

APL Volumes

Season 3, Episode 2: READERS RESIST

This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MUSIC

GENN: Hello, fellow lit lovers, and welcome to Season Three of APL Volumes, coming to you from the very heart of downtown Austin, your Central Library. I'm your host, Genn Mehalik, avid reader and admin senior for the Customer Access division of APL.

This season we are turning the pages to explore the intriguing connections between books and the lives of their authors. Each episode will have a unique theme and guest. All of our guests are fellow staff members, brilliant passionate folks that I'm so lucky to work with, so I'm very excited to hear their hot takes. Whether you are a dedicated bibliophile or just looking to add a new chapter to your podcast playlist, you can go to bed at night knowing APL Volumes, Season Three, was made just for you.

Today we are talking about book bans and banned books, consequently.

DALE: That's right.

GENN: My guest is Dale Bridges, who works with me here at Central Library. Do you want to say what you do?

DALE: Hello. I'm a library associate. I work with Circulation, taking those books in and checking them in, putting them back on the shelves and making library cards. That's some of it. Oh, I'm a published author. I have a novel called *The Mean Reds*. You can buy it on Amazon, you can buy it at BookPeople.

GENN: I used to work in Circulation so we used to do some particular jobs together. I was thinking about that yesterday, how like when we used to go around and get the money out of the vending machines.

DALE: Oh, yeah.

GENN: That was how like basically I got to know you.

DALE: Yeah, that was a weird job.

GENN: Yeah, but it is fun because you are here before anybody else. You just walk around from like the top floor of the building all the way to the bottom and go to every place that people put money, which is mostly to make copies of things. It was fun.

DALE: Yeah. Good time.

GENN: OK, so we're going to talk about book bans and we thought it was important to define what a book ban is. Because, as Dale mentioned, a lot of people think it is just burning books, or what you see.

DALE: Right. Burning them up or making them so they can't be published.

GENN: Yeah, actually I went down a rabbit hole on the internet, I guess because I searched book bans so much that the internet thought that I was into book bans.

DALE: It was like your thing?

GENN: Yeah. It took me to all these, I got into the mind of a person who wants to ban books, kind of.

DALE: Because it takes you to the websites.

GENN: Yeah.

DALE: Oh, that's interesting.

GENN: I never knew about this subculture. I mean, I knew it existed, but I had no idea.

DALE: Yeah, we're going to get into that. It's got a lot of things.

GENN: So one of the biggest messages that I saw was that book bans aren't real. They don't exist. I'm assuming they are saying that because of what you said. Books are still being published, so they are not banned.

But that's not what a ban is. A book ban is any measure of action that attempts to restrict access. By even challenging a book, which isn't always called a ban, a challenge. That can be a parent saying to a school, "I don't want this book on the shelf." And there is like a process that has to happen. It's different everywhere. But the school might take those books off the shelf temporarily and nobody knows when they are coming back. They don't know if they are going to decide that they should not come back. And so for however long, these things are not top priority so they can be years sometimes. The kids are not able to access those books.

DALE: And book banning also isn't when the entity itself, the school, the professionals at the school, the teachers or the library, decides not to have something on their shelves. That's not a book ban either. That is internally the experts in those areas are deciding.

A book ban is when it comes from an outside entity and is sort of forced upon the institution.

GENN: What you are speaking on is kind of like librarians, they go to school, they have all the best practices. And so they are constantly making decisions about collections. That is their whole job. Well, not their whole job.

DALE: It's a pretty big part.

GENN: It's a big part of it that people don't see. It's behind the scenes.

DALE: And they take it very seriously.

GENN: There is a Library Bill of Rights that librarians follow from the American Library Association. Kind of like how we have the United States Bill of Rights, and a Constitution.

Libraries in general, public libraries, follow this Bill of Rights. Very strictly.

DALE: They are very serious about reading, and they are very strict about books. And when they are putting a book on the shelf it's not a political act. They are not trying to stir up things or trying to change people's minds about stuff. These are books that they think people need access to for a variety of reasons. It's an important part.

And certainly there are ways to challenge those things and ways to let the library administration know about certain things. And sometimes those challenges are upheld.

But more often it's sort of a public, and like recently it's been really intense, with groups that are organized throughout, on the internet a lot. And also by conservative politicians who are pushing book bans right now.

