

Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode
ALA President Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada

Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts: Marian, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. Our third librarian, Dorothy, had a family emergency and was unable to be here today.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

Before we begin our special interview today, we wanted to mention a couple of things. First, in case you haven't already heard, the Brooklyn Public Library started the Books Unbanned initiative last year to make banned books available to young people who can't access them. The Brooklyn Public Library invites Americans who are 13 to 21 years old to apply for a free BPL ecard to access their full ebook collection. As of January 2023, they had 6,000 teenagers apply for a Books Unbanned ecard and check out 52,000 books. The Seattle Public Library recently joined the initiative. They allow anyone in the U.S. who is 13 to 26 to access their full ebook and audiobook collection. If you're interested, you can sign up for their programs and/or donate to both of their funds. You can find more information about Books Unbanned in our show notes and on our website.

Second, we wanted to mention that National Library Week was April 23rd through 29th. The American Library Association, or ALA, celebrated libraries and library workers and drew attention to banned books, reminding people how to fight censorship and releasing the top 13 most challenged books from 2022. We wanted to add how much we appreciate libraries and library workers. Thank you for everything you do!

Today, we are excited to share our interview with the president of the American Library Association, Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada. Lessa talked with us about the ALA Annual Conference, her experiences as president, the Unite Against Book Bans campaign, and ways that we can fight censorship. We loved talking with her and learned so much from her.

Oh my gosh, she was just so real. She's, she's a librarian like like we are and I don't know what I was expecting, but she was just so so down to earth and so um as much affected by all of the things going on as we are, I just felt like, you know, we could all sit down and be friends.

Yes, she was so lovely and so thoughtful in her responses. And it was such an honor to talk with her today.

And I have to say, I mean, the ALA is obviously an important organization for libraries and librarians. But to find out and I, I've always known all the great things they do, but to find out all the things or not all the things, but that there are things that they are doing behind the scenes. So as to make things better and not worse, worse was a really, that was a really eye opening um moment for me and it just made me feel so, so good that, that my membership is definitely money well spent.

Yeah, for me too, Marian, I thought that the fact that they go by what is best for the community and if it does not help the community to have the ALA publicly helping in certain ways, then they try to do more behind the scenes. So I thought that was really wise of them to do it that way.

It just shows, you know, how smart they are and how respectful they are of each individual situation, which is exactly what libraries and in their individual communities should be. So um A kudos to the ALA um in, in our interview, we actually discussed some features of the ALA annual conference.

The ALA Annual Conference and Exhibition is in Chicago from June 22nd to 27th, 2023. If you are interested in registering, please visit 2023.alaannual.org. For those who are unable to travel to Chicago, there is the option to register for "The Digital Experience"; you will have on-demand access to the main stage and educational sessions. Additionally, at the closing session, Amanda Gorman, the youngest presidential inaugural poet in U.S. history, and Christian Robinson, a Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor Award winner, will be discussing their book *Something, Someday*, which is available in September 2023.

We were thrilled to have the opportunity to talk with Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada. She is the 2022-2023 American Library Association president and adult services assistant manager at the Palos Verdes Library District in Rolling Hills Estates, California. She recently completed a

term as an ALA executive board member from 2017-2020 and was elected as ALA councilor-at-large for three terms. In addition, she is an active member of the Association for Library Services to Children and the Public Library Association, among many others. She has held an ALA membership for more than 13 years. Pelayo-Lozada has been involved in over ten committees at the ALA and division levels. She was also the APALA Executive Director (2019-2022) and past president of APALA (2016-2017). She is a past chair of the Palos Verdes Library District's BUILD Team, focusing on diversity and racial equity, and a Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature board member (2012-present). She also is a 2011 ALA Emerging Leader. Pelayo-Lozada holds an MLIS and a BA in sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles and an AA in philosophy from El Camino College, Torrance, California.

Without further ado, here is our interview with Lessa Kanani'opua Pelayo-Lozada.

Lessa, thank you so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians. Um We brainstormed some questions that we want to go over with you. And the first one is, what are some parts of the ALA annual conference um the upcoming conference that you're most excited about?

It is so hard to pick, I will tell you. Uh But one of the things that I am the most excited about is actually my president's program which is going to feature author Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, who is a Stonewall Honor Award winning author, as well as a um LAMBDA award winning author. She's a native Hawaiian cultural practitioner um as well as a trans rights advocate. And so her book *Kapaemahu*, which won the Stonewall Honor book. I had the honor of announcing at the Youth Media Awards and it took everything I had to not cry. Um I think at the first uh native Hawaiian person to be on that stage and to win that award um was so meaningful and her book is um about uh for Mahu, so not male, not female book, a Dual Spirit in the Hawaiian culture who come and bring healing powers to Hawaii. Um And what that looks like for the people of Hawaii as well as how that legend and legacy has continued into today. So I'm really, really excited to be in conversation with her. I get the honor of interviewing her, which will be wonderful. And I'm also excited, I mean, excited is probably not the right word to be quite honest, but I am really um happy to see the breadth of programming that we have around book challenges and censorship. We will be kicking off the conference on Thursday night with a rally to read where we're going to celebrate individuals who have made contributions and battled these challenges head on. And then we are going to figure out what our future looks like, how we can be more proactive and there will be sessions all throughout the conference. I think

