

Rogue Librarians, Episode 26 Flamer (Part 2: Close Reading)

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

We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, and Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion.

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Alanna, do you have any information you want to give us on the background of the book, Flamer?

Yes, thank you, Marian.

Today, as you mentioned, we are continuing our discussion of Flamer by Mike Curato.

First published in 2020, this graphic novel received a Lambda Literary Award, which recognizes excellent LGBTQ plus literature in 2021.

It received several other awards and honors too.

Flamer was also fourth on the ALA's list of the most challenged books in America in 2022.

It has been challenged or banned for its LGBTQ plus content and for being considered sexually explicit.

Please listen to our previous episode to learn more about why it's been banned.

And just on that note, we want to let our listeners know that there is a trigger warning with this book.

It does have some discussion about suicidal ideation and we will be discussing that as well today.

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

Yes, I actually looked up good reads this time just to get me started, so I don't ramble too much off task.

It's the summer between middle school and high school and Aidan Navarro is away at camp.

Everyone's going through changes, but for Aidan the stakes feel higher.

As he navigates friendships, deals with bullies and spends time with Elias, a boy he can't stop thinking about, he finds himself on a path of self discovery and acceptance.

So it's basically takes place at camp, Aidan's at camp and dealing with questions about high school going forward.

Everyone is sort of telling him that they think he's gay and he doesn't think he's gay, but he probably is.

It's a very emotional read and brings in a lot of questions about our upbringing and beliefs that we get from our religious backgrounds and from society at large.

And yeah, it's just a really very good coming of age story.

Yeah, beautiful.

It's also difficult at some points for me, not the hard emotional stuff, just like the lcky bullying stuff.

So there's a lot of different bullies in different ways in this book.

There is an, you know, as an adult who survived that age range.

That's all adults did.

Yes.

It did stir some discomfort in me as well reading it.

And, you know, you never really forget kind of the traumas that you've gone through when you were in middle school, high school.

It's just such an emotional time and puberty has your hormones all over the place.

And, you know, it's, I think this is a book that everyone can identify with.

Definitely.

Well, should we go into characterization?

Let's do it.

So Dorothy already told us some things about our main character, Aidan Navarro.

I'm just going to give a little more detail about him to start us off.

So Aidan is 14.

He has been going to Catholic school through eighth grade, and he was given a choice for the future.

Does he want to go to Catholic school or to public school?

And he's had such a miserable experience at Catholic school because of the bullying, especially from one particular boy, that he decides he's going to go to public school next year, but he's really nervous about it.

And Aidan has a difficult home life.

His dad seems to be verbally and physically abusive to his mom, and his mom cries a lot, and his dad doesn't spend much time with Aidan and his twin siblings, who are much younger.

And Aidan feels like home is not a safe, supportive place.

And the one place he has felt at home is at Boy Scout Camp each summer, and that's where the story takes place.

And it seems like there are a couple of things in his life that are really important to him.

One is being a scout and being friends with these other boys, and another is his faith.

So he's been an altar boy for years, and he seems to be in touch with his spiritual side, and though he struggles with some of the beliefs of Catholicism, which we'll get into later.

And he has one best friend who's a girl named Violet, who he met at a Christian camp, and Marian will tell us more about Violet, but she is his one really safe person, and they exchange letters throughout the summer, because this takes place in 1995, and there are no cell phones and no new technology, and they write letters to each other, and it seems like they have a payphone they can use occasionally too.

So Aiden is bullied not only because other boys call him a homosexual or gay, or they use homophobic slurs as well, but also for being biracial, and he is half Filipino and half white, and also for being overweight, so they call him terrible names for that too.

So he's been bullied by many kids in the past, and he experiences quite a bit of bullying while he's at camp too, though he also has friends there with him who are much more supportive.

So is there anything you two would like to add about Aiden before we move on to some of the other people who are important to him?

Well, I would just like to chime in that he's also bullied for being short, and that even his doctor, when it shows him in a scene being measured, his height being measured at the doctor, and his doctor's like, come on, stretch all the way up, stand your full height.

And he's like, even my doctor can't make me taller than I am, and that kind of bugs him.

