

THE EDUCATION ISSUE

How Book Bans Turned a Texas Town Upside Down

In a political environment where book-banning efforts are being used to drive voter sentiment, librarians find themselves on the front lines.

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The group began convening around lunchtime last summer, inside of the rose-beige conference room at the Llano Library. They sat on red plastic chairs atop drab carpet, surrounded by donated dolls representing world cultures. Speaking in hushed tones about children's books, sometimes they also prayed together. Rhonda Schneider, a librarian who was also a member of the group, had recently tipped them off to a few new titles she found questionable at the branch. They grew fixated on a series by Dawn McMillan and Ross Kinnaird, which included "My Butt Is So Noisy!" "I Broke My Butt!" and "I Need a New Butt!"

"A new butt! Mine's got a crack," one book begins. "I can see in the mirror a crack at the back." The character then tries to figure out how it happened. Did he get the crack from going down the slide, or riding his BMX bike, or from a fart? He imagines all the new butts he could have: spotted purple and yellow, or a mural of watercolors, or an alien butt made from titanium that is fireproof, bulletproof and bombproof. "Kids loved it," says Tricia Dwyer-Morgan, a member of Llano's technology-services staff at the time.

Dwyer-Morgan remembers Schneider's telling her that the books were "grooming stuff," referencing a tactic that abusers use to gain the trust of a young victim. "We can't have that in the library."

From her perch near the kids' stage and kitchen toys, Dwyer-Morgan's colleague Tina Castelan, who became the Llano children's librarian three years ago, watched the butt-book drama unfold. "I was trying to be a good little librarian," Castelan told me. "A good little soldier." Wanting to better understand the concerns of the group, she researched the butt books for hours and found no credible documentation of the series being linked to pedophilia or pornography. Some of the titles, it turned out, were acclaimed best sellers.

A patron of the library since she was 5, Castelan remembers visiting the branch in high school and finding the novel "Impulse," by Ellen Hopkins, about three suicidal teenagers. It helped her cope with her own depression and feelings of alienation. When she tells people that story, some will respond that no kid should have been allowed to read so explicitly about suicide. But while she was growing up, the Llano librarians never questioned her choices. "If I hadn't read that book," she told me, "or read more books along the same line, I wouldn't be here." The librarians became a steady presence in her life. "I needed a place like this." When the butt-book complaints first began, she was concerned, but quietly continued doing her job.

Over the next few weeks, calls to restrict the books only intensified, spreading through churches and on social media. Another Llano resident, Eva Carter, who owns and manages local rental properties, remembered friends from the group, mostly mothers, showing her the illustrations that had troubled them. "There was a little kid bent over with his bare butt," Carter told me. "An adult painting on his behind." ("Why not an arty-farty butt?" the book reads. "One not to be forgotten, with watercolors on the top and a mural on the bottom.") Carter became a Christian in 1996, after hearing a Billy Graham sermon on television. "Getting the filthy books up out of their reach," she said. "That's what I'm about." Carter, who is active on local boards, connected the group with a judge and other members of the county commissioners court.

'It's a battle between good and evil.'

By early August, two of the butt books and several more that had been called out by the group vanished from Llano Library's shelves and online catalog listings, including Jane Bexley's "Larry the Farting Leprechaun," "Gary the Goose and His Gas on the Loose," "Freddie the Farting Snowman" and "Harvey the Heart Had Too Many Farts," along with "My Butt Is So Noisy!" and "I Broke My Butt!" Amber Milum, the Llano County Library System's director, handles purchasing books for all three of the county's public libraries. In early October, she wrote an email with the subject "Butt Books" to the commissioners explaining that the situation had been handled: "All of the books have been in my file cabinet in the office."

That fall, tensions flared again around the time Castelan would have normally created a display as part of Banned Books Week. In previous years, she decorated it with fire symbols or caution tape and attached labels to each book: “I’m banned because I’m considered pornography,” or “I’m banned because I’m too depressing.” She would exhibit books like “The Diary of a Young Girl,” by Anne Frank; “In the Night Kitchen,” by Maurice Sendak; and a sex-education book, “It’s Perfectly Normal,” by Robie H. Harris. But that year, in 2021, she was asked to forgo the display.

