*It Wasn’t the Last Time I was Called Pedophile Just for Being a Gay School Librarian*

 I was honored to serve on the Georgia Children’s Book Award (GCBA) middle grades state committee from 2017-2020. Winners of the GCBA award have included the books *Wonder* by R.J. Polacio and *Projekt 1065* by Alan Gratz. I’ve read the books longlisted for the award through the years and purchased the titles to put in my school’s library. The book list is also used for a statewide reading bowl program. My first position as a school library media specialist was in an affluent public school in Atlanta. The community was diverse and supported my library with both volunteerism and funding beyond my expectations. I created the first reading bowl team at that school and twice won the school system, and divisional, levels. The team reached the semi-finals of state twice.

 It was a natural fit then for me to apply to be on the state wide award committee as I’d known their book list intimately over the years. And while I knew the titles well, there was another reason I wanted to be on the committee. That was to expand it’s book list to be more inclusive and representative of the students of Georgia. The list usually veered to typical middle grade books, heavy on fantasy and contemporary family archetype characters. But Georgia is more than that, and I really wanted to see more BIPOC and LGBTQ+ centered books. To my knowledge, prior to my tenure on the committee, no LGBTQ+ book was ever on the longlist.

The committee is comprised of educators and librarians from around the state. Throughout the year we read and read, suggest titles for others to read, and score these books on a rubric. All of this is done remotely. Eventually, that exhaustive reading gets narrowed down to a list of books to consider and we meet in the spring to hash it out. The committee spends an entire Saturday making that longlist. There are debates, conversations, advocations, and compromise. This is simply the condensed version of a very in-depth and thoughtful process.

Even though I was a first year on the committee I fought hard for what I saw as glaring holes in representation. That year there were a number of amazing books with LGBTQ+ characters and storylines that were age appropriate for our target grades of 4-8. Because the census erroneously fails to count LGBTQ+ persons in America, we can only find guesstimates. Most approximate that Georgia has a 4% LBGTQ+ per capita population, ranking eighth in the nation.

I’m never one to shy away from my opinions. While just a first-year member of the committee, on a three-year appointment, I knew time was of the essence so I hit the ground running and put up a number of LBGTQ+ books for consideration. When the big day came for our meeting, an all day event, I advocated strongly. To extraordinary joy, there was support and not pushback. Two age appropriate LGBTQ+ books made the list. Richard Peck’s *The Best Man* about a kid being in his uncle’s wedding to another man, and Donna Gephart’s *Lily & Dunkin* about a young Trans American as one of the two protagonist.

As a young reader, I never saw characters that were like me. The absence of gay, male teens in books easily led me to believe there was something wrong with me. As a voracious reader, a lack of representation meant I shouldn’t exist in my mind. In high school, I came out to my mother and she hid books in the bottom of her desk drawer and told me I could read them if I wanted. That act of hiding them out of sight was telling me to hide myself. I was given a chance to remedy that for young readers in 2018. And I was proud that I just didn’t look to fill a void for me but also by advocating for a Trans themed book as well.

I remember leaving that day with such a feeling of accomplishment. The long list also included books by amazing BIPOC writers as well. This list was comprehensive and inclusive. It truly was putting into the hands of Georgia’s young readers a panoramic view of the world through literature.

I remember posting on social media my excitement. Friends and co-workers had to hear ad nauseum about this over dinners and lunch breaks. When the list came out, I eagerly couldn’t wait to share with my reading bowl team what an amazing time they’d have reading these books.

Then I opened my work email.

It was flooded.

With hate.

I began to shake a little.

I was afraid of what this meant.

My inbox was filled with incensed parents, and some non-parents, from across Georgia demanding a retraction of the two LGBTQ+ books on the list. It was a precursor to what is going on today with book banning and so-called parental rights. The emails threatened my job, which wouldn’t be the first or last time a very riled up parent would do that. Other emails threatened litigation.

But the worst were the ones that threatened me with the law and called me a pedophile and child pornographer. I truly feared a knock on my door from police. My experience with police in Georgia was not a positive one. Even in the 21st century, police still raided gay bars in Atlanta. Atlanta police seemingly ignored all the wrongdoing at straight bars, but if it were a gay bar, I feared what would happen by just being there even when doing nothing wrong. The police seemed to relish in doing perp walks for gay bar raids.

As an over-explainer, I wanted to draft lengthy emails back. Luckily, I texted a dear lawyer friend who crafted a two sentence reply for me. While all of us on the committee got emails, I was the only one who was called pedophile to my knowledge.

Why?

Because of a pink shirt.

The GCBA had a website with all the committee members’ bios and pictures. While it did not disclose email or home addresses, it did disclose where we worked. Easy enough for hundreds of people to fill my inbox with threats. I have no doubt that my picture screamed gay to people and with a quick Google search to my socials, it would be confirmed.

While it sucked to get hate email, I’m proud that when people search me they can conclude I’m gay. I’m proud of the fact I do not hide.

But this was another level. I told no one this. The accusation of pedophile was scary. How could someone accuse me of such a thing just for a booklist? Even today, radical conservatives throw that word around so casually. If you disagree with one MAGA talking point, you too can be accused of pedophilia. Look at any GOP candidate’s socials or Fox News comments that Trump has come against. His followers will throw that word around. Worse, radical conservatives will make false narratives that LGBTQ+ is adding a P to the acronym cause they lie and say we support pedophilia.

