraries as well.

Wow. So we saw an article a little while ago that said that most of the requests to challenge books were coming from, I believe, 11 individuals. Are you still seeing? Is that a small number of people who are challenging these books, or have you seen a growing number of individuals, or can you not even tell that from this data?

You know, I can't tell that really from this data, but I think, you know, that it tracks that Washington Post report about those 11 people, you know, that's, you know, when I, anecdotally, when I talk to librarians, and I've been spending a lot of time on the road talking to librarians across the country and what they report is something similar that there will be a small handful of people or maybe even one patron who will begin to agitate and that the vast majority of people don't want restrictions on reading materials to be determined by some people and not others in the community.

I remember reading about a library library close to where Dorothy and I live that has had a lot of pushback from the community because they were not willing to go along with a lot of the restrictions that people are trying to place on them. Does it affect libraries' funding if they push back against these patrons who are trying to challenge lots of books?

Yeah, you know, it's, uh, there are so many different ways to ban a book, right? And one of them is to, is to challenge the book and get it removed from your shelf. But I think, you know, another way of doing that, a sort of soft way of doing that are hard, um, is to attack the funding of the library and to, you know, I think that's, that's, I see, you know, my, analysis is that that's really the, what we're seeing here is that it's not a sensible attack on the book, but it's also turns quite rapidly to an attack on the institution itself. You undermine the authority of professional librarians to make collection development decisions for their communities, right? Which is what that is. It's a, you know, when you say this book shouldn't be in the collection and I know better than the person whose job it is to make that decision, right? You're on the authority and agency of the professional library worker. And then we're seeing that story that you just told play out in lots of places and they're hyper local, right, every library is different and every one of these challenge situations is different. But in many cases, you're seeing attacks on the library funding in just the way you describe. I was talking to someone out in Colorado last week where the librarian, a librarian who refused to go along with the demand that we, that she erased the stories of LGBTQ+ people in her library collection and to eliminate Black history from the collection, right? Things that you just can't believe we're fighting over, right? It's just unreal. And she was fired from her position. And so you see like, like the the extreme threat to the library worker who could lose her job and then attempts to defund libraries if they don't go along with the decisions or you know with the with the pushes to censor materials. You know, and I think it's scary, right, in that context to, you know, which is why we need to come together as a community, why we need to stand with one another, but we really need solidarity across the country and across library types. And all of us need to stand on the side of libraries right now because it is a very scary thing, you know, to, you know, I think all the time about what it would be like to be like a solo librarian in a small community and to have to stand up against sort of organized state power that wants to attack your right to be a librarian and do the things that libraries do, that's a scary thing to do on your own, which is why I think it's really important for us to be together.

So that'll always be the thing I'm most excited about, about any conference is the chance for us to be together.

Obviously, one of the ways that books get censored is just self-censoring from librarians themselves, but is there a number of ALA members who maybe buy into some of the rhetoric about what should and shouldn't be in the library?

Oh, I think so. Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, there are 50,000 of us in the American Library Association and we're all different from one another. And I've certainly seen some Op-Eds penned by librarians in different parts of the country that are, you know, kind of see the point, right? And I think there's a lot of pressure to, oh, well, if we just compromised on this. I was talking to a colleague like a year and a half ago who, you know, said, if all of this drama is being caused by having drag queen story hour, why don't we just not have drag queen story hour. And I think that's an, that's an appealing option for people because if there's just something we could do to make it stop, you know, maybe we, maybe we ought to do that. But I think the danger there is that, you know, that isn't, we fight for drag queen story hour because that's where the fight is, right? It'll be something else next.

If they enter a win, they go for the next level.

I mean, I'm like that. When I get a win, I go for what I can get next, right? Like it's normal, but like we can't give them wins because those wins build their power. And so we've got to resist in all of the ways that we possibly can.

Well said.

You mentioned the importance of coming together to fight censorship,, and when we spoke with Lesa, she mentioned that the ALA uses a variety of tactics to fight censorship in different states. So, could you share what types of tactics have been especially useful in different places recently?