there's at least 20 sessions out of the 200 sessions, educational sessions that we have on how to get your policies, you know, in place, how to fight challenges, how to take care of yourself during challenges as well because they are not easy on us as library workers. So there is so much going on. There's also, of course, news you can use, lots of exciting authors um as well as finding out what is hot in the literary world that we cannot underestimate the power of that exhibit hall and meeting all the authors and seeing the exciting new books that are coming out.

Well, that is amazing. And you've actually already answered my second question. So, so we'll just probably skip that because what I was going to ask next was what are the offerings that will be at the annual conference, um which is at the end of June. Um What are the dates again?

The dates are June 22nd through the 27th.

Right. And that's in Chicago. Um that uh I wish I were able to go, unfortunately, um in my new position at a public library whose name shall not be mentioned for anonymity. Um But as you know, only some people get to go to the conferences because we have to have somebody to keep the libraries open. So, um so I'm hoping for a future opportunity to come. But yes, so one of the questions was, what offerings are we going to have at the conference on banned books um or similar topics? And it sounds like that you've already answered that unless you'd like to add anything more to that.

I think the only thing I would add is that we're also going to have um programs on health and wellness and trauma, which I think are intrinsically linked to book banning. Um, you know, and as well as coming out of COVID. So I just want to highlight those two additional ones, those are two additional topics as well.

Yeah, and that's huge because I know that I started in my new job in November and we've already had an in, in house, you know, staff meeting on trauma, handling trauma. And we've also, we just were participating in our state conference, um the regional conference and the keynote speaking speaker was speaking on trauma. Um And some of those sessions are really hard to sit through. I will say because we've all experienced trauma, but I cannot um I cannot say enough how important they are. Um And in dealing with the public, how, how important it is to know our own levels and trauma and what our triggers are and then you know, how to help our patrons who are also suffering from trauma. So that sounds fantastic. I'm excited again. I'm

jealous that I can't go. But um I'm sure I will learn lots from our folks who are going and will bring back information for us.

And we heard there's the option to register for the digital experience where you can watch some of the sessions from home. Is that right, Lessa?

Yes, that is absolutely right. We are excited to offer a hybrid experience again for individuals. So the virtual option, uh our digital experience will give participants access to more than 60 presentations from the conference wherever they are, these presentation selections are specially curated and include access to our main stage sessions, including speakers like Amanda Gorman and Christian Robinson, who are gonna be our closing speakers, um virtual programs and educational programs, our news, you can use sessions and if you are a nerd like me, you can also have access to your ALA governance meetings and see your ALA council in full swing. Um But these sessions will be available live as well as um many will be available for on demand through August 31st.

That's what I was just going to follow up and ask is um because those of us who will be working in the libraries wouldn't necessarily be able to view them live or participate live. But so they will be um available as on demand.

Absolutely. Because we know how hard it is to balance that, you know, work conference life, especially when we are at work and on the reference desk and such. So you can enjoy it whenever you want to do for two months following.

Wonderful. That's a great option. Thank you for bringing that up.

Of course, thank you.

We want to come back to banned books a little bit later, but we wanted to find out more about your background first. So we were wondering: what was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up and why?

There's so many. But I think one of the ones that are just, it's so vivid in my memory is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. So, yeah. Right. Yeah. So I read it for the first time in seventh grade in Mrs

Garcia's English class. Um, and I've read it actually a, a couple of times since then, both as a teen, as a young adult and as an adult because I think that I get something different from it every time. Um when I read it that first time as a kid, it really opened my eyes, I think to the nuances and beauty of living and to develop an appreciation for different kinds of lifestyles, right? And all of the things that we might be missing if our rights are taken away. And I also just love that, you know, at the end he leaves, you know, and he goes, he takes a risk and he knows that something isn't right and he takes what he can into his own hands. Um And as an adult, you know, I was watching some of these themes play out in the world we are living in. Um you know, to be quite honest, trying to figure out what are we depriving ourselves of like, what does freedom of choice really look like? And how do we know, when we have it and are not just following what is, you know, I think one of the most vivid memories that I have even from reading the book the first time is when, um, when he, he is given, you know, his first color and just the emotions that overcome him and what that looks like. And how do we go through that as, as we are living our lives when we experience things that we never have before. And to just think of not having that ability if we lived, you know, kind of in this dystopian world, you know, our, our lives would be so much less rich. So that, that has been super influential for me throughout my life. And I think it also probably kicked off my love of post-apocalyptic literature and, and what I call my love of sad books and, you know, kind of dystopian, this dystopian world.

