

**Rogue Librarians, Episode 15**  
**The Librarian of Basra (Part 1: Why It's Banned)**

Welcome to the 15th episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

So before we start our episode today, we'd like to share something personal um and keep it fun. So, uh Alanna, I'm going to go to you first. Um I'm thinking that it might be fun for each of us to share a favorite thing about spring.

Ok. Sounds good. Um I love spring. It's my favorite season. And the thing that makes me happiest is all of the flowering trees. And uh I live in an area with a lot of beautiful trees this time of year and right now the red buds are blooming and it makes me very happy. What about you, Dorothy?

Well, hands down, it is the cherry trees in my yard. So I share the love of the blooming trees, but these trees just fill my heart with joy. They are not the hanging kind, but, um, the ones that bloom a little bit later than the DC ones, um, and they are just completely covered. You know, they're the really lush looking ones and I just go lay on the ground and stare at them all day. That and my crop with current crop of dandelions that's going in the yard.

Dandelions are actually really good for our pollinators. So, just gonna throw that in my yard. Yay. So for me, um it, my favorite thing about spring is the longer days. Um I just, I am not a winter fan. I don't like uh darkness and it's really been great to wake up in the morning with the sun and also to have sun still when I get out of work at the end of the day, so...

Speak for yourself. I'm still waking up in the dark.

So sorry, hang in there, it'll be changing. Um Yeah, it just depends on where you are in this grand country of ours. So, um All right. Well, I think we are ready to move on to our first segment. Um, before we get into discussing the book that we are going to discuss today, we wanted to share some updates on banned book legislation, um particularly because we did a

special episode on book banning legislation. And um we just wanted to fill folks in on what has been changing. So, um since our bonus episode was released in February, on March 22nd, 2023 the ALA, which is the American Library Association, released data documenting the record number of attempted book bans in 2022. According to the ALA, 2571 unique titles were targeted for censorship which is a 38% increase from the 1,858 unique titles targeted for censorship in 2021. Um And if you remember in 2021 that number was the most ever.

Yeah, that was my question. Wasn't that itself breaking records?

Yeah, so we've had a 38% increase in the wrong direction help. Um Of those titles, the vast majority were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color. Of the reported book challenges, 58% targeted books and materials in school libraries, classroom libraries or school curricula. 41% of book challenges targeted materials in public libraries. Of the overall number of books challenged, 90% were part of attempts to censor multiple titles and of the books challenged. 40% were in cases involving 100 or more books. The ALA will release the list of the top 10 most challenged books of 2022 on April 24th. So stay tuned for that. I'm sure we will be talking about that in a future episode.

I'm not sure when this one's gonna be up so it may already be out and available for you by the time this airs.

That is true.

Uh Some states are still working to pass book banning legislation, for example, um North Dakota of March 29th, as of March 29th, there was a bill targeting sexual content in material in public libraries nearing final passage. At the federal level, on March 24th, the US House of Representatives passed what they call the parents' bill of rights. Uh The GOP claims this bill quote will protect public school students by requiring schools to make classroom curricula publicly available and provide parents with a list of reading materials in school libraries that seems like a long long list. Uh The National Education Association noted that the legislation, which the Democratic-led Senate is not expected to take up, offers solutions to a number of problems that don't widely exist and promotes a toxic vision of parental engagement in schools. And quote, Congressman Castro's website claims that the bill is quote part of the GOP's nationwide campaign to censor the education system, rewrite history, ban books and attack

minority communities. The bill would create unnecessary and burdensome reporting requirements on schools, divert essential resources and personnel away from uh meeting families real needs, open the door to dictate what students can and cannot read or learn. So, uh echoing a lot of the concerns that we talk about here.

Mhm. Yeah, for sure. So there is still a lot of bad news out there in terms of attempts to ban books. But we also wanted to share a little good news. Lizzie, our audio editor, mentioned to us that a federal judge ordered Llano County, Texas to return all books removed from libraries due to their content or viewpoint. Library patrons successfully argued that quote, content based restrictions unquote were unconstitutional. The judge also prohibited officials from removing more books while the lawsuit is pending, and we will see what happens with that case, and we'll see if similar cases come up in other states.

I would love to see, I guess I could probably do a Google search or something. But what, where do the rights of the students come in here is we've heard a lot of talk about parental rights. Uh and I, I know that uh students are allowed First Amendment rights and I'm not sure how freedom to choose their own reading material fits into that.

That'd be worth looking at. Yeah, it's a great question. I, I assume it is part of their rights but um uh we should definitely look into it more.