GENN: I read that between 2021 and 2022 there was like a 38 percent increase in unique titles. So not just like bans in general.

Who is doing the banning? There are three groups who are behind the majority of these bans. Moms for Liberty, Citizens Defending Freedom, and Parents' Rights in Education.

And the largest by far is Moms for Liberty. They formed in 2021 in Florida. They have 284 chapters in forty-four states already. 81 percent of all the school districts in the US that have enacted book bans are in or adjacent to a county where there is an active chapter.

From what I've read, the way that the resurgence has become so prolific is, they are getting these lists together of hundreds of books and then one parent can take the list.

DALE: That's absolutely how it's happening. Getting a list together, and it's often a lot of children's books and young adult books that are being challenged right now. It involves a lot of subjects that are LGBTQ. Also with authors of color and characters of color. That is happening a lot.

But yes, people are getting these really broad lists together. I don't even think a lot of times a lot of these people who are making these challenges have really gone through the list.

GENN: It's like hundreds of books.

DALE: Yeah. They are just being passed around. Go see if these are in your library and go challenge all of these.

So, people listening at home who might want to know how they can participate and push back against that: you really do need to get involved in your local school boards and your local politics and find out if this is happening into your area. And then show up and show support, because I think these administrators' and these educators' groups are organized and suddenly people show up and there is a lot of pressure. But if it can be showed that is not the entirety of the community and there are just as many if not more people pushing back and fighting for these books to stay and freedom to read is important to people, then they can stand up to it easier.

GENN: Yeah. It's really just like the pressure that they put on these entities like the school system districts and libraries, if there is not other voices to counter that, they are going to win. Because there is no opposition.

DALE: We were talking about this before. Part of what is great about doing this podcast for us is, you were talking about Florida being the start of Moms for Liberty. Florida is the number one place where book banning is happening. But number two, and this is not a contest that we want to be in the running for, is Texas. It's a really sad fact.

So number two is Texas. Being in Austin and at the Austin Public Library, we are not really affected by that. Our community, I haven't even really heard much of an inkling of people trying to pressure the Austin Public Library and local libraries.

But that is happening throughout the state of Texas. I'm sure other libraries don't feel that they can speak out about book banning or have these conversations. So it is important for us at the Austin Public Library to do that, because we can. And hopefully we can be a voice for some other people who are going unheard right now.

GENN: Yeah, that's a good point. It's like we are safer in saying a lot of things that smaller towns, even right outside of Austin, might not be able to.

DALE: Absolutely. I can talk a little bit about the resurgence of book banning and how it kind of comes and goes in American culture. This has not necessarily been tracked throughout American history, unfortunately. It's sort of a newer thing to track book banning. There's a couple of different The Pen America is tracking the school libraries. It's a fairly new thing. But they are doing that. And then the American Library Association has been tracking, but only for about twenty years or so, so it is sort of a newer thing.

We do know historically that book banning kind of rises up during times when our democracy is challenged. So the big one historically that we had was the Red Scare in the 1950s, and we had a big resurgence in book banning and books that wanted to keep out, that had to do a lot to do with communism. With a lot of these things, once one

topic, it doesn't sort of stop with communism. It bleeds over. Oh, we also have these other areas we have problems with.

GENN: It's like a slippery slope, the whole thing with book bans. If one person has an opinion and they feel that their opinion is enough to take it out of whatever institution, a whole book or a whole list of books, then whose to say that... I mean, I read something that said you can take any five people and put them in a school library and say, "Take all the books that you disagree with out," and there would be nothing left.

It's true. No one person's opinion is more important than anyone else's.

DALE: Absolutely. And we are going to get into some of the examples of how ridiculous those proposals can be. We get them there too. And the Red Scare was the big one. The satanic panic in the '80s had a big sort of resurgence. Everything was sort of around satanism. Anything dark.

But these are all eclipsed, it's not even close to what we are going through right now. The statistics are showing in 2021 an over-400 percent increase in books that are attempting to be banned and challenged than anything that we've seen before. 400 percent is huge. This is a colossal... I think part of it is what you alluded to, that internet organizing is so much easier for people to do. Maybe people are not as involved in their local government as historically.

Yeah, and in 2022 over 1269 books. This is from the American Library Association. It is the highest since they started compiling data.