And he's not athletic as a result of being short, and he calls himself fat.

But I would say he's kind of pudgy, all of those things.

Yeah, although he loves to canoe, right?

He loves to do some of the things like that at Boy Scout Camp.

But you're right, Marion, that in terms of playing volleyball with the boys or football or basketball, those are not his sports.

Yeah, he doesn't consider himself coordinated in that way.

But he does love the outdoors.

That's his piece, is being in the outdoors.

And you had mentioned his religious affiliation.

He, not only is he an altar boy, but he's apparently very friendly with the priest, the pastor at his church.

And it's clear that they've had numerous conversations in their continuing mentoring relationship.

And the priest has asked him to think about considering the priesthood as his vocation in the future.

And I don't think that he says it to the priest, but in his head, he thinks, I'm not really cut out to be the priest for the priesthood, not because I don't want to be, but because I don't think I'm a holy enough person.

So he's got a lot of things that he churns up inside his head that make him feel less than.

And it's tough enough to go through puberty and middle school, but then to have these self-deprecating thoughts as well about his own identity, it makes it even harder.

And it seems very clear in the book that Aidan is gay, but Aidan does not identify as gay.

In fact, one of the lines early on was how much he does not like that word because it makes him feel unsafe when people use it.

And, you know, how can I be gay?

I'm an altar boy.

I do all the right things in church, and the church says it's a sin, so I just can't be.

And so, you know, that epitomizes regardless of what your sexuality or your issues are in middle school is the time when you are trying to figure out who you are.

And, you know, sometimes it can be as simple as do I want to be a nice person or a mean person?

I've talked to middle schoolers who wake up one day and go, oh, I don't have to be mean all the time, you know?

So, but I just, it really speaks to that state of mind.

And I think developmentally, if I remember this correctly, that it's at this point in development that, boys and girls start to become much less self-centered in their, you know, in kind of their views of the world and start really paying attention to, wait a minute, there's a world out there and there are people in it.

And what I do affects them and what they do affects me.

And so that kind of plays into this whole, you know, feeling of puberty and what's going on and that kind of thing.

Yeah, well, Dorothy, do you want to tell us more about the boy who Aidan is very close to as a friend and has been starting to have strange dreams about?

Yes, Elias Schaeffer is his cabin mate.

And he is just one of those all around great guys who everyone likes, good looking, you know, slim, athletic.

He isn't behaving in sort of a toxic masculinity way that a lot of the other boys do.

You know, he doesn't make stupid bathroom humor type jokes and, you know, homoerotic jokes.

And he doesn't talk badly about his girlfriend.

He's not, you know, trying to talk about her in an objectifying way.

And I think this is one of the reasons that he really, you know, likes Aidan's company.

He says at one point, Aidan is the only boy he can talk to about his girlfriend.

And so, you know, he helps Aidan with the archery unit when Aidan is not as good at it.

So he's compassionate in that way.

He's really just a kid that you would hope every kid could be at that age.

Yeah.

Even, you know, I'm trying to think back.

Remind me, you guys, if there were any scenes where Aidan was being bullied, that Elias stood up for him.

I feel like he did, but I can't think of one specifically.

I think he checks up on him afterwards.

I don't think he was usually there in the moment when those things happened, but he's definitely concerned about him.

Yeah.

Yeah.

They also find that they have similar tastes in music and they bond over just that they sneak out to canoe and look at the stars in the night.

So there's just so many levels on which they're bondings.

And then he is also the boy that Aidan keeps having little fantasies about both in his dreams and also when he's daydreaming.

And he kind of just puts those aside, Aidan does, and says, I'm just not going to think about that.

But they become increasingly fervent.

And what I also love about Elias is, Elias is not gay.

I had a question at some point whether Elias was going to turn out to be into this.

But he didn't, and he reacted badly when, spoiler, when Aidan kissed him on the cheek, when they were having a bonding moment.

And he kind of left the tent, and it really hit Aidan very hard.

But Elias processed that for a couple of days, but came back around and, you know, stayed a good friend in the end.

So he's not a complicated character.