Yeah, because I was thinking of, you know, some of the like movie stars and um, pop stars that have become emancipated from parents that, you know, tried to manage or take their money or, um, you know, so, I mean, there are definite, there's a definite precedent of minors having rights. Exactly. Um, over and above what their parents are trying to do, especially if what their parents are trying to do to them or for them is, um, inevitably harming the minor, if only we could get somebody to understand that. Uh, this is in response to a thing that I heard about at school system who's got budget crunches and is thinking of just eliminating the libraries. And I thought to myself that is how kids learn to read. They should have a right to have access to reading material. I mean, at some point, you know, any reading material, but kids aren't going to learn to read if they can't, you know, they don't have access to books and not everybody does.

Hm. Well, that's for sure. And especially, you know, my experience with students is that they want to choose their own reading material. They don't want someone to tell them what they

must read. And, you know, if you do away with libraries and it's always teachers saying, ok, we're going to read this book, um, that, that completely takes away student choice. And, um, I think we're going to have a much bigger problem in terms of um literacy in our country.

Today, we will be discussing *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* by Jeannette Winter. This book is different from others we have discussed. First, it's a picture book, and, second, it never made the top 10 list of banned books. According to the ALA, it was the 96th most challenged or banned book from 2010 to 2019. We thought it was worth drawing attention to it because many books are challenged in only certain schools and libraries. And this one was banned for different reasons from the others we have discussed so far. First published in 2005, this book is based on the true story of the experiences of Alia Muhammed Baker during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by a coalition of American, British, and other forces. It won an ALA Notable Children's Book Award in 2006. A portion of the proceeds from the book sales were donated to a fund administered by the ALA to help rebuild the collection of Basra's central library. This book has been recommended for different age groups by different websites. Amazon says ages 4 to 7, I saw others say 5 to 8 or even 8 to 12. So Dorothy, would you mind giving us a summary?

I would love to. Uh So this book is based on a story that was first reported in the *New York Times*. Uh The story of an Iraqi librarian who with friends and neighbors and no help from the government moved books from the library after the start of the Iraq war. And uh you know, when, when the planes started bombing. Um according to the, the book there were government people working out of the library at that point. Uh So, you know, the librarian wondered, you know, could they be a target and was worried about the books? So I took it upon herself to get them moved and, uh, some of the neighbors nearby helped, helped her out.

Great. Thank you. Well, let's talk about why it's been banned. *The Librarian of Basra* has been challenged for being un-American, promoting a religion besides Christianity, some people claimed it was promoting the Koran and praying to Mohammed, and being too violent for young children. Another book by Jeanette Winter called *Nasreen's Secret School* takes place in Afghanistan and has been challenged for similar reasons.

So I just wanna unpack that a little bit and think about really why it's being banned. Um So for being un-American. Um First of all, I have not heard that language in quite some time which is

concerning it's very McCarthy era phrase, right? Um Well, in other words, are we required to only have, you know, pro America books on the shelves in our libraries. I mean, I think that that's problematic to start with, but that said when you read the, but there's not a lot, if any mention of America, there's no mention of you don't even know what this war is or it involves America at all. So, yeah, so I think that that is a pretty big stretch and I think it was not banned, but was challenged. So I don't believe that it was actually taken off the shelves. Um Also promoting a religion besides Christianity. I mean, the definition of promoting is fast and loose here because the characters, you know, are, are not Christians. But again, there's no like preaching about the religion at all other than that, that opening close, which we'll get to.

Um No, not really. There's no, and the only giveaway that, that folks might be, um, Muslim is that their attire in the pictures is different than what, what we would wear in. But, but that's also very culturally appropriate to the part of the world in which folks live. I mean, anyone who lives in the Middle East, um, or I shouldn't, not, I don't mean to overgeneralize but, but anyone who's been to the Middle East sees a majority of people wearing clothing that is much more similar to what we're seeing in this book. So, I mean, so it being an American, I feel like that is code for, um, don't, don't make us look bad. Uh, even if you don't say the words. So it's the implication, I think that we were the ones doing the bombing. That's the only thing I can think that would make it an American, right? If you know anything about the war.

Exactly. Um, so, yeah. Um, you know, where, where I, on a panel looking at the merits of this challenge. I don't think that that's what I, you know, that I would agree with them. Um, what I find the most interesting is that it's, um, I'm sorry, Marian. And I'll, I'll cede the floor in a sec. Uh, not only that it's, um, people of color, uh, but interesting that it is saving library books and in general, maybe that's a message that people who want to ban library books don't want out in the world. That's a conjecture on my part. What were you gonna say, Marian?