GENN: And I think that is unique titles, not just how many times they were banned. Which would be way more.

DALE: Absolutely. So the numbers are astronomical right now. This is a real serious problem. And it comes up once again when democracy is challenged in America. People have their specific things that they don't...

GENN: When you were talking it reminded me. There were certain books that were banned for promoting, that's like a big word, the ideas that they were actually written to oppose. Like *Animal Farm* and *Fahrenheit 451*. 1984. Like all about authoritarianism and how dangerous it is.

DALE: The crazy irony of it.

GENN: There's people saying, "This promotes communism." They ban them for that reason. It's like, clearly you are not reading the book.

DALE: Or not getting the right message out of the book.

GENN: And what those books do for society is a lot. You have to be able to talk about things. It's just ironic. Their idea of communism, which is not really communism I would say, is exactly that. It's suppressing voices. Authoritarianism.

DALE: Yeah. And also the idea that these are libraries. These are places where you are not required to check out anything. Your children are not required to check out anything from this library. You can certainly have discussions in your own home about what is acceptable for your own child to read or whatever. But this is taking the books off for other people. This is saying that not only, we do not think it is appropriate for your household to read either. And trying to make that decision for other parents and other people in the community. Which is not acceptable. It's not your role.

GENN: I think a lot of people feel safe, they must assume that there must be some Supreme Court decision that we're good, even though these crazy people are doing this.

DALE: Right.

GENN: So they don't get involved. But really, when this did go to the Supreme Court in the eighties, it was like thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds that were fighting it in their school in New York. They went to regular court first, lower courts, and they had multiple fights for six years before it went to the Supreme Court.

The ruling was kind of ambiguous and that's what leaves us open to so many of these bans now. You know, they ultimately said, "In brief we hold that local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion or other matters of opinion."

So basically they said, they ruled on the side of the kids and said that you can't ban things just because you want to and you disagree with them. But the wording left it so ambiguous. First of all, it doesn't apply to any books that have not yet been chosen in the future, right? It only applies to pulling books off, what's already there at this time.

DALE: I was going to say that yes, part of how this resurgence sort of got started too is COVID and anti-vaccination groups that then got turned into ... there's a real big movement against public education right now. A lot of people are choosing to homeschool. That happened during the pandemic. And that's fine. That's a fine choice.

But there's a big movement now to take away money from public schools. It baffles my mind how people are denigrating teachers right now and that they are abusers of power and that it is taxpayer money that's not being well spent. I taught for one year, which is about all...

GENN: I know a lot of people who taught for one year.

DALE: Yes. It is a very difficult job. The people who stay in it are fantastic public servants doing a great work over there. But there is a big movement right now that is against that. And this is all tied up in it together.

Once again, people really need to get involved in their own local governments. Because what you were saying about a lot of the ambiguity, there are still all these ways that you can challenge things.

GENN: And it's because of the wording of the Supreme Court.

DALE: Exactly. It leaves those things open.

And they're pressuring librarians to be fired. Or people taken off school boards and stuff like that. So they are going around it in these other ways if they don't get their way.

GENN: Yeah. And it leaves a lot of people vulnerable, losing their jobs. Because honestly who can keep up with all the changes? It's hard. It was difficult for us, I think, definitely me, trying to gather the current information for talking today.

Even when something is challenged it is not necessarily pulled off the shelf immediately. Let's say a teacher gets the book from their school library, and they are reading it with a student, not even teaching it, just reading it. They can be subject to punitive actions.

I guess the only thing I wanted to say also, that I keep coming back to in my mind, is just that a big part of the problem to me is that there is no clear response that should happen every time there is a challenged book or every place where books are challenged. They are kind of just making it up on the fly, or they have already made up what their response is going to be, which a lot of times in the most fair cases they try to have a board of people who have different interests to read these books. But they can't read all the books, first of all, and when they do it's like, "Ok, we choose out of these hundred books, fifty should stay, forty should be banned, one should require permission from parents, or whatever." It just feels arbitrary. It's just these people deciding and a lot of times they say, "Oh, we had these twenty books that we couldn't make a decision on."

Meanwhile it's taking them two school years to come to that. And more and more lists are being submitted every day.

