

Librarians are targets in culture war

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FULL TEXT

FALL RIVER

David Mello leads the children's section of the 19th-century library in the center of the city, a longtime public servant whose ready smile turns rueful when he recalls the ugly protest on its granite steps late last year. About 20 neo-Nazis shouted at adults and children as they arrived Dec. 10 for Drag Story Hour, a library event in which volunteers who are dressed in drag read books to children. The readers were denounced as pedophiles. Antisemitic slurs were hurled at an adult there wearing a yarmulke. And protesters flashed the Nazi salute. "It's now come to our doorstep," Mello said. "In a building where everyone should feel comfortable, it saddens you that people have to be worried violent protesters might be outside."

In Fall River and communities across the nation, libraries find themselves on the front line of the increasingly bitter culture wars. Books are being challenged and removed, events such as Drag Story Hours are being canceled because of safety concerns, and librarians are harassed and insulted in the workplace, sometimes being denounced as "pedophiles" and "groomers."

"This is a program that teaches inclusiveness and tolerance, and Lord knows we need more of that in our lives," Mello said. "This is alarming to see. The library should be a place of free thought and free-flowing ideas."

The Fall River protest is only one example of a coordinated, nationwide effort to bar or restrict access to books and programming deemed objectionable by a rapidly growing number of parent groups and conservative organizations, with much of the targeted material in schools and public libraries relating to sexual identity or race.

Protests against Drag Story Hours have occurred elsewhere in Massachusetts, including vitriolic ones at libraries in Taunton and Holbrook. Public libraries in Boston increased security for the events.

"Challenges are pouring in left and right," said Andrea Fiorillo, head of research and reader services at the Reading Public Library, as well as co-chairwoman of the Massachusetts Library Association's committee for intellectual freedom and social responsibility. "This is super well-organized."

A September survey of Massachusetts public libraries found that challenges, objections, and disruptions over books and programming nearly quadrupled in 2021, rising to a combined total of 78 from 20 the previous year, according to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners.

The survey included responses from 103 libraries, which indicates that the full statewide total is much higher. Its steep trajectory in Massachusetts, one of the bluest states in the country, mirrors the rise nationwide.

The American Library Association tracked 729 challenges in 2021 to library, school, and university materials and services across the country, efforts that resulted in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals.

In the first nine months of 2022, the association found 681 attempts to ban or restrict library resources, with 1,651 titles being targeted. Many challenges took aim at multiple books at a time.

Looking solely at US schools, PEN America, a nonprofit organization that promotes free expression, documented 2,532 individual books being banned there from July 2021 to June 2022, a move that affected 1,648 titles.

Challenges in Massachusetts are posing an increasing emotional burden on librarians and municipal officials who oversee community libraries. More and more, dehumanizing attacks —in person and online —are becoming part of the job, librarians said.

"Every week, you're kind of navigating something, and that can deplete your tank. But if you don't call them out,

who's going to do it?" said Allyson Dowds, head of public services at the Reading Public Library. "Just because you disagree with a viewpoint, it doesn't mean it shouldn't exist."

Some encounters have been ugly, she said.

Library staff have been called "groomers, pedophiles, or accused of sexually exploiting children via phone calls, social media posts, and in person," Dowds said. "This 'script' is an unfortunate and common experience playing out in libraries across the country."

Topping the list of books being challenged in Reading, as well as many libraries elsewhere, is "Gender Queer," a graphic 2019 memoir written and illustrated by Maia Kobabe, who recounts her exploration of gender identity and journey from adolescence to adulthood.

"This is pornography!" one person who objected to the book shouted angrily in the Reading Public Library, the librarians recalled.

Many complaints at their core seem directed at the types of people characterized in the books, rather than the books themselves, Fiorillo said. Often, the targets are characters and voices from the LGBTQ community, Blacks and Latinos, and Native Americans whose stories traditionally do not appear in the mainstream press.

Fiorillo summarized the critics' mindset this way: "We do not want to hear these people. We do not want to hear these stories. We never had to listen to these stories before, and don't let my children hear them."

The nature of challenges has changed significantly. In the past, they typically would emerge from a single parent or patron. Now, many challenges are initiated by outside groups, which librarians said seem to use a similar playbook, sometimes even calling for criminal background checks of supervised library presenters.

In Dighton, the library has faced a challenge over "Seeing Gender," a book by Iris Gottlieb that explores the history, science, and sociology of gender identity and sexuality. The challenge occurred after the library had posted a list of new additions to its collection, said Jocelyn Tavares, the library director.

"I expected at some point we were going to see something," said Tavares, who added that the library's copy of "Seeing Gender" is currently checked out.

"It feels very pervasive," Tavares said of book challenges generally. "It's another issue that's a wedge in the conversation."

In the past, she said, "we've always been able to have conversations with parents, and parents take the active role about the information sources their children have. We respect where families are and whatever is right for them."

When asked to describe the new stresses in her profession, Tavares paused for several seconds.

"I don't have the words," she said softly. "I don't want to antagonize anyone."

At the Fall River Public Library, where "The People's University" is carved in granite above the entrance, assistant administrator Kathryn Kulpa said the ordeal has reinforced a commitment to the institution's purpose.

"Our staff was very shaken up," Kulpa said of the December protest. "We don't want anyone to get hurt, but we don't want them to win. We don't want hate, bigotry, and violence to shut down what this library is doing."

The status of Drag Story Hour is one example of that determination. At a story hour in January, more than 100 supporters demonstrated outside the library, protected by police and dwarfing a half-dozen protesters.

The readings have been discontinued there for the time being, but library officials said they expect to bring the event back.

Although the story hours and book offerings displease some people, Kulpa said, they continue to serve a purpose.

"You may not like it, but that doesn't mean it's not going to be worthwhile to somebody else," Kulpa said.

In Reading, the challenges have not pressured library officials to change policy, which Fiorillo and Dowds said requires rigorous in-house vetting of books and publications that are added to the collection.

"We should be leading with our values, which also means we'll have something that offends someone," Fiorillo said. "We know who we are. Our message is the more democratic message."

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