

Rogue Librarians, Episode 21

This Book Is Gay (Part 1: Why It's Banned)

Welcome to The Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marion, Dorothy, and Alanna, and we are The Rogue Librarians. We would love for you, our listeners and readers, to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod.

It turns out we are going to discontinue our Twitter page that we've had for the past year, but we also have a few other announcements that we want to share with you before we jump into today's book.

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We also wanted to mention that we recently celebrated our birthday. So our podcast is over a year old now. Our first episode was in October of 2022. So thank you for listening to us for the past year, we can hardly believe it's been a whole year already.

Yes, it's hard to believe. Finally, we wanted to say how incredibly grateful we are to Lizzie for doing our sound engineering and audio editing since we started this podcast. Her recording expertise and edits literally made this podcast happen. We really appreciate her helpfulness, her kindness, her passion, and her ability to stay calm in every situation. She needs to take time to focus on other parts of her life now, so Dorothy has taken over the editing. Thank you so much, Lizzie and Dorothy. We couldn't do this without you.

Today, we will be discussing *This Book Is Gay* by Juno Dawson. First published in the UK in 2014 and in the US in 2015, *This Book Is Gay* was written, quote, as a guidebook for young people discovering their sexual identity and how to navigate those uncomfortable waters, end quote. Before she became a young adult author, Dawson worked as a personal, social, health, and economic teacher in Britain, which means she taught young people about health and wellbeing, relationships, and living in the wider

world. When she first wrote this book, she was out as a gay man. She came out as a trans woman in 2015 and uses she/her pronouns. We read the revised and updated edition from 2021, which mentions some of her experiences as a trans woman. In 2016, the ALA awarded *This Book Is Gay* a place on its Over the Rainbow Project book list, which "recognizes current quality nonfiction and fiction books that authentically express gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender experiences." First banned in Wasilla, Alaska in 2014, the book tied for 10th place on the ALA's list of the most challenged books in America in 2022. Common Sense Media and Amazon recommend the book for those 14 and older. So Dorothy, could you please give us a summary of *This Book Is Gay*?

Sure. It's a little bit different than my usual rambling rant, but this one, I just like the part on the back of the book where it's billed as an instruction manual. So *This Book Is Gay* covers everything from how to tell if you're gay, to coming out, to how to express yourself as a gay person. It includes everything on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, you know, as well as any one book can, I guess, because that's a lot. But then aside from the nuts and bolts, you know, how does sex work, for example, it has useful tips like how to challenge homophobic language or what the laws in different countries are regarding homosexuality. That's it in a nutshell.

Mm-hmm. Great. I like the fact that on the back cover it says, "This book is for everyone, regardless of gender or sexual preference. This book is for anyone who's ever dared to wonder. This book is for you," which I thought was really well done. So Alanna, tell us a little bit about why it's been banned.

Right. Well, as you can probably guess, this book has been banned for its LGBTQ+ content, as we've seen in many other books this past year. According to the ALA, *This Book Is Gay* has been challenged or banned for that content, for providing sexual education, and for claims that it is sexually explicit. According to PEN America, it has been banned from classrooms and libraries and school districts in California, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia in 2022 and 2023. So none of that is surprising, but the fact that this book does talk explicitly about sex, it's providing sexual education. You know, the fact that that people are objecting to that, I mean, that is the point of this book. So sorry, Marian, what did you want to say?

Oh, no, that's okay. And I completely agree. When I used to be a second grade teacher a million years ago and had to teach sex education as part of the public school curriculum, there were always parents who opted out or opted their child out of being in class for those mandatory classes. Mandatory meaning that we had to teach them, not mandatory for every child to be a part of them if their parents chose to opt out. So already Juno Dawson was embarking on a controversial topic before even starting to discuss LGBTQ+.

Right, and I'm actually surprised that, so this shows my lack of knowledge about elementary education. I'm surprised that it begins in second grade because I know for myself, I think the first sex ed we did in elementary school was in fifth grade. So what does it look like in second grade?

Well, let me just correct you quickly. It actually, in public schools, starts in kindergarten.

Really?

