

“Focus Always on the Child.”

A Conversation with Pat Scales

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Pat Scales, the former chair of the American Library Association’s Intellectual Free Committee and freedom to read expert, shares her insights on the uptick of book challenges and bans. She also provides ideas on how educators and librarians can address and combat censorship in a proactive way.

Children’s and young adult books have long been the target of book challenges, with books like Raina Telgemeier’s *Drama*, Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson’s *And Tango Makes Three*, and John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* often making the American Library Association’s (ALA) top-10 list of most challenged books for the year. However, the threat of challenges has recently become even more dire. The ALA reported that 2022 saw the highest number of book challenges that the organization had seen since it started tracking the data, with 2,571 individual book challenges or removals. This is further corroborated with research by freedom of expression organization PEN America, which found that within a six-month period (July 2022 to December 2022), there had been 1,477 ban cases. While national surveys have found that a large majority of voters (ALANews, 2022) and Americans in general (Backus and Salvanto, 2022) oppose book bans, the minority who seek to challenge books that address issues of race, gender and sexuality, and other so-called controversial topics are vocal, and some have resorted to vitriol and personal attacks on teachers and librarians who want to include these books in their classroom, school, and public libraries.

Fortunately for those who believe in the freedom to read, Pat R. Scales is on their side. As a school librarian, her Communicate through Literature program provided parents and guardians with ways of talking to their children about challenging topics by using children’s and young adult literature. This led her to her work as an advocate for the freedom to read, and she has served as the chair of the American Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee and currently is on the Board of Advisors of the National Coalition against Censorship. As a passionate defender of

intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights, her expertise has been sought after by libraries, schools, and publishers. Despite her busy schedule, she was able to find the time to talk to *Study & Scrutiny* editor, Terri Suico, in the summer of 2022 about her past and current work as well as the current rise of book challenges.

Terri Suico (TS): Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. When we were setting up the interview, you said that you were traveling a lot this spring regarding censorship and challenges.

Pat Scales (PS): Yes. I was at state conferences. One was in Texas, and you probably know the saga with Texas. The professionals are drowning out there. They feel threatened, they are being threatened. One even told me that her child who plays Little League had been harassed on the Little League field by someone who is raising issues with books with all the politicians. They worry about harm, that's how bad it's gotten out there. They invited me to come and speak at the state conference, and the room was standing room only because that's how much they need help.

The other place I went to was the New Jersey Library Association, and they too have had a good many problems. But there's hardly a state that hasn't had problems right now. I keep up with all of the issues being raised, and it's all over the nation. You would be surprised by some of the states, because we thought they were a little more progressive, but they're not, and it all stems from politicians at this point.

TS: It has been really scary. I was just reading about a children's librarian who was getting threats. She ended up quitting her job because she didn't feel safe doing it anymore.

PS: I ran into a couple of people in Texas that were retirement age but had not planned to retire yet, they were on the young end, but they had decided to leave. They said it's not worth it. When they went to library school, this is not what they signed up for. And it's happening to teachers as well.

TS: How did you become interested in the freedom to read and issues of book challenges and bans, particularly when it comes to children's and young adult literature?

PS: It started early in my career from a proactive way. I had developed a program for parents called Communicate Through Literature, where I basically was teaching them children's and young adult

literature, how to talk to their kids about books, and how they could make a connection through books at a time in a child's life -- I was at a middle school at the time -- when they tend to pull away from the parents, how to have good conversation through books.

I realized early on that I needed to have topics so that they would have some focus in their reading. I started doing topics that were of interest to adolescents, so I addressed sex and sexuality. Of course, bullying is a big issue, and it always has been and always will be probably in schools. We did all kinds of topics, including relationships with parents, relationships with friends, sibling rivalry, the kinds of topics that kids and adolescents deal with.

I never had a book challenged. There were some, not necessarily in that program, who might have a question here and there, but they never challenged it. They just said, "I'm not sure I want my child to read that," and I said, "That's fine." In the Communicate Through Literature program, if that came up, another parent would say, "Well, I want mine to read it." I just sat back and let it happen.

I was at an ALA conference, and Mary K. Chelton and Dorothy Broderick had, at that point, started *Voice of Youth Advocates*. I was sharing the program with her when we were sitting together, and she asked me if I would write an article to them about the program. I did, and Judy Blume found it, saw it, and wrote to me and asked me if she could use that as a prototype. At that time, she was doing The Kids Fund, and she thought it was a proactive way of dealing with censorship.