Yeah, that's a wonderful choice and so beautifully put too. I remember when I first read it in school, it made a huge impression on me, but I haven't gone back to read it any time recently. So that makes me want to go back and reread it.

Yeah. And I'm curious if you went on, went and read the, and she, Lois, doesn't call them the sequels or prequels. But the partner books, companion, companion books. Yes.

You know. So I tried and I actually couldn't do it. I couldn't finish any of them and I suspect it's because, like, this book made such an impact on me, the, the following ones just, they, they weren't doing the same. I, I feel, um, and it was kind of all I needed was *The Giver*. So it just didn't have quite the same vibe for me. So I couldn't, but I've always wanted to go back and see if I can read them now.

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. And, you know, I've always said that there are different times in your life when you're able or not able to read certain books. So, yeah.

Yeah, for sure. Have you, have you read them?

I have. Yes, I read a couple of them. Yes. But I, I felt the same way. They felt very different from the giver. They, they did not seem to fit in the same way.

Yeah. And I, I ran into Lois Lowry at an ALA conference, um, at one point and was fortunate enough to have a long conversation with her and asked her about them and she talked about, you know, she never intended to write any other, you know, versions of it. Um, you know, *The Giver* was *The Giver* and she said so many of her fans kept writing letters and saying I want to know more. I want to know more. And so that led to what is it *Messenger* and *Gathering Blue*. Um And then inevitably the last one was so, um, so I, I never read *Sun*. I will admit that I own it. It's even autographed, but I have not yet read it because it hasn't been the right time for me. Um, so I, I will, I will at some point, but I, I, I did enjoy *Gathering Blue* and I did enjoy *Messenger*. But you're right. For me, they also did not have the same impact I refer to *The Giver*. It's, it's so funny, Lessa, that you said that because in today's world, um, so many things remind me of *The Giver*. And I think to myself, God, how did Lois Lowry know that? Like, I don't know, it's just, it's, you know, because it's kind of prophetic but, um, but it, I, I absolutely think about it and refer to it all the time. So that tells you what kind of a nerd we are all, what kind of nerds we all are. I suppose we're in good company.

We are. So, Lessa, how did you decide to become a librarian?

Yeah. So I was planning on becoming an elementary school teacher. That's what I always wanted to be other than, you know, a couple forays into wanting to be a marine biologist as I think a lot of people my age wanted to be for some reason. Um, but I, so I went, uh, my schooling was all about going into teaching and, uh specifically kindergarten through second grade. Um, I was working at Borders for a number of years and saw a bunch of Los Angeles public library librarians come in and they had an end of the year slush fund. It was when we were all still very well funded in public libraries. And they just bought a ton of books and walked out with carts of manga and fiction and picture books. And I was like, what is this magic? And somebody explained to me that they were librarians and where they worked. And I, I had never

thought of that as a career path for myself, which I think is kind of an interesting thing because I was definitely a library kid, you know, in the 4th and 5th grade, I went to the library every day after school. It was the only place I was allowed to go by myself. I walked there. It was in between my grandparents' house and my school and I would go to my grandparents every day. My mom also works in a library. She works in a community college library um as a library technician. But I never saw that as a career path until that moment in *Borders*. And so I thought, oh, well, I, after I am burnt out being a teacher because I like to have multiple plans and be very realistic about the future. I thought I would become a librarian. So I went to two days of credential classes, um decided teaching was not for me. Actually, the pressure of having all of those young people's futures on my shoulders was a little bit much. And so my plan B became my plan A and I went, walked into the County of Los Angeles Lomita Public Library to volunteer. And they said, well, actually we're looking for a library page if you would like to be a page instead. And that kind of solidified my love of libraries. Um I got to explore a lot of different areas of librarianship as a page. Um you know, working out of classification probably a little bit. Um but I got to try my hand at adult programming and children's programming to make sure that it was the right fit for me and it absolutely was. And I haven't looked back since then.

Oh, that's such a wonderful story. And, and honestly, one that I can personally relate to. So, as I told you, my mom was a school librarian and when I was a kid growing up, she was the librarian in my school. So I would also spend a great deal of time in the library and, you know, not just because it was my mom, but she would let me shelf books and do shelf readings and things like that. And I always helped her do inventory and yeah, so it was kind of in the blood. So what a great story. Um So we want to get back to um your current position, which is um the president of the American Library Association. And we were wondering if you could um put into words, what some of your proudest accomplishments are from your tenure as president of ALA?

