

Rough Podcast Transcript

Note: This is not meant to be an exact transcript of our conversation, particularly as some sentences may have been edited out of the final podcast recording. APA 7th edition references have been added into this document to make it easier for users to explore the works cited in this conversation.

Courtenay: Welcome to Library Lens, where we look at current issues in library and information work through different analytical lenses to help see ourselves, each other, and the world through a prism of vantage points. I'm your host, Courtenay Adams, and I'm recording this from Mohkinstsis, also known as Calgary, located on the traditional territories of Treaty 7 indigenous peoples and the Region 3 Métis Nation of Alberta.

Today we're discussing a recent news story—from just this past August—wherein a small library in Michigan was defunded by the town after refusing to pull the book *Gender Queer* from its shelves. This episode's analytical framework will be critical librarianship. Joining us for this deep dive is resident CritLib specialist, public library employee and current MLIS student at the University of Alberta, Stephanie Jeanes. Welcome, Stephanie!

Stephanie: Hi. Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here having this conversation with you today. And I'd like to mention that I'm coming to you from Treaty 4 territory in Saskatchewan, which is the original land of the Cree, Salteaux, Dakota, Lakota, Nakota and the homeland of the Metis.

Courtenay: It's so good to have you. And to get right into it, let's start by digging into what Critical Librarianship is. Emily Drabinski (2019) wrote an excellent article wherein she contextualizes CritLib by first describing library workers as experts in organization, and then noting that the structures behind *how* we organize say so much about our worldviews. So many of the systems at work in libraries, from catalogs and classification structures to the hardware and software behind digital library platforms, reflect back at us a tapestry of views from the dominant voices throughout history. I love this quote:

"Critical librarianship must grapple with librarianship's relationship to time, to a past accumulation that represents an ordering of only certain kinds of things, reflective of only dominant modes of seeing and making the world. And we must grapple with the future, the kind that we make every day with our pedestrian present-tense practice, the decisions we make about what we collect, how we organize it, the ways that we share and don't, the what and how of our accumulation." (p. 49)

End quote.

Here Drabinski lays out how the technologies we use daily in information work privilege certain ways of seeing the world over others, though these realities are invisible to us without deeper interrogation.

Do you have anything to add to this definition?

Stephanie: I think it's worth mentioning to our listeners that critical theory goes back a long way—as Hines and Ketchum (2020) note, it emerged over a hundred years ago, and critical librarianship is just the application of critical theory within our profession. Critical theory is often associated with the work of the Frankfurt School and thinkers like Marx, Engels, and Hegel. It's about thinking critically and coming to discover hidden assumptions and debunking their claim to authority. Critical librarianship has an agenda of activism and of social justice around LIS work.

Courtenay: Thanks for those clarifications. So, here's a breakdown of the story we're discussing today, which appeared in the *Washington Post* in August of this year: Amber McLain, the director of the Patmos Library in Jamestown, Michigan, purchased a copy of each of the top 10 young adult books of 2020 as identified by the National Library Association. Among these books was *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. Then, around November of last year, amid growing nationwide backlash around the book—complaints started rolling in about McLain. She started experiencing harassment and eventually quit her job. These events led up to a town vote on the library's funding, and the community—by a slim margin—decided to defund Patmos Library (Paquette, 2022).

Stephanie, reflecting on this story through a critical librarianship lens, what are some of the fundamental things you notice in stories like this one coming out of Michigan?

Stephanie: Unfortunately, book challenges are becoming more common, and books that address issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are among the most often challenged. The challenge of *Gender Queer* in Jamestown was not an isolated incident. The book was challenged in many libraries. In fact, it was the most challenged book of 2021. Of the top 10 challenged books that year, 5 of them were challenged on the basis of LGBTQ+ content.

So ideology is a common thread among challenged books. Books that go against the dominant ideology are the most often challenged. Most book challenges are coming from religious and conservative groups. [PEN America](#), an organization that stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the US, released a report last month that found that book bans occurred in 32 states. Texas banned more books than any other state and Florida was close behind. A total of 801 books in 22 school districts were banned between July 2021 and June 2022 in Texas alone (Lopez, 2022). And we're just talking school libraries here. Among the banned books, those that addressed LGBTQ+ themes were the most banned at 41%. Race was the next big category with 40% of banned books having protagonists or secondary characters of colour.

Courtenay: Relatedly, *The Guardian*, just back in September, published an article about an ALA report that highlights a rise in book challenges and bans over the past few years. To quote the article, "The challenges reported to ALA in 2021...represented the highest number of attempted book bans since the list began more than 20 years ago" (Luscombe, 2022, para. 15) and many of these challenges were based on issues around gender and sexual identity.

