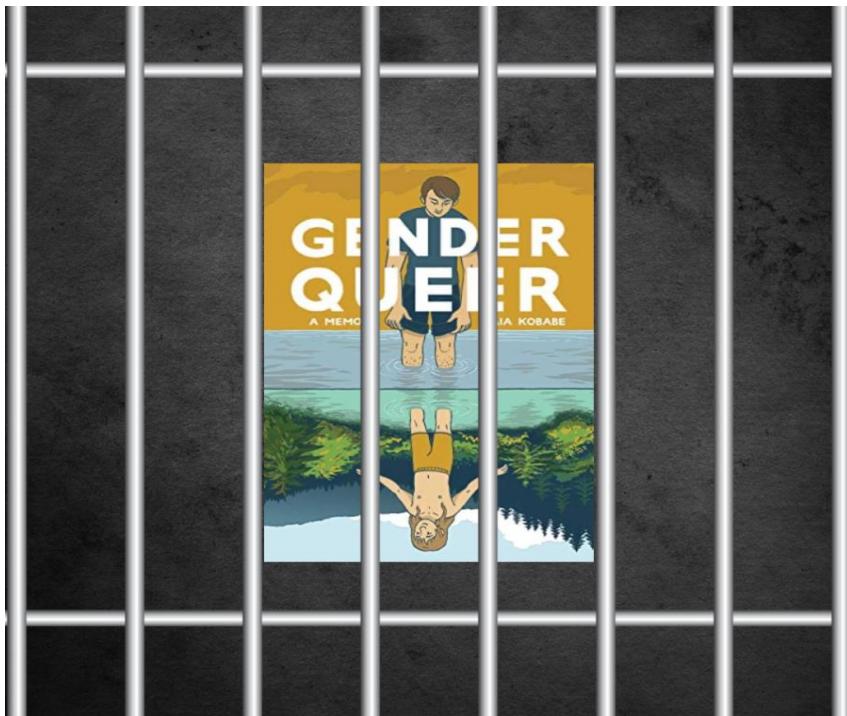


Books Don't Belong Behind Bars



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As the hub of the school, students stream in and out of the RHS library all day, in groups or alone, but always feeling welcomed. Any RHS student can tell you about the warm ambience of this space filled with comfortable blue chairs, half-finished chess games, and shelves full of brightly covered books. Senior Sabina Eraso explained, “The RHS Library is not only a place where you can do homework, but also a place where you can hang out with friends and take a break. All of my

friends and I love sitting together in the library during lunch and free periods, and we especially enjoy talking to the librarians.” Even more than the friends, books, and study space that students find in the library, it is the kindness of the librarians, Mrs. Wetzel and Mrs. Richter, that helps so many students feel comfortable here.

Unfortunately, certain parents in the Radnor School District do not understand or respect the importance of the library, the books within it, or the librarians themselves. On November 6th, a Radnor parent filed a police report about the Radnor High School library having the book *Gender Queer* available to students. This event occurred just months after a committee of Radnor parents and educators, including Dr. Batchelor, participated in thoughtful discourse that ultimately ended in a vote to keep *Gender Queer* in the Radnor High School Library. As Common Sense Media describes, *Gender Queer: A Memoir* is “a comics-style illustrated account of the author’s journey toward understanding nonconforming gender and sexuality.” In 2020, the book received an Alex Award from the American Library Association (ALA), which commends books that have a “special appeal to young adults, ages 12 through 18.” Despite this thorough review and approval from members of the community and the ALA, the parents targeting the book labeled it as “porn” and felt it necessary to report it to the police.

The trend of parents labeling books that focus on race or LGBTQ+ issues as dangerous or inappropriate has skyrocketed across the country, and Radnor has been no exception. Parents have tried to target books including *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, *George*, and *Lawn Boy* – all of which are LGBTQ+ inclusive. As these parents try to insert their belief system into the school for the “safety” of their children, they are

simultaneously harming so many others. Sophomore Finn Metzger, who uses They/He pronouns, explained, “Some children are gay, some children are trans, and those children enjoy reading books that reflect their experiences and tell them that everything is going to be okay. It makes me incredibly sad to know that there are some parents out there who would deny their children that feeling of belonging.” The reason that parents have given for targeting books such as *Gender Queer* usually comes back to “explicit sexual content.” Senior Michael McNicholas drew attention to the hypocrisy of this claim, stating, “I have had to read plenty of books within this school with heterosexual sex scenes and those aren’t getting banned, so why the homosexual ones?”