Yeah. So I think one of my proudest accomplishments and probably the nerdiest accomplishment I'll start there is, um we've got through a bylaws revision. It is a historic moment in the association. You know, we traditionally have had a constitution and bylaws since the beginning of our association, which is almost 100 and 50 years ago because ALA was founded in 1876. And the way that modern associations and modern nonprofits work is they are not quite so mired in ancient uh policies and procedures, whereas ALA has been. And so back in 2017, I had the honor of being the chair of the steering committee on organizational effectiveness to look at ways that we could modernize our association as well as increased member

engagement. And one of the recommendations that came out of our final report from that committee was to modernize, modernize our bylaws. And so thanks to the constitution and bylaws committee, as well as the committee on organization and a number, a huge number of working groups in between our original committee and getting this to council, um we were able to pass a new bylaws. It has a new executive board structure, it has a new council structure. And so that historic moment which happened at LibLearnX in New Orleans. Um is one of my proudest accomplishments seeing that through over the, you know, the last six years in different iterations and participation on my part. But being the, the president to guide us through a four hour bylaws convention that is rooted in parliamentary procedure was quite the task and something I love doing. But I think also what I have been extremely proud and honored to do is to steward the association through one of I think our most challenging times um in the profession, you know, I think when I decided to run for president, I decided to run in the summer of 2020. So we were, you know, in the beginning of COVID, we were in the middle of protests, you know, for the murder of George Floyd and the racial reckoning that we had ahead of us. And I thought that those were the themes that were going to be the ones that I would carry through and lead our association in. And I did not know that I would have book challenges, which I think come exactly out of those two main things that inspired me to run for president, um to be able to be the spokesperson for the association and to fight back publicly has been a proud accomplishment of mine as well as an honor. And to figure out what that path looks forward for us in a proactive situation rather than continuing to be reactive against book challenges.

Yeah. And that, that just really beautifully leads into my follow up question or my next question, which was, what has it actually been like to lead the ALA in the midst of a record-breaking book-banning push across this country?

It's been, it's been difficult, I mean, to say the least, I think that, you know, being the president, especially in this time, there's a lot of, there's a very heavy weight and responsibility on my shoulders um to figure out what our future looks like in a member, led organization. You know, that's one of the beautiful things about ALA, but also one of the frustrating things and moments where we have to do things quickly where we have to, you know, galvanize ourselves and organize ourselves as much as we can as we are, we rely on volunteers to do this work, right? Like I am a volunteer. I still have a job. I still have to go to work in addition to being president. And so I think that, you know, while I, I said earlier, it has been an honor. It's been very difficult

and challenging and, but I think that our members have risen to the occasion to be able to do it as well as our ALA staff. You know, we have an ALA staff of about 200 folks who work across multiple divisions and offices. Um and who execute and help our members to um actualize the things that we need. And so through that partnership, it's been rocky and it hasn't always been perfect, but I think we are getting to a place um where I'm really excited about the things that we have coming up to continue fighting back against book challenges.

Oh, well, that's great. Yeah, we wanted to ask a few more questions about those efforts because we know that you've been working so hard on that. And um we know that you just published data from 2022 of how many book challenges there were. And um it also mentioned that many challenges don't get reported. So it's not even inclusive of all the challenges that have happened in the past year. Do you have a sense of how many more challenges have occurred that haven't been reported to the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom? And uh do you also have ideas for how we can encourage more people to file reports?

Yeah. So it's it is really tough to say since it is all self-reported, we do also take into consideration um news reports that we see if things haven't been reported. But based upon the data that PEN America has gathered as well as the data that we have. I would say that we're probably at least double the number in reality of, right, because we're also talking soft challenges. We're also talking formal challenges. There are so many different areas that go unreported because I think that folks are afraid, right? It's, it can be scary to report a challenge if you think that you're going to be found out for whatever reason, you know, we have like library workers facing harassment and doxing and potential job loss and you know, fines depending on what state or what jurisdiction they're living in. So I can completely understand why individuals don't report. But there's a couple of things that I want to emphasize to encourage more reporting is that ALA keeps your information completely confidential. Um We put out during National Library week, a heat map of where book challenges have occurred within the country that have been reported to us in 2022. And the conversation around making that map even was a very, very nuanced one. You know, because we really had to think about if we attach numbers to states, how are people going to maybe try to seek out those individuals? You know, what does confidentiality look like because it is of the most important to us to make sure that individuals are not outed. Um You know, a lot of this work has to happen behind the scenes because ALA as a national organization is not welcome in a lot of places and actually can do more harm than good. So we want to make sure that we're mindful of that, and, also, I want to encourage folks to

file reports because so that we can get an accurate number. Um to know that it's confidential and to know that the Office of Intellectual Freedom can help you. Also, if you don't know where to start or if you are experiencing harassment or legal ramifications, our office is there to help you figure out what your path forward looks like and how they can help you and your community and your library get through these challenges.

That's really helpful.

Yeah, it really is because I think also like, yeah, obviously these it feels isolating, right? Like it's you feel alone a lot of the time when these challenges can be happening, especially if you, especially if you're in a school library. And so to know that you're not alone also and to make those reports. So just wanted to add that extra plug there.