He's just like a regular kid being a regular kid.

Yeah, who happens to be a football star as well.

I don't remember whether he was the quarterback, but he is very athletic.

And he just, you know, kind of like the all-American boy next door.

And his hair is a little bit longer.

He lets his hair grow a little bit longer.

Which, you know, I think it's, I'm guessing it's kind of intentional that, that the illustrator drew it that way.

I guess that's Mike Curato.

Because, I mean, this is obviously based on Mike Curato's real experiences, but, you know, it leaves it ambiguous until, you know, until you're, until the kiss happens.

And Elias has a reaction, so.

Yeah, that's a really good point, Marianne.

And I was thinking back to the mid 90s, when I was growing up, and a little bit younger than them at the time, but longer hair was definitely in style for some boys.

If you think back to Hanson, the Mbop song.

True, yeah, yeah.

At least one of them had longer hair, you know.

They were both into Nirvana as well, Kurt Cobain.

Yeah, yeah, good point.

So I think it's a choice on his end to be a little bit different too, which I think shows something else cool about him that he, you know, even though most of the boys at the camp have shorter hair, he chooses to wear it long.

And he doesn't get bullied in the same way that Aiden does normally.

Yeah, that kind of speaks to me a little bit of privilege.

You know, white, good-looking, sporty, athletic, he can afford to be different.

Right, and Aiden's mannerisms are described as being more effeminate too, and that's not the case for Elias, so that's probably why Aiden is targeted more often.

Well, and Aiden has, as we talked about before, all these different reasons that people are picking on him.

But one of the things I love about the book is that you don't see that effeminate quality immediately.

It's not like part of the setup of who he is.

It just keeps being revealed to us through his actions, and he's like, why is it that every time I try to be myself, you know, people yell at me?

Because, you know, I like that it's a developing, developing consciousness of those things.

And feeling unhappy with how his voice sounds when he hears it, which I know is something that other boys and men have expressed feeling self-conscious about too, especially if they are gay and didn't know it yet or didn't want to reveal it.

Do you want to move on to our next character?

Yeah, absolutely.

So the next character that I wanted to mention specifically by name, Alana already mentioned, it's Violet who is Aidan's, he calls Violet his best friend, his pen pal.

She happens to be, and the reason I want to mention her is that even though she, we never physically see her, there's no drawing of her.

We only know about her through Aidan, but she's also the only female character in the book.

And we know who she is and what her thoughts are, and what her views are of the world and relationships and so forth through her letters.

Alana already mentioned that Violet and Aidan met at a Christian camp, which in itself is very interesting because Aidan went to the Christian camp kind of to escape the family, for the same reason that he's going to Boy Scout camp every year.

And he didn't really know what he was getting into.

I mean, he didn't really know what to expect because Christian camp is very specifically not Catholic camp.

And Aidan is very Catholic.

I shouldn't say very.

Aidan is a devout Catholic.

And Christian camp is sort of a non-denominational Christian envelope.

But for some reason, Christian and Catholic don't necessarily go together.

That I've learned through life that there are many Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, who do not view Catholics as Christians.

They're something else.

But in any event, Aidan and Violet hit it off.

They become very good friends.

They really connect on an emotional level, and they become lifelong pen pals.

And really Violet is Aidan's lifeline throughout this book.

Other kids are getting care packages from home, but what Aidan lives for is his weekly letter from Violet.

And at a point in the book when there's a delay getting a letter from Violet to him, it becomes really tragic, and he feels very lonely as a result of that.

So I want to mention that.

And then Ted is a scout leader at the camp, and he's this cool guy that Aidan feels very comfortable around.

Not all the leaders are so personable, but Ted becomes an immediate role model for Aidan because he seems very secure in who he is.

Ted's kind of like Elias in that he's got longer hair, he wears it in a bun, and he's someone who Aidan wants to be more like.

We are going to start by talking about the symbolism or motif, if you will, of the flame throughout.

Obviously, it is the title of the book.

And we've got the, you know, the color scheme is the oranges and yellows of a fire.

When there is color, that's the color.