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, there's this temptation to just like, if we could just figure out the right thing to do, then we would win. And so, though, I'd like to just start by saying, I think that's, um, it would be a don't want to do that. You know, I'm a big believer in trying something and seeing how it goes. And if it's not working, trying something else, and we need everybody doing everything they can, everybody doing something in this fight that we find ourselves in. And so sometimes it can be easy to sort of sit back and be like, well, we shouldn't do that. That didn't work. Or that wasn't wise. And I'd really encourage folks to think a little bit less about what other people are doing or not doing and think about what we can do. And that can mean everything from sending an email to a legislator, the Washington office of the American Library Association, or sends out dispatches to members when legislative advocacy is necessary, and I'd encourage everybody to sign up for those alerts. Call your legislators,

send a letter. We have support for our state chapters. I just got back from a chapter leaders workshop that we held in Chicago, where we gathered ALA chapter leadership from across the country to talk and share ideas about what is working in different contexts. I talked to a librarian in New Mexico, and he had a challenge from a homeschool parent in his community. So a heavy user of the library and somebody who was really committed to the library, and she brought in one of these books that, you know, there's there are these lists going around said, I don't think this book should be in the collection. And he talked about instead of shaming her or organizing against her, he invited her in and said, Okay, so I understand you don't like this, you don't want this book in the collection. Let's talk about what you do want in the collection. And, you know, she had a set of books that, you know, maybe I wouldn't want to read, but that she wanted in the, in the collection in the library, bought a couple of them. And, you know, like really worked with her on what she wanted to see instead of what she didn't want to see. So that's a tactic that I've heard that works. It may not work where you are, right? But I think what we really need is a lot more sharing of what those tactics are. I pay a lot of attention to what's happening in Louisiana, since that's a real hotbed of censorship. And we've seen everything from lawsuits, to legislative advocacy, to community organizing in the area, or in the parishes that's gotten the public really involved. And I think that's another strategy we need is to make the case for defending the public library, defending the school library, not defending the right to intellectual freedom in all of our libraries, that that has to be connected to larger political and social struggles for equality, for equity, for the dignity of every human life. And so that means pulling in the faith community. It means talking to people engaged in environmental sustainability action. It means everybody who's working to make a world that I want to live in, right, where everybody has what they need to survive and flourish. And that includes fully-funded, well-resourced public libraries and school libraries and academic libraries where the workers are supported and given agency to meet those needs. So I don't know, that's a bit rambly, but ALA does a lot. We gather the stats, we report the stats, we share the stories, we try to get ourselves on the news, we try to get our members on the news, we talk as much as we can, as many places as we can, and we have a robust federal legislative advocacy program that is trying to move the needle at the national level.

Excellent. Thank you. That's really helpful.

So what other organizations do you work with at the ALA to fight censorship?

When this started to really ramp up, the American Library Association started a public-facing campaign against censorship called Unite Against Book Bans. That pulls in partners from all different sectors, everything from our individual libraries, my library system, the City University of New York is a member of Unite Against Book Bans, publishers, we get a lot of support from our colleagues in the vendor community, really proud of our relationship with Penguin Random House and the support that they offer the association and the work that we do together. It also includes labor unions,

the AFT and the NEA, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, are united against book bans partners, and we continue to grow that network.

So speaking about the groups that are responsible for some of the, you know, organized attacks, we have read the political groups, you know, that promote these book bannings have been losing their influence recently as sort of evidenced by the recent elections. I think all of the moms for liberty candidates lost or a good number of them.

Not all, but several, a lot.

Yeah, I think 60%, was it 60 % of their backed candidates lost.

So it's not everybody, but it's a lot. Do you anticipate that book banning as an issue will follow that trend, or are you concerned that it will just continue independent of those groups?

You know, it's hard to say. I think it depends a lot on the place where you are and the community you are. I mean, these are highly localized kinds of struggles. So I was heartened by the midterm elections. I felt that there was a lot of promise there, that there's sort of waning influence. I can say that the attacks I've experienced personally seem to have lessened, although I never know when they're going to start again. But I think I take heart from that. But I also think we have to be clear-eyed about what we're looking ahead to for the next year, right? Or just under a year in this election cycle when libraries have become a sort of politicized entity. And as long as there are votes to win by attacking libraries and what we do, I think we can anticipate that those attacks will continue. So I'm hopeful, like I said, that next year, there will be a rosier story to tell, but I'm also not sanguine about the possibilities of these sort of organized forces being truly in decline. They have a lot of financial support, they have a lot of organized money behind them and so I think you know we just need to keep working.

So we recently did an episode covering the Brave Books and Kirk Cameron and their attempts to sort of vilify the ALA. At least that's how I read it. How have this and other attempts to discredit the ALA impacted your work?

You know, it's really challenging. It's really challenging, and because it kind of comes out of nowhere, I don't think we have a precedent in history for the kind of coordinated attacks on the association that are happening at the level of individual states. So as state libraries are pushed to withdraw from the association or their arguments, or I think it's important to look at who's making those arguments, and you'll see that the same people making those arguments are the ones that are organizing to remove books from individual libraries. And so I don't think as an association we could have taken the

stand that we've taken and put the resources that we have put into fighting against organized censorship and not have ended up under threat in the way that we have.