Well, no, and I appreciate that because um you know, it's not a surprise and in my library we a library we also recently had, I guess what you'd call a soft challenge. Um There were people who were unhappy about it and but it wasn't, it never became official, right? Um There was a discussion about it at a board meeting. Um But the thing is, you know what, what we've all learned from it. First of all, the librarian who had read the so-called offending story was terrified because of the particular location where that person works and what the politics are of the folks who live around there. Um And also, um you know, from our director, we learned a lot about how our local politicians are involved in library funding and so on and so forth and how those relationships are very delicate. And so, you know, decisions and things that you say or do have ramifications far beyond um what you think they do. And so this has been very eye-opening as, as a um relatively new public librarian, I had previously been a school librarian. So it's been interesting and a little bit scary. Yeah.

Yes, we have seen a bunch of great resources on the website of the ALA's Unite Against Book Bans campaign. There's a very detailed toolkit and lots of suggestions for things that people can do. What actions do you think are most useful for us and our listeners to take to fight censorship at this point?

Yeah, I think the number one thing that we can do is to spread the word to our friends and family. You know, we cannot do this alone. We cannot be the only ones speaking out against book bans. We have to have those individuals in our communities. You know, our patrons who

need these materials, who need these books to speak out on our behalf. Um Because that is, you know, we, we are often public employees. Um and it's the voters, right? It's the voters who have to speak up, those who put these individuals into positions of power that are trying to subvert our power. So I think that spreading awareness is really important, but I think also being proactive is really important. So writing to your library and school administrators to say that you like the collection that the library has, um you know, to let them know the impact that the books have made on you and your family. So that when book challenges come, they already have that information in their hands. And if you know, if you're comfortable, there's also um information on how to help you do this in the toolkit, you know, write Op-Eds to your newspaper before book bans come to alert folks, you know, that they are not welcome in our community or that we are open to having a conversation about these books in our community and what that looks like. And to emphasize, you know, that not every book is for every reader, but every reader absolutely deserves to see themselves in a book. So it's a lot of spreading awareness, getting the message out there and stopping them before they even come.

That makes so much sense. And we're certainly doing what we can to spread awareness. And we're going to continue to ask everyone who listens to this to do what they can to talk to their friends and family and spread awareness every way they can. We have already touched on this a little bit. But uh the ALA has noted that there is a politically organized push to encourage conservatives to challenge books and pass legislation especially in certain states. Does the ALA use similar tactics to help fight against censorship? And is the ALA focusing on particular states where censorship is particularly rampant such as Florida, Texas, North Dakota, Indiana, Missouri and other such states?

Yeah. So some of the ways that we are trying to organize ourselves are through the Unite Against Book Bans campaign. Um you know, as a 501c3, we do also have to be really mindful of the constraints that we have um as an educational nonprofit organization. So we do have, you know, limited lobbying, the types of information and advice we can give is sometimes limited, but we also have a lot of power in organizing and galvanizing our advocates and those who support libraries across the nation. And so what we really have to do, especially in states like Florida, Texas, et cetera is to understand when and where we will do more harm than good as a national organization and when we need to be out front and when we need to be behind the scenes helping, you know, um we helped a lot in Texas with the uh Llano County Public Library where they had books that um were removed, the judge ordered them to be put back on

the shelf, we helped with that part of it um behind the scenes and then also getting folks when the local city government wanted to just shut down the library because the books were back on the shelf, you know, calling upon our advocates who had signed up for Unite Against Book Bans in that area to be able to talk to their legislators and let them know that they wanted the library to be open and they were successful. You know, we've also done a lot of help um and work in Missouri um around the defunding of the library. And so, you know, we do, we do a lot of these things um quietly because that is the most effective way. But we are absolutely helping to organize um and to help in whatever ways that we can in whatever ways because each state has its own chapter also. And not all state chapters are made the same. Um You know, some have staff and some have, are completely volunteer. So we take the lead of our local folks to know best for their communities and step in and be that loud voice when they need us to be and when it would be most helpful.

That's wonderful. And that makes a lot of sense that it's very individualized and whatever the particular community needs, then, you know, how you should or should not step in to help. But I did not realize that you were doing things uh behind the scenes in Texas to help make that a success. So, that's really great.

Yeah, that's, it's, oh, sorry. Oh, no, I was just gonna say, agree and say that's very encouraging. It's tough because we do. It's a lot of what is ALA doing, right? Like ALA isn't doing anything. We're being silent but it's because we're doing everything so quietly because we don't want to, to make it work right. So, it's, it's very nuanced and I'm glad that we have, um, you know, after the fact, um, you know, some library organizations are, are sharing the ways that ALA has helped. But even if they don't, we're just happy to see, you know, legislation, pro library legislation passed and anti library legislation not passed. So, however we can help. We are there for whether we get credit or not.