So for me, first of all, there's the double entendre of, we call gay men who have the voice and the mannerisms, the effeminate mannerisms, we call them flaming.

So I thought that was, you know, on purpose.

And then throughout, fire seems to be, like he likes to light fires, he's good at the fires.

So it's something positive for him.

At the very end, of course, there's the flame within him, which is, you know, basically his soul, his inner-Essence.

Yeah, his inner essence is that flame.

Whenever he's having thoughts of a sexual nature or fantasies about Elias, we get a little, just a little tinge of the color happening in those frames.

Can you guys think of any other places?

Well, I was thinking, he asks the priest at one point about the eternal flame that's in the church and what the symbolism of that.

And the priest is like, well, you know what that means.

But, you know, he adds it in as well.

And of course, then there's the fires of hell.

Right, right.

You touched on this a little bit already, Dorothy, but he specifically mentions that Flamer was, maybe sometimes still is, a homophobic slur.

And he also mentioned that he imagines himself burning at the stake, like tied to a bunch of wood.

And he mentions that the word faggot originally referred to like a bundle of sticks.

And he kind of puts that together with the homophobic slur in a way.

And wasn't a fag a cigarette back in the 50s?

Yeah, they still call it that in Britain, I think.

Yeah, they do.

But that's another thing that burns.

Interesting.

They also show the flame colors whenever there's a high emotion.

So when he's being bullied or even when the bear shows up, and the whole background of the page is kind of an orangey.

Bird sienna, if you will.

It kind of brings me back to the saying of, I'm burned up, I'm burning with anger or I'm burning with emotion.

Or desire.

Or desire, yeah.

Desire, I was going to say.

But man, you burned me, man.

You insulted me.

You burned me.

You know, it's also, yeah.

And I was thinking that the red also shows up in the moment.

He thinks of St.

Sebastian, who was shot with arrows for his beliefs.

So he thinks sometimes about martyrs too.

And there's an image of the Catholic kids being confirmed, and they're all wearing red robes.

So it's interesting how they're tied together.

Thank you for bringing that up, because that also reminded me that the idea of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is often represented as a flame.

Yes, exactly.

And as an altar boy, you like candles.

You do.

And then there's the speaking in flames, which means that you have, and I think he mentions that too, that you have the ability to speak in languages that other people can understand and accept.

Right.

And if you think back to the Bible, the burning bush is how God speaks to Moses.

Yeah.

Am I remembering that correctly?

You are.

Because many times in my life when I have thought, gosh, I wish I could get a burning bush so I could figure out what to do.

So, yeah.

And as Dorothy mentioned, for the most part it is black and white, and I think I mentioned this in the previous episode too, but apparently Mike Curato painted the color separately and then used Photoshop to kind of layer it on top.

So I also think that's an interesting, a cool way of doing the illustrations that you could see them as separate images, but they look like they were always meant to be together.

So Dorothy, is there anything you want to add about the flames as a symbol and a motif before we move on to the first theme?

Well, I think that it's just so beautifully woven throughout the book, this idea, and adds so much, you know, as a person who doesn't naturally tend towards graphic novels, you know, that element just really brought an emotional connection to things that maybe I wouldn't have seen otherwise.

Oh, yeah, I completely agree with that.

I mean, it stirred up the fire in me.

It's a beautiful, righteous indignation fire.

Yeah, a lot of fires, yeah, for sure.

All right, and one of those points of righteous indignation that we saw as a theme was the toxic masculinity and how it hurts everyone involved, not just Aidan.

And so when you were talking about friends of Aidan's that were trying to help him by saying, well, if you didn't act like that, then people wouldn't call you gay.

And how even when you're trying to be well-meaning, the nature of toxic masculinity, as I understand it, it's just the fact that you have to think that way.

You have to think in terms of what makes people manly enough to be accepted by other men.

And you see it in all the homophobic jokes where they're joking about the hot dogs and the buns, and they're in the shower, and, you know, well, it's okay, we're all, you know, manly men.

It doesn't matter if we see each other naked, but there's a homo in here, you know, it's just very bro-y.

And, you know, it hurts someone like Elias, who is not like that.

