



Op. Ed.

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LITERARY CIRCLE CHANGES COURSE AFTER IOWA BOOK-BANNING LAW TAKES EFFECT

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If you had told me a few years ago that Iowa would be rolling out a book-banning law in school libraries, I wouldn't know whether or not you were serious.

Book bans bring pyres with stacks of books withering to ash to mind, an image that seems utterly archaic and foreign to me. While Iowans aren't holding book bonfires, the reality is that Iowa is one state where book-banning legislation has become a reality.

Governor Kim Reynolds signed Senate File 496 into law on May 26, 2023. This law, lauded as "parental rights" legislation, restricts what books and materials are to be made available in school libraries, banning materials discussing gender identity or sexual orientation in grades K-6, as well as non-"age-appropriate" materials in grades K-12.

But what constitutes "age-appropriate" material?

According to SF 496, any material with "descriptions or visual depictions of a sex act" is unlawful for schools to provide. However, the lack of details provided by this description has left schools scrambling to interpret and enforce the law. By not thoroughly defining the guidelines schools must use in evaluating materials, the law is largely up for individual interpretation.

Jenni Olson, the librarian in charge of material selection for the WBCSD, is one such librarian who has had a difficult time figuring out how to apply the law to the school district's libraries.

"Part of the frustration and the challenge is—what does this mean?" she explained as she flipped through the copy of SF 496 she had annotated, trying to make sense of its vague language. "And the Department of Education has not given us any concrete definitions yet that I know of... As far as I know, nothing has been defined."

Librarians and administrations around the state have been left to define how the law will come into effect at their schools, and every school differs in attempting to comply with the law.

Olson has been using the Iowa Criminal Code, specifically section 702.17, to guide her through this process. This section defines what counts as a "sex act" by the law.

"I don't [have books with those in them]," said Olson. "Of course we don't, we wouldn't."

Even so, Olson pulled out half a dozen books that she was unsure about just to be safe. Currently, she's in the process of reading through or listening to the books that have been pulled to see whether or not they

are "age-appropriate" by the standards of the law.

"I can see where there might be a couple that need to stay off the shelf until such time as the law is changed, but not very many," she acknowledged. "Which I know is actually pretty frustrating because that means that there are books that [students] want to read that we don't have access to."

One concern Olson brought up about the phrase "age-appropriate" is that the interests and abilities of readers vary on a person-to-person basis.

"What might be appropriate for some eighth graders might not be appropriate for other eighth graders, which is why, along the way, what we try to teach the kids is how to choose a book," said Olson. "And if you're reading something that you're uncomfortable with, put it down or ask questions of your trusted adults."

By setting restrictions and removing books from libraries based on "age-appropriateness", the law doesn't give students the chance to decide for themselves what they're ready to read. The beliefs of certain groups shouldn't be pushed upon school libraries because they believe they know what's right for every kid.

Kids need to be given the chance to explore new worlds through literature, not told to only read about the world other people think is right for them. Young people are more capable than legislators realize, in part due to the skills and knowledge given to us by our schools.

As someone who has been taught library and material selection skills for my entire school career, I want to be trusted to put my knowledge to use to pick out the kind of books that are right for me. With the passing of this law, state legislators are rescinding their trust in both students and those who teach them book selection skills.

To that point, Olson explained another provision in SF 496 that eliminates the requirement for school librarians to hold a master's degree, highlighting contradictory ideas within the new law.

"It feels like somehow school librarians are not doing our jobs. And the part I find most upsetting is that to be a school librarian you have to have both a teaching certificate and a master's degree in library information science," said Olson. "But I'm not being trusted to do my job. I'm not being trusted to use my training, that I'm going to buy materials that support the curriculum, that I'm going to buy materials that are interesting to students. And in fact, because of the teacher shortage, one of the provisions of this law... is taking away that requirement for a master's degree... That's why I think it feels so targeted to librarians... you're saying 'Well, any-

body can do your job. But we also don't trust that you have the education to do your job' and I'm caught in the middle of a catch 22."