That's great. Yeah, absolutely. And I'm not sure if you've had an opportunity to listen to any of our previous podcasts. Um, but we did do a special segment on legislation, both, you know, legislation that's being debated in some states and also legislation that's already passed in some states. And, you know, there are some pretty, um, scary bills out there that are seeking to hold librarians, both school librarians and in some cases public librarians criminally responsible if, um, we, you know, as librarians using our, um, national knowledge that we've got master's degrees for you know, if we choose to read a book that or have a book in our collection, even

that is considered offensive by someone, by someone's standards that are not very clear, librarians can be sent to jail or fined heavily. And that's a, a pretty frightening um precedent that is being set in, in some states. So, um, so I was wondering, um, Lessa, if you could maybe speak from the ALA perspective about how have library um sorry, how have library workers, both librarians and um librarian assistants um pages. How have all library workers been affected by this rise in censorship um and new laws that are targeting these schools and libraries?

Yeah, you know, we've seen a lot of fear, um you know, fear for job security just like you were describing fear of being jailed and fined, um as well as harassment. Um You know, we've seen individuals have Facebook groups um formed, you know, to kind of go against them like Amanda Jones in Louisiana, a school librarian. Um we have seen uh you know, effects on mental health um like the Lemony Snicket Award um winner from 2021. Um uh Martha Hicks, you know, she is very vocal in the toll that the book challenges in her school library took where she had to take time off because she was not really able to function anymore. And, you know, all of this results in a retention issue for libraries you know, we don't have, you know, specific numbers on it, but we have anecdotal evidence that we have individuals leaving the profession because this is not what they signed up for. They did not sign up to be attacked and to have their professional and personal integrity challenged at every turn. And so one of the things that we're really trying to figure out is how to support our library workers. You know, we had a lot of mental health issues and fear coming out of COVID, of course, right? Like the the trauma that we all experience. And so this is just adding on top of that, like we have not been able to have a break as library workers to just process everything that has happened to us. It's one thing after the other. So we're seeing the these are kind of the general themes that we're seeing. Um and we're really hoping to be able to support library workers, not just in knowing that they're not alone, but also in being able to provide them resources. I know it's watching a webinar or something like that is the least thing that you wanna do, you know when you're experiencing these things. So to bring people into community um and to make sure that also their administrations are helping them in the ways that they need, it are essential, right?

I think that's, that's wonderful and that is, is so very important. I mean, because, you know, I'm, I'm seeing it in my library, you know, how, how stressed um some, some of us are. Um but the other thing that we've been talking about, you know, kind of amongst ourselves is, it feels like all of this legislation that is leading to um you know, questioning librarians and their professionalism is somewhat of a systemic devaluation of the library and certification. Um you know, and, and

the same thing is happening kind of in the schools where, you know, teachers are professionals, they have to get a degree and they have to pass tests and they have to get a certificate and they have to renew that certificate every five years or something like that in most states. And the same is true for librarians and yet, you know, common humans who may or may not have even a high school education or beyond are questioning the professionalism of, of librarians and teachers and that whole certification process. So, where do you see that going or have you, have you all talked about that as an ALA?

Yeah. You know, I think it's an attack. It is, you all are exactly correct. It's an attack on education, right. It's eroding trust in our educational institutions that are actually very trusted, you know, ALA did a survey in March of 2022 that found that I think it was like the number I don't have right off the top of my head. But I wanna say 90% of people, bipartisan individuals, surveyed voters said that they trusted their public library, they trust their library workers to make decisions based on their professional training. And so this is absolutely a way to erode trust and to pump misinformation into our community so that nobody knows what is what and they will just listen to the loudest voice. Right? Because I think it's important for us to know also that it is a vocal minority that is in favor of book bans. And that same survey that ALA did, 71 percent of individuals said that they were against book bans in public libraries. And so we know that we are the trusted institutions that we are members of our communities. And that is why these, you know, this vocal minority that is in, that is trying to hold on to a certain level of power are coming after us because we are trying to ensure that power is shared and that everyone in our community can have a voice and that is troubling to a lot of individuals.

Yeah, for sure, for sure. Um Is there anything else that you would like to share with us um about the conference, we wanted to get back to talking about the conference and um you know, or, or the current work of ALA or things that you would like people to know that ALA is, is working on on our behalf.

Yeah, I think one of the things that I would like folks to know that ALA is working on, um, is because we've been talking a lot about, you know, the devaluation of, you know, our professionalism and the trauma and stress that we've all been going through is that we are working towards, um figuring out how to best utilize our companion organization, the ALA-APA, all a professional association, which is a 501c6 and can do different levels, levels of advocacy and lobbying on behalf of library workers. So we've been looking at the opportunities for that.