Could you talk briefly about book challenges and book bans and the processes behind them?

Stephanie: As you mentioned, it is increasingly common in both school and public libraries for concerned parents, teachers, or other members of the community to suggest or even demand that certain items be removed from a library's collection. On the one hand, we have well-meaning individuals who are concerned with protecting or sheltering children from content deemed to be inappropriate. In other cases, the individuals who challenge books have a more

political or ideological reason for wanting certain content removed. This is often the case with challenges based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

On the other hand, we have the institutional mandates of libraries that include providing access to diverse viewpoints. Part II of the Library Bill of Rights says, and I quote: “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.” End quote.

Further, censorship is a serious threat to intellectual freedom. As Toni Samek (2001) explains, “the principle of intellectual freedom define[s] the library’s responsibility to society” (p. 33). Additionally, the IFLA has a [statement on censorship](#), which explains how censorship contradicts Article 19 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) which holds that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

Preventing censorship is one of the most important ways that libraries can protect the intellectual freedom of their communities.

This is not to say that libraries or librarians are neutral, but rather that librarians should consciously work to prevent their personal biases from interfering with collection development. Similarly, community members should not let their biases interfere with other people’s freedom to read.

To that end, most libraries have formally articulated collection development policies as well as procedures for dealing with book challenges, so decisions about what to add to or remove from the collection are not made haphazardly. However, when a library item *is* challenged, one of three things can happen:

1. Nothing changes. The library acknowledges the complaint but the item in question remains in regular use by the library. The complainant is informed of the library’s collection development policy and commitment to intellectual freedom and it ends there.

2. The item is reclassified or relocated to an area where it is less likely to be seen by children. This could also occur when library staff determine that the item is better suited to another part of the collection. At the public library where I work, *Gender Queer* is catalogued as a young adult graphic novel, so it is not likely that a young patron browsing would stumble across it; however, someone seeking it out can search the OPAC and can find it with no problem.
3. The item is removed from the collection and discarded. This is what we would call a book ban.

I'd also like to highlight the importance of documenting challenges. We've already discussed the record number of challenges and bans in 2021, so initiatives like [Unite Against Book Bans](#) organized by the ALA are important in empowering people to stand up against censorship. Here in Canada, the CFLA has an online Intellectual Freedom Challenges Survey that allows library staff to report challenges in a national database. The database allows for the creation of reports to track changes in activity over time. It collects information about the type of challenge, the nature of the challenge, the library involved and the resolution.

Fortunately, the removal of books from Canadian libraries as a result of challenges is uncommon. Between September of 2019 and September 2021, challenges to 45 different books were reported to the Intellectual Freedom Committee. Only one title was removed and effectively banned.

Courtenay: Stephanie, what is it about the topic of gender that makes some people uncomfortable enough to want to ban certain books from libraries?

Stephanie: I think part of the reason that so many of the challenges we see in libraries are on materials that feature sexual orientation and gender identity is that they challenge the status quo. Within capitalist society, challenging the status quo, and the structures of power is not seen as a good thing. CritLib *aims* to disrupt the status quo. The centralization of power leads to marginalization of those who aren't part of the dominant class. Drabinski's 2019 article explains that invisible, intellectual structures (among which I would include gender) "have a relationship to the material world of knowledge construction" (p.50). Where there is a conflict between gender and sexual identity, how those identities are represented in libraries and elsewhere

reflects power structures. When books about gender and sexuality enter the library, they are placed within existing structures of knowledge organization (Drabinski, 2019). For example, books about lesbians are cataloged with books on social problems and deviant sexuality. Gender minorities are marginalized within libraries just as they are within society. So we want to understand how that came to be and the structures that produce and reproduce power relations. What ideologies are perpetuated and who do they benefit? We need to dismantle and interrogate ideology and its impact on society.

Courtenay: Relatedly, it's not just that there are more incidents of challenging books, those incidents are now more likely to come with a physical threat. In the case of Patmos Library, multiple library workers faced in-person harassment. Further, the ALA report highlights an increase in armed protests outside libraries and schools, and a recent *Technology Review* article out of MIT discussed how organized groups that demand the banning of books—groups which pretty much always have conservative or Christian leanings—are now training members to monitor the online activities of library workers and teachers via their social media accounts; recently, a gunshot was fired outside the home of a targeted educator. The MIT article argues there is a shift toward targeting individuals instead of institutions, causing many workers to feel that their personal security is under attack (Basu, 2022).