DALE: You are right. That's a loophole that people are using. They know it's gonna take a while. So even if the books aren't coming off the shelves permanently, they come off the shelves temporarily. And that temporarily is getting longer and longer because, as you said, they are submitting more lists.

Yeah, there is a lot of loopholes that are being used. And once again, the best way to combat all this is to show up ourselves. Stand up against it and push back against the people who are leading these charges and tell them that this is not acceptable in your community.

But yeah, I did want to talk about Texas specifically. There are some very interesting things. Texas Republican State Representative Matt Krause. Have you heard about this? He sent a letter that has 850 books. He just sends it out to all of these.

GENN: Yeah, I did hear about this.

DALE: So this is a politician who is, "Here's a bunch of books. Check your local library and start the process of banning these."

GENN: And then they go out and do it. They don't even look at the list. They just say, OK.

You know, one of the books that I heard about being on one of those lists was because the author's last name was Gay.

DALE: Oh, really?

GENN: Yes.

DALE: The last name itself was Gay?

GENN: Yes. That was on the cover of the book because it was the author's name.

DALE: They are getting this ridiculous. Also Greg Abbott, the HP900, have you heard of this?

GENN: I don't think so.

DALE: So this is an act that he has put in. And fortunately so far it has been blocked. But we'll see how it goes. But basically so book sellers, it requires them to put a rating on the books before they sell them. Which is just insane. It's not even possible. Can you imagine the BookPeople, our local bookstore, having to go through every book and put a PG-13 type of rating on all the books before they sell it? Book sellers have enough trouble making money in this post-internet world that we have without those sort of things.

But yeah, that's in injunction that was recently stopped.

And then there's some weird stuff happening. A parent over in Katy, TX, which is a suburb of Houston, asked the district to remove children's biographies of Michelle Obama because it promotes reverse racism. Parents in the Dallas suburbs wanted the school district to ban a children's book about the life of Black Olympian Wilma Rudolph because it mentions racism as something that this person had to overcome while achieving what she had done.

These are the types of things that are being banned, if you are wondering what people are going crazy about and what people are being so upset about. And it's a lot of kids' books that have to do with...

GENN: Gender.

DALE: So many upset about gender.

GENN: Race. I saw a whole bunch of them that were like about hair, different kinds of hair, different races and their hair. Just kids' books that are loving, happy, could not possibly be bad. It's hard for me not to be carried away because it is so frustrating.

DALE: The critical race theory is one that they... I don't even think that people know what critical race theory is. Critical race theory is a graduate level, in graduate school and law school mostly, study. And nobody is teaching that in your junior high.

GENN: It's not just like they find that in all these kids' books.

DALE: Even in the high school level no one is teaching these things. This is something that has been picked up.

What is being taught is how race has affected different populations throughout American history. You can't teach American history properly without this sort of information. But they just throw the term around because it's a real big thing.

GENN: It sounds scary. People are like, Oh, what's that?

DALE: Yeah. Anything that involves that or the word woke.

GENN: The word woke. That's a big one.

DALE: They are very upset about the word woke.

GENN: I read somewhere, and this is totally my thoughts as well, that people want to believe that if their kids don't read about something they won't know about it. And if they don't know about it, it won't happen.

I'm not a parent. I'm a person in the world. And I think that I've realized that people are going to learn about other people in the world. They exist. They are around them starting from the time they start school. People are who they are.

DALE: And also the internet exists today. So would you rather have your student, your child, have a library book that has a difficult topic or something to discuss that you can discuss with them or teachers can discuss with them, or just running around on the internet with any random thing that they find which nobody may have a discussion with them except on the internet. Which is not the place to go.

GENN: At the end of the day, as a parent, your kid comes home at the end of the day and you have at least the same influence as the people they see at the beginning of their day, whoever it is—school, TikTok, social media. I don't know why it is such a threat to people, that teachers and libraries have certain books. Nobody has to take out every book. And if they are interested in it and they take it home, then isn't it your responsibility to know what your kid is reading? And then you can talk about it from there.

But I think that people just don't want any threat. But everything can be a threat to someone. And they just want to step back and feel like they don't have to pay attention to what their kids are doing.

DALE: This is what I've always loved about libraries, and why I work at a library. And why it is a beautiful thing. It's because the material is there. The books are there. Nobody tells you that you have to check out anything. And nobody tells you how you need to think about the thing that you are reading.