Well, that's, that's really interesting. I, I was simply going to say that it's very unclear unless you read, you know, the author's note, it's a very unclear whom, who is, who is at war with whom in this book. Um, but also it's very clear that the librarian in this story goes to the governor, I believe, and asks for permission to rescue the books from the building and to protect them somewhere in a bomb shelter or whatever. And I mean, she doesn't say specifically, but so if anyone is to look bad in this story, it's, it's their own government who is making the decision not to save the books, um, or not to do anything, you know, um, to protect the books in the event

that something should happen. And, you know, sadly in the Middle East, it's happened very frequently recently or when I say recently, I would say in the last 50, 60 years that antiquities have been destroyed through wars and, you know, most of those wars are civil wars within the same country having to do with religious differences. And at this point I'm thinking of Afghanistan and Syria, you know, Syria. Yeah, there have been so many precious antiquities that represent, um, cultures that have been destroyed. And what's so sad about that is cultures are cultures, um, because of their art and literature. And, um, and so if those things are destroyed, you know, we talked about it when we were talking about um mouse one and two that if you destroy the literature and art of a culture, it's the first way that you start to kill off a culture. Um So it, it just is an interesting concept that it's, you know, as, again, it's, it's in my mind, it never was meant to be anti-American. I think it was simply meant to be some people value books and some people don't and some people value culture and some people.

Yeah. Well, and then what we have not discussed yet is the idea of it being too violent for young Children. And um certainly they talk about bombings and there's fire in a lot of the images. Um I, I don't feel like it really presents it as particularly violent. I know that uh I looked up a little bit about the third grade curriculum and the third grade was one of the specific uh challenges uh to take it out of a third grade curriculum and, uh, they're learning about world history in the third grade. I can't imagine that is without, without mention of wars of any kind. So, um, so that's my question, what is the age and we looked at there they have diff different sources show different age ranges as appropriate.

Right. I, I think by, I, I'm actually surprised that this was part of a third grade curriculum because it seems too simple, I would say for third graders in terms of the, the content of the book. But, um, you, you know, I guess if you wanted to expose kids to other cultures in a quick way, this could be a good way to do that. But, um, I, I would see more like kindergartners and first and maybe second graders reading this book rather than third graders and older.

Yeah. According to Amazon, it says 4 to 7, right? I say 5 to 8, I could see bringing this up into higher levels depending on what you're trying to teach. Um, certainly the idea of one person making a difference, you know, that that could be taught all the way up through high school. I agree.

And I also think just the value of antiquities and why, why we archive and value antiquities? What is it that they teach us about history? Um I think that could be, you know, a loftier discussion for older Children. Let's, let's go into our historical context for *The Librarian of Basra*. So um we thought we should share some more information about the real librarian behind the story who died in 2021. The following information is from a news article by Gilgamesh Nabeel in Al-Fanar Media. And this is a quote. "After more than three decades of dedication to books and libraries, Alia Muhammad Baqer [written Baker in the book], Basra's famed librarian, died on August 13, 2021 of complications from Covid-19. She was 69. Baqer, who was the chief librarian of Basra's Central Library, saved an estimated 30,000 books from destruction during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by a coalition of U.S., British and other forces. That was a turning point in Baqer's life... Haunted by stories of the horrors of libraries' destruction when the Mongols sacked Baghdad in A.D. 1258, Baqer fearfully watched the imminent danger of the 2003 war threatening her library and seaport city in southern Iraq... As British troops occupied the oil-rich city on April 6, government buildings were evacuated, street fighting erupted, and the library's furnishings were looted. Baqer persuaded the owner of a nearby restaurant, local residents, and some neighbors to smuggle the remaining books into the dining room of the restaurant.

For nine days, Baqer and her friends rescued 70 percent of the library's collection: 30,000 English and Arabic books, a Spanish-language Koran, and a rare 700-year-old biography of Prophet Mohammed. However, the library was set on fire the next day. Many books were lost and Baqer suffered a stroke... In 2004, the library was rebuilt and Baqer was reinstated as chief librarian... "Nothing but illness and retirement prevented her from keeping her life's passion," Hashem said. "Baqer inspired many men and women alike." Baqer's bravery was first highlighted in a New York Times story. Then she became the heroine of two graphic comics for children: "The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq" by Jeanette Winter (2005), and "Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq" by Mark Alan Stamaty (2010). While her story became a source of inspiration to children in the United States and Europe, few Iraqi children might have heard of her courage."

We thought we would also provide a little more context about the war in Iraq which began 20 years ago, which I found really hard to believe all of a sudden, I was like, wait 2003, we're in 2023 now. It's hard to believe. So the war began on March 20, 2003 after President George W. Bush vowed to destroy Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction and end Saddam Hussein's rule.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “When WMD intelligence proved illusory and a violent insurgency arose, the war lost public support. Saddam [Hussein] was captured, tried, and hanged and democratic elections were held. In the years since, there have been over 4,700 U.S. and allied troop deaths, and more than one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed.” There was also photographic evidence of the torture and humiliation of detainees in the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison.