Then I was contacted by Judy Krug at the Office of Intellectual Freedom in Chicago, and she said this was a good example of how we needed to promote intellectual freedom. Judy Blume and I wound up on the *Today Show* together, and the show came and filmed with the parents. The rest of the work I do has just been growing over the years, but it all started with a proactive way, and I still promote proactive ways to dealing with censorship. I did that both in Texas and New Jersey, promoted proactivity, even though I said yes, we have to react. And trust me, we are reacting, I'm reacting on their behalf through newspaper articles. We do have to react, but we can develop proactive ways.

Also, I always taught kids the First Amendment and their free speech rights. I think if we do all that, it's not going to fight the politicians necessarily, but it will put us in a good place with parents and with students. This way you get the students involved with the freedom to read, and they too will begin to fight against censorship. I think that's what we need to focus on. We are fighting it in every way we know, but we also need to develop proactive ways in whatever we do in the classroom. As

I've said, every time we listen to a child's opinion about anything, we're practicing the principles of intellectual freedom. It can start in kindergarten and first grade. If a child says, "I didn't like that book," instead of saying, "You have to finish it," just say, "Tell me what you don't like about it." That is promoting intellectual freedom.

It sounds simple, but there are too many teachers and librarians who allow their opinion about a book to interfere with what a child wants to read. Maybe that's the nature of adults, but we've got to shift in the way we see that, because maybe a kid is just not ready for a certain book, and they will reject it. However, you've got to give them permission to reject it, and too often, we as teachers and librarians don't give them that permission.

We need to start early with teaching children about intellectual freedom now. I would say this to teachers, I would say it to librarians. This is not going to fight the politicians, but it will set the stage in your classroom for a positive experience. And I think this is what happened with my Communicate Through Literature program. Even the parents that didn't come or couldn't come knew what we were doing, and they didn't question it because they saw that we were doing some positive things here.

This whole fight is two-pronged in a way, one that we can do through schools, and another is somewhat out of the teachers' and librarians' control with these politicians. I've told teachers and librarians that we cannot control the way politicians vote, but we can control our votes, and that's what we have to remember. If we put these people back in, censorship and book challenges are what we're going to get.

TS: You have been talking about the influence that politicians have had on the recent surge of book challenges and bans. Why do you think they are so invested in it? Has this always been the case, or is there something particular to this moment that is making them more invested?

PS: I think we've always had some problems, and I think we can track this. We had a pretty rough time in the '80s. However, in the '80s we didn't have the Internet to spread information so quickly, so it took it a while to show up in newspapers across the nation. I think that's when the Moral Majority and the far-right movement became so big. That's also when Judy Blume was being challenged the most. They went after everything she wrote, even if it was *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*.

I think, and I've read some articles about this recently, that the Moral Majority did not have that much influence on some elections, but they vowed to keep plugging away at it, and they've been working at it all these years. They are affecting state and local politics and even school boards. I think that's a little bit of how the movement started, and now they've got legs, they're not letting up. These people have no problem harassing others. We've got a really good school board person here -- I'm actually one of his constituents -- who has decided not to run again because he just said the vitriol has gotten so terrible, it's affecting his family, it's affecting everything. That's what they want to do, they whittle away until people give up.

As far as the book censorship, I think that some of these politicians needed a political platform, and they saw a chance to get people to go after books. I don't even think these people actually care about the books. They certainly haven't read them. Matt Krause in Texas has a list of 850 books he wants out of libraries, and I've got the list here because I work with it a lot. Every book on the list is either LGBTQ- or race-related, and he hasn't read any of those books. They did key word searches is all. Then other Republican governors started going after books. I hate to say it, but it tends to be Republicans at this point, like Ron DeSantis in Florida, who went big-time against *All Boys Aren't Blue*. There was Tim Anderson who was running for Congress, but he lost in his primary, thank goodness, in Virginia Beach. He is suing Barnes and Noble over stocking *Gender Queer* because he says it violates the Virginia obscenity laws. A judge just dismissed this case and said the book doesn't violate the obscenity laws. This is a very big win for the free speech community.

If we start suing businesses, what's next? If he won this case, what's next? Are they going to sue Victoria's Secret for carrying some of the underwear they do? He needed a platform, and he thought he would get his name out there, but he did lose.

If we were dealing with individual challenges here and there, we would handle them the way we have traditionally, and we often won those cases. But now we're not dealing with individual challenges; we're dealing with these groups that want 850 books out of the library. It's a hard battle.

TS: In your books, you mentioned that book challenges rarely result in book banning. What are the ripple effects of a book challenge, even if the book ultimately isn't banned?