Elias doesn't behave that way, right?

He cannot talk to these other boys about his girlfriend because of the way that they're always like, oh, how big are her boobs?

Yeah, have you gotten into her pants?

And it's what causes the sort of panic moment for Elias when Aiden kisses him on the cheek, right?

That's about the toxic masculinity and the fear of becoming that kind of a target.

Those are great examples.

And there's one moment where Elias stands up for Aiden when he does the Valley Girl style during their sing-along.

And one of the other boys says, hey, I didn't know this was Girl Scout Camp.

And Elias says, hey, shut up.

Maybe you should go to Idiot Camp.

So none of them ever say like the way you're talking, the way they try to respond to these things is kind of by insulting each other.

So it's not exactly calling out toxic masculinity as a concept, but it's saying like, stop it.

You should not be saying that.

And even David, even though he's a good friend to Aiden, one of the first times we meet him, he's saying really toxic things about girls, as you mentioned.

And so it made me think badly of David, but that's just the way that a lot of people still talk.

Yeah, they're learning this through society, through osmosis.

This is the way men talk.

This is the way you talk about women and the insults that they choose, whether it be about being gay, about being effeminate, a girl scout camp.

I've heard at where I work recently, heard somebody use the word retarded and then gay.

And I was like, you don't mean either of those things.

Use the words that you mean.

I would never tell you to call someone stupid, but if that's what you're trying to say, use the word.

Because you're insulting everyone in a whole group when you do that.

Not so much the person that you're talking to.

Well, they hear it as an insult.

And it doesn't matter which othering they're doing.

It's all part of the same.

I am like everyone else.

I am the way society wants me to be.

Yeah.

Do you want to move on to the next one, Mary?

Sure.

So shame.

Shame is a theme throughout this book.

And we all know as adults that shame is one of the most damaging emotions.

And yet it is still so prevalent in our society and in our societal institutions, such as religions, families.

It really struck me, it hit me so hard, that Aidan makes the comment that I already mentioned once before, which is, you know, when he's talking to the priest and the priest says, you know, you should consider a vocation in the priesthood.

And Aidan thinks, I'm not holy enough.

I've already broken rules before I even knew they were rules.

And there's a shame in that.

There's a shame every single time Aidan has a dream where he is a character dressed in female attire and he's fantasizing about a lovely relationship with Elias.

And he wakes up and there's so much shame, and there's a scene that we're going to talk about later which just really exemplifies that feeling of shame that permeates.

And at one point, Aidan says, I can't be gay because it's a sin.

And I'm concerned that if I am gay or admit that I'm different than other people, that I'm going to be tortured my whole life, just like all of these saints who've gone before him and that kind of thing.

And we think about shame in terms of how shame has affected, for example, women who are victims of rape or abuse, victims of alcoholism.

There's a shame that destroys a person's inner essence and destroys their self-esteem.

And we just see that playing out in this book.

And the shame that the other boys are feeling about, I can't accept Aidan being effeminate, because then that would put me in shame potentially.

Or if I understand him, I'm accepting something that the world is, the message of the world or society is telling me not to accept.

And then, of course, the Boy Scouts in this time period where Ted gets fired for being the gay scout leader, they're backing up this philosophy that being gay or being other is a sin.

So it harms everyone, I guess, is the point, much like what we just discussed with toxic masculinity.

Did you all have any thoughts on this?

I think you put it really well, Marion.

Well, should we move on to something a little more hopeful?

Lighthearted and hopeful, let's do it.

I was thinking the same thing.

Sounds good.

So we decided to end our discussion of themes with two intertwined themes that are definitely more hopeful.

So one is that you are enough as you are, and you are worthy of being alive and loved.

And another is that hope and friendship are incredibly powerful.

So hope and friendship can help you see that you are enough and that you should be loved however and whoever you are.

And those themes came through so strongly for me while I was reading this book.

Aidan struggles, as we said, with the bullying, with his feelings for Elias, with the shame, and he eventually reaches a point where he feels like Elias has abandoned him.

His other friends like David are going to abandon him.

He hears the discussions of the Boy Scout leaders talking about how they got rid of Ted because someone discovered he was gay.