Traditionally, it's been used for primarily for certifications. There's an administrator certification um as well as a library worker certification. But we think that it can be a real advocacy tool and arm for, especially for those um who work in libraries where perhaps they don't have a voice um or they don't have a strong relationship with administration to be able to have their needs met. So, um if folks are interested in what ALA-AOA has to offer now, they, we also in ALA-APA are the sponsors of National Library Workers Day, which of course um occurs on the Tuesday of National Library Week um as well as has resources for what organizing your workplace might look like. Or the library salary survey also to make sure that you are being paid you know, the, the correct amount. So that's one thing that I would like to highlight that ALA is working on um for our annual conference. Um I'd like to just maybe share a couple of more exciting speakers that are gonna be there. Um We're gonna have a Tony Award winner, Idina Menzel and yes, and her sister, Cara Mentzel, they're gonna talk about their book, *Proud Mouse*. Um One funny note is that, you know, kind of in all the press that I do. They're like, you know, Idina Menzel *Frozen's* Elsa. I'm like, no, that is *Wicked's* Elphaba. That is *Rent*. That is my girl. That's right. Uh-huh. Yeah. So we have Idina and Cara coming. We also have Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro talking about their new book, *The Sun and The Star*, which is a fantasy novel that follows Nico di Angelo, the son of Hades, and Will Solace, the son of Apollo, um, which were two of the popular. Yeah, from *Percy Jackson*. Um and I'm also excited to welcome, um, Nikki Grimes, poet and author, Nikki Grimes and illustrator, Brian Pinkney, to talk about their new book, *A Walk in the Woods*. So there's gonna be a lot of really exciting authors, of course and speakers and we just can't wait to share it with everyone.

Oh, that sounds, sounds wonderful. We wanted to ask a couple more questions if you have time, Lessa. Um, before we wrap up. Ok, great. Um, so you recently released the list of the 13 most challenged books from 2022. And we were wondering if anything in particular surprised you about the list this year?

Yeah, I thought, well, number one that it's a top 10 list that had 13 books on it that, uh, that surprised me. Um, because there were so many ties which I think is indicative of a couple of things. One that individuals are using past lists um to challenge books, they're using it as a kind of a guide, which I think helps us as library workers because we can see if these are sometimes in good faith book challenges, right? Because I think that it's ok for people to ask questions about why books are in the library or why they're in a certain section and not other sections because it's a great time for us to, for them to understand how our library processes work, how

our collection development, um processes work. But also to understand, you know, the concerns of our community members and where they are at. Um But when they're using these book lists as guides, that's a different conversation. So that was one of the things that I was most surprised about where the number of ties. But the other thing was the number was the books that hadn't been on the list in a long time but reappeared on the list. It's I think it's related to individuals using the, the previous list as quote guides. Um But like *Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins, you know, these are books that I, you know, *Perks of Being a Wallflower* uh, of course, you know, is, is a timeless, you know, a modern classic for so many. But it was also like, are people still reading, you know, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*? Um They hold a special place in my heart, But, you know, some books are for a certain time and don't always perpetuate. So I thought that was very interesting. Um And, and frustrating as well.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense because a lot of the books that were on the previous year's top 10 list were still on this list. But as you said, there were some, some older books that uh reappeared that were on previous lists. So that's very interesting.

Yeah, it is. And we had, we had looked through that list again and, you know, had a similar reaction. It was kind of like what's going on here? Why, why is that back there?

Yeah, I thought also, you know, the number of books, of course, you know, books are, the books on the list are really focused on LGBTQ and BIPOC voices and stories. But the number of books, almost every single book I believe every single book had the one of the reasons listed as being sexually explicit, this extremely vague term. Um You know, whereas before they might, individuals trying to ban these books might try to come up with more quote, creative, uh, reasons to ban it. It was just straight sexual explicit, sexually explicit, which I think just shows that they have not read the books also and cannot take the con the, the scenes perhaps, or the passages that they're looking at if they have read it at all, um, into the context of the entire work.

Yeah, we definitely found that to be the case when we read and discussed *Out of Darkness*, you know, the kinds of reactions that there were to that book and, you know, people clearly had not read beyond, you know, certain passages. Yeah, definitely certain passages which, which is sad because, um I mean, yeah, it, their books are so rich and you have to tell the full story and the full story has to carry with it some difficult things in order for us to fully understand and learn. But um yeah, it, it, it's just a sad statement that people are getting so bogged down with, with one or

two passages and they can't, they can't see the, the, you know, basically they can't see the forest for the trees.

Um So, but I will say it's wonderful, you know, for podcasts like yours and individuals like you folks who go through those stories, right? And who really analyze them and talk about them and show that these are whole people's stories. You know, if you just take one scene out of any of our lives and make that the whole story, we know that you are missing so much richness out of the individuals that we become. So I just wanted to say thank you for all the hard work that you folks are doing too.

Well. Thank you. We really appreciate that. And honestly, it has led us to reading, to have read to some truly life-changing books. I mean, I know that the three of us were completely shattered by *Out of Darkness* and we all loved it. So, yeah, and definitely, definitely felt that life-changing um feeling and, and we're all learning. I mean, we're all learning. I I kind of want to go back to number one on the list that is still *Gender Queer*. And um what does that say to you?

