

Episode 1 Gender Queer (Part 1: Why It's Banned)

Welcome to the first episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. The three of us enjoy discussing books, but we would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit us at www.theroguelibrarians.com if you would like to leave a question or a comment.

Today, we are going to explain who we are and why we are starting this podcast, and we will discuss *Gender Queer* by my Maia Kobabe, which was the most frequently challenged book in America in 2021.

Just a little about our credentials. We are three teacher-librarians. We have collectively spent many years sharing the joys of reading with students and discussing books with them. You may have noticed that we have used pseudonyms, which was a decision we made because of the sensitivity of the issues that we are discussing and the nature of our professions. You know, we all have day jobs, and we did not want to use our real names so that we don't reflect in any way on the people that we work for...we're not representing them. We are just acting on our own deep love of reading and belief in the freedom of information. Plus, it kind of goes with the Rogue.

It does kind of go. We're like the underground librarians. I like that. So towards that end, the pseudonym I have chosen is Marian. Um and this is because when I was in library school, I often joked that when I completed my degree, I was going to change my name officially to Marian. The librarian Marian. The librarian, for those who may or may not remember, um is a character from the musical, *The Music Man*. It's always been one of my favorites, and Marian was really kind of a badass in that place. So I like to think that librarians in general are pretty bad as I think we are.

So I went literary and chose Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Love that.

Because I just when I think back to my childhood and the books and I read a lot of books as a kid, but those just stand out as seminal to me and also just Dorothy's also a little badass. She's how many protagonists did we get at that time that I think she went on not just one book, you know, a bunch of books, I think she's often mischaracterized as whiny, and I mean she was not whiny. That girl, she smacked a lion on the nose. She sure did. She killed that witch. She didn't just protect her dog. I mean talk about a true humanitarian, someone who cares and helps people. Yes, absolutely.

So I chose Alana as my pseudonym because she was my favorite character growing up. I read all of Tamara Pierce's novels when I was in middle school, and she's still one of my role models. And I think she's badass too. She is also one of my Maia Kobabe's favorite characters because she is basically nonbinary. She really struggles with being seen as a girl and she is great at protecting her friends and so loyal, and I love so many things about the character. You know, she basically dressed as a boy to be able to fight.

Yeah, I love that, I love that. Well, so to further introduce ourselves, um you know, as you may have gathered, we um the three of us certainly have feminine sounding voices. Um and we have we all use our pronouns she/her. Um so just to clarify for that because as we all know, we shouldn't be presumptuous. Um but we are she/her. And um we just wanted to kind of put a disclaimer out there that as we discuss LGBTQ characters and themes, you know, please know that at least two of us are have a certain age um where we did not grow up with these words that are current, and we will promise to do our very best to use the terms and pronouns correctly, but by all means, please educate us if we fail to do so, and, most of all, know that we intend no harm.

I could jump in with a little bit about why we decided to start the podcast. Just first of all, we've all, we're all fans of pods that read books, close readings of books. So it's just been in the back of our minds for a while, but in the past year has been unprecedented censorship of books—challenges against 101,000, 597 individual books last year, 2021—which is the highest number since the group began tracking books in 20 years.

That's just crazy.

So it seemed. And as the librarians just to be clear every year, librarians do celebrate banned books. I don't know if they're doing it in elementary schools, but they certainly start in middle school.

Well, I can tell you that I did it in elementary school because I thought it was very important for kids to understand that, and for my whole lifetime, the idea that books were banned has felt egregious to most of the people I've ever interacted with. It is only recently that I'm hearing people sort of trying to defend this concept in any kind of a very loud way.

Yeah, yeah, for sure. So so we feel like it's really our mission as rogue librarians to fight against this censorship. We want to make sure that every person has access to books, all books. Um and obviously we're focusing on frequently banned books. Um and we want to do this by promoting deep conversations. We don't, you know, we're not here, we're not we're not a porn group, we are here to um to really further the belief that reading allows us to understand multiple perspectives um which really is the of the utmost importance in this increasingly polarized country that we live in. Um and and world honestly, I mean the world is becoming much more polarized.

So as a result we've chosen several Young Adult, or YA, books that have been banned recently, and we're going to spend two episodes on each book. In the first episode, we'll talk about why it's been banned and why we think it's worth reading. And in the second episode we'll go deeper and discuss the book's characters, themes and significance.