Castelan was then surprised when Jerry Don Moss, a member of the Llano County Commissioners Court, showed up at the Llano Library, asking her to point out the most controversial books in the building. She directed him to some that had typically been on the banned-books display. Castelan watched Moss zero in on “It’s Perfectly Normal.” The graphic novel, intended for inclusive discussions around sexuality, depicts nudity. Moss told Castelan the book was inappropriate, but Castelan knew it had been on the shelves at least since she was in sixth grade. Why was it suddenly an issue now?

After Moss’s visit, Milum removed “It’s Perfectly Normal” from the system, along with “In the Night Kitchen,” which, she said in a court statement, “contains illustrations of a naked toddler whose genitals are depicted throughout the book.” Milum said that both books had been checked out “too infrequently to remain on the shelves.” She later wrote an email to Suzette Baker, the head of the Kingsland Library, a 25-minute drive down the highway from Llano’s library:

Hey Suzette,

With everything going on with the people being angry at almost everything the libraries are doing. We all need to watch what we say. ... You never know if someone is listening. ... I spoke with Commissioner Moss yesterday, he said that there are a few people who are trying to start in on Kingsland now too. ... He said all these people are watching the libraries like a hawk and they are pouncing on anything they can. ... We are constantly looking over our shoulders. I don’t want this to come y’all’s way so be on the lookout and cautious.

At the end of the email, Milum wrote: “Kill them with kindness.”

Baker replied: “OMG!!!!!!!!!! They need to get a hobby.”

Over the last year, campaigns to ban books have erupted throughout school districts and local libraries across the country. The American Library Association, which tracks challenges to library books or resources since 1990, previously documented roughly 300 to 350 complaints annually, with most challenges targeting a single title each. But in 2021 alone, the association noted 729 complaints against 1,597 different books. It has been “an unprecedented increase in the number of challenges,” says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, who directs the A.L.A.’s Office for Intellectual Freedom. (A regular target of challenges, and a frequent object of political attacks, has been “The 1619 Project,” a 2019 special issue of this magazine and a subsequent best-selling book examining the legacy of slavery in American life.)

Strategies on how to lodge complaints against books are traded on Facebook and shared among branch chapters of parental rights groups. One of the most influential of these groups is the Florida-based Moms for Liberty. Since its inception in January 2021, it has grown to include more than 200 chapters nationwide, with more than 100,000 members. In some towns, members have compiled their own book lists with dozens of titles.

“What you’re seeing are moms and dads communicating across the country now,” Tiffany Justice, a founder of Moms for Liberty, told me. Justice sees their effort to restrict materials in schools as an extension of parental controls imposed on movies or websites. The group has focused its campaigns on school libraries and classroom reading lists as a way of “safeguarding children and childhood innocence,” Justice says. For Moms for Liberty, potentially harmful books include those involving sexual acts as well as titles that tackle L.G.B.T.Q. identity (“gender identity has no place being taught in schools,” Justice says) and critical race theory (which examines how historical patterns of racism are embedded in institutions and which opponents are using to describe teachings about race in schools).

Last year, politicians in Idaho began pushing to ban critical race theory in schools. Parent groups in the state then started contesting titles, some of which had also been flagged by Moms for Liberty. In March, the Idaho house passed a bill aimed at eliminating protections for schools and librarians, opening them up to fines or prosecution for lending books seen as harmful to minors (it stalled in the Idaho Senate). Then in May of this year, a school board in Nampa, Idaho, voted to remove 24 books from shelves, including “The Kite Runner,” by Khaled Hosseini; “The Handmaid’s Tale,” by Margaret Atwood; and “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,” by Sherman Alexie.

Moms for Liberty book lists have also factored into book-censorship efforts in Tennessee. In a complaint filed with the Tennessee Department of Education, a local chapter of Moms for Liberty flagged books including “Ruby Bridges Goes to School,” by Ruby Bridges, about the civil rights icon of school integration, and “Separate is Never Equal,” by Duncan Tonatuih, about a family’s fight to end school segregation in California. The complaint was rejected in November. But at a campaign event a few months later, Coty Wamp, who was running for a local district attorney position, addressed a question from an audience member over whether librarians should be held criminally liable for exposing children to books deemed inappropriate. Wamp replied that she had contacted Moms for Liberty to seek their input on the books and to meet with a local sheriff’s department. “I think that there’s going to come a time in some of these books where it crosses a criminal line,” Wamp said at the meeting. “It’s called contributing to the delinquency of a minor.” (A representative later said, in a statement to the magazine, “Ms. Wamp has no desire or intention to prosecute schoolteachers or librarians.”)

