

Banned and Challenged: Four Book Reviews

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Reviews with rationales for four challenged trade books that deserve a place in our libraries, classrooms, and in the hands of our students: New Kid by Jerry Craft, Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison, Attack of the Black Rectangles by Amy Sarig King, and You Can't Say That! an anthology edited by Leonard S. Marcus.

Literature for young adults has long been the target of censors, with YAL classics *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier and *Forever* by Judy Blume being on the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom list of the 10 most frequently challenged books of 1990-1999 (ALA, 2013). While the ALA only started tracking book challenges in 1990, books such as Blume's were frequently under fire from the time they were published (Gross, 2023). However, recent years have seen an uptick in book challenges and bans, with groups like Moms for Liberty going on an organized offensive against books they deem unsuitable. Data from the ALA and PEN America reflects the efforts of these groups and their efforts; the ALA (2023) reports that 1,269 challenges to library books and resources in 2022 "were nearly double that of 2021, reaching the highest number of attempted book bans since ALA began compiling data about censorship in libraries." PEN America (2023) found that "during the first half of the 2022-23 school year... [there were] 1,477 instances of individual books banned, affected 874 unique titles, an increase of 28 percent compared to the prior six months."

Despite the bleak numbers, there is cause for hope. A national poll by the ALA (2022) "shows that seven in 10 voters oppose efforts to remove books from public libraries" and that "three quarters of parents of public school children (74%) express a high degree of confidence in school librarians to make good decisions about which books to make available to children." Given this silent but overwhelming majority, the reviews for this issue focus on books that have been banned and challenged as well as books that allow readers to consider what bans and challenges might mean for them and for the authors of these texts. We hope that these reviews will pique people's interests in these books and in challenged books as well as provide ideas and rationales for why these books belong in libraries, classrooms, and readers' hands.

NEW KID

by Jerry Craft

(Published in 2019 by HarperCollins)

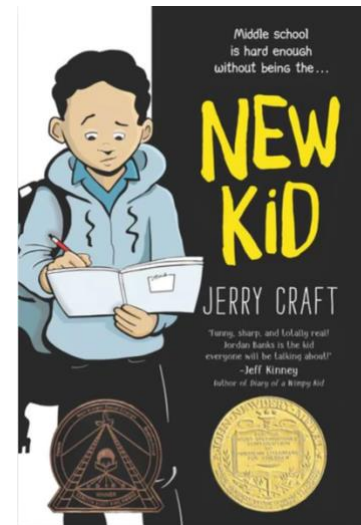
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New Kid, the first graphic novel to win the Newbery Award (2020), visually narrates the experiences of middle school student, Jordan Banks, as he acclimates to life in a new, prestigious school. Starting a new school is never stress-free for young adults, and Jordan's challenges are complicated by his race. Jordan is one of the few students of color attending the selective school. Although Jordan would have preferred to attend art school, his parents recommended he attempt Riverdale, a school known for its superior academics and selective enrollment.

The artwork in *New Kid*, reflects the honest, humorous style and tone of the text. Jordan's daily relationships with other characters, and his gradual adaptation to the school climate reflect experiences that will attract readers. To satirize the anxiety and chaos typical of first days of school, chapter two begins with the heading, "The Annual First-Day-of-School Zombie Apocalypse." Drawings of dazed students with spiral eyes and limp, hanging, arms lope to school in three separate Chicago neighborhoods. Another example is the drawing of Jordan's first school cafeteria experience. At lunch time, Jordan encounters Andy, who is the unfiltered, infamous school jerk. One picture on the cafeteria experience page shows a mini-Andy, wearing an alarmed expression, as he is scraped off a plate into a garbage receptacle.

Jordan's own black and white drawings distinguish his personal perspective from the rest of the narrative. In Chapter One, Jordan's "back to school" drawing shows monster-size books, rulers, and calculators chasing screaming, young adults. In a later chapter, Jordan's drawings parody nicknames, along with the propensity at the school for some Caucasian teachers and students to refer to teachers and students of color by incorrect names. Throughout the novel, Jordan and Drew, another black student, become friends, and jokingly call each other incorrect, black-sounding names, such as "Darius" and "Deandre." The underlying humor reflects the frustration experienced by



students of color in a predominantly white school. However, any student who has felt out of place will be able to connect to the events and characters in this graphic novel.