Yeah, I think I think that's great. Um before we dive into today's book, um we just want to explain why we as librarians and representatives of that great um career um but as rogue librarians, why we object to banning books. Um You know, we already heard a little bit about how many books have been banned just in the last year.

The ALA, the American Library Association, issued a statement condemning censorship in November of 2021. Um and this is what they said, "We champion and defend the freedom to speak, the freedom to publish and the freedom to read as promised by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. We stand opposed to censorship and any effort to coerce belief, suppress opinion, or punish those whose expression does not conform to what is deemed to be orthodox in history, politics or belief. The unfettered exchange of ideas is essential, essential to the preservation of a free and democratic society."

We agree with the ALA that everyone has the right to express themselves and to read. And recent efforts to ban books have especially tried to silence marginalized voices, particularly the stories of LGBTQ, meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, individuals and those who are black, indigenous, and people of color, which has been extremely upsetting to us. In the past year, more groups and individuals have suggested that these books are immoral or dangerous, and some of them have threatened the safety of librarians and other educators. And we've noticed this has been particularly an issue in the election cycles of 2021 and 2022.

Now we do believe that parents have the right to decide whether or not a book is appropriate for their own children. Um, but they don't have the right to decide that for anyone else. And to me, there's also a question about um rights and for students, students have rights to freedom of information where the line is between what parents can tell their kids not to read and what the fact that they should have access to it. I don't pretend to have an answer to that, but I do believe that that's a discussion you have with your kids, ask them what they're reading. That doesn't mean we have to keep everything out of their reach if you don't want your kids to read it.

And I'll also add that in studies done by librarians, students will often self censor they know what their parents, you know, expect of them. They know what they're ready to read, they know what they're curious about and they don't tend to pick up the books unless they're ready.

It's absolutely true. I mean I can tell you that in my years working as a school library and both in elementary and in middle school, particularly in middle school, I had students who would come

to me with a book that they had, you know, maybe started and read part of and I loved having conversations with the students and I would ask them, you know, what did you think of the book? And they would flat out tell me this book was terrible. I couldn't get past the first chapter it was, you know, and whatever it was about it, they would tell me oftentimes it was they just weren't ready for the material yet. But other students were, it just depends on what your life experiences are and what your maturity level is right.

And when schools and librarians choose books, they're trying to choose age appropriate materials that will benefit students, and it doesn't mean it's going to benefit everyone or be appropriate for everyone. But, in general, they think it will be beneficial and they rely on starred reviews, like the ALA and various other places that laud books for whatever reasons, you know, say this is a Stonewall book or this is a Caldecott winner or any of those things. We take all of that into consideration.

And we want books to be windows, mirrors and glass doors, as many educators have said, and we want children to be able to see themselves and to become fully immersed in others' worlds. So we want to present as many options as possible.

Yeah, on that note, I just want to add, you know, and I've been a librarian for a long time but empathy, we're all talking about empathy in our world today and compassion and readers learn to be empathetic people because readers people who have read widely their entire lives and have immersed themselves in different perspectives and different cultures are truly able have empathy because they've immersed themselves in someone else's perspective. Whether or not they agree with it doesn't really matter. They understand that they're not an individual thinker who is the only one that's right.

And as an educator that was always my most important goal was to teach students how to be empathetic. Absolutely. I think we can all learn from that.

So we've decided to begin our exploration of banned way books with the most frequently challenged book in 2021, which was *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. Kobabe uses the pronouns e, em, eir.

After it was published in 2019, the ALA named *Gender Queer* an Alex Award Winner and Stonewall Honor book. And this book is a graphic memoir, which means it tells the true story of a period of the author's life and contains a message and is told with images in the form of a graphic novel.

Yeah. In this book, um Kobe describes what it's like to be assigned female at birth (afab) but not feel like a girl. It's just hard for me to imagine what that must feel like for a human being um to not to not feel like you're in the correct body. And and my heart just goes out to people who have that feeling. Um But in the book e displays eir experiences in childhood and young adulthood as e struggled to figure out eir identity. Kobabe demonstrates eir challenges with getting eir period, having a gynecological exam, and dating. Dating is difficult for everyone. E eventually came out to eir family as nonbinary and asexual, receiving eir family's support. But e still face difficulties with asking others to use eir pronouns and wondering whether or not to come out to eir students.