Hm. All right. Oh, I have to bring that back up into my memory. All right. So I, I found it. Oh, sorry. No, no, you go ahead.

I was just going to say, I found it interesting that, um, you know, there were a couple of news articles since we just passed March 20th 2023. I did notice a couple of news articles talking about the war in Iraq, but I was surprised there wasn't more given that this was the 20th anniversary of the war's start. And I think, um, like, maybe people don't want to think about all of the poor decisions that were made at this point. But, uh, I just thought that there would be more of a discussion of the war or more of a reckoning at this point. But were the two of you surprised by that?

Uh I've noticed a little bit being said at mostly around how they turned out not to be weapons of mass destruction and, you know, why those decisions were made. Uh, but I'm not too surprised because I feel like as, as divided as the country is, it's hard to recon anything, you know, to reconcile anything that had two sides to it.

Yeah, I would tend to agree with that, Dorothy.

Um, that was kind of my take on it too, which was nobody wants to talk about this.

We have too much going on already that's dividing us.

Well, right. And, you know, some people could say, well, it was a mistake to invade. Um, I think a lot of people but some people thought it was a mistake to end the initial conflict without going all the way to, um, you know, to go after Saddam Hussein who invaded Kuwait and in 1990. So, I mean, was it 1990? Yeah, I mean, so there, there have been a lot of, you know, hindsight kind of questions revolving around what it was that, you know, what we should have done as a

country. Um, you know, you do the best you can with the intelligence that you have at the time. Um, but yeah, no one, no one wants to say, oops, we shouldn't have done that. And so, yeah, they're not going to talk about it.

I disagree. A lot of people want to say, oops, we shouldn't have done that, but it tends to fall along party lines.

Ok. Yes, I agree with you, Dorothy. I agree with you. I, I guess I was thinking in terms of, um, some of the louder, um, the louder members of particular parties certainly don't want to hear this, but a lot of, a lot of antiwar folks, you know, certainly I have a lot to say about it and, you know. Yes. So, I, yes, I agree with that.

We were gonna talk about the pros and cons uh briefly before uh our next, next week's discussion of the book. Uh So, uh the prose, it is beautiful as are so many picture books with colorful illustrations, very clear uh illustrations. Um And, you know, with her, they show her home containing all the books and the, the restaurant next door and just lovely pictures and the text is very, very simple. Uh Did you guys want to chime in on any of these?

Well, I just want to say that if you've looked at other books by this particular author, illustrator, um they're all done in a, in a somewhat similar way and they're all gorgeous. So this is sort of a, a signature kind of a look as many other illustrators do have that. I mean, I, I think of Jan Brett, um there's always a particular look to those Eric Carl. Um you know, you can, you can go on. But, um, so I almost when I look at these pictures, I look at them almost as like a framed, a framed picture. They're, they're very framed in, in the book and I find that really interesting um that you could just talk about the illustrations and we shall.

Yeah, that's, that's very true. And I, I loved the illustrations too and one thing I especially liked was uh the facial expressions of the characters. They are just, it's very clear what they're feeling without reading the text. And um I also like the Dorothy already mentioned how colorful it is, but I like the patterns, it feels like um some of them feel a little like collages or they're, the people's clothes are very colorful or have um certain patterns on them. So I, I think it is, it is a very distinctive style and one that I really like too.

I agree the, the story itself is very moving. Um I, I love how it shows people working together to save something they love. I mean, they make very little of the fact that the government is not willing to help. It's simply stated and we move on and uh I just love this idea that, uh you know, uh as the, the theme that Jeanette Winter was trying to get across, which was one person could make a difference. Uh But I also loved how, you know, there were people working together with her.

I agree, Dorothy. And I also, um I really like the humanity that it shows you know that the, the illustrations just very much show how human everyone is and, you know, regardless of your culture or your religion or your, um, political beliefs, if you're in a country that is being targeted with war type activity, um, be it civil or international, um, you know, not everyone in the country is for a war. And, um, certainly, you know, the, the residents are very affected and no one asks them per se and, you know, their lives are, are terrified, are terrifying. You know, they're, they're living through a very, very scary reality and, you know, with no sure ending. Um, so, you know, I, I, I see the humanity very much in the way folks are reacting and, um, in the questions that they were asking in the library.