In some states, books by Black American authors have been pulled from school library shelves for suspected Critical Race Theory indoctrination. Seven states, mostly Republican dominated, have barred teachers from teaching ant-racist content (Bellamy-Walker, 2022). In the case of *New Kid*, public schools in Katy, a Houston, Texas suburb, temporarily removed Craft's books from libraries after four hundred parents accused *New Kid* of promoting Critical Race Theory and Marxism. A visit from Jerry Craft was also cancelled by Katy ISD. Fortunately, several thousand parents who recognized the quality of Craft's storytelling and artwork, countered the four-hundred parent critics, demanding the books be returned to the library. According to the opinions of the majority parent group, public schools must promote cultural sensitivity, and create a safe, supportive environment for all students. Once the community of Katy adjusted to the idea that Craft's books would indeed remain in the school libraries, a Katy bookstore invited Craft to speak. Craft enthusiastically discussed his work, exhibiting a "no hard feelings" attitude toward his earlier school visit cancellation (Goodman, 2022).

Most likely, the local publicity of *New Kid*, served to further promote Kraft's work. However, the book's literary and artistic quality speaks for itself. Along with the Newbery Award, *New Kid* has received the Coretta Scott King award and the Kirkus Prize.

Language arts middle school teachers could share this book with students at the beginning of the school year as a method for alleviating students' anxieties about the new school year. Graphic novels invite reluctant readers to participate because the text is less dense; the artwork enhances students' reading comprehension. Teachers could also integrate comic design and other artwork for classroom activities after reading the book. Scenes from this book would work well with readers theater also. The humor and visual art in *New Kid* may ultimately assist in creating a safe space for discussions about race, culture, and identity. I have required my teacher candidates to read this book in my young adult and children's literature classes since its publication. Hopefully, these teacher candidates will exhibit enthusiasm for *New Kid* with their future students.

LAWN BOY

by Jonathan Evison

(Published in 2022 by Algonquin Books)

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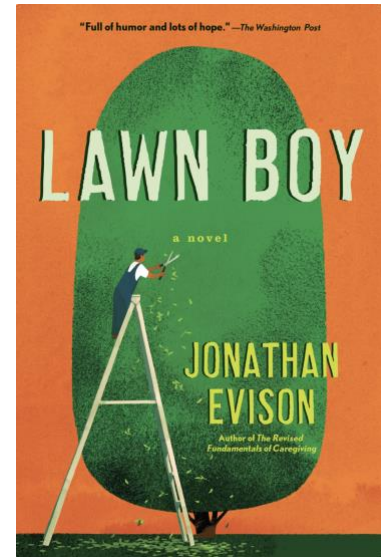
Mike Muñoz is nearly 23 and a talented landscaper, his topiaries elaborate, but he's stuck mowing lawns for low pay with ultra-wealthy white Bainbridge Island clients also expecting his doing their personal tasks. After refusing to clean up after an enormous St. Bernard, he's fired and begins job hunting from his family's trailer, overfull with Nate, his severely cognitively challenged 300-lb brother, exhausted mother, and Freddy, her latest boyfriend who enjoys watching porn while playing guitar and smoking weed.

There's also his best friend Nick, who is always faithful but whose bigoted views are becoming more irritating, and thoughtful librarian Andrew, who recommends books about societal change. Mike's painful self-discovery journey begins with endless failed minimum-wage applications and a few bites, with him working longest for a wily entrepreneur jailed for dicey business practices and Doug, a former classmate with big plans and equally dubious methods.

Mike desperately wants better, but as only knowing daily survival, he has no idea how to make the seemingly insurmountable changes for a different life. His insufficient financial circumstances are seen throughout (Freddy's inept dentistry assist is definitely cringeworthy), and stand in contrast with many readers' experiences, as Mike is unable to simply repair or purchase another item once broken, and he buys only necessities and seldom meals, snacks, or treats.

Still, his widening social circle increases his self-awareness, particularly in his reflection of his childhood sexual experience with Doug, and its meaning. Also evoked is recognition in the importance of believing in himself, the value of living the lifestyle he wants, and the reality that change occurs by working with others, which is particularly important as Mike has long shouldered responsibility alone. These embolden him to declare his sexual identity, create a new work partnership, and envision a hopeful future.

The novel powerfully provokes consideration of America's widening economic, cultural, and class inequalities with Mike's sexuality realization viewed as simply normal. Unfortunately, although



these topics are extremely valuable for class discussion, they are also likely to hinder its use, as both are contentious and currently controversial in schools.