And so, yes. And it's very obviously age appropriate. So in kindergarten, for example, they're taking the kids on a tour of the female bathroom, the girls' restroom and the boys' restroom and noting the differences and why there's a urinal. And the usual boys have a penis, girls have a vagina. conversation. In second grade, we focused largely on good touch and bad touch in terms of, you know, keeping your child safe from bad touch specifically. And so it was very scripted. And there, we also did some labeling of body parts and things like that. but yeah, so it had more to do with like what's a private part of your body versus what's, you know, not private. So your hand is not necessarily private, though I'm sure in some cultures it is. But for example, anything that's covered by your underwear is something that would be considered private.

And that means that, you know, other people besides your underwear. and only even then in certain situations, other people should not be touching that part of your body. That's your private part. So it was very interesting.

I imagine it's different in different school systems as well. Yes. In terms of when it when it starts and what is covered.

Oh, that is most definitely true. This was in a relatively liberal area of the country.

When I was teaching 8th graders a few years ago, I had some students who were very upset that the curriculum in our school district did not include sex education for LGBTQ+ individuals, and they thought that it was unfair that it still was only about heterosexual sex. And I don't know if things have changed in the last few years, but they circulated a petition to try to change things.

Oh, good for them.

I would be willing to say without having looked into it that they were probably considering changes and have since decided to change things,, but I don't know. Just given the political climate.

Yes. I think that's very likely because that was going on before everyone lost their mind over trans people.

Well, it's definitely gotten worse.

Yes. Yes, it definitely has. Incredibly sad. Well, speaking of that, should we hop into the historical context for this book?

Yeah. Sounds good. All right. So, I want to share some quotes from Juno Dawson from a *Publishers Weekly* article from March of 2023. "I felt as a former teacher, sex education for LGBTQ + teenagers wasn't very good,' Dawson explained in a heartfelt video posted to Instagram. 'They weren't really learning anything about safety in relationships.' Dawson wrote the book to give hope to those who found their journey rife with confusion instead of wonder and hope. And *This Book Is Gay* found its audience, positively affected readers' lives, and became a bestseller along the way. 'This book is truly something I wish I had growing up when I was figuring out who I am,' said Corey Evans in a Goodreads review. 'It should be a must read for all teens so that they never have to feel alone. It should be a must read for any parent whose child has come out to them,' said L.J. Evans in their Goodreads review." So this is, you know, apropos to what we literally just were talking about, which is there isn't a lot of, and hasn't been ever, a lot of sex education, if any at all, in the United States of America, pertaining specifically to anyone who identifies as LGBTQIA+. And so, you know, obviously, a lot of the comments that have been made about *This Book Is Gay* up, well, from 2014 when it was first published in Great Britain until now, a lot of those comments were coming from readers in Europe. So it's, it would be very interesting to compare the countries now, although I don't really, I don't really know what that would show. But it would be interesting.

Yeah, interesting. Right. I just think it's worth noting, you know, or calling out that she was, um, that, uh, she was, sex ed teacher, you know. So, if anyone was going to write this book, I feel like she's well qualified to do it.

I agree with that. And if I remember correctly, and I can't remember where this exactly came from, but I feel like I remember reading that she was asked or encouraged to write this book.

She was, yeah.

And she felt totally unqualified to do it as just a teacher of sex education. But kudos to Juno Dawson for taking this on because it's obviously made an impact on a lot of lives. There was also a fantastic article in *Rolling Stone* where they asked a lot of the questions that have been about all of the stuff that's been circulating. And one I thought was fairly interesting while we're talking about, you know, sex education and what is there and isn't. They asked her how does, how did she think sex education and available information have changed since she wrote the book. And she pointed out which was exactly what I thought when my kids were going through middle and high school. The internet is, you know, out there with all kinds of information, way more than you want your kids to have. And she mentioned she was seeing hardcore pornography,

you know, inundating the websites, guys in the DMs. And she pointed out which was exactly what I thought when my kids were going through middle and high school, and Instagram, you know, being maybe aggressive. And so, you know, more than ever, her point was, and I'll quote her here, quote, "I think we have a responsibility as adults to say this is what the internet is like now and this is how you need to stay safe." End quote. That's why she thinks that the, you know, responsible thing we can do is to give people information as much as possible.

Yeah, I think that's a very valid point. I mean, kids are going to get information however they can. If you're not telling them mom and dad or grown up who's in charge of the child, they're going to find someone who will tell them things. And it might not be a person who agrees with your values. And it might not be a person who is telling all the information. So the best thing we can do is give our kids information and anticipate that we've raised them well and that they will use the information as they need to, but at least they'll have the correct information with which to make their decisions.

