



January 10, 2021

Dear Superintendent Bergeson:

I am the author of *Out of Darkness*, the award-winning 2015 historical novel you recently elected to ban from Washington County high school libraries. I am also a parent, a former high school English teacher (Houston ISD, 2004-2007), and a current literature professor at The Ohio State University.

Your position today is challenging. In a comment on the opposing views in your community about youth access to books, you noted that “trying to make both sides happy is not easy to do.” The fact is that “making everyone happy” is not the solution or, frankly, a leader’s job. “Making everyone happy” is irrelevant because our most important job as educators is putting students first, focusing on their learning and their maturing. Effective educational leadership calls for keeping our eyes on students even when there are dramatic demands for attention elsewhere. It calls for centering decisions on students’ needs and interests, their rights and realities. It calls for consideration of *all* students learning in your district’s high schools, not just the children of a handful of parents who have directed their energies into restricting what other people’s kids may read.

I believe that sincere parental concerns matter. I also believe that school leaders must respond to those concerns without disrupting all other students’ learning or access to books. What has happened in Washington County, however, is not the result spontaneous parental concern. Rather, in your district, as in many communities across the U.S., book-banning actions are largely being driven by social media and conservative websites that direct followers to go after specific books, like my novel *Out of Darkness*.

Whatever complaining parents say, profanity or mature content is not what the books under attack most have in common. Most of the books being targeted tell stories of people who are Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, or otherwise marginalized. If the issue were really sex or cursing, as the parents claim, we would see far more books about white, straight, middle-class characters on these lists. They account for vastly larger quantities of “mature” content in high school libraries, including those in Washington County. But books about white kids are not the ones being vilified.

Following its publication in 2015, *Out of Darkness* was on school library shelves for more than five years without a single complaint. I have had the pleasure of hearing from readers whose hearts—like mine—were broken by Naomi and Wash’s story, readers who felt changed and challenged to engage their world differently because of it. But in the last year, books like *Out of Darkness* are being repeatedly attacked in copycat challenges across the country. Let me be clear: *It’s not about the books*. And in most cases, the parents have not read the books they are objecting to. The books are proxies in a culture war where the real objective isn’t getting rid of a book but asserting control and sending a message.



Individual parents may have convinced themselves that this is about “saving” the kids. It’s a mistake to think that removing a story that reveals painful aspects of human experience protects kids. That’s a myth. It impoverishes them by removing a safe way for them to examine difficult issues. Reading is a gateway for understanding the human experience, and a means to engage young minds about it.

Whatever their motivations, please know this: when parents show up to school board meetings—or on the news or in viral videos—calling a book that centers a black or Latinx character “filth” or “smut” or “obscene” or “inappropriate,” it sends a message to students of color—and to white students, as well—that is as clear as it is harmful. The message is this: stories about “people like these” are not fit for school, and the *very existence* of students who share these identities is controversial—just like the presence of the books branded as unfit for school.

Listen to young people in North Kansas City talk about what books like *Out of Darkness* mean to them, and how they experienced its removal. Their testimonies start at the 28:00 marker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8hGg2lVHNI&t=16s>. A student explains why *Out of Darkness* matters to her and other students at 38:00. (For the record, this Missouri district clarified its priorities and restored the books, including *Out of Darkness*, to libraries. Your district, too, can chart a course that restores the focus to learners’ needs.)

I understand that school leaders cannot prevent school board meeting comments from parents who represent extreme views not held by most in the district. But you can prevent those perspectives from being unduly empowered by following your own policies. For example, you can calmly share with parents the diversity of experiences students bring to schools and how library materials meet the needs of a wide range of students, not just students who share the identities, experiences, and values of a particular group of parents.

Let’s talk about the harm that results when school leaders prioritize parental performances of outrage and—as has happened in Washington County—remove books even when the evidence of their appropriateness for the age group is overwhelming. This action elevates the questionable judgment of a small minority of extreme parents over the professional discretion and training of librarians and educators—and over the needs of students. It rubber-stamps hatred and bigotry and cedes control of the educational process to individuals unwilling even to read the books they are challenging. This amounts to a public, official endorsement of the disenfranchisement of already marginalized students.