However, readers will champion Mike, portrayed as anyone's friend. His narration is strikingly realistic, doubtless mirroring many students' lives and providing necessary insight to others. Sharp, witty, and often-hilarious dialogue depict his trials and setbacks, revealing his anger while movingly showing his vulnerability and fears.

He pointedly questions what happened to the American Dream, where those like himself who want to work and achieve found respectable, stable jobs. Instead, he's disparaged for being biracial brown and of the working poor, and rather than moving up, he finds his situation ever-worsening, with advancement unattainable for people unless they are white and already of means.

The story is uneven at points. Some events drag, while others speed by, with much occurring quickly before the ending. This results in other plot points and characters such as Nate, who has an exceptionality that is rarely represented in young adult literature, appearing less frequently later in the book. Although Mike's sexuality struggle is conveyed by recalling his long-ago encounter, that scene is continually repeated without corresponding growth or connection to current feelings, which is somewhat confusing and delays his realization and portrayal of an LGBTQ+ male.

His new lawn business is somewhat problematic, dependent upon an unexpected benefactor and him its spokesperson, attracting wealthy whites preferring hiring those not fully Mexican. Nonetheless, he's now able to use this unfortunate reality advantageously.

The novel's subjects and their classroom consideration and discussion are important to all teens, especially Mike's perseverance and determination to succeed and build the life he wants, on his terms. This is perhaps the best version of the American Dream, providing hope and inspiration to readers, and particularly those with similar lifestyles and situations, also wondering if better possibilities are available to them.

ATTACK OF THE BLACK RECTANGLES

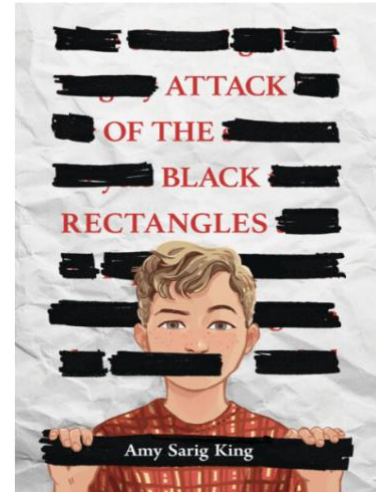
by Amy Sarig King

(Published in 2022 by Scholastic Press)

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“There is an ugly black rectangle over some words”
(King, 2022, p. 33).



Each year the American Library Association (ALA) (2002a) publishes a list of the most challenges books of the year. The ALA tracked 1,597 challenged books in 2021—the highest number of challenged books the ALA has seen in the twenty years it has been keeping records of such challenges (Harris & Alter, 2022). Book challenges and book banning efforts are occurring in many localities around the country - including in the Pennsylvania county which inspired King’s (2022) *Attack of the Black Rectangles*.

King’s (2022) *Attack of the Black Rectangles* presents a case against censorship. This 258-page middle grades text includes the following lines in its closing paragraphs: “What happens next, if we let it happen, is the truth sets us free. Even if it makes us uncomfortable or sad. It’s still better to know the truth that it is to be lied to” (pp. 257-58).

Mac lives with his mom and grandad in a small town in Pennsylvania. His dad comes around on the weekends for dinner - and to work on his spaceship (read: Mac’s granddad’s car) because he thinks he’s an alien. In addition to a complex family dynamic that juxtaposes Mac’s mom’s grace with his dad’s unpredictability (which leads him to eventually rob from their home), the novel introduces readers to a group of students who seek the truth.

When Mac’s sixth-grade teacher Ms. Sett creates literature circles for the class, Mac, Marci, and Denis are all put into the same group and are assigned Jane Yolen’s (2004) *The Devil’s Arithmetic*. As they read this tale of the Holocaust, they come to several black rectangles. When they compare their version to the local bookstore’s unmarked version, they figure out that the rectangles cover up references to breasts. The students’ anger at not being presented the full story results in meetings with their principal, local protests outside of the bookstore, and an eventual school board meeting presentation.

The ever-endearing narrator Mac deals with so much – family matters, book censorship, and his first crush – and it is good for middle grade readers to see a character struggle with being honest with his feelings. Black rectangles, then, become more than just the literal markings on a text but rather those curtains over emotions. The central thesis of the book is, of course, that the truth, what is written on the pages or in one’s heart, must endure.