Yeah, the internet I've noticed is really the go-to. If a kid wants to learn something, or you know, it's kind of a trope at this point that someone who thinks they might be gay would go to the internet and type in am I gay, right? So they know how to go and find the information that they want on the internet as well. Just a thought. I mean, they're inundated with a lot of stuff that we don't want them to see and that we need to explain about with all the pornography, but and no shade to sex workers there, but age-appropriate stuff. and there's a lot of, you know, a lot of different things out there, espousing a lot of different ideas.

Right, and a lot of things on the internet, as we know, are wrong too, so I mean, they're not always getting the best information.

Right, right. Yeah, a lot of it's intentionally misleading.

Exactly. So in the same *Rolling Stone* article in April, Dawson was asked if she was surprised that the book has been frequently banned in public schools in the United States, almost nine years since it was published, and she responded, quote, "It was not surprising, it was disappointing. It didn't happen overnight, it was a bit of a trickle. Since 2017, what started as the odd isolated incident became a flood, and the book was being challenged widely in a way that it just hadn't been for nearly 10 years. But we know why. It's because the people challenging to ban books in the U.S. became a much more organized campaign," end quote. And this is something we've talked about before, the fact that certain groups are trying to get individuals in their communities to challenge and ban books in a very organized fashion is helping the spread of banned books. So, Marian, and I think you wanted to add a little bit more about that.

I did, thank you, Allamna. I wanted to mention there was a recent article in *The Washington Post* with a headline that was quite compelling, and it indicated that there

are about 11 adults, 11 who have been responsible for 60 % of all the book challenges during the 2021 -2022 school year, and some of those 11 adults have been contesting close to 100 books in their school districts alone. And if you think about that, I mean, that is crazy. That's crazy that 11 people are making themselves a nuisance in the sense that they are trying to speak for the rest of us and say what they consider to be appropriate or not appropriate. And they're doing this while the rest of us are just living our lives, not necessarily tuning out, but just living our lives. And this is the end result of what's happening. A lot of people are just completely unaware that this has been going on. A few more statistics, if I may. The number of book challenges in the year 2022 nearly doubled the 729 documented book challenges in 2021. The ALA indicated that 2,571 books were targeted for censorship in 2022, which is a 38 percent increase from 2021's numbers. Of those books that were banned or challenged, the majority were either written or about members of the LGBTQ + community and people of color. So those are just very disturbing facts. I know we've brought those up in previous episodes, but I also wanted to tie this back to what we were just saying about the power of the internet, because the fact that these 11 people are communicating over the internet through specific Facebook groups and other types of groups that bring like-minded thinkers together, they have increased their power. So if one person in one school district were doing this, that would be a bad thing. But the fact that they're connecting with each other in different states across the country in ways that they never would have been able to do before the internet. This is an example of how the internet is connecting people and passing on really tough situations that are, in my mind at least, challenging our freedoms in the names of, you know, in the name of their freedom. So that's a, it's something to think about.

I know there have been polls that say the majority of Americans are against book banning. Just throwing that out there.

Yeah. They're just not as loud.

Absolutely. And it just coincidentally, I just am back from a library conference in the state in which I live in which. which we discussed the fact that, you know, as librarians or library workers, we need to inform the public that this is happening because there are a lot of people who just don't know, they're just not aware, they don't read the newspapers for whatever reason, they just don't know, and yet, if they were told, would not have this, they would, you know, be encouraged to write letters to their legislators and, you know, come to board meetings, join school boards, and try to prevent this kind of rampant censorship from happening. So we all need to inform ourselves. We all need to do a little bit better job of sharing the word, which is, of course, one of the main reasons why the three of us decided that we wanted to do this podcast so that we could do our part to inform people of what is going on.

Yeah, so moving right along, another Q &A from that same *Rolling Stone* article from April of 2023, the question from *Rolling Stone* was, you know, much of the conservative

pushback around your book calls it pornographic and sexual explicit. Do you think that's a legitimate critique or one in good faith? And of course, Juno Dawson's response is very clear. "I definitely don't think it's pornographic. I would challenge anyone to be titillated or aroused by what is essentially a textbook. We're all very clear *This Book is Gay* is not for children. This is a book kept in the young adult section, like a lot of the books that are on those banned book lists. Throughout the book, there are content warnings and trigger warnings. But of course, that's not what people do on the internet. They screengrab it out of context.