PS: Because everything does play out on the Internet, I think it can have a ripple effect in communities. But the statement I made was before Texas, before all this started with the politicians, and I think again, that's very different than an individual challenge.

But if you've got an individual challenge by a parent that might really have a legitimate complaint -- and I'm not saying I would necessarily agree with them -- they don't want to have to go through filling out any kind of form or going through the process. I think that if it goes through the normal process and goes through the materials review committee at a school district, then nine times out of ten, we retain the books.

The issue--and we have had this issue for a long time--is that too many school administrators, school boards, and library boards tend to give in to the naysayers who are complaining about a book more than to the people that would be for a book. They want to keep their name out of the news, so they think if they give in to that parent, they won't have to deal with it. It actually grows sometimes when you don't deal with it. If we dealt with it and put it to an end, we may not have any future problems, except for one here and there. You're going to always have some questions.

I think principals, administrators, and superintendents sometimes violate the school district's own policy, and they get away with it unless someone challenges them on it. This is my fear right now. I'm sure you know the Pico case [Island Trees School District v. Pico, which is a Supreme Court case about a school board's removal of library books from junior high and high schools]. We didn't get everything we wanted in Pico, but we got a lot. I think with the Supreme Court that we have now, we could lose Pico if any of these cases ever got that far. I think we're going to lose gay marriage. We already lost the abortion issue. All the things that had made us a little bit more progressive, they're going to overturn, I think. This is my great fear for Pico. I hope none of these cases make it up to the Supreme Court because I just think that we would possibly lose. If we lose Pico, we have no ground to stand on, I mean that has been our precedent case.

In the case of Pico, that school board violated its own policy. I was an expert witness to the *Annie on My Mind* case in Olathe, Kansas, and that superintendent lost that case for removing *Annie on My Mind* from the high school library. It had been on the shelves 10 years, and he just pulled it. He lost the case because they cited Pico as the precedent case. According to the Pico verdict, "You cannot remove a book based on your own personal convictions." The superintendent didn't even pay attention to the school district's mission statement where "we serve all students."

Well, "all" means gay, straight, black, white, brown, whatever, that's what "all" means, and all maturity levels, all intellectual levels. He violated it, and he lost the case.

I was an expert witness in Miami on a book challenge case, and we won the case in federal court. They appealed it, and we lost it in the court of appeals. We're always going to win some and lose some, but if we lose Pico, we're going to be losing them all, I'm afraid.

TS: What do you think makes children's and young adult books particularly vulnerable when it comes to challenges and bans? Is there something that you think is specific to children's and young adult books that makes them really vulnerable to challenges?

PS: One of the things that makes children's and young adult literature so great to me is that we are dealing through that literature with everyday issues that teens and children face. But in so doing, they have become edgier. We've come a long way since *The Outsiders* and *The Contender*, which by the way, in their times were challenged because they were edgy. When you look at writers like Ellen Hopkins who deal with very edgy topics for teens, I think the teens are there, but their parents are not there. Parents tend to remember what they read as children and teens and compare what they remember to the books now. When people start yelling, "We've got to protect teens and kids," the best protection is for them to read about and know about these topics. That was one of the things I covered with my parents, that knowledge is power and reading helps young reader gain knowledge. What they are reading may not be their life and it's not going to make them go and do what they are reading, but it helps them develop empathy for others who may be facing these issues.

Currently, it's topics about LGBTQ issues - and especially books about transgender issues - that are controversial. People don't understand it. They're convinced that if a kid reads [Alex Gino's] *George*, which is now *Melissa*, in elementary school, it'll make them trans. You know, if the tendency is not there, it's not there, but it might make them be kinder to somebody in their class that might be trans.

There's not a topic that any publisher or writer shies away from now, but the public has not caught up with that, especially parents, and some teachers are uncomfortable with it. Not every book is going to be taught in a classroom, but libraries are about choice, and so you don't have to read it if you don't want to. We've become edgier, and to me that's a good thing, but it makes a lot of people very nervous. And I fear, and I think it's happening, that some schools are just not buying some of

these books because they think it'll keep them out of trouble. However, kids have always faced these issues, they just didn't do it publicly, or it wasn't out there for us to know. The literature has caught up with the societal demands, but yet a lot of parents aren't there.

TS: There is this fear about what kids read. Some people seem to believe that kids will automatically adopt an idea they are reading. For some reason, this fear doesn't always extend to what they're watching or what they're listening to, even though there have been movements about that.