That is the beauty of libraries. So the material is there. If you don't want your child checking things out, monitor their library use. If you have concerns about what they are checking out, talk to them about that. But the library is not pushing that on anybody. We are finding books that we think people want to read. We are taking suggestions from people on what to have in the library. And we are providing those to the public for free.

The reason that book banning hurt the library is because of that free access. Not everybody, you can't just say, "Oh, they can go buy that book at the bookstore." Not everybody can afford that. That's the point of libraries. And you are taking those books away from the communities that need them most. Ones that can't afford to shop at the bookstore.

GENN: Yeah, where they don't have transportation or whatever. I remember as a kid just feeling oppressed in all the ways. You have no freedom. And the library was one of my favorite places because I could explore things.

DALE: Mine too.

GENN: Maybe I couldn't travel the world as a kid. But I could see all the places in the library.

And you know what I also think about which is interesting to me? There is a certain something about everyone that we just have innately in us that makes us who we are. That can be up for debate. But what I'm talking about is, some of these hot topics, if I picked up a book at age ten or twelve and read it, either I wouldn't be interested because it was over my head, or if I was interested I already have an opinion about it. It doesn't have anything to do with what my teacher said. Probably they haven't even talked to me about it. It's just an innate thing.

I think that some of the funnier, ridiculous book bans like *Where's Waldo?* getting banned because there was a topless lady. I don't know if you've seen *Where's Waldo?* books, but they are like the tiniest people because they are making it really hard to find. If a kid saw that, what do they do? They giggle. They show their friend. They giggle together. And that's it. It's over.

A lot of people make the argument that it is animated, it's not anatomically an actual nude person which is what they are saying, they are banning it for nudity. But I think at the end of the day for me it comes down to like, what is so threatening. These little kids giggling about that. I'm imagining myself at like twelve or something, finding a book that talks about a hot topic. Let's say it is about abortion or something. I already believe something. The stuff that is in the book is information. It's not telling me to believe one way or the other generally.

DALE: I was raised in a very conservative family in a small town and we weren't allowed to watch television. We weren't allowed to listen to secular radio or go to the movies. But the one thing that I was allowed was a library card and to go the library. To my parents that was educational. And for the most part they didn't really monitor or worry about me reading books too much.

I wasn't going to the library and reading crazy racy stuff. But it did open up worlds to me, which books do. It helps you think about the world. It helps you form your own views about the world. It's just this place, this formative place where you are starting, I think, as a young person to realize that you are an adult who can find who they are going to be, by reading books and getting information. It's a really powerful feeling.

GENN: Experience.

DALE: Yeah. And it's great. And that's something to be protected for everybody.

GENN: Yeah. I agree. I imagine kids who are not allowed to read just whatever they find or browse on their own in a library, and you don't know who their parents are, restricting their reading. It's not going to make them believe everything their parents believe, first of all, because that's just not how people work. You just have your own opinions regardless. They might be influenced by other things, but they are not made by other people. I just think about people like that, kids like that, and growing up. I don't know.

A lot of people probably read the book *Educated*, which I loved. This is an example. She goes to college and realizes, well, first of all nobody else in her family, they were sort of anti-establishment, antieducational establishment. And then she's an adult, like a full adult in her twenties, and is being exposed to these topics for the first time. And I can just imagine how stifling that would be. How bad that would feel.

Honestly, it would feel like a betrayal, because your parents, your guardians, it's their job to prepare you to go in the world. And if you don't even know about a lot of these things, which is what a lot of these bans are trying to do is suppress words and topics, you are going to be very unprepared.

DALE: I started out at a private school in our tiny church, but then started going to public school in the third grade. But yeah, a lot of things were restricted or held back from me, or I was just told things like evolution doesn't exist, you don't need to look into it, and that's just what we believe in. No other further information is needed. Certain things about the history of the United States which I just had no clue about as well.

Going into college, it was a disorienting experience. It was surprising. And I would say to people who are bringing up children, as somebody who experienced that, it would have been much better to have the conversations about what my parents believed and why they believed it with them before heading out, if that how they would want to influence their kids in the future, and being introduced to the information that was there. If they have opposite information or they have counter arguments to those, to have those in the house before the kid goes out into the world.

It was disorienting. It was difficult with things. But college was an experience, not just learning but also meeting people that I'd never met before and having those experiences. All of those things.