I'm not just talking about how to have sexual intercourse, but also the well-being and the relationship and the nurturing side of it as well. As an educator, that was really important to me, so that young queer people can picture a future for themselves as well-adjusted queer adults. This is how to keep yourself safe and healthy. This is how to be in a relationship that is nurturing and not coercive or controlling." End quote. That pretty much says it all. And again, apropos to our conversation about the internet, you know, you've seen these things. You've been triggered by them. Oh my gosh, they're making our children read this. They're making our children do this or that. You've seen it in campaign ads. And I assure you that if you do your homework, you will find that much is taken out of context.

And, um, you know, no one is trying to make five-year-olds read *This Book Is Gay*. And, um, no one is trying to tell 11 year olds, you need to know how to have sex. That's not the goal. It is not in the middle school libraries to be clear, as far as I know. It's high school. And as we have also discussed before on this podcast, if you think that people in high school are not having sex, you haven't been paying attention. So yeah, that's true.

We actually did look up an article on a study done by the CDC, which apparently does these studies every 10 years or so. And in their 2017 report, 50 % of teenagers reported that they were having sex. So it's happening. Yeah.

Yeah. Not, not all of them, but definitely a big chunk.

Yeah. For sure. Alright, so we are now going to move on to the next section, which is our assessment of the pros and cons of the book. And a further discussion of what's in the book will be in our next episode. So pros and cons. On the pro list, it covers a lot of topics that would be helpful to young adults figuring out their gender identities and sexual identities. It's pretty clear. If you don't know, and it's hard to put myself back in a mindset where I don't already know myself, but you know, you can see there's just there's so much and so many options. And that's why there's all the questioning.

So just having a book that kind of lays out some of the options and helps you figure out what, what each of those means, I think is super helpful. So that's pro number one. Pro number two, they have excerpts from a lot of different people that were surveyed. So you can see a lot of different experiences. And sometimes those experiences, you know, are polar opposites to one another. So it really kind of emphasizes the fact that everyone has different experiences. So I like that as well. Alanna, what do you think?

Well, I agree with both of those, Dorothy. One of the things I also liked was the fact that it discussed gay sex in a straightforward manner to help people understand how it works in the same way we learned about sex ed in middle and high school. So there are a couple of drawings of what the different body parts are and it's very clear on the different ways that people can have sexual content and it emphasizes the importance of safety throughout. So she's a big proponent of using condoms and making sure that you're having sex safely in any way you have it. And there's also a content warning for young people, as Marian mentioned, before the section begins. So it explicitly says, If you're not old enough or ready to read the section, then skip this section and go on to the next chapter. But those who are feeling ready to read it, you know, this is a very straightforward way to learn about how it works. Another thing I like is that, throughout the book, the tone is light, except when it deals with more serious topics like drugs and places where homosexuality is a crime. But in many cases, the book is often very funny and some lines actually made me laugh out loud, especially some of the comparisons. And I just had to read them a few times because they were very funny to me.

I agree, Alanna.

Yeah, Marian, what about you?

Well, along those lines, there are cute illustrations in the book that emphasize Dawson's points. And, you know, those cute little illustrations keep it light. And it kind of reminded me of another book that I've read recently that I recommended, which is a recently published book called *Queer Ducks*, which also has cute little illustrations. And, and I think keeping it light particularly for YA readers is so important. Additionally, I love the fact that that it's a book that is a guide to gay icons, people who have been outspoken on behalf of gay rights, or who've, you know, kind of been trendsetters paving the way. There's also a really important guide for parents and caregivers of LGBTQ + young people, which is invaluable. That's why one of the things that, you know, think we all agree on is that even if you don't question your gender identity or sexuality, if you know someone who does, this book is an extremely valuable book for you to read. It also has a glossary and a list of helpful resources. And as I was perusing those resources, I found that there were things that I was learning. So definitely important things.

Thank you. Also, it encourages young people to work for LGBTQ + rights, which I think is in this political climate so important. We have a very low voter turnout in the United States of America, and particularly for young people. And I think part of that is that people are either apathetic or they feel like their vote doesn't matter. But I think it's really important for people to feel that they can make a difference. And in fact, they can, each individual can. So I love the fact that it encourages people to be

proactive. And further, it provides information about organizations that support LGBTQ rights and gives readers suggestions for how to blacklist and boycott people.

and companies who are homophobic or transphobic. And sometimes that is the best activism that we can share. So I thought those were all really good additions to the book.