So I see it as a same sort of part of the continuum continuum. And if we think about these attacks as not just about the books, but also about undermining librarian agency and undermining libraries as institutions, then undermining the association that brings us together, that convenes us to solve the kinds of problems that we're facing, like it is in their best interest that we don't have the capacity to do that, right? And this is not to say that everybody's a member. member of the ALA or that ALA is in charge of American libraries, but what we do do is we provide the infrastructure for library workers to get together and talk about what's happening and try to figure out how to solve our problems. And so if you undercut our ability to do that, if you make it harder for us to get together, if you attack us and divide us, right? If you have people, you know, 'cause I hear it even from library workers. and even from my ALA members, right? Like, why aren't you, why are you X, Y, and Z, right? But if you, if you turn the attack on the association that's responsible for convening us as a profession, you know, I think that can, you know, the risk here is for really long-term damage to our connections to one another. And I think, you know, just as I said, like the thing that keeps me going is to know that I'm standing with others. And that's true all the time. It's certainly true right now. And I, you know, I see that, you know, because I was at the hearing where the State Library of Montana was the commissioners voted to withdraw their membership. And it was tough. There was some tough stuff to listen to there, you know, as an out and open lesbian to hear someone reading Leviticus passages to make the argument that I was immoral, you know, that's really, I was tough to listen to and I know that I'm not the only one on the receiving end of that kind of stuff, right? That it's a lot of library workers, a lot of people in their communities sort of having these terms hurled at them that they're evil or groomers or sexually, you know, deviant or whatever. Um, this is like a hard to listen to. And I think, you know, we are in a position where we really have to not just defend the individuals, but also defend the institutions that, uh, have made it possible for so many of us to do our work. And so, um, do I think that they're winning? Absolutely not. You know, I think the, um, actual impact of those things is smaller than the bluster that they, uh, hear. And there are so many more of us than there are of them. And I think about that all the time. There are just so many more of us than there are of them. And everybody agrees with us. Survey after survey says that people trust their librarians to make good decisions about their communities. So I really lean into those numbers and those survey numbers that I know that even though that they're getting a lot of attention, that they're in the extreme minority. And as long as we can stick together and not let them divide us, I think we're going to be in good shape.

Wow, that sounds incredibly hard to deal with, though.

It is, but I am not alone. And so I would just, I guess, say that to your listeners, that you're going to be in good shape. are not alone, and I'm with you. And my name is Polish, which means when you Google it, I come right up. And I'm always looking to

build community with people who are on the receiving end of a lot of these public personal attacks. It's really upsetting. So reach out.

Thank you. Absolutely. Thank you. Well, on a lighter note, we were wondering what is one of your favorite books that has shown up on the ALA's list of most frequently challenged and banned books and why you especially like it?

I loved Flamer. Did you guys read that?

No, I have not read it yet.

But it's Mike Curato, it's a graphic novel about a boy at Boy Scout camp. He's at a summer Boy Scout camp and he's sort of grappling with his identity as sort of is he gay, is he not gay? Who, what is his sexuality? What is his identity? And it's a very quiet book, I think. And sort of about sort of keeping the flame alive, right? Like the flame, the light inside of each of us. And it's a beautiful book about that. And you see the sort of struggles that he faces and the challenges but also the love that he has for you know like who he is like at the at the end and I love it because it's such a good example of what we're up against and why I believe we're gonna win it's a really beautiful book it's quiet soft lovely warm you feel empathetic towards this character you want him to um be able to be who he is you want to you know I just read it and I wanted to go and give him a hug and he you know echoes of my own experience and so uh you know to want to ban it you really see what they're the meanness and the finality of our opponents that they're really they want to snuff out uh the flame of our children and that's really what's happening I think that book is a really um profound example of how much we're right, you know, that we want everyone to have access to a meaningful life where they can flourish instead of being snuffed out.

And so, yeah, that's my favorite. You should read it.

Beautiful. Very excited to read it.

Yeah, it really, what you said really speaks to me. I have I have, well, I say two trans children, one's trans and one's nonbinary. And it's just terrifying to, you know, that push to snuff all of that out. And as an educator, you know, we run into more people in our you know, daily work that's especially with the young ones are, you know, identifying in these ways.