PS: I do find it interesting why people question a book, but they don't question the video games that kids are playing or what kids are looking at on their phones at night when they're in bed. I mean if kids are just on TikTok, look what they're probably seeing.

It makes no sense, but maybe it's because they've developed a general mistrust of teachers and what they are and are not teaching in the classroom. The thing that scares me about that is I've had a lot of questions for *School Library Journal* about advanced placement (AP), and I also have a friend that was an AP English teacher. Some people want to control kids at any level, but AP is college credit, and yet they're trying to dumb it down. So are we really educating these kids? Can we call ourselves educating kids when we allow people that do not know curriculum to develop the curriculum?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone, an attorney who is the executive director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom, was telling me what the law says about education in this country. The law says parents have a choice, but their choice is one choice -- they can either choose a public or private education for their child. That's all the choice they have when it comes to schools. But yet, school boards all across the nation are giving in to these parental demands.

Parents are afraid that they may have to engage in a conversation they really do not want to have, which was the basis of my Communicate Through Literature program. And I thought that I could teach them that you can use a book to engage kids in conversation through the main character, and then apply it to their own lives. I wish public libraries did more with developing parent groups on how to talk to your kids about books. We need more programs that help parents know how to address these issues, and then we might get more support.

TS: Something I appreciate about the three books of yours that I've read is that they provide readers' questions and ways at having conversations about these difficult topics and about these books. You certainly don't shy away from both the difficult topics and the controversy surrounding the book, which I think is so important to talk to students about.

PS: Now we have -- and this is really a positive thing -- students across the nation forming their own banned books clubs. I know specifically of one in Pennsylvania and one in Texas, but they're all over. Middle and high school students are starting these. The one in Pennsylvania meets at a bookstore. They're not having to be sanctioned by the school, these kids just did this on their own. We need to promote that more with them and say this is a positive approach, so the kids are standing up for their own rights.

Something like the questions I put in *Books Under Fire* and *Teaching Banned Books* could be used by these book clubs. The problem is that book bans and challenges are such moving targets that we've always got to update the resources. I'm actually working right now with Random House. A lot of the publishers are developing banned book sites. I've written introductory comments for two of the publishers. Random House is putting on their banned books page discussion questions that deal specifically with the challenges but also deal with the book too as a whole, because we don't ever want to lose sight of the book. It shouldn't be just about the challenges. I'm putting that together for them. I've gotten several done and already sent to them, but it will be ongoing. Right now, we're dealing with the most current of the challenges, but we're going to look at their backlist and include some of the backlist. A recent book that has been showing up on the list of banned and challenged books for them is *White Bird* because Holocaust deniers are targeting that book, and so I've already done that one.

Publishers are stepping up trying to address these issues. We just have to not lose sight of what our job is, and that is serving students. Hopefully, we will weather this. We've weathered bad times before, but it does seem worse right now. Part of it is that 24/7 news reports it all. But there have been some positive things. Ali Velshi has the banned book club where he interviews a writer that's been challenged or banned. He had Jacqueline Woodson as his first guest. I discovered it quite by accident, and it's been interesting where they talk about the questions they get about their book and why they've been banned. Jacqueline has weathered a lot. It is *Brown Girl Dreaming* that's big on the list right now for a lot of reasons, such as the race issue and the LGBTQ issue too.

People like Jacqueline and Jason Reynolds are becoming spokespeople on our behalf and on behalf of literature for kids. I think Jason and Jackie do it the right way. And there are some others who have done it the right way: Lois Lowry has, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor has. I think there's a fine line to how a writer needs to respond— they can't lose sight of their book. I greatly appreciate what Jason, Jackie, and some of these people are doing. The other person that's doing a really good job right now is George Johnson with *All Boys Aren't Blue*. I saw him interviewed on MSNBC, and he didn't come out fighting. He came out with a more positive message of, "This is why kids need this book."

TS: What advice do you have for teachers, librarians, authors, readers, and reading advocates during these challenging times?

PS: The advice I have is to find proactive ways to deal with this. Instead of having punitive ways that we deal with this in the classroom or instead of feeling like we've got to notify parents with every book we use, I think we need to find ways of appealing to children and teens. We need to keep teaching the way we know how to teach and just try to block out some of the noise. I know that that's not always easy to do, and it's especially hard if you have an administrator that doesn't support you. I would never ask a teacher or a librarian to do anything that would cause them to be fired. However, it's not as easy to fire people as some people think it might be. They can make your life miserable, that's true, but I don't think it's quite as easy to fire teachers as some people think it is.