In some cases, books may be pulled using the American Library Association's own most-challenged-books list as a guide. "That list gets shared through social media through organized efforts by these groups," Caldwell-Stone says, adding that political figures have also used book-banning efforts to drive voter sentiment. "We're just seeing a perfect storm of elected officials hopping on the bandwagon."

One of the most prominent figures shaping the debate over book banning in Texas is State Representative Matt Krause, who in October 2021 issued a widely circulated letter to the Texas Education Agency and a group of school-district superintendents listing 849 books he wanted investigated. He asked officials to identify books with "sexually explicit images" or ones that "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." The books on the "Krause list" include "Between the World and Me" and "We Were Eight Years in Power," by Ta-Nehisi Coates; "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," by Michelle Alexander; and "The Fight for LGBTQ+ Rights," by Devlin Smith. The list prompted school districts across the state to remove or review the titles.

As a result of these nationwide efforts, both school and public librarians have felt under attack, their names shared on Facebook or published in newspapers. In Michigan, after some residents in Jamestown Township complained about L.G.B.T.Q.-themed books available in the library, the community voted to slash its operating budget in August (outraged supporters have raised roughly \$250,000 to keep its doors open, but the library's future remains uncertain). In Illinois and California, Proud Boys have shown up at meetings or gatherings dedicated to discussing specific books.

In other towns, librarians have lost their jobs. At the Erie Community Library in Colorado where she had been employed for more than two years, the librarian Brooky Parks held meetings for a "Read Woke" book club, where teenagers would discuss books like "This Is My America," by Kim Johnson; "Watch Us Rise," by Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan; and "American Street," by Ibi Zoboi. The High Plains Library District challenged the program, instituting restrictions and stating that such groups "should not be intended to persuade participants to a particular point of view" or be "intentionally inflammatory," according to its new policy. The district fired Parks, who filed a charge of discrimination and retaliation with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission claiming she was terminated for speaking up against censorship. "They're writing the policy," Parks told me. "It basically allows them the discretion to cancel whatever they want."



"May God protect our children from this FILTH," wrote Bonnie Wallace, whose list of books became a flashpoint in Llano. Photo illustration by Paul Sahre

Coming off the successful curbing of the butt and fart books, Carter, the resident who had first connected the moms to the county commissioners, forwarded an email to supporters linking to an article about the Krause book list. In response, someone asked if anyone was interested in going through the 16-page document “to see if we have any of those books in our library?”

Carter wrote back: “I’ll take a page.” When I spoke to Carter, she told me she didn’t recall why opposition to the butt or sex-education books snowballed to include titles on the Krause list. But Carter supported the county commissioners and prayer-group members. “I think God is using this to bring awareness to people who had no clue what was going on,” she said. “It’s a battle between good and evil.”

When complaints about the butt books began spilling over to the Kingsland branch, Suzette Baker decided to purchase more Christian-themed books for teenagers, like those by Chuck Black, author of a series of biblical allegories set in the Middle Ages. Baker, who was promoted to head librarian in March 2021, believed that a diversity of books and viewpoints would give parents and children more choices.

The book “Critical Race Theory,” by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, also appeared on the library’s shelves. Baker ordered it long before the Krause list began circulating in Llano County, and the book itself was never flagged once the list went around. But Milum knew it was in the library and asked Baker to put it behind the counter. The controversy in Llano, Baker realized, wasn’t about maintaining a wide selection of books representing differing viewpoints. It was about making certain books go away.

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Then, in November 2021, another list began circulating. Bonnie Wallace, a member of the original Llano citizens’ group and a real estate agent who was active in her local Methodist church, wrote an email to the Llano County judge, Ron Cunningham, with the subject line “Pornographic Filth at the Llano County Libraries.” Cunningham oversees the library system and is Milum’s boss. “I’d like all the pastors to get involved in this,” Wallace’s email read. “Perhaps they can organize a weekly prayer vigil for this specific issue. Also, everyone needs to share this on social media.” She ended her letter with the line, “May God protect our children from this FILTH.” Her list became known as “the Bonnie Wallace spreadsheet.”

Milum gave Baker a copy of the spreadsheet, along with each book’s author and branch location and the name of the librarian who purchased it. Baker refused to remove the books, and told Milum that doing so would be censorship. In December, Milum wrote an email to another head librarian in the county system, Melissa Macdougall, informing her of the “good news” that county commissioners had voted to close all three libraries for three days. “We will all be labeling books and checking our shelves for ‘inappropriate’ books.”