Getting a little off topic but...

GENN: I like it. Totally on topic.

DALE: Bring it back to, one of the things we were talking about the weird things that people have banned is D&D, which is one of the things that came up. It's like a funny weird thing. And I was not allowed to play D&D. It was told to us as like a satanic practice.

GENN: Dungeons & Dragons.

DALE: Yeah. Dungeons & Dragons. The little rituals and the things they were doing were actual satanic things that could conjure up demons and stuff like that. So that's a thing that like happened in the eighties. There were several really lonely kids that had committed suicide, and instead of looking back at how their mental health issues weren't treated and the other issues in their life that really led to that, the parents and the community sort of latched on to the idea that these kids had played D&D.

GENN: Yeah, they conjured demons in their basement.

DALE: Exactly.

GENN: And they led them to kill themselves.

DALE: Exactly. I remember believing that. I remember hearing these things when I was younger and really believing these. Prisons have banned Dungeons & Dragons. Part of it is that it uses dice and they are concerned about gambling happening. But also weird ideas like wardens have said that it promotes forming gangs and stuff like that. Which is what I think is one of the silliest ideas that I've ever heard.

GENN: There are like the gnomes, and the elves.

DALE: The orcs are all in the prison yard.

GENN: I think those would be much better gangs than there actually is probably.

DALE: Exactly.

Did you have a couple of books, I have a couple I think are hilarious.

GENN: Yes. Like *The Lorax*. I kind of like kids' books, so I tried to focus on those. But like *The Lorax* was banned for portraying the logging industry in a negative light.

DALE: Oh, I read that! Because the loggers were upset about that, right?

GENN: And promoting environmentalism, because it's all about protecting trees.

A Light in the Attic, which is a book of poems, was banned because there was a poem about a kid who is breaking dishes so that he doesn't have to wash the dishes. That's his chore, and every night he breaks more dishes so there won't be any. And they said it promotes this idea of kids suddenly breaking all the dishes so they don't have to wash them. And I'm here thinking that they're going to have to clean up all the glass.

One of them that is not really funny but is so ridiculous is *Charlotte's Web*, which was banned because it anthropomorphizes animals.

DALE: And I quote, "showing lower life forms with human abilities is sacrilegious and disrespectful."

GENN: Yeah, sacrilegious to God. But if I were to go into any kids' section of the library and take out all the books of animals that are talking or wearing clothes, there would be nothing.

DALE: Disney as well. All of Disney.

GENN: Yeah. Everybody loves Disney.

I think the reason why kids' books use animals so much is kids really, it takes away the human element. It takes away the authoritarian sort of feeling of an adult. And kids love animals. I love animals and I want to read about them. Everybody has a favorite animal. So there are books with alligators, books with cats, and you're going to be drawn to those.

A lot of these bans, they say they are promoting the thing that is in the book. There is animals in it, it is promoting the thing of animals as people. That is threatening for some people, somehow.

DALE: One of my favorite ones is banning the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* in schools. I guess it happened in 2010 because a kid was looking in it and he found oral sex in the book and so there was a big campaign to ban the whole dictionary. So you are just banning the definition of words now.

GENN: The fact that it exists. This is a reference material. You use it to find the information, find what something means. But there are parents or adults who don't want kids to know what certain things mean.

DALE: You have to have those conversations with them. This is a book. The book can't just limit the words to just the ones that you are comfortable with.

GENN: And that example reminds me of this really cute book called *And Tango Makes Three*, which is a little picture book about penguins. It's a true story about two male penguins in a zoo who just decided to love each other and raise a baby penguin that I think was an orphan penguin together. This is like a true thing. They just animated it and made a book about it. That is like such a controversial book. It boggles my mind because, wait, you can't tell a story about a real thing?

DALE: Kids' books. Did you come across *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*

GENN: Yes. That was crazy.

DALE: That one may be my number one of the insanity of book banning. This was in Texas. They were trying to ban somebody named Bill Martin, Jr. He wrote a book called *Ethical Marxism*. They didn't like a book that had to do

with Marxism in any positive light. They decided, well, Bill Martin probably like all of his books must be bad so we'll just ban all of the Bill Martin books. Not realizing that there might be another author named Bill Martin.

So in that they banned this real cute kids' book.