Before the passage of SF 496, WBCSD already had procedures in place for anyone wishing to challenge books or other learning materials in schools, something the law now requires.

"We have always had a material selection policy and a materials reconsideration policy, which is a process by which anyone can challenge a book's inclusion in the school library," Olson stated. On the school district website (west-branch.k12.ia.us), the "Objection to Instructional and Library Materials" document can be found under the heading "Parents". The form can also be found in the school offices.

Within the document, any person or group/organization can fill out the "Reconsideration of Instructional and Library Materials Request Form" to submit to the school for further action, citing what material should be reconsidered in the school district and why they believe so.

When a material has been disputed, it is brought before the Reconsideration Committee. They make a recommendation to the superintendent, who issues a decision on whether or not the material in question should be removed from the district libraries.

The reconsideration committee is made up of eight members appointed by the superintendent and school board, but SF 496 has also changed how reconsideration committees like this one are made up. In the past, students were allowed to be on the committee, but under the law, students are no longer allowed to do so.

Students no longer have a seat at the table when it comes to discussions about the materials that they're allowed access to. This is an issue that directly affects what is made available to us, and all of the decision-making is happening in a way that we can't share our thoughts. As much as it's important to let parents have a say in their kids' education, isn't it also important to let the ones being educated have a say?

Olson emphasizes the importance of student contribution, saying, "So something gets reconsidered, and there's no student input to say, 'That book was amazing and it changed my life' or 'Yep, that book drove me crazy and I never want to see it ever again.'" Despite the challenges and frustrations she faces in interpreting and enforcing SF 496 in the WBCSD, Olson remains hopeful that librarians like her can continue to serve as a light for their students.

"I'm still here because sometimes I think having a person who's an advocate is just as powerful as having a book that's the advocate, and I'm hoping that I can be that

person for some of the students," she beamed. "Even if I can't get them the materials, there's somebody behind them cheering them up."

Effects on the Literary Circle

As the time came closer for the literary circle to begin ordering books for its members, concerns over whether the club's first selection, *Firekeeper's Daughter*, would be considered lawful began to arise.

Although the novel's target audience is high school students and is in the young adult genre, a scene of sexual assault against the main character lead the book to be reconsidered for this year's discussions.

It was a tough decision on book club advisor Elizabeth Gallagher's and principal Sara Oswald's parts to put *Firekeeper's Daughter* on hold. Despite the book being highly acclaimed, they had to consider the attention it may have brought the school with the law currently spotlighting and scrutinizing Iowa schools.

"There's no obligation to read the book that we pick," said Gallagher, "but the two of us just decided together that it wouldn't be the best option for this year."

Gallagher does note that it wasn't a difficult transition to the book the club recently voted to read: *Black Chalk* by Christopher J. Yates.

"I feel that there are so many good books in the world that it was not a hardship to change books for this," she said.

This doesn't mean, however, that Gallagher didn't feel the club was capable of handling the book's more sensitive topics. From past experience, she holds a deep trust in the club to handle mature topics.

"I feel that if we had read *Firekeeper's Daughter*... we would have handled the rape scene in a mature way and we certainly wouldn't have dwelled on that," insisted Gallagher.

As a whole, Gallagher has faith in all of her students' abilities to hold mature conversations around difficult topics, saying, "I've never had difficulty with any student just rising to the level that they need to rise to... I haven't had any immaturity."

The literary circle hopes to be able to read *Firekeeper's Daughter* in the future once they have a better understanding of the law. They will reevaluate the novel later in the year, once they've finished reading *Black Chalk*, to see whether it will be an option for the second semester.

Although the year began with disappointment, the club has plenty of opportunities for rich literary discussion and bookish fun on the horizon.

Previous selection: *Firekeeper's Daughter* by Angeline Boulley

The literary circle's initial selection was the highly acclaimed debut novel by Angeline Boulley, *Firekeeper's Daughter*. The best-selling book, which is now being adapted by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company for Netflix, has garnered numerous awards and was named one of the "100 Best YA Books of All Time" by *Time* magazine.

