

“It is not enough to add LGBTQ titles to publishers’ lists.... All of us must speak out and act against any insinuation that drag has an agenda to indoctrinate children.”

The Need for Allyship

A mother and publisher urges the book community to stand firm against homophobia and transphobia

BY ANGELA ENGEL

As a publisher and a parent of a queer-identifying child, I was thrilled and honored when Drag Story Hour chose to read our book *No One Owns the Colors*, written by Gianna Davy and illustrated by Brenda Rodriguez, for Read Across America Day in March. I saw it as win-win: great recognition for a book and author I love, plus a wider platform for the book’s important message of joy, self-expression, and liberation.

But that was before the backlash. Once I started to express my enthusiasm for this opportunity, I was accused of promoting the “grooming” of children, and an onslaught of emails ensued, one of them even attacking my mothering. The experience popped my San Francisco bubble and made me realize how important it is to stand up and speak out for books, authors, and communities who need our support.

Recent headlines portray drag events as sexual and harmful to children, distorting and misrepresenting the art of drag and its rich history that can be traced back centuries. Drag has been described as the theatrical performance of gender and creative self-expression that plays with traditional notions of gender, among many other definitions. And while there have been countless stories and features on the harm of banning books with LGBTQ content, we’re not seeing the same outrage about the war on drag.

We need to work with organizations within our industry such as Drag Story Hour to elevate their platform, which exists to promote reading and diversity. The program strives to capture the

imagination and play of gender fluidity that’s a cornerstone of childhood and gives kids glamorous and positive queer role models.

It is not enough to add LGBTQ titles to publishers’ lists or create imprints dedicated to LGBTQ titles. We are at a pivotal point in history where all of us must speak out and act against any insinuation that drag has an agenda to indoctrinate children—an accusation that blatantly misunderstands LGBTQ experiences and is rooted in homophobia and transphobia.

In March, Tennessee became the first state to ban drag performances in public spaces as well as anywhere in the presence of someone under 18 years old. I am a mother of a child whose gender expression and sexuality is being questioned by conservative activists and politicians. I am also an ally—to my child and to anyone whose gender expression doesn’t fit neatly into the confines of the socially imposed binary.

In January 2022, Tennessee also banned the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, about the Holocaust, citing “inappropriate language” as its reason for doing so. I wrote a Soapbox column for *PW* that March titled “Correcting the Distortion of History,” about the importance of stepping into my own power as a granddaughter of Holocaust survivors to create a safe space for Jewish voices. The efforts to extinguish popular drag story hours at which queens read to kids take from the same playbook. Both crackdowns seek to undermine the validity of marginalized

people’s existence.

Being an ally means taking an active stance for the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it. The Nazis began with burning and banning books in 1933. Between 1933 and 1945, an estimated 100,000 gay men were arrested by Nazis—a dire warning about just how scary and real these Tennessee laws are. We need to examine our relationship to homophobia and transphobia as we see the rise in book challenges and bans at libraries across the U.S.



© CAMERON CRESSMAN

Publisher allyship means working on systemic changes to the homophobic and transphobic behavior in our society. We can fight censorship of LGBTQ books, regardless of the books we publish. We can seek partnerships with organizations such as GLAAD, Drag Story Hour, Little Free Library, and Unite Against Book Bans, or simply support them. Be an upstander for the queer and trans community when they are being bullied and attacked. Create avenues to promote the trends, messaging, and events that showcase positive experiences for queer and trans people.

I am raising a 15-year-old daughter who identifies as pansexual. My allyship to my child means fostering and nurturing relationships; it means continuing the work it takes to build empathy and resilience. We each need to create our own toolkit for fighting against homophobia and transphobia, because if one person in a kid’s life affirms their lived experience, their risk for suicide plummets.

Be bold and brave. Let’s make it our mission not only to inspire change through books but to be the change. Change starts with you. ■

Angela Engel is the publisher and founder of the Collective Book Studio, a partnership publisher that produces lifestyle, food, gift, and children’s books.