Pedagogical opportunities around *Attack of the Black Rectangles* (King, 2022) abound. Pairing this text with Yolen’s (2004) *The Devil’s Arithmetic* will engage students in discussions around what “black rectangles” do to a book’s meaning. Investigations into the ALA’s (2022a) top 10 list and the ALA’s (2022b) several [sharable graphics](#) may contribute to such discussions. Complementing these discussions with media stories about book banning, such as Harris and Alter’s (2022) *New York Times* piece titled “Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S.” or Ulin’s (2002) *Los Angeles Times* op-ed “Why Inappropriate Books are the Best Kind” may be enriching.

Creating literature circles around recent middle grades novels that center around book bans or censorship can also be a great idea. In addition to King’s (2022) *Attack of the Black Rectangles*, students may choose from the following titles: Varnes’s (2019) *Property of the Rebel Librarian*, Gratz’s (2017) *Ban this Book*, and Levithan’s (2022) *Answers in the Pages*. On a more a more local level, inviting school or public librarians to the classroom to discuss the process of challenging a particular title would give students insight into that process as well. Ultimately, individual readers will decide where they stand in terms of the black rectangles’ attack!

‘YOU CAN’T SAY THAT!’

Edited by Leonard S. Marcus

(Published in 2021 by Candlewick)

ANITA DUBROC

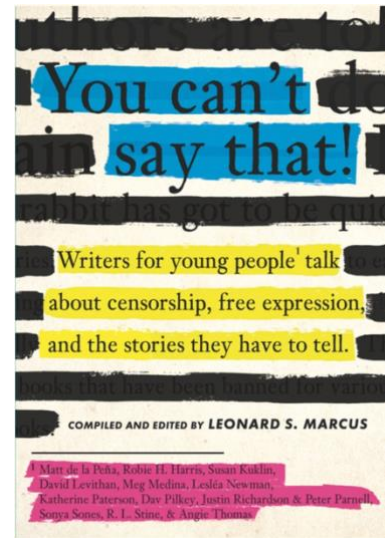
EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

‘You Can’t Say That!’: Writers for Young People Talk About Censorship, Free Expression, and the Stories They Have to Tell

explores concepts of the silencing of children’s, middle grade, and young adult literature. Leonard S. Marcus interviews thirteen

authors who write for young readers, including Matt de la Peña, David Levithan, R.L. Stine, and Angie Thomas, all of whom have faced book banning and pushback from stakeholders in schools and communities. Their works take on a variety of issues experienced by young people including sexuality, bodily changes, and racism. The editor begins this collection of interviews with a short prologue explaining freedom of speech and the beginnings of book bans in the United States starting at the republic’s founding up to the present day.

Marcus states, “Book challengers often justify their actions in the name of protecting children from what they consider to be premature exposure to information or knowledge of one kind or another” (p. xviii). His interviews show that authors are committed to sharing the truth with their readers about ideas, people, and conflicts that they deal with in daily life, in and out of school. There are too many great quotes to share in this short review. Matt de la Peña reveals in his interview that he used his life and personal experiences as the basis for his writing, especially as he was a first-generation college student from a working-class family. Robie H. Harris author of *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health*, explains, “My mantra is if it’s in the best interest of the child, it’s going into the book” (p. 32). These writers truly care about the young people and families who read their works, and they want young people to experience themselves and each other through the pages. Susan Kulkin whose book *Beyond Magenta* has been subject to numerous challenges, comments, “We need to know one another. We need to read one another” (p. 60). The authors seek to help young readers understand each other and the world around them through their writings.



The book was a fascinating look into authors' writing process, their influences, and their feelings around book banning. The writers often look to professional organizations such as the American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom, PEN America, and the National Coalition Against Censorship, when their works are challenged. *We Need Diverse Books* is also frequently mentioned as a resource.

As this is a nonfiction work, the book would be a great dive to help students understand interviews, biography, and author's craft and motivation. The book is perfect for author studies before getting into a novel study, especially if reading one of the authors interviewed. It would be an awesome book to read a few interviews during Banned Book Week. Marcus includes source notes and a list of selected reading, and these resources are worth pursuing by both teachers and students. I think the book would help anyone understand the emotions and stances surrounding book banning, particularly from an author's point of view. Students could contrast the book banners' intentions and the author's reaction. The authors are fierce defenders of bringing the truth to their readers, despite their youth. The writers genuinely want young readers to enjoy their books, the joy of reading, and the revelations that emerge from literary adventures.

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