And that brings us to the cons for lack of a better word, which is always my least favorite part. But I feel like we want to kind of give a balanced view. So one thing that we noticed, and I think we mentioned it a little bit earlier, is that it mentions non-binary, asexual, aromantic individuals. So it really does attempt to span this very large rainbow, if you will, of options. But there's not a lot of focus on those perspectives. So it's maybe more helpful for the gay, bi, and trans individuals and less information there for the non-binary, asexual, and aromantic individuals. So they are mentioned. Well, the author identified as a gay man and then as a trans woman. So it's great that the trans stuff has been brought in. The rest of it, you know, I mean you could you could write a whole series of books, but, for what it's worth.

Yeah. Yeah, for sure another kind is that the addition that I personally read was clearly written for an American audience as it includes some discussion of things that are happening in America. However, it probably wouldn't be as helpful if you were living somewhere else. And perhaps, and I don't know the answer to this, but perhaps the book might be, it might have two different editions, one for Europe, one for America, I don't know. But that would certainly be a helpful thing.

I think there's a British version.

Great, great. 'Cause I think that would make a difference. Additionally, the book has a lot of voices in it beyond Juno Dawson's. Juno does a great job of putting survey responses in the book to give lots of different perspectives. However, almost all of the survey respondents included in this edition were British or American. So they don't have as much of a sense of experiences of people in other countries, so it's just something to be aware of. I don't think it's necessarily a big con, just something to be aware of.

Yep, and the last con we were thinking of is also not a huge con, but it's about the language of the book, and it's supposed to appeal to teenagers and young adults, but for me I thought it was sometimes trying too hard and wasn't always using language that actual teenagers use at this point. So I mean, it was just kind of funny, but it wasn't always, I think, the most up to date. And I noticed in an Amazon review that one person said that this book was quote, "It reads a lot lot like an older queer trying to be cool and hip for a baby gay."

You know, I read it that way too, but I don't think I, I would never have articulated it, but because I'm old, I just thought it was cute and funny.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I thought it was cute too. But this person had other issues with the book, but basically saying that they thought it was out of touch with modern-day gay issues. And they said the younger generation is already extremely accepting of one another and could easily Google what this book provides. And they also suggested some other books that focus more on trans experiences and gay experiences. So they said, you know, maybe this book isn't as helpful as it was when it was first written in 2014, but I think the three of us still think it's a really important book for students to have access to and a really helpful resource for young adults and adults of any age, so just because it's not perfect doesn't mean that it's not worth reading and should still be available to people in their libraries and high schools if they want to find out this information.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine the outcry if the kids wrote the book that they think is up to date at the moment?

Oh yes, it would be something. It would be something and I have to just say, you know, this is the challenge of anything being written and published is that, you know, it's almost already outdated by the time in terms of language, in terms of colloquialisms, by the time it hits the bookstore shelves. But on the other hand, on the other hand, what I think is so important about this book, remaining in public libraries in the YA section, is that there are people who live in areas where they don't have internet for one reason or another, either because they're trying to protect themselves from all the vile information on the internet or, and I say vile in air quotes, or because children are locked down because parents don't want them to find out any information. But if they take them to the library, which, you know, family families tend to do that, they can still find it in the library, this book in the library, and get at least some good information, even if the language is a little outdated.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. All right. Well, I'm looking forward to discussing the book in more detail in our next episode.

I agree. Me too. But for now. All right. Well, thanks for joining us. We hope that you will join us next time for a close reading of *This Book Is Gay*. It will be a little bit of a different conversation than our usual discussions of fiction books, because, you know, how do you discuss characters and themes in a nonfiction book? But for fun, join us. If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod. If you're enjoying this podcast, and we certainly hope that you are, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your podcasts. And please leave us that five star rating, which we crave, which helps other people to find us. And thank you again to all of our team. Thanks to Chris for creating the music, to Heather for running our Twitter page up until now, even though we as we announced in the beginning are going to discontinue that. And again, thank you to Lizzie for helping us to start the Rogue Librarians and for doing our audio editing for a full year and for getting Dorothy up to

speed on the audio editing. And finally, thank you to all of our patrons who have been supporting us financially and being patient with us during this transition time. We could not have done this podcast without any of them. And thank you to you, our listeners, for reading with us because books are meant to be read. Bye.