And he feels like, and he feels cut off from his family.

He tries to call his mom and his mom isn't available.

So he, and he hadn't heard from Violet.

He usually gets a letter from her.

And so he feels abandoned by her because he had told her about these secret feelings and dreams he had been having.

And he just feels like he's lost all hope.

And he starts to think about and make plans for dying by suicide.

And Dorothy will get into this moment later on, but there is a moment that helps him see that he is perfectly fine who he is.

And then Elias comes to find him, and he does get a letter from Violet, and she still loves him.

And those seemingly small actions from other people help him to understand that he is still worthy of being loved and that people would be upset if he died.

And it ends on a really hopeful note, not to say that all of his problems are fixed.

We imagine that things are still going to be tough at home, and things might still be tough at school in the future.

But he sees that he has a way to move forward.

And I know I'm spoiling a lot at the moment, so I hope it's okay if I spoil one more thing.

That's kind of how we do this.

So it ends with an image of him looking at the still burning fire after everyone has gone to sleep.

And you get farther and farther away from him as you see the flames and coming back to the symbolism of the flames and the fact that this is throughout the book.

I think it so beautifully represents how he still has the desire to be alive and to be who he is and to figure things out in the future.

So the book does this so beautifully.

And this is a message we've talked about in a couple of other books that we've discussed together.

But it was just incredibly moving for me to read it here.

I completely agree with that, Alana.

And that was just beautifully said.

And it reminded me of another piece of symbolism for fire, which is the concept of the phoenix rising from the ashes.

And there's so much redemption that you just described coming at the end of the book.

And Aidan has in fact risen above the bullying and his suicidal ideation and all of these things to have a newfound understanding and hope, hopefulness and gratitude and reliance on friends, all of which will propel him to continue living and embracing who he is because he is so lovable.

So I just wanted to throw that out there.

Yeah, beautiful.

All right.

Well, should we move on to significance?

Significance, yeah.

Yeah.

So this is the part of our discussion where we bring up some, a song or TV show or movie or questions or a passage that this book can, we felt that this book made a connection to.

And for me, there were a couple songs that just popped right into my head immediately.

The first one, which is the Lady Gaga song Born This Way, which, I mean, that song personally has lifted me up many, many times.

You are perfect the way you are.

Baby, you were born this way, and you are enough.

And it just is such a powerful message delivered in a powerful song by a powerful figure who truly is an advocate for self-love and society accepting each other and stopping othering.

And so I thought that was a terrific song to bring up.

And then the other one that popped into my head as well is a song by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis called Same Love, which again, just-

Love that song.

It's such a beautiful song.

And I just, I mean, I remember the first time it hit the radio and people that I was working with who identified on the LGBTQ spectrum were just so touched by that song.

And it's funny because I had been touched by that song also and I don't identify on the LGBTQIA plus spectrum.

And I just thought, wow, this is a beautiful song about how we can all live in peace and harmony and accept each other.

And it doesn't matter what race, creed, color, sexual orientation, sexual preference, we, love is love.

And I just thought that was beautiful.

And Dorothy, I know you brought up a song too that I think is also perfect and fits in with our theme of fire.

So I'll pass the baton.

Sure, Firework by Katy Perry.

And I know that, you know, I used to be a music snob and Katy Perry, oh, we've heard this song a million times.

And then I had young children and I worked in a middle school and I can see the uplifting power of songs like this.

All of the lyrics of the song are about, you know, people who, did you ever feel like a, you know, paper bag blowing in the wind or plastic bags blowing in the wind?

You know, feeling down and then saying, this is the fire, you know, you have a fire within you.

You're a firework.

Let it, let it out, be yourself.

And, you know, how appropriate for this book, be a firework.

I love that.

I love that music video too.

I just, it's just a great music video.

It is a very uplifting melody too.

It's just so much fun to listen to.

And we used to play music in the hallways.

We're not doing that this year for some reason, but when firework would come on, I was always out there like lip syncing and doing grand gestures.

Of course you were.

I love that so much.

The kids are looking at me sideways like, you're weird.