I understand from your public remarks that you were depressed after reading my book (or hearing about it from someone else). It’s a very sad book, indeed—sad as the history of racism in our country and the harms that go along side it. That said, emotional reactions and one’s personal “values barometer” are not relevant to the review of content. Constitutional law governs protected speech, including school library books, and prohibits their removal based on personal values and emotional reactions (see *Pico v. Island Trees*). Nor does such a removal accord with Washington County district policy regarding content review. I have taken the time to carefully read the policy, and I do not see any grounds there for removal. I have provided relevant evidence to support each criterion below. Could you clarify for me exactly how—in terms of the



review criteria--you came to your conclusion to remove the book? I hope a reconsideration of the district policy will lead to a reconsideration of your decision.

3.7.1. The material has identifiable literary value.

3.7.4. The selection has identifiable aesthetic value.

Here are some of the awards, reviews, and selections that demonstrate the literary and aesthetic value of *Out of Darkness*. Do you actually believe that all the librarians, educators, and professional reviewers who evaluated the book were mistaken about its merits? To disregard these judgments (and that of your own librarians) sends a message to educators, librarians, and parents in your district that they cannot depend on you to respect the expertise of professionals in the field. Especially in the difficult current moment, teachers and librarians need our support and appreciation, not our opposition to their efforts on young people's behalf.

Out of Darkness. New York, NY: Holiday House, 2019. (paperback); Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Lab-Lerner, 2015. (hardcover)

Reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Kirkus Reviews* (starred), *School Library Journal* (starred), *Booklist*, and *The Horn Book Guide*; selected by *Kirkus Reviews* as a "Best Teen Book of 2015," *School Library Journal* as a "Best Book of 2015," and *Booklist* magazine as one of "Booklist's 50 Best YA Books of All Time" (June 1, 2017)

2016 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, Texas State University

2016 Américas Book Award, Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs

2016 Michael L. Printz Honor for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, American Library Association

2016 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award finalist, Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, National Council of Teachers of English

2016 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection, American Library Association

2016 Tayshas Top Ten Books selection, Texas Library Association

2016 Best Children's Books of the Year selection, Children's Book Committee at Bank Street College

2016 Spirit of Texas selection, Texas Library Association

2016 Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) Choices selection

2016 Discovery Prize Winner, Writers' League of Texas

2017 Oklahoma Sequoyah Book Award selection, Oklahoma Library Association

2017 Virginia Readers' Choice Award Reading List selection, Virginia Library Association

2017 Garden State Teen Book Award nominee, New Jersey Library Association

2018 Lincoln Readers' Choice Award selection, Association of Illinois School Library Educators

2018 Virginia M. Law Award for the Most Distinguished Book for Young Adults on Texas History, Daughters of the Republic of Texas

3.7.2. The material has positive social and moral value.

Many reviewers, librarians, educators, and scholars of education and history have spoken directly to the "social and moral value" of my novel, often noting that *Out of Darkness* reveals



and challenges the painful reality of racism as well as the harms that run alongside it. To cite just one example, *Out of Darkness* was selected in 2018 for the Virginia M. Law Award for the Most Distinguished Book for Young Adults on Texas History, an award given by a well-known and highly patriotic historical organization, The Daughters of the Republic of Texas. Here is a description of the selection committee: "A three-member panel of judges will be comprised of persons from the following categories: historians, teachers, school and public librarians, Library Science and Children's Literature professors, library/educational coordinators, and DRT members with library science/education degrees who are approved by the DRT Library Committee Chairman. These judges will select the winning entry."

Or read an article like the one I have attached, "The Social Mind: Using Drama to Walk Through Racism in *Out of Darkness*." In it, a team of educational researchers describe how they use the novel—including the very passages that some parents have read from to condemn it—to aid readers in recognizing and deconstructing racism and dehumanizing language beyond the obvious harm and slurs we are familiar with.

3.7.3. The material will help students develop a better understanding of themselves and others.

I frequently hear from students of all backgrounds about how *Out of Darkness* helps them understand their experiences in the present as well as building their curiosity about those Americans who lived and loved in years past. For example, Latinx readers often tell me that this is the first book that showed how their great-grandparents were segregated and systematically excluded from educational opportunities by being forced to attend "Mexican" schools. I have heard from white students who describe understanding, for the first time, how very different their experience in public spaces (school, a park, a store, the rec center) may be from the experience of students of color.

There is a wealth of research on the role of literary imagination in developing the empathy that makes students capable of understanding other perspectives, an ability that is essential for leadership and daily living.