Despite parent attempts that started over a year ago to ban books in RTSD, many RHS students are still not aware that this is happening. Finn Metzger pointed out that they usually find out about these attempts through other students, adding that there is a need for “transparency and assurance that [the school administration] won’t give into these parent’s demands” from the school district. He also suggested that “a message on the [RTSD] website or on Schoology saying that [RTSD administrators] won’t stand for this hate would go a long way.”

To students, the RHS library is a place of trust and belonging, and these parents are trying to chip away at that with their attacks. Many students rely on the librarians’ kindness and support each day, but how can we expect them to do their job the same way if they’re threatened for doing it. At Radnor, our librarians do more than help people with books. RHS Executive Director Michael McNicholas emphasized, “One time last year I was about to have a panic attack, and neither my case manager nor the school psychologist was here. I was freaking out, and Mrs. Wetzel was there for me and helped talk me down.” Michael described the two librarians as “godsends” and “true inspirations,” a sentiment shared by so many students at Radnor. In addition, the librarians make great efforts to enhance every single student’s education. Finn Ryan, class president for the Class of 2024, commented, “We have access to amazing resources that some students may not have access to outside of Radnor. Mrs. Wetzel and Mrs. Richter do a great job of bridging that gap and helping students get access to those resources, and they are able to help you figure out how to use them.”

Along with the different databases and websites the library provides, books with representation, whether in regards to race, gender, or sexuality, are a critical resource for students. Finn Metzger explained, “Books can act as the bridge between staying in the closet and coming out. For somebody who knows they’re not cis het but doesn’t have the confidence to do something like join SAGA or enter a queer online space, books can be a fantastic way to learn and experiment with their identity without having to tell other people.” They emphasized that these books help make the library and the school safer for many students, possibly even “safer than at home.”

Any parent is allowed the right to try to protect their children, but when it comes to efforts to ban books, our community really needs to consider who is being harmed in the long run and why parents see certain books as a threat. In surveying nearly 34,000 LGBTQ youth, The [Trevor Project’s 2022 National Survey](#) on

LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that “LGBTQ youth who live in a community that is accepting of LGBTQ people reported significantly lower rates of attempting suicide than those who do not.” When parents actively denounce and vilify books that feature LGBTQ+ characters, they send a message to the children in our community. Finn M described that parents targeting certain books conveys the message that “[LGBTQ+ students] will only be accepted if we never talk about our identities and experiences.” He continued, “I was really hurt when I found out that *Gender Queer* was being targeted last year because I felt that the casual “I’m okay with gay people as long as they don’t shove it down my throat” homophobia that I had sometimes faced at home was making its way into my school.” Finn R. pointed out, “The books that certain parents might not agree with, just the fact that they’re in [the library] doesn’t really mean anything because someone has to choose to pick up that book. Even if they do choose to pick up that book, the books chosen serve no other purpose than to broaden the scope of understanding and the awareness of people, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing whatsoever.”

As students reach high school, we receive more freedom and more opportunities to make our own decisions. We are told that as high schoolers we now have more responsibility and that we must act as role models for younger students. In keeping with these messages, parents should be able to trust their students to read books that are right for them. Students should have the freedom to experiment and choose independently of their parents’ influence. As Finn Ryan explained, “It’s sometimes a little insulting to students to think that just picking up a book means that we’re indoctrinated and learning all of these new things that we’ve never been exposed to before.” RTSD parents need to understand that while a high schooler can easily make the choice not to take a certain book off the shelf, if that book is not there in the first place, then so many students, including those who may be struggling with their identity, will be deprived of a safe outlet.