

Steven Sepe

From: Padma Venkatraman <venkatraman.padma@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, February 26, 2024 7:31 PM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Cc: Rep. Stewart, Jennifer A.
Subject: Testimony FOR Bill H7386

To: Steve Sepe and the House Committee on State Government and Elections

From: Dr. Padma Venkatraman, RI resident and author

Subject: Testimony FOR Bill H 7386

Dear Representatives,

My name is Dr. Padma Venkatraman, and I am the author of 5 award-winning novels for young people, published by Penguin Random House, USA. I am writing in support of the bill to protect our public libraries from partisan book bans, introduced by Rep. Stewart and others.

I was not born in this country; I chose to become a citizen. I was sworn in as a citizen in this beautiful ocean state, not far from where you witness the hearing for Bill H 7386. I came here as a student, with nothing in my pocket, and I was awed when I first entered a public library and realized that I could access any book I wanted - without having to pay a cent. That was the moment I fell in love with these United States.

Public libraries enable every citizen to sail the seas of knowledge and opinion and imagination. Public libraries are a pillar of our democracy, and librarians need our support as they work to protect our access to any and every book we may choose to read.

I am sure each of you has read or listened to a story and felt transported to a different place or time. And I hope each of you has also, as a child, found at least one story that transplanted your heart into the heart of a heroic character, so that when the character in the story was afraid, your heart beat faster, and that when the