One comment I would make is that you never know what they're going to challenge. We can say you have to have permission to read this book, which I'm violently opposed to, but you might have to do this when the school board says you do. However, we can't avoid controversy, we just can't. I think my greatest fear is that teachers are just going to dumb things down. My advice here is please do not dumb down the curriculum just because we're dealing with book challenges. Talk to the kids honestly.

If a child objects to what you're reading in the classroom or a library book, you can give them an alternative novel to read. Of course, parents don't want their kids singled out, but if they choose to challenge, they are singling their children out, and that's not your problem. In the library, I would just say to a kid "Put it back, let's find a book you would like."

I don't know how to have teachers and librarians fight the politicians. We're doing it at the national level. I'm involved with the National Coalition Against Censorship as well as Freedom to Read, and trust me, we are really trying to be on top of this. But I think there's a limit to what a classroom teacher and a school-level librarian can do to fight it. They're busy serving those students every day, so my advice is, continue to serve the students in the best way you know how, and let us do that fight on your behalf.

TS: I think that is excellent advice. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you were thinking, "I really hope that we discuss this"?

PS: I get so many questions through *School Library Journal*, and I'm realizing that school boards and administrators are sometimes breaking their own policies when it comes to book challenges. This is why I advocate proactive ways, like empowering parents to speak up against censorship, because if they see that the school district is not following their own policy, they may call them, and school boards will listen to a parent before they listen to a teacher. The way I framed it in New Jersey and in Texas was to just follow best practices. Best practices will help us in the long run. Focus always on the child, don't ever lose sight of who we're serving, and that will help guide you in best practices. Also, teachers and librarians should be working together so that they can support one another should a challenge happen.

I'll give you an example. I had a sixth-grade student many years ago, and after school one day he came in to get a book. I said, "What have you read lately?" and he said he read *Dreamland Lake* by Richard Peck. And I said, "Did you like it?" and he said, "Well, it's got a bad word in it." I honestly could not think of any kind of language in that book. I said, "Do you want to tell me what it was, because I'm trying to remember, I've read that book." He whispered it to me, and the word was "God damn." When he told me, I did remember it, and I said, "You know what, I think I do remember. Tell me if this is the scene." I related the scene, and it's where the two boys hide from the guy that's following them, and they're in this abandoned park. There's a "Beware, do not cross the bridge" sign because the bridge is condemned. The boys had hidden in the bushes, but the guy who is following them goes across the bridge, and when he does, the bridge collapses, and he falls. As they're watching from the bushes, one of the boys says, "God damn."

I told the student, "When a writer is writing a scene like that, they have to find a way to show shock. Just to say 'he crossed the bridge, and it fell' does not show a lot of shock. But if the two kids that are a little bit responsible because they're hiding from him, and one says, "God damn," that makes you take a look, it's jarring, because it's not all the way through the book. And so Richard Peck did his job to create that within you, that shock within you." He said, "Yes, ma'am, I get it now."

These are the types of conversations we need to be having with kids. We need to be having them as librarians, we need to be having them as teachers, and we need to be having them with parents if it comes up. Unfortunately, we want to shut down. Our tendency is not to be that open, but we need to be open with these kids. This was a prime opportunity because he chose to tell me about the bad word. We need to have these sorts of conversations instead of just saying, "Okay, put it back." I wanted him to understand the power of literature and that the word was used purposely to create this emotion or reaction. I never heard anything out of that; no parent challenged it.

TS: I think that is a great example, and it's a great way of having a respectful conversation with students.

PS: I had another case with a student back when *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* was so big. Her dad was a pediatrician here, and the family was pretty conservative. The kids at the school were going crazy reading that book. I could not keep this book in. I had 10 copies in the library and sold 115 copies in one afternoon at a book fair. As kids would come in asking for it, she would follow them around and say, "My mother won't let me read that book." This had been going on, and finally one day I took her aside—I didn't do it in front of the other kids—and I said, "I understand your mother may not want you to read that book, and that is fine. But Amy's mother wants her to read it, and I'm going to help her find that book. And when I finish, I'll help you find a book for you." She never said another word, and she never followed the kids around anymore after that. I talked to her in a positive way. That's the principle of intellectual freedom. You're saying, "I understand, however, Amy's mother wants her to read it. So let's get a book that you would like, and maybe your mother would like for you."

My advice again is don't be afraid of your students. These parents might be afraid of their kids, but you cannot be afraid of your students. Do what is best to serve them. I felt like, in that situation, I did what was best to serve both sides, and we have to do that.

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