“Thanks for the update,” Macdougall wrote back. “I’ll need information/procedures on what constitutes ‘inappropriate’ and on the labeling. I actually don’t see it as good news that we have to close.” She signed off with the tag “Currently reading: Bewilderment by Richard Powers” under her signature.

Five days before Christmas, the branches shut down while Castelan and other librarians found themselves scrambling under orders to go through every book in the children’s section, pulling anything with a semblance of nudity, from potty-training books to how-to-get-dressed books. In the end, Castelan offered up stacks and stacks of books, at least 1,000 titles. “I guess they started to realize, ‘Oh, that’s a lot of books,’” Castelan says. Most of the books ended up right back on the shelves.

One banned book, “In the Night Kitchen,” never made it back on the shelves. Several years ago, the Llano County resident Leila Green Little picked up the book, which features a boy’s dream journey through a baker’s kitchen. The protagonist, Mickey, is illustrated falling into cake batter in the nude. She checked it out and read it to her kids. “It became a family favorite,” she says. By the time Little learned that “In the Night Kitchen” had been purged from Llano’s library system, she had already started speaking up. She had attended a county commissioners court meeting and remembers being among the few voices against the book bans. Undeterred, she made a public statement: “Books in libraries are expressions of ideas,” she said, and then quoted Ray Bradbury, author of “Fahrenheit 451”: “There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches.”

Long before the mandated library closures and the controversies surrounding children’s books, the Llano resident Rebecca Jones remembers the town as the kind of place where people could hold differing views and still get along. She recalled dinners where community members of various political backgrounds watched the presidential debates and then discussed them over dessert. She appreciated the exchange of ideas. Jones grew up in a household much the same. In high school, she once brought home the book “Last Exit to Brooklyn” by Hubert Selby Jr., which depicts a gang rape. “When you are done with this,” her mother told her, “we’re going to talk about it.” Jones had not been paying close attention to the book bans until she tried to download an audiobook from the library back in December.

After Jones tried to log onto OverDrive, she learned that the county commissioners had voted unanimously to suspend access to all of the libraries' 17,000 digital titles. That's when Jones began poking around and learned that books from the Bonnie Wallace spreadsheet and the Krause list had been flagged in the system. "I can tell you that at least some of these books show drawings, cartoonlike drawings of sexual acts between two young boys," wrote one resident, Larry Huston, on the Llano County TX Rants & Raves Facebook page, in a discussion about the libraries that drew nearly 300 comments.

Jones was shocked by the censorship. She began emailing the county commissioners and telling people she knew at the art guild and the local knitting group. Soon, she found herself connected to Little, the mother whose kids loved "In the Night Kitchen," whom Jones had never met. Most who opposed the book bans — parents, grandparents and retirees — did not know one another, and did not even share the same political backgrounds. "We sort of all just found each other by screaming about it," Jones said. The group started gathering regularly, joining Little at the public meetings to speak out. They pooled their money and spent around \$2,000 on public-records requests, resulting in nearly 5,000 pages of documents, including emails to county officials and librarians.

By January, the commissioners court had voted to dissolve the library board and appointed a new one, which included those who had originally advocated for restricting the butt books. Community members and librarians began attending the new meetings, taking notes and asking to make public statements about the bans. The county then decided the meetings would no longer be open to the public.

Around that time, Suzette Baker heard news that a pastor in Tennessee had organized a public book-burning event in early February, and images of a giant bonfire and books ablaze were recorded and posted on Facebook, as a crowd tossed famous titles into the fire. In response, Baker updated a sign near the entrance of the Kingsland Library to read, "We put the 'lit' in literature." Inside, she set up a display of historically banned books like "1984," "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Fahrenheit 451." She also featured books from the Bonnie Wallace spreadsheet that she had refused to remove, including "How to Be an Antiracist," by Ibram X. Kendi, and "Between the World and Me." Baker said Milum showed up the next day to the Kingsland branch and told her to replace the "lit" sign and remove the display.

A month later, on March 9, Baker arrived at the library before it opened to begin her shift. Milum and a representative from the county's human-resources department pulled her aside and handed her a notice, which stated that her recent behavior was upsetting other people and that Baker was making decisions beyond her authority. "You have been terminated," it read.