Absolutely. And, you know, I look at my kid and I love him so much, like so much, like you would not be probably the way you love your kids, right? Like just he's, he's the sun and the stars and the light. And I don't know how anyone who loves a child themselves can sort of be on the side of these folks. Like you just, you know, I don't know who would want to do make a child suffer. It's very unfamiliar. It doesn't make any sense to me. But they're resilient, you know, and I see when I was coming, you

know, when I was growing up. up in Boise, Idaho, I knew one lesbian. She, well, two, it was to these two lesbians who ran an antique store up out on Fairview Avenue, right, Sherry and I forget the other one's name. And that was it. That was all I had. And now to see kids able to come out and embrace gender identities that weren't even possible. opportunities for me at that age and to see that as a queer, as a sort of older queer person, it's so beautiful and so wonderful and so amazing and so great and just extraordinary opportunities for people to be who they are in ways that I couldn't have imagined growing up. And to see that elicit the kind of backlash we're experiencing, I mean it's just devastating. I read a quote, I read a note, a stat that from the Human Rights Campaign, that something like 60 % of trans and gender variant kids report feeling unsafe in school on any given day. 90 % report feeling safe in their school library.

Wow, that's our sound bite right there.

And you want, you want to eliminate that? We need more of that, we need that everywhere.

Now, it's so disheartening when schools have been removing their libraries too for various reasons and that is the safe space, like you said, for so many kids.

I mean, I ate lunch there every day in junior high, every day. I spent my lunch period there. I was kind of a loser, I didn't have a whole lot of friends, I'm a twin, so my twin sister was like my only friend. and she was the one who spoke for us, right? She was like the one who made friends. And so I was like, a lonely, isolated kid had, you know, a home life that was not ideal. And the library was a total haven for me. And maybe that's why I became a librarian. But it definitely, you know, we need, we need more of us and not fewer of us, more libraries. But like, it's not just about the books. It's about like, survival. Exactly.

Well, we saw an article that you published in September 2022 in Truthout that argued that disinvestment in libraries poses as great a threat as book bans. Could you please tell us more about why you think libraries are worth investing in?

Yeah, I mean, I just last weekend attended a candlelight vigil to say goodbye to Sunday service in New York City public libraries. The mayor here has instituted some across the board budget cuts to city agencies. And that has meant the end of Sunday service. That means that yeah, all across the city. city, in a city that had a \$5 billion budget increase this year, like a lot, a lot more money in the city, but it's not going to our libraries. And so we were there at the branch when it was closing on a Sunday at five o'clock and guess what? It was full of people. There was a guy sitting in a chair up on the second floor snoozing away. There were some teenagers huddled around a computer, some young professionals using their laptops at some tables. I mean, they looked like professionals. I don't know. They like young people working, you know, and

people reading the newspaper. There was a guy in the kids area. And he was like, you know, it's like one of those sunken spaces like you step down and it's like a little pool. And he was he was like literally like on his back doing the airplane with one of his kids, you know, and that's what we're missing, right? When you disinvest in libraries, there's a whole day of that at every branch in every city and every community all over the country, right? Where that isn't happening, all of those good things. I'm really having an amazing time learning about rural libraries during my presidential year. I live in New York City and have for 30 years and so I didn't know what rural libraries were doing for their communities, providing broadband internet in places where you don't have that. I was in New Mexico for the state chapter conference a few weeks ago and learned about a library that in partnership with the university is providing potable water, the only potable water for low income residents in the county. And it's the kind of like mind-blowing work that libraries do that I think people don't always see. And that when you disinvest in the library, you lose all of those things, not just the individual book on the shelf, but all of the human connections that are made possible by the library and by the workers in that library who connect people to the resources they need to have a life that means something. And, you know, I can't, there's no institution that does that for everybody, right? Schools, that's one, you know, I think of public parks, right? Like we really need public parks because they're available and open to everybody. But there isn't another interior space for that's open to everybody who can just walk in. And so when you disinvest in that, you lose it. And that pain is felt acutely.

Yeah. I'm thinking about how libraries are cooling centers, or alternatively, warming centers. So nobody on a Sunday in New York can go find a place to stay out of the heat or out of the cold. That's just crazy.

Yeah. In New York City, like one of the hardest things to do in New York City is go to the bathroom. Like just there's nowhere to go to the bathroom. It's just like it's not nowhere, but you can go into your library and you can use the bathroom, but not on a Sunday. It's just it's a kind of cruelty that I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense.

Wow. Do you think communities, relationships with libraries have changed in recent years, or do you think it's that they are choosing not to put in as much money into libraries as they should have?