3.7.5. The material is appropriate for the purpose for which it is to be taught/used.

In the case of Washington County, *Out of Darkness* is not an assigned classroom text that students are required to read; it is an *option* on a library shelf. So the question for evaluation of use is whether the book should be available for recreational reading by those students who choose to read it. There is a reason that *Out of Darkness* has been included on many state reading lists and is widely selected for inclusion in high school library collections. Books like *Out of Darkness* tell stories that are rarely represented in classroom reading or mainstream media, but they are important to giving students a sense of the diversity of experiences in the world and the moral complexity of navigating them.



When it comes to judging “appropriateness,” I would remind you that literature, *especially* the so-called classics, abounds in depictions of situations that are criminal, devastating, unjust. From the Bible to the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Morrison, and contemporary writers, what makes literature *literature* is that it engages with human experience, and that is often a dark mess. When writers engage difficult topics or depict harm, they are not endorsing it, and tackling sensitive issues is not grounds for exclusion from library collections—if it were, we would be left with very little to read, and we would have denied students important opportunities to grapple with the complexity of the world around them.

The painful dimensions of reality--and the need for opportunities to examine them--are especially intense for historically marginalized communities. *Out of Darkness* is about a terrible time in Texas history when segregation, terrorization, and lynchings were part of non-White Americans’ daily experience. In *Out of Darkness*, I deal with sexual abuse, racism, crude language, racialized violence-- not because I relish any of these--but because they are part of my characters’ world in 1936. I portray healthy sexuality, deep friendship, loving family, and community strength because they also exist in that world. Recall that I write to you as an author, former high school English teacher, and current literature professor. Literature—writing it and teaching it to young people—is my world. I respect young people, and I tell stories that I believe will save someone’s life, open someone’s eyes, change someone’s mind, reshape someone’s future.

3.7.6. The subject matter, reading level, and the maturity level of the material is appropriate for the student using the material.

Given the hyper-connected media ecology young people live in, we’re dangerously naive if we imagine that a library book is the sole space where they might encounter challenging content or depictions of difficult experiences. Rather, what quality literature does is put that sensitive material in a context that allows students to think and feel in ways that are far less likely with the media flying across the screens of their phones. Nor should we underestimate the maturity of our students. Some are already living with difficult, painful realities, and even the most sheltered high school students are just a few years or months from military service, college, or the work force—situations where people from all walks of life mix. To be prepared for the world they are entering, students need every chance to understand many life experiences and histories. Books give them spaces to think deeply about the world and consider who they will be in it.

You might be thinking I am blowing things out of proportion in my concerns over the removal of this one book. But impacts on students don’t end with the removal of a single book. The greatest threat posed by attacks on youth access to books is the broad chilling effect they have. What happens when a librarian has seen his superintendent fail to back up his judgment in book selection, or if he knows that every book order is being reviewed by “Utah Parents United”? It’s quite possible that he may simply opt not to order the next story with an LGBTQ character or author—even though it is highly recommended by library buying guides and important for some readers. This form of censorship is just as harmful as the removal of *Out of Darkness*, for it



means that readers—or kids who might otherwise become readers—do not find the books that they need. I have heard many reports of schools and districts where “controversial” materials are being pulled quietly, unofficially, in hopes of avoiding problems. This is no less unconstitutional than public bans like the one just instituted in Washington County.

The fact is, an excellent education, one that genuinely equips students for the 21st century, cannot make everyone happy. That is not its purpose. We cannot put students first while also placating parents who believe that their values and worldview are the only ones that belong in schools. But we can engage these parents in genuine conversation. If their concern is sincere, and if they can be reminded that not all learners are like their own children, they can also be educated about the range of experiences students bring to the library and the range of needs that books meet for different kids. Access to rich, relevant, and diverse books in school libraries is essential to students’ well-being and the quality of their education.

Like all books, *Out of Darkness* can’t be everything to everyone; I never intended it to be. But the fact is that a book like mine is for *someone*—and that student deserves to be able to find it in Washington County high school libraries. Please reconsider your decision and restore it to library shelves immediately.

This unfortunate situation still has the potential to be righted, and it offers a powerful learning opportunity for your district and community. I have significant experience working with school boards, leadership, and communities around to encourage understanding of the value of access to books like *Out of Darkness*. I would be glad to be in conversation with you or other school leaders and to support such efforts in your district.

Thank you for your time. I would appreciate your response this week.

Sincerely,

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World Literatures Program Coordinator
Novels: *Out of Darkness* (2015),
The Knife and the Butterfly (2012),
What Can’t Wait (2011)