Yeah, I agree, Marian. I also really liked the epigraph, which Dorothy mentioned earlier. Um, but this epigraph is quoting Baker from the *New York Times* article in 2003. And she said in the Koran, the first thing God said to Mohammad was read and the picture shows her reading the Koran. So I thought that was a really powerful way to start the story. And it's the only time the Koran is mentioned, it's the only time you see the Koran. But it, um it brings us into the story, it tells us why reading is so important to her, I think. And, um, it, it immediately draws us in and helps us understand one of the main themes in the story. So one potential con that I was thinking about is we find out at the beginning of the story that this is set in Iraq and Winter, the author, describes it as sand-swept and my reaction to reading it was well, isn't there so much more to know about Iraq than the fact that it's sand-swept? I think there's so much more we could learn about the culture and the history. And I get that this is a picture book and it's meant to be short. But I thought, well, what about a few more lines about some of the really great things about Iraq or things that a kid might be interested in? Because I could imagine for some Americans, some American kids that this is their first exposure to a book about Iraq. So I personally would want to give them a little more information about it. But what do you, the two of you think?

Do you have thoughts, Marian? Well, I, I think um I think a picture book, it's very pic the pictures tell the story more so than the words. So I do think that the pictures are very um rich with images that one could study further. Um You know, certainly, for example, the floor, the tile floor that's in the library has a very um to me stands out as you know, something that would look different. Um the attire of the, the patrons and the the community residents, um the architecture of the buildings, the fact that um you always see palm trees. Um There are subtle touches like the nighttime picture with the crescent moon which um the crescent moon is typically part of Middle Eastern flags. Um You know, the, the stern look of the, of the soldier, which, you know, is not necessarily any different. I don't know, I, I guess I just feel like with the colors and the architecture and you can see, you know, like it looks like there's a mosque in one of the pictures. Um I don't know, I feel like you're right. It doesn't say words that describe Iraq, but I think it definitely shows through the pictures that there is, you know, there is a different look to this country and I think the way I look at it um maybe because, you know, like both of you, but I, I taught elementary school. And so, um and you know, I feel like it's a jumping off point to say, hey, you know, what did you notice in these pictures? What do you think these pictures show us about Iraq? And what more do you want to learn? Hey, let's go learn some things. Let's go look up some things.

Nice. I just think that the more words about Iraq that would be put in, but I don't feel like this story is meant to be about Iraq. I think it's meant to be about this woman's bravery. Mhm. So, uh maybe it was a choice to, you know, to not try to, you know, at what point have you given enough information, I guess is the question? I do love the phrase sand-swept, though. It's quite lovely. Um We talked also about how there's no context given for the war as a con uh there. And I am once again, um wondering, you know, I feel like it was a choice, um, and maybe more appropriate for young readers to leave it unsaid what this war is about or who's fighting in it. Yeah, because just to keep away from being more political, ironically. Right. Right. Um, you don't have to be before or against the war to understand that this war is negatively affecting people in this town and, um, will negatively affect the library.

Right. And in terms of the age appropriateness, um, there are several pictures as we said that have fire in them and there's, uh, a couple of illustrations that show planes dropping bombs from far away too. So you just see planes in the sky. And so I can imagine for a really young child that, that might be scary. And so parents should use their judgment when to introduce a book like this to their child. But, um, there is no other violence portrayed. It's, you just see some fires

and some guns because some of the soldiers are, you see soldiers carrying guns but you don't see soldiers shooting guns, um, I think more than anything what this book shows is just how valuable books are. Um, I think that's kind of, the whole story is just that books have to be preserved because this is how we learn and, um, this is how we learn about different cultures and different perspectives and, and maybe with more people reading books, we would have fewer wars. I almost feel like, um you know, that that's kind of a, an underlying theme here too.

Well, I look forward to getting into that in our next episode and we get to discuss this in more detail. I would agree with that. Mhm. Um Are we, does anyone else have any thoughts on uh on the cons potential cons here?

No, no, I'm good. I think, I think um I mean, in my mind it's a little bit of a stretch to find a lot of cons because I feel like it's just a really beautiful book. Um And the pros in my mind certainly outweigh the cons. But um but we will discuss it in more detail in the next segment.

So we ask you to please join us next time as we do a close reading of the book's characters, themes and significance. If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod. Or on Twitter @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. Additionally, please consider supporting us on Patreon at [patreon.com/roguelibrarians](http://patreon.com/roguelibrarians). You can hear our book recommendations and other bonus audio content, and we will give you personalized book recommendations and other great perks. Thank you to Chris, as always, for creating the beautiful music and to Lizzie for doing all the audio editing. We couldn't have done this podcast without them. And finally, thanks to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read. Bye!