GENN: Really famous. That reminds me, a lot of these books are award-winning books. Pretty much most of them are award-winning books.

Which also reminds me. I believe it was Pen America, which you mentioned earlier. They have on their website something called book resumes. And it's really amazing. You can look at any of these titles and they put pictures of their covers, a whole bunch of them, so you can scroll and browse.

And you can click on it, and it can take you to a resume of the book.

I have one here. What's in the resume is the information. The title, the ISBN, who made it. Age range. All that stuff. And then it will have a short synopsis. It has some reviews. It has resources. Those will be a bunch of links that lead you to other information that is vetted information on the internet. And then there are some links to challenges and responses to the challenges, which I like because it is not just the challenge. It has responses.

And then there is an author's statement, and a note on the age ranges. So you can look that up for any book, pretty much. It's really amazing because it is very unbiased.

DALE: And once again librarians and teachers are not picking these books just out of the thin air.

GENN: There's not an agenda that's like a biased agenda. The point of a library is to have everything. It brings me to the thought: why are people so resistant to the thought of browsing materials? I've noticed that as long as I've worked in libraries. Even adults who come for something for themselves. They don't want to walk and browse the shelves a lot of times. They just want to go to a catalog and find something and then go look. They don't want to go to the shelves until they know what they want.

And I so do not agree with that, because browsing a library is one of the most magical experiences. That's the most fun part, finding something you didn't know existed.

DALE: There are plenty of books here that I don't like.

GENN: Me too.

DALE: There are books that I would never read, that I would hate. But really truly believing in reading and education, even if it's a book that I dislike, if it's written down in black and white, where you can sit down and you consume that information, it's not coming from a talking head on TV, it's not coming through your radio with somebody just shouting things. It's black-and-white information in a story that you are consuming yourself, I think there is something more practical and logical that happens.

So even if it is something that I dislike, I really do think that if a person sits down and reads something as opposed to listening to it, I think that they are going to have a more intelligent and logical response to it.

So I still want those books on the shelves. And I still want people to read those books if they like the topic. Even though I vehemently disagree with some of that.

GENN: Yeah. I mean, we are all going to have opinions. And that's the point.

We didn't even get to talk about the First Amendment which is a whole part of this. So at the end of the day we are all going to have opinions. That is why book bans exist. But that is also why we, me and you, think that every book should be allowed. And that's why librarians fight for that. So that there is not any one opinion that is greater than another.

DALE: At the end of the day, go get involved in your local community. Show up. Represent yourself. And be involved in your kid's lives if you are concerned about what they are reading and what information they are consuming. It is your responsibility, not the library's or the school's responsibility.

There is a wide variety of kids and they have a wide variety of needs.

So they can't just have books that are for just your kids that you approve of. They need to have it for the family next door and the family across the tracks. All of that needs to be available to them.

GENN: And that's where the intersection comes with the First Amendment. It's like you have a right to your opinion, but not to affect other people's lives.

I could talk about this all day.

DALE: it was a good conversation.

GENN: Yeah. And I know people think that librarians just sit around and talk about this all the time. But we don't. I mean, I haven't had a good conversation like this in a long time. Because we are busy.

DALE: Yeah. We have a lot of stuff to do.

GENN: Exactly. Never doubt that we are busy here at the library.

But it was enjoyable. I loved it. There are probably a million things that we didn't get to talk about. Thank you for being on this podcast, and we will not keep people here all day for how many hours we could continue.

DALE: Thank you, Genn. It was great.

MUSIC

A huge thanks to my guest Dale Bridges, who urges you to stop by the Central Library and tell us what you plan to do to get involved in the quest for the right to read.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Central Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Maker Space. You too can use the Maker Space in all its glory, from software to hardware, all the best in AV, 3D modeling, graphic design, animation and more, is available to you. So come see us.

I want to give my many thanks to the APL innovate team for their help behind the scenes on this podcast. Thanks also to our editors and transcribers who are part of APL's fantastic volunteer team.

Thanks to Peter Hofstad for getting Volumes onto the airwaves; Michael Wheat, for our rad logo. Maddy Newquist and Hannah Shepherd, our producers, for all your hard work and for letting me make this snazzy background music.

And, of course, thanks to listeners like you for supporting your local public library.

MUSIC

END TRANSCRIPT