Yeah, I think that that one is, I would say the number one book taken out of context, right? So I've actually sat on a reconsideration committee for *Gender Queer* in the past. Um And the, the reason was that it was pornographic, you know, because they looked at the one panel. But if you read the whole story again, that is not the case. But I think also it speaks to why graphic novels are often challenged and misunderstood as well because it adds the visual element to the story. Um So it makes it seem like it's for children because it's illustration. But we know that there are graphic novels that are for adults that are for young adults and that are not for children and are not marketed to children at all. And so I think that it's also just a real misunderstanding of the beauty of graphic novels and what we as adults can get out of them and that they are not just for children. So that's a huge, you know, kind of educational campaign that I know a lot of graphic novels and, and comics lovers have been on for a very long time. Um, but it just, it really shows that folks don't want to listen, they, they don't want to listen to each other. They don't want to learn to have empathy for any opinion that is not theirs.

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and that's again, goes back to why all of us, all three of us and our colleagues are all doing what we're doing because we, we want, we want people to read and learn and experience and have conversations because the conversations are what are going to bring us together and to, to help us all to understand each other better. Yes. Yes. Um, we saw on your

website that you have held several different positions in libraries, including children's librarian, teen librarian, and most recently adult services librarian. What is one of your favorite things about being an adult services librarian?

So, um I will say making the transition from children's to adult was very difficult for me because I love being a children's librarian so much. Um But I also wanted to explore this new community that I didn't have as much experience with. And so one of the things that has been really um wonderful about being an adult services librarian is helping folks through their golden years and helping them thrive through their golden years. I think that so many folks, especially because I live um I work in a community that has a very high population of seniors. So I think it's like 60% of our population is seniors. Um So what we see are individuals who are not ready to be put out to pasture, who are not at the end of their lives or even their careers and still have so much to offer the community. But as soon as individuals retire, hit a certain age that stigma of they can't navigate technology or, you know, they can't do, they can't drive themselves, they can't do all these things um becomes a stereotype that I see so many folks working whether consciously or subconsciously to fight against. And so just seeing how they can bring their wisdom also to the library and to the broader community by giving ideas and sharing, you know, what their career used to be and how, you know, they can apply their engineering skill to helping with the children's program or with the friends of the library or just learning a completely new thing and starting a new business, they meant to retire. But oops, they're now starting a whole new job or career, um, in their golden years has also been really rewarding and just developing those relationships and seeing how their communities grow has been a wonderful part of being in adult services.

That sounds great. Yeah, I, um, I've dabbled just a little bit in my public library in adult services. Um, but one of the things that I really love is when a library does hold different book discussions that are not pegged as, you know, adults only or children only or teens, you know, y a um, but it's really fun when people come together to have conversations about a book and are bringing their perspectives from, you know, whatever age they are and, you know, I always get a kick out of some of the, the seniors who come in in the, you know, they'll say to the younger folks, oh, I'm so much older than you or I'm the oldest person in the room and here's my perspective. But what I notice is how much the younger folks really appreciate that and I think vice versa. And that's, you know, that's part of the whole learning conversation that needs to happen in society. You know, the library is where it all comes together, um, is how I always look at it and, you know,

that's, that's where community all comes together and it's just so beautiful to see it all happen like that.

Absolutely. I think the book club is a beautiful example. I, we did one um uh for Women's History Month for uh we should all be feminists and it was an intergenerational group that was there and to listen to, you know, our older generation talk about what feminism meant to them and how it was a dirty word. And um you know, for us younger folks to be like, oh yeah, like I'm a feminist. I do this and like just seeing how we bridged kind of the gaps over the years and shared our experiences on what it was like to be a working woman, you know, in the fifties and sixties versus now and how things are different and how they are not. Um It was really a wonderful way for our community to come together. So I love that idea. I think everyone should have intergenerational book clubs.

Yeah, for sure. I love that too. Finally, Lessa, could you please tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Yes, I am at lessaforlibraries.com. All of my social media handles are also lessaforlibraries with F O R spelled out except for Twitter because I don't know how uh letter counts work. So that is the number four, lessa4libraries.

Awesome, Lessa. Thank you so much for everything you do for the ALA and for your library and thank you so much for talking with us today.

Thank you. This has been a real pleasure and delight to speak with fellow library workers.

Uh Thank you, Lessa. We've really enjoyed you very much and your wisdom and thank you for all of the behind the scenes things that ALA is doing for libraries. We, we just are so grateful.

Of course. Thank you. Thank you.

We really enjoyed talking with Lessa today. We were so honored and excited that she could speak with us. It was a really eye-opening conversation. You can find Lessa's contact information and the ALA conference information in the show notes. You can find more information about the ALA's Unite Against Book Bans campaign and other resources on our

website at theroguelibrarians.com/resources. Please join us next time for a discussion of the picture book, *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story of Iraq* by Jeannette Winter. If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at [roguelibrarianspod](https://www.instagram.com/roguelibrarianspod) or on Twitter at [RLibrarians](https://twitter.com/RLibrarians). If you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcasts and please leave us a rating and review. Your ratings and reviews help other people to find our podcast.

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