



The Library Board meeting of September 28, 2022 was an incredibly challenging evening for anyone in that room. Passionate emotions grew high with the basic core standings of a Public Library being the center of the conversation.

To begin with, several people came to the Board meeting upset about a certain book: Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe. I was unaware at first of the purpose of their attendance at the Board meeting. They asked about the Library, funding, and management. I went over a brief history of the Library and its funding resources. It was later that we heard about the book at the heart of the visit.

The book in question is a graphical autobiography of someone's life growing up with gender identification issues. The issue with this book is a couple of frames with graphic portrayal of a sexual nature that offended those in the room. It offended most, but not all, and this may be the heart of the issue.

Libraries are not safe repositories of a past or present that is inoffensive to everyone. Public Libraries are wild, and wonderful places to explore the world and our community together through the past, the present, and the future. The past is there in older materials in the collection that sometimes become less relevant, or other times may give us a window into who we were, such as genealogy and local history. Public Libraries are also a reflection of the interests of everyone in the community now, and a glimpse of where those interests are going. Anyone that spends time in a Public Library will soon run into materials and people that challenge, disturb, and offend them. We are a broad spectrum of people in our community, and to meet the needs and desires of everyone, this challenging and uncomfortable part of Public Libraries is inevitable.

Libraries are a wonderful place for parents and guardians to help the children in their lives negotiate the good and the bad in our world. Libraries empower parents and guardians with all the information they need: the pros and cons, for and against, that with which they agree and that with which they vehemently disagree. Those viewpoints are not forced on anybody in the Public Library; they are there to be consumed by those who are interested, and ignored by those who are uninterested. We give the keys of knowledge to parents; how parents use those keys to teach their children is their choice and no one else's.

I am not upset with the individuals that came in passionate protest to the Library Board meeting. I actually have quite a bit of empathy for them and their feelings. I have those same feelings of misgiving regularly about materials that I see and help purchase for the Library, but I have also come to realize that the Public Library is not a reflection of only my interests or those that agree with me. It is here for everyone in the community equally. I need to provide that service equally to each and everyone in the community, and that is when conflicts arise.

I challenge everyone to look around you at the world. Do you agree with everything there? Are you in the majority on every subject, or are you in the minority on any subjects? Do not all of those interests need to be reflected in our Public Library? For that is what we are at the core. The Public Library reflects the entire community in all its various beliefs. It is a place where we can come to explore those interests that we may share with the many or the few, and be treated with respect.

I know this is hard to swallow for many that do not work in a public library setting (and even those that do), because the Library is such a personal place. We think it reflects us, and I hope it does. The obstacle is that it also reflects others in the community that we do not agree with in various ways. For the Library



to be Yours it also needs to be Theirs. That may be easy intellectually to understand, but in daily life it is exceedingly difficult to come to grips with on a personal level.

I wish the best to all of you that take this wild and wonderful journey of navigating the untamed content of the Library. It is challenging, but I also think that it is the core of what we are as a Free Society and as a Public Library serving our community.

We would like to honor Free Speech by inviting all members of the public to engage with us in this conversation. The Library is going to be building two lists of books we as a community love and hate on our website to share with each other. Watch the website parkwoodlib.com or contact the Library to find out how to add your choices of books you are passionate about. You can also stop by one of our branches and ask about banned books. Come let your voice be heard at our next board meeting, Wednesday, October 26th at 5:15pm. The Library supports and will continue to support free speech in our community. Will you join us?

- Brian Raitz, Director
Parkersburg & Wood County Public Library