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We All Have the Right to Read What We Want

Yolanda Hood
University of Central Florida



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We All Have the Right to Read What We Want

By Yolanda Hood
UCF Forum columnist
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There are people who I am thankful for in the trajectory of my “success” in life, especially my family and my elementary school librarian, Mrs. Walker.

I was Mrs. Walker’s student assistant in third and fourth grades. I ran basic errands for her and alphabetized the checkout cards. But mostly I read books. And she encouraged me to read whatever I wanted, anywhere in the library. It didn’t matter if they were fiction or nonfiction, suited for a kindergartener or a fifth grader. If I wanted to read the book I could read the book.

All of my family members were the same way. Not once do I recall any family member suggesting that I not read a book because of the maturity level of the content.

The result of so much freedom to choose was that I grew up reading well above my grade level, did astronomically well on standardized tests, and even got a few scholarships to college.

What *didn’t* happen as a result of the freedom to choose my books? Well, I didn’t start or join any gangs. I didn’t engage in teenage sex or become a teen-pregnancy statistic. I didn’t vandalize anyone’s property. Nor did I stop believing in God.

And let me tell you, I read some pretty strong stuff by the time I reached the eighth grade: *The Godfather*, *Lolita*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, *Wifey*. I knew all about S&M well before *Fifty Shades of Grey* made an appearance. Geez, *Fifty Shades* is light fare compared to some of the stuff I read as a kid.

Relax. I chose softer stuff too: *The Hobbit*, *Jane Eyre*, *Watership Down*. But, the common denominator among all of these books is that I was allowed to choose them. No one attempted to stop me, and I am no worse for the wear. Actually, I’m probably better.

So, this brings me to the unfortunate incident that happened in the Seminole County School District in early February.

An Orlando television news station, WFTV, in an investigative report said a parent complained that her 9-year-old third-grader brought home the multi-award-winning graphic novel, *This One Summer*, by Jillian and Mariko Tamaki. In this coming-of-age story, a young girl lets go of her innocence in the wake of her mother's heavy grief over a miscarriage and the whispers of her parents' possible divorce.

The Seminole parent was concerned that the book's content was too much for her child to handle. That's awesome. We educators love concerned parents, parents who take active roles in their children's lives. But that's just it, isn't it? She has to take an active role in her *own* child's life and not in the lives of other children.

She asked the question: "Do they need to know this stuff? And if they do, do they need to hear it from the school or do they need to hear it from their parents? That's the question that the screening process needs to do."

Actually, that's not what a school system's screening process needs to do or should do. And, if everyone involved espouses the principals of intellectual freedom and First Amendment rights, things might have played out in a more appropriate manner – rather than the school system considering to remove the book from middle and high schools.

In a perfect world this is what *should* happen: Libraries have policies in place to ensure that good, quality books reach the shelves. If there is a challenge to a book, a committee should be called together. The committee should consist of educators, parents, and community members. Each committee member should read the book, not scan, and should review the gathered supporting materials for the book such as reviews, awards and testimonials.

Then, and only then, should a decision be made by that committee and honored by all involved. The principal should never make the decision about the book, and the decision should never be made based on someone's religious beliefs or practices. The decision should be based on the quality of the writing, the supporting materials, curriculum use, and popularity. And, a factor that no school system can ignore: whether the book mirrors the people, circumstances, and diversity of the school community.

I read this book when it was first published in 2014. It is a good book. Is it appropriate for an elementary school? In my opinion, probably not. But, we have policies and procedures in place to address this. An “investigative” report was not necessary.

In my years as a librarian I have observed that we don’t ever have to censor books. Children self-censor every single day. If children think a book is too violent, sexual, or vulgar, they will not finish the book; it will be too uncomfortable. They will put it down or return it to the library.

My 14-year-old, who attends a Seminole County school, abhors violent and sexual content in books. So, when she asks for guidance before reading particular titles, I steer her away from books with that kind of content. I don’t let her read those books unless she decides she wants to try.

That’s what I’m supposed to do as a parent – protect her. But, because she and every other person in the United States has a right to read, you will never find me attempting to stop anyone from reading what he or she wants.

Yolanda Hood is the head of the UCF Curriculum Materials Center. She can be reached at yolanda.hood@ucf.edu.