I'm really curious: Do you think modern technologies like social media platforms create opportunity to challenge some of the structures driving behaviour like this, or, in your view and experience, do they tend to fuel—potentially violent—resistance to change?

Stephanie: I think it can go both ways. With regard to technology, critical theory would remind us—and I'll quote Sam Popowich (2018) here—that “technology is also not an independent entity but a system of relationships between people with a history and a socio-economic context” (p. 45). In these stories, we can see how that technology is built to privilege certain levels of access and influence and unquestioningly perpetuate those views. It's cyberbullying that escalates into real-life bullying. In Jamestown, criticism started online, but escalated to the point that librarians actually feared for their safety. There were fliers and yard signs accusing the staff of being pedophiles and grooming children. Those are serious accusations. The harassment led McLain to quit her job, but the hostility continued and her replacement quit as well despite the fact that *Gender Queer* was purchased along with other award winners as part of the “normal” collection development process and was never listed as required reading. It

wasn't purchased in order to promote a certain agenda. That this happened shows how the powers of the technologies in play extended beyond their perceived boundaries to impact a library that dared to step outside of the town's comfort zone.

Courtenay: One of the takeaways I have from the current events we're discussing here is that with the threats of violence against library workers—particularly women—on the rise, these workers are, in turn, being expected to take on an even heavier emotional labour burden. What might CritLib say on the subject of gender and emotional labour?

Stephanie: I appreciate you raising the issue of emotional labour, which refers to the demand to regulate your emotions in order to accomplish your job (Rodger & Erickson, 2021). The demand for emotional labour is disproportionately higher in female-dominated professions like nursing, teaching, librarianship and other service-oriented positions. Critical librarianship aims to surface hidden labour, and emotional labour tends to be unrecognized and undervalued. Critical feminists Butler and Weed (2011) explain that we can see gender “as a mode of signifying power, to produce and sustain certain ways of organizing social and political life” (p. 4). In the recent [Urban Library Trauma Study](#) out of the US, ⅔ of respondents said they had experienced “violent or aggressive behavior from patrons at their library” (p. 13). Even during these incidents, library staff are expected to be calm and polite, and not get angry. Like other social identities, gender is determined in relation to structures of power (Drabinski, 2019).

This makes me think about the importance of having an Ethics of Care, which is a concept that calls on us to recognize how we are relationally dependent on one another to sustain our world and make it better—we are not autonomous beings working our way through the world independent of others. We're seeing calls for this in areas like health care (Schuchter and Heller, 2018) and government (FitzGerald, 2020), and it's starting to be discussed in LIS circles as well (Bradley, 2021). While it's often used to encourage compassion between a service provider and service receiver, we should also consider how an ethics of care between an employer and employee may reduce some of the emotional burden the employee faces in their work. Rather than viewing librarians as units of production that deal with circulation and reference queries, we can see how they are an integral component in the nurturing of a community.

Courtenay: I love that as a call to action, though I'd like to pick your brain on one more potential technology-related opportunity in this story. As we discussed, Patmos Library was defunded by the town, but they since took their fight online and have managed to secure funding for the 2023 year via the GoFundMe platform (Dillman, 2022). Do you think platforms like GoFundMe give information organizations more room to challenge the invisible boundaries and norms that precipitated these reactionary challenges to representing broader worldviews?

Stephanie: That's a good question, and I'm not sure what the answer is. Just as we saw how technology and social media can be used for bad, we can also see how technology can be used for good. Twenty or 30 years ago, something like GoFundMe couldn't have existed. But it's important to remember that technology in general reproduces the control of the few over the many (Leckie & Buschman, 2009).

Courtenay: So true. And you know, I think that ties really well into some final thoughts. Is there any room for optimism in a story like this?

Stephanie: I think there is some room for optimism. In this case, enough money was raised to restore funding, at least for the current budget year. It was a close call, but the censors didn't win, and the library wasn't forced to close its doors. It amazes me that a town would choose to rob their entire community of the benefits of a library because of a questionable book. Book banning is a slippery slope that could lead to more extreme forms of censorship.

Courtenay: Well we're running out of time. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we sign off.

Stephanie: Well thanks for having me on Library Lens Courtenay. I'd just like to add that if any of our listeners are interested in learning more about critical librarianship there are a couple of great resources I'd like to mention. First is a by Hines & Ketchum simply called *Critical Librarianship* and second is *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship* by Karen Nicholson and Maura Seale. If there's one thing I'd like our listeners to take away from this conversation it's the commitment of critical librarianship to identifying power structures and disrupting the status quo as well as working towards social change and social justice.

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