Yes, but that's why they love to take your classes.

Goodness.

Well, Alana, did you have a question?

So one thing I was thinking about while I was reading this was how this book might make different people think about different things, depending on their identities, backgrounds and experiences.

And I remember that when we discussed the book in the first episode, we talked about how Mike Curato wanted to write this book because he didn't have books out there when he was growing up that showed people like him.

And we talked about how this book saves lives and is trying to make kids realize that they are important just who they are.

And then I was trying to think as a teacher, if I don't think I could ever teach this book in the classroom because of the language and content, even in a high school class, I think you would have difficulty doing that.

But if I were to discuss this as a teacher, how would I discuss the sexual elements that parents seem to have more trouble with, or at least the people challenging this book seem to have more trouble with?

Do you think that the book needs all of the references to more sexual thoughts or like where Aidan briefly mentions finding his dad's porn and watching that, or where he talks about masturbation and thinking about, oh, do priests masturbate, or where the other boys gather in a dark tent to play this game where they're each masturbating, as we talked about in this very disgusting way.

So, do you think it was in the best interest of the book, given how important it is, to include these things that I'm sure are completely realistic, but make certain people more comfortable?

Or do you think if Mike Curato hadn't included a few of those scenes, that more parents would be willing to have their children check out this book?

So, that was a very long-winded way of asking.

Do you think the sexual elements are necessary to understanding this book?

Or do you think he could have toned that part down a little bit?

I think that if what you want is to reach kids where they are, the sexual elements are the things consuming their minds at this age.

And I think any message of you are enough the way you are sort of needs to address them, especially when it comes to things like guilt about, you know, masturbating, for instance, or the toxic masculinity piece.

It's hard to put that together without those parts.

What do you think, Marion?

I was curious if Mark Curato has fielded this question, pardon me, in the past.

Because I struggle with this, as a librarian, as we all are, I don't believe in censorship.

And I feel like what we know about the story is that this is based on Mike Curato's actual experiences.

So if that is the truth, and I believe that it is, then Mike Curato had a reason for including all of the parts that went into this story.

Not only that, as a published author, Mike Curato's story was edited by professional publishing houses that I'm sure had questions and there were parts that got cut out, parts that got left in.

I just feel like for it to be the realistic story that is not censored, that if this is really what happens to middle school boys, and I was never a middle school boy, so I don't know, then there's a relevance and a reason and an importance for it being in there.

I do recognize that it's uncomfortable, but I think that that's part of it, in that, you know, as I discussed shame a little bit ago, you know, we're supposed to feel shame for this, you know, and this is a thing that parents, you know, who are complaining about these scenes, they find these scenes to be shameful or they find, you know, a discussion of sexuality to be shameful, but I mean, that is a religious perspective that people have been handed down for generations.

But at the same time, if you go back to, you know, the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible, and even the story of Abraham as the father of Judaism, you know, we were all instructed to be fruitful and multiply.

So, sexual behavior in and of itself is the way that we continue the species, and, you know, if animals don't have shame for masturbating, so why do humans have to feel shame for masturbating?

I mean, these are questions that I have as well.

And, I mean, I understand your point of how do you then use this as a teaching book in, you know, in a school system?

And maybe you can't.

And maybe you can't.

But on the other hand, I mean, we talked about Are You There, God?

It's Me, Margaret, and they also went and looked at Dad's Playboys.

And, you know, I mean, this is not exclusive to Mike Curato's book.

I mean, this is, I mean, that book was written in 1971 or whatever.

So, you know, I think published in 70.

So, I mean, this is not behavior that, you know, has come out of the internet age or because, you know, people talk about, you know, homosexual behavior or, you know, any of that.

I mean, this is just this is just the natural human development.

So yeah, I just we're a prudish people, which is ridiculous.

Yeah, no, that's true, and I think it's I think it's still built into our, you know, very much a Puritan relic that we have built into our society.

And like you said, a lot of people just don't want to have these things out in the open, even if they're happening or being discussed.

I think Mike Curato made the comment that there's nothing worse in his book than in a Judy Blume book, which I understand his point, especially if you look at her book that was pretty revolutionary for talking about sex and depicting that more closely.