It does have frank discussions of puberty and sexuality. So the *School Library Journal*, one of those journals that libraries consult for books, Um they recommended it for ninth grade and up, and Common Sense Media recommends it for 16 and up probably because of the controversy that's surrounding the book. Amazon, on the other hand, listed 18 and older as the reading age because they don't want to get into trouble for. Well we don't know why we're assuming we're assuming. Yeah, they're trying to stay clear. I think of the controversy. Yeah exactly.

According to the *New York Times*, *Gender Queer* has been challenged and banned because of its sexual content. And what some claim are images displaying pedophilia and pornography. However, many people believe, and we also think, that those who want to ban it are actually challenging the book because of its depiction of LGBTQ+ characters and themes.

And as you've probably seen there's been a much greater backlash against LGBTQ+ individuals and their rights in certain parts of the country recently. And you know, in Florida, where they're talking about children being groomed to be LGBTQ+, as though by knowing it exists, we're somehow making it happen.

Right, Florida is at the forefront of this push. Yeah for sure. And you know, I'm just going to throw in, I just read an article recently of which I'm not going to cite. Um but there's a lot out there on the internet for anybody who wants to do their searching. But you know the article clearly has issues with this book because this author of the article clearly has issues with LGBTQ+ individuals. In fact claiming at the conclusion of their writing their article that um that Maia is in a female body therefore e should be comfortable with using she/he.

Interesting. And so many people like that have pushed school districts and public libraries to pull *Gender Queer* from their shelves. And we saw in Virginia Beach a lawsuit was filed in May to stop Barnes & Noble from selling the book to minors without parental consent.

Yes. Apparently that's still going on. So, according to at least one school district's review of the book, there is no evidence of pedophilia, and it should not be considered pornographic or obscene. And we agree with that school district's assessment.

There's also there was a recent interview with Maia Kobabe, the author, in a February 7th, 2022 *Northern Virginia Magazine*, in which Kobabe stated, "My understanding of the issue is that some parents flip through my book and see images that make them uncomfortable, and which they don't think are appropriate for young readers. Or they don't even look at my book- they simply see a few images taken out of context on social media and decide the whole book is inappropriate, and should be removed from library shelves. Parents are of course allowed to make decisions about what their own children have access to. But it is not okay for one parent to try and control what everyone in a whole community can read."

Well, the Rogue Librarians, I think we can all agree that we agree with em. Yeah. And in fact those are the librarians basic talking points as usual. Kobabe also asked people to read the whole book before judging it. Which is standard for any kind of um person who wants to request the removal of a book. The very first question that the librarian asks when they are approached is have you read the book. It's required before that can go through the system for it to be read in its entirety.

And we've been part of those reviews, and in Kobabe's words, "Reading it will give you a deeper understanding of why I decided to include images of queer sexuality and reproductive health. They are part of the story but they are not the whole story—the whole story is about how hard it is to live without the language to express your identity, and how powerful it is to find that language and to be seen as you truly are."

And I just want to throw in a plug right here. Um, you know, for those who are questioning the validity of this book or of any other type of a book that they claim promotes LGBTQ+ behavior claim. Um I just want to remind folks that the suicide rate um is very high, particularly for adolescents who are exploring their sexuality, questioning their sexuality and are feeling as though they have been completely marginalized or ousted by our society. So when we're talking about empathy and compassion, I think that we really need to take that into consideration as well.

Yeah. I just quickly looked it up and the National Institutes of Health, that's where I'm finding this, data indicate that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide. Which is huge.

That is huge. I mean when you add that to the already high rate of suicides amongst adolescents in general, life is hard. I'm sure we all remember how awful middle school was, and, you know, whatever your high school experience was, I don't think many of us would want to go back and repeat those years. Um but and then you add Covid on top of that, you know where

people have been isolated and um yeah I mean I don't think these are statistics that any of us should be taken lightly right now or ever.

Just from those people that I know that are trans. It's not so much that they weren't around before, but that they just didn't have the language to describe it or didn't feel that there was a community enough of the community to come out. And I have talked to trans people of a variety of ages, some of whom are only now willing to even understand that about themselves, much less share it with the world by only now. I mean, you know, they're my age or older and I'm old just in case you haven't figured that out. Right, well not that old.