You know, I don't, I think that the people who use the library have always valued it, and I don't think that's changed. I think one of the things that may have changed is that the people who make decisions about how we use our resources are maybe not as engaged in the library as they ought to be. Like I'm kind of a traditionalist, right? When people say, what's the future of libraries? I'm like, it's what libraries have always done, right? It's like, meet the needs of our communities on the local level. You know, the people who work there make good decisions about how to serve their communities, right? Like I think it hasn't, I doubt it has changed over time, but I think what has changed is is the investment in public institutions writ large, right? So it's not like the

library is the only public institution under attack. Schools, K-12 schools have been, you know, really up against it. You know, the book ban stuff happens alongside efforts to restrict curriculum at institutions of higher education. And so, you know, it's not like the library is the only public institution under attack. I think you can even make a relation to the attacks on the post office under the Trump Administration that anything that serves everybody and that is about circulating goods and services is, you know, subject to 40 years of consistent disinvestment. And so I think that's the that's what we're up against is really the undermining of faith in our public institutions that they can do their work and meet their mission and then you starve them of the resources necessary to do those things and then point to them as unable to meet the needs of their communities and then you close them and it's a story we've seen play out all over the country and lots of different kinds of public institutions and I do think it's come for libraries in the last few years and we need to be really clear-eyed about the situation we're actually in.

All right, so let's maybe lighten it up once more and learn a little bit about you personally as a professor. What topics do you enjoy publishing and presenting on?

So when I'm done being ALA president, I will return to my academic work with gusto. I write about the politics of cataloging and classification. Right, pretty interesting stuff, like how do we, exciting, yeah, there's definitely a niche audience, but I'm interested in how we organize materials. I'm working on an oral history project with a colleague at NYU Libraries named Amanda Belintara, and we are recording oral histories with people who have developed alternate cataloging and classification schemes for collections that lie outside of sort of dominant narratives. So, for example, if you are looking something up in the library catalog, right? Like the controlled vocabulary terms are often reflective of only a sort of a single way of understanding the world. So they're white, they're Western, they're Christian, they're English, they're whatever. And so how do you access materials that are not those things? And so we interviewed a couple of people involved in the development of the Chicano Thesaurus, which is a controlled vocabulary for describing materials emerging from the Chicano communities and the Chicano student movement. and documenting the work that they've done and the community they've built through resource description and access.

Wow, that sounds really cool.

It does. It's fascinating. I've had a lot of interest in the past decade or so just in how things are categorized, not just collections of things, but scientific categories, etc. And I love that all of that is being challenged.

Yeah, like, did you know that, so I went to the New York Botanical Garden Library many years ago when I was in library school, and they organized all the plants based on like traditional plant classification, but then with the introduction of DNA science, right, where now you classify and order plants according to their DNA. Do you go to the

work of reorganizing the entire plant archive so that it better reflects DNA classification or not? It's like a really interesting question if you are a library nerd, which I am.

Yes, absolutely. Fascinating. Is there anything else that you want to tell us about the Lib Learn X? Is that how I would say that?

The Lib Learn X, yep, LLX, yep.

Or anything else that you want to highlight about your work with the ALA?

I'm just really excited. And if you can make it to Baltimore, please make it to Baltimore. We're going to have a terrific time. We're going to learn from each other. We're going to hear some great speakers. We're going to see some new books and celebrate the books of the last year and really excited to see as many people who can make it to Baltimore. Really excited to see you all there. And remember that the American Library Association, it's us. It's its members. And so if you want to see something happen inside of ALA, I believe you can make it happen. And I would just encourage everybody to think about the value of the association and the value of the coming together that we can only do as a part of organized groups like the ALA, and seriously, reach out. Send me an email, send me what you wanna see, you wanna get together at Baltimore. I'm trying to be as maximally accessible as possible during my presidential year, 'cause I think it's important for us to hear everyone's stories and to make sure, so I'm trying to do my best to tell as many of them as I can. can.

Wonderful. Emily, could you please tell our listeners where they can find you?

I am, my website is EmilyDrabinski.com or you can see a big picture of my face. I'm also active on X and Instagram @edrabinski is my handle and Google me and I come right up.

Wonderful. Thank you so much. much for talking with us today, Emily. We really appreciate it.

Thank you, it's been a joy.

Thank you. We loved talking with Emily. We were so excited that she could speak with us today. You can find Emily's website and social media links in the show notes. You can also find more information about the ALA the Unite Against Book Bans campaign, and other resources on our website at theroguelibrarians.com/resources.

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