I think Are You There, God, It's Me, Margaret is a very different case because even though they look at the Playboys, they're not talking about masturbation.

And even though they're talking about periods, they're not talking, they're not having these very detailed sexual fantasies, right?

They're still younger and more innocent.

There's an innocence, yeah.

Which tracks with development, I think.

Yeah, I mean, because they're 11 and Aiden is supposed to be 14.

I mean, you do get that in Deany, well, not that it's sexual, but Deany, where Judy Williams book Deany, where she discusses, you know, that special place she touches herself and discovers that it feels really good.

And then you have, then again, Maybe I Won't, which is the boys version of, you know, wet dreams and masturbation.

Well, what I wanted to point out in this discussion is that when we talk about the masturbation scene, we're grossed out by it.

Yeah, true.

And so is Aiden.

Yeah.

Yes.

And as we said last time, you don't see anything happening.

Not at all.

You just hear their discussions of it.

So it's not like it's graphic or anything.

It's just the concept is like, oh, like you're masturbating in front of all of your like troop members.

That's gross.

That's something that the three of us would have ever thought would happen.

Right?

Well, and so I wonder whether that that is to me, it felt like that was the point.

That was like, I don't know.

It was bad.

It was bad.

Aiden was uncomfortable.

I was uncomfortable.

Yeah, I think you're supposed to be uncomfortable, but also, oh, can I interrupt you, please?

I was just going to say that I've always kind of pondered this conundrum in real life, that when something is happening in private between you and someone that, you know, consensually with another person, it's, you know, glorious and amazing.

But if two people next to you are getting hot and heavy, you're like, get a room, you don't want to see it.

So you know, it's such a weird line for people.

It's just the same way that knowing that it happens is one thing, but seeing it in a book is especially a graphic novel just brings it home in a different way.

So I don't know, we've all got to un-fake the ideas about sex.

Yeah.

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't have answers.

That's the point of these questions.

No, it is.

Yeah.

True enough.

Well, thank you so much for discussing with me.

It is something that I have been thinking about is like, when you want a book to have a big impact and reach a huge audience, how do you make those decisions?

Because you want it to be real.

You want it to not be shameful.

But then again, so many people feel shame about it.

How do you do that?

So thank you for helping me think about that.

You're welcome.

All right.

I have a passage from the book that I wanted to discuss.

So this is the climax of the book.

Aidan is feeling bereft and like he has no friends.

Elias has moved out.

He's been bullied for everything about himself.

He hasn't received a letter back from his pen pal.

And he feels abandoned, and he feels like he's also going against his religion.

So he walks off and interestingly goes to a little chapel and pulls a knife out of his pocket, and he's contemplating using it to end his life.

And he has a vision at that point of a fiery being.

And this is the segment from the book.

He says, is this hell?

No.

Then why is everything on fire?

It is the fire of life within you.

This is your soul.

So it's just a little small snippet.

And the pictures throughout this whole section are gorgeous.

He has a whole conversation with this fiery soul from within.

But I kind of liked this juxtaposition here of hell, fire, another way to interpret fire, with actually it being the fire of your soul.

And I liked the confusion there because religion so often tells us that the things about us that are our inner truths like being gay or trans or who knows what else are going to take us straight to hell.

And I like that it flips that idea to, you know, that is the fire within you, that is your life blood, your spark, another fiery word that we often use to describe people's personalities.

So that's really interesting, Dorothy.

And this book is so worth reading and so worth having available.

I loved it so much.

So I really hope that more kids are able to get access to it.

I completely agree.

Alanna, Dorothy, it's, as always, a pleasure having this conversation with you.

And you've inspired my mind to think of different thoughts that I hadn't really included with this before we sat down to do this.

So thank you.

That's why I do so love a good book discussion.

All right.

Well, we're going to wrap it up for our discussion of Flamer by Mike Curato.

We invite you to please join us next time for a discussion of the book Crank by Ellen Hopkins.

As always, we welcome your comments, questions, suggestions, critiques, whatever you want to throw at us.

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