While this longlist is not mandatory reading in Georgia, it is used by the state wide reading bowl. That is where things got tricky. As a committee we have nothing to do with the reading bowl, it is a separate entity altogether. They just use our list for some reason. While the reading bowl is an outside of school activity, and not mandatory, it created some legal muddy waters. In the end, the list, and those books still stands intact today.

However, the lasting impact of those hateful emails and baseless accusations had a long term emotional and psychological impact. The next year, I had no fight left in me and didn’t advocate for LGBTQ+ books. In my view, as a committee, we all were exhausted by the experience and played it safe. The next year’s list was inclusive regarding race. Books about the Native American undefeated football team, a book with a Middle Eastern teen protagonist, and a book about the American Japanese interment camps during WWII. But there was no LGBTQ+ book. Worse, the book that ended up winning was about a dog. Not to diss dogs, I’ve adopted many, but it’s not novel nor inspiring. It’s safe. Exactly the way we played it as a committee.

With my email safe from pedophile accusations and threats of sending the police to my doorstep, I’d gotten my mojo back and my fight for year three. While there wasn’t the same number of young adult LGBTQ+ books on my radar as I’d hoped that year, one book was a standout. *George* (now titled *Melissa)* by Alex Gino. It was such an important book to me that year. I’ve always noticed a slight divide in my community regarding the T in our acronym. Because I saw this, I was so happy to find an age appropriate, and important, Trans representation for young readers in my state. While *Lilly & Dunkin* may have read a tad too adult for some rural and suburban Georgians, this book was not. It was absent of any questionable phrasings and material that could be questioned by readers. It was personal, relatable, and accessible. I loved this book. While I have always felt a need to represent my youthful experience as a gay, male teen in books, I know the youthful Trans experience is pushed even further to the margins in our country, even more so today as radical conservative news outlets attack Trans youth daily. This was my book I was going to advocate for.

In a tragicomic fate, the day the committee was scheduled to meet was the same day as state semi-finals for the reading bowl, the same competition that uses our book list. And guess whose team was in the semi-finals? Yep. Mine. There was no choice to make. I would never let my students and their hard work down. I was so proud of them.

And I was confident that the committee, knowing that our booklist is used by this competition would be willing to reschedule. I was wrong. They weren’t as I was the only one who could not make it. Fine, I thought to myself. I’ll send two titles knowing that *George* (now titled *Melissa)* was a shoe in. I sent an email to the chair listing this book first, and my runner up was Katherine Paterson’s *My Brigadista Year,* an historical fiction novel about Fidel Castro’s literacy program. I had no doubt in my mind that my first choice would be on the list.

It wasn’t.

I don’t know what happened in that meeting.

I instantly sent an email with my request for a reconsideration, but was met with a no and that one of my books made the list, albeit not my top book. I interpreted it in a manner that it was a done deal.

So I removed myself from the committee and sent a heartfelt email rescinding my participation in the state conference where we present the list and classroom activities and lesson. I told the chair I did not see myself in this list at all, and if I couldn’t see myself represented, I couldn’t represent the committee. However, my name and picture still appears on their website from those years. I leave it be.

What happened and what I think happened may not be in alignment with that day. But since I wasn’t there, I will never know. I do think it was a bit wrong to hold the meeting the same day as the competition that uses our books. We should all be in attendance to celebrate the books and celebrate the kids demanding work in the competition who read them. I don’t think it was intentional, but had I chaired it, I would clearly reconsider the date. I did give them a months’ notice when I asked for a reschedule.

In addition, with a member out for a noticeably clear and acceptable reason, I would never make the list finalized until that person had some input. This is the age of the internet and Zoom after all. Previous years had members remote in, they could have asked me to Zoom in briefly between competition rounds. But that did not happen.

My little protest is minor. I know that. But it is significant and meaningful to me. The chair did send me a note she was heartbroken by my decision. I found that ironic that their heart was the broken one in their mind. Wasn’t I the one whose voice was not heard, wasn’t I the one locked out of the process? Wasn’t my teenage, underrepresented self, and all LGBTQ+ Georgia kids, the ones whose hearts were the broken ones by not being represented on that list? Their response of their heart broken was akin to *let me tell you how your pain impacts me* type of statement. It fell on my deaf ears.

What’s done is done and there were lessons to be learned. For years, I took things in stride, took it on the chin, and sucked it up. But this was a time I couldn’t and didn’t. I believe I will never accept things after this stand that I find wrong regarding LGBTQ+ kids and books. I found a voice, albeit quiet, but a voice, nonetheless. No one knew about it, but I knew. I also learned the power radical conservatives have. The GCBA list, to my knowledge, has never had LGBTQ+ representation since. I could be wrong as I’ve not read all the titles since my tenure, but from summaries, it appears I may be right. The attacks from radical conservatives on LGBTQ+ Americans is so high, including in Georgia, it makes perfect sense the GCBA would unconsciously avoid queer representation. I know it’s not because of a lack of titles. There are a plethora of amazing LGBTQ+ books out there for them to put on their longlist. That makes me want to make my voice louder, hence writing this.

Lastly, I do find it funny that the one book I proposed that made the longlist that year was about a communist, Marxist leader’s literacy program in Cuba. Funny I didn’t get any emails that year about that book. Seems that the parents of Georgia aren’t as obsessed with calling out liberals for being socialists or communists or Marxists as they are with slanderously calling LGBTQ+ educators pedophiles. I no longer work for that district so I cannot access those hateful people’s emails. But if I could today, I would publicly out them and properly call them slanderers. Perhaps that is the lesson I learned the most. I will no longer be fearful when called something I am not. I will call that person what they are, and call them to the carpet.