On April 25, Little, Jones and five other Llano County residents filed a federal lawsuit against Milum, Judge Cunningham and the county commissioners, as well as members of the new library board, including Wallace, for violating their constitutional rights by restricting and banning books and closing board meetings to the public. Wallace, Cunningham and other defendants in the case did not respond to interview requests or declined to talk, citing the continuing litigation.

The lawsuit is among a wave of other legal actions that have emerged in the wake of the book bans. Two months earlier, the A.C.L.U. of Missouri filed a lawsuit on behalf of two students against the Wentzville School District over its decision to remove eight books from school libraries including "The Bluest Eye," by Toni Morrison; "Heavy: An American Memoir," by Kiese Laymon; and "Modern Romance," by Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg. The lawsuit argues that the books (most of which have since been put back on the shelves) were banned because they discuss race, gender and sexual identity. "The government can't just remove books from shelves because it disagrees with the ideas inside of those books," says Vera Eidelman of the A.C.L.U. But in August, Missouri lawmakers banned books with "explicit sexual material," from schools, making it a crime punishable by a fine or up to a year in prison for any educator or librarian who "provides, assigns, supplies, distributes, loans or coerces acceptance" of such books to students. The A.C.L.U. had also filed motions in Virginia to dismiss lawsuits aimed at blocking statewide sales and distribution of "Gender Queer," by Maia Kobabe, and "A Court of Mist and Fury," by Sarah J. Maas. On Aug. 30, a judge dismissed the lawsuits, which would have criminalized the distribution of those books in the state.

In Llano, lawyers for the defendants stated in court records that plaintiffs "can still check out and read every one of the disputed books through the Llano County library system," whether through an interlibrary loan, an "in-house checkout" system (in which a personal or donated book is made available to patrons) or through a new online book database. OverDrive has since been replaced with "a more expansive" online database of books, defendants stated. They also said that Milum did not get rid of all books listed on the Bonnie Wallace spreadsheet, citing 41 titles that still sat on shelves.

Milum would not discuss the specifics of the case with me, but she did explain the book-weeding process, which she says the libraries used in determining which titles should be removed. Some books are weeded because they are damaged or old. Others are replaced by newer editions. Some are culled because they are deemed misleading or factually inaccurate. Others are determined to have no discernible literary or scientific merit or are considered irrelevant to the needs and interests of the community. Milum, who told me she doesn't remember the specific justification for removing each book named in the legal filings, said that the books would have been weeded anyway. After residents began complaining about some of them, "there was kind of no point in putting them on the shelves," she says. "If people were just going to keep complaining, you know, it's kind of like: 'OK, I hear you. Let's buy something else.'"

Castelan, for her part, has been challenging Milum and the county commissioners in staff and public meetings. (As a result, she says, she gets regular visits from human-resources staff members.) She has also begun recording workplace conversations and meetings. She played one recording for me from a recent meeting in which Milum was showing the staff a stash of books she was keeping on a shelf in the back office. When Castelan looked at the books more closely, she realized they were books from the Bonnie Wallace list.

When I visited, Castelan led me into the back office and pointed to a shelf. There, between two metal bookends, stood “It’s Perfectly Normal”; “Freakboy,” by Kirstin Elizabeth Clark; “Shine,” by Chris Grabenstein; “Spinning,” by Tillie Walden; “Gabi, A Girl in Pieces,” by Isabel Quintero; “Where the Crawdads Sing,” by Delia Owens; and others. “It’s to the point where I’m now understanding that the county, they want to do things the way they want to do it,” she said, “regardless of the way it’s supposed to be done. So if they want to fire me, they could find some reason to.”

After Baker’s firing (over which she filed a charge of discrimination and retaliation with the E.E.O.C. on Aug. 30), the Kingsland branch is still short-staffed. The librarians who remain continue to worry that anything they post on social media or say publicly about the case could cost them their jobs. Over the summer, the county commissioners voted to close the libraries on Saturdays and proposed a \$152,466 cut to the library system’s budget for the coming fiscal year.

Baker’s blue-painted office remains unused, with stacks of cardboard boxes and filing cabinets unopened behind a glass door. Inside sit rows of donated books, which the county has not allowed to be processed into the library system or made available to the public. No new books or DVDs have been purchased or put on shelves since October. The office contained titles like “Lies My Teacher Told me,” by James W. Loewen; “Lord of the Flies,” by William Golding; and “Breaking Dawn,” from the “Twilight” series by Stephenie Meyer. Tucked away on a top red rolling shelf were “I Broke My Butt” and “My Butt is So Noisy.”

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