Well, and that emphasizes why it's so important to leave books like *Gender Queer* on the shelves just to give people the language, give people an opportunity to see someone else's experience like this. And in an interview with the *New York Times* on February 1, 2022, Kobabe commented, "When you remove those books from the shelf or you challenge them publicly in a community, what you're saying to any young person who identified with that narrative is, 'We don't want your story here.'"

So we think young people need stories like *Gender Queer*, particularly if they're trying to figure out their identities. We need to make it clear that all children and young adults matter, and there's nothing wrong with them if they do not fit traditional gender roles and sexualities.

And you know, just anecdotally since we have started including more and more um books of whole variety. So more queer books, more books with BIPOC individuals. Um in the library, what I've noticed is that the students will walk in and immediately gravitate to the one that looks like them, uh, feels like them. You can see how happy they are to see these books, and they pick them up before any other book in the whole place.

Yeah, I've noticed that too. I have to. Yeah. And you know way back a few years ago when I was working in a middle school library. Um you know I, as I mentioned, I have had many conversations with students um asking them what they like to read, helping them to find the

things that they want to read. I've had students come up to me and tell me that they hate to read and you know, but they have to read a book for a class and can I help them find something that they can tolerate? Um and I found them books or helped them to find their own books that helped them to connect in a way.

It's not that people aren't readers, it's that a lot of people have not found the book that makes them a reader. And as librarians that's truly our mission. Um And to go back to the whole empathy thing. This again is a plug for libraries and librarians. Read people—get out there and read. If you don't like what we're saying, get out there and read. If you do like what we're saying, get out there and read, regardless read, because we need to be a more um well rounded world where we take into consideration different perspectives to learn from and um and to make this world a much more peaceful, empathetic, compassionate place.

So we wanted to talk about how a committee reviews a book determine whether or not it should stay in a school library and when they do that, they read the book as we said, read it in its entirety and consider its merits and challenges and they decide whether the pros outweigh the cons and what alternatives can be suggested if a parent objects to their child reading a particular book in class.

And so based on that, that's why we decided um that we would offer our own assessment of what are the pros and cons of *Gender Queer* and why we think it is a book worth reading. What are you guys did you write down for your pros and cons?

Well, for me, I feel like the book is just so incredibly powerful in its form as a graphic memoir. I think there's something so beautiful about the illustrations, but I also think the fact that it's a graphic memoir enables the author Maia to invite us in in a much more personal, intimate way to understanding things that really can't necessarily be put into words.

I also feel like, and maybe this is counterintuitive, but I feel like it invites the reader to identify with Maia because if you're reading about someone who is saying that they are gender queer,

you're picturing it in a whole different way, you're picturing it as weird or other, whereas just seeing these pictures of a normal person interacting with other people having a life kind of invites you in, right?

And I think that's something the three of us really liked about is how much we could identify with pieces of the book. And one thing for me was Maya is around my age and is a little bit younger than me. And uh we enjoyed several of the same books growing up, we enjoyed the same movies and music growing up. And I think many of us can relate to the experiences of going through puberty and finding out what it's like to have a period and things like that. So um I think there are just many pieces of the text that we can relate to.

I think that's definitely true. I mean I, as a person of a certain age, didn't expect or didn't really know what to expect when I picked up the book um and found myself so completely drawn in. Um and and feeling like, yeah, I felt like that at that age and I felt like that at that age and and not to add spoilers in here, which we'll do next episode, but I there were so many things that I really connected to and thought, wow, this is an everybody book. This isn't just for someone who's questioning their sexual identity.

As a parent of a—she doesn't use gender queer. Um that and that's the wrong pronoun, there's me showing the certain age. Um he uses um not gender fluid, but nonbinary. As you know, so there are many, many words to use for that sort of in between. But it was so great to just see the thought processes because your own kids are not going to share all of that with you. And we've had some conversations after I read this book, you know, where I explained that I had realized things that I didn't know and it was great for our relationship. Yeah. Has your child read it? Not yet.

I can say that both of my children have read it on my recommendations since I read it. Um, and both have just loved it and felt it was a beautiful, necessary book.

Yeah, I completely agree. Maia mentioned that e wanted the book especially for young people who are questioning their gender and sexuality because um you didn't have a lot of books like that. Um or really any books like that when e was growing up. And so I think that's incredibly important.