One of the biggest factors considered when the club initially chose the book was to dive into a story about another cul-

ture. The novel centers around 18-year-old Daunis Fontaine, an Ojibwe girl. By reading such a highly-praised book featuring Ojibwe culture, they hoped to highlight and analyze another culture.

Olson, who has read the book, explained the significance of representing Ojibwe culture, saying, "There are so few Native American authors that to have a Native American book with a strong female character written by a female of Native American ancestry is huge, and she's writing a very realistic 'caught in two worlds' story. I loved it."

New selection: *Black Chalk* by Christopher J. Yates

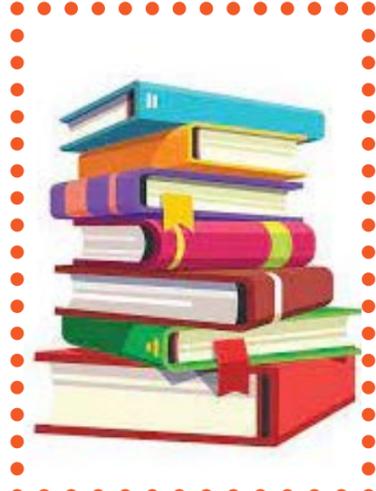
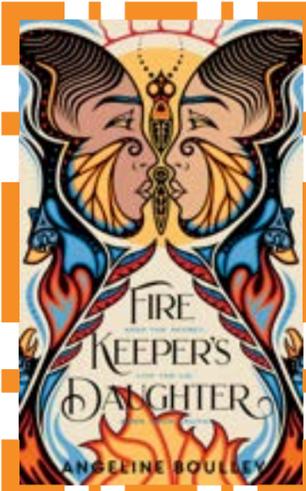
Despite facing challenges in selecting materials for this year's club, the literary circle began reading their first novel for the year, *Black Chalk* by Christopher J. Yates. The psychological thriller is reminiscent of the club's book from last year, *If We Were Villains* by M.L.L. Rio, which was well-received by the club.

"I felt like [the literary circle] must have liked the mystery intrigue," speculated Gallagher about why they were drawn to *Black Chalk*. "And I also think that

it was college-aged kids who were the protagonists... I think that this group of readers likes to read about at least kids their age, or adults. They're all strong readers, and I feel like they liked the idea of the college setting, because the book we read last year was a college setting as well."

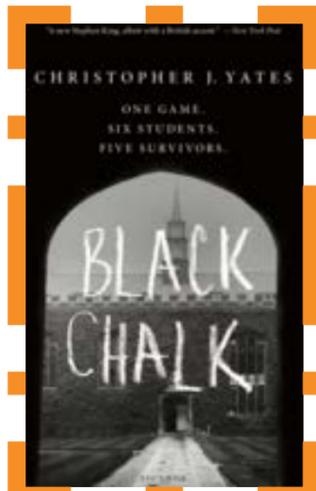
The students agreed with Gallagher that the intriguing mystery aspect was what drew them in.

"I am a sucker for a good thriller and this book seems to bring more of a twist to the idea," said member Katey Lenocho. "A group of friends doing fun truth or dare gone wrong and now they come back years later for the final round. My cup of tea!"



Black Chalk Synopsis

It was only ever meant to be a game played by six best friends in their first year at Oxford University; a game of consequences, silly forfeits, and childish dares. But then the game changed: The stakes grew higher and the dares became more personal and more humiliating, finally evolving into a vicious struggle with unpredictable and tragic results. Now, fourteen years later, the remaining players must meet again for the final round. Who knows better than your best friends what would break you? A gripping psychological thriller partly inspired by the author's own time at Oxford University, *Black Chalk* is perfect for fans of the high tension and expert pacing of *The Secret History* and *The Bellwether Revivals*. The author's background in puzzle writing and setting can clearly be seen in the plotting of this clever, tricky book that will keep you guessing to the very end.



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