But as you said, even if you're not questioning your gender or sexual orientation, you can still really enjoy the book. And as we said, um one of the joys of reading is learning about other people's perspectives. So they don't have to be like you to still learn from them. And not only Maia's perspective or a person who is an adolescent or older or younger questioning their sexual identity, but as a parent, as a grandparent, as a friend as a community member, as a, a religious member of all different walks of life. To truly be able to see the humanity in this book and to understand how to be um, how to be compassionate. Because isn't that what we're all trying to be—a little bit more compassionate?

Yeah. And I think that that really speaks to what I believe is the real reason for the ban is not these couple of frames because the amount of sexual activity in this is not a lot.

Yeah. Well, let's talk about those, you know, perhaps cons or or why the book has especially been banned. So, you mentioned a couple of those images. Um and which ones in particular do you think we're particularly objectionable to people?

Well, the one that stuck out to me and it's not one that I have heard described in these was the one where Maia was with an early sexual partner and trying out having a dildo attached and the partner was performing fellatio on the dildo. That frame, I was like, whoa, okay, I can see maybe somebody being objecting to this.

But interestingly, that is not the frame that I have heard discussed. Mm hmm. The frame that is most frequently discussed. I guess we're spoiling here. So I'm just gonna go for it. Um is there's a frame which has of, it's a Grecian urn and anyone who's studied Greek art and Greek

mythology knows that the Greeks worshiped the human body and represented in their art naked all the time. Everybody.

Um and there is a an objection to a a panel in this particular book where people are saying that it is promoting pedophilia because of the image on the Grecian urn, which I'm sure is in some art museum somewhere. And I wonder how many people have claimed pedophilia there, but I'll let that be right now.

Yeah. And there are discussions and even images related to masturbation and menstrual blood that I could see. Um parents especially thinking are too graphic or too explicit for children to be able to handle.

So perhaps when e was illustrating this, he could have made it um a little less explicit to make it less controversial. But I think one of the things we said we really liked about it was how frank and honest it is. And you you see those things, but not in a over the top way, it's just like, you know, this is what's happening in these scenes.

So, and to presume that students even as young as middle school, which is, I don't know that I would carry this in a middle school library. High school, I think it would be all right. But are we presuming that these kids don't masturbate, that they don't think about their sexuality because, my experience granted, they're not talking to me about this stuff, but it is a little bit different, they're doing it.

Yes, yes, they are. And um, you know, if you drive through Ohio, West Virginia, um Indiana there are, you know, lots of billboards advertising the adult superstore The Lion's Den. You know, you've seen them and my kids certainly asked about them and we've had conversations. So, you know, I mean if this is the type of story that opens up conversations for, for children and parents, um, and when I say children, I refer to anyone who's been born of a parent because my kids are in their twenties and they're my children. I think it's great to open up those conversations. That's to me that's the purpose of reading a book. Um, is, you know, we've said it already, it's to have

different perspectives of the world presented, but it's also to open up conversations, which is why you're listening to this podcast. That's why we're having this podcast to discuss um what our perspectives are of a particular of a particular book.

And that reminds me we saw on Common Sense Media, a parent wrote, um, their review...When I last checked Common Sense Media, there were only three reviews. One was a parent and two were from people who objected to the book, but the parent, who was very positive about the book wrote, "I read this because of all the news about it and also because my child is non-binary and possibly trans. They read the book too, and we agree that it is amazing! It captures the confusion and the uncertainty perfectly. The author is sharing their experiences so that kids dealing with the same differences can feel safe and seen...My child's high school library has this book, despite pushback from the community, and as the parent of a questioning child who took comfort from the book, I am VERY glad of that."

Yeah. And that's a really I think that's a really important point. Not to belabor this um and not to keep anyone too long. We want to go ahead and tell you what our next episode is gonna cover. Hopefully we've just got you salivating.

So in the next episode we will discuss this book in much more detail. Um It will include some spoilers, though. Apparently we've already started that. So please join us next time for a close reading of *Gender Queer's* characters, themes and significance. And if you would like to leave us a question or a comment, please visit us at www.theroguelibrarians.com. That's T H E R O G U E L I B R A R I A N S dot com. And thank you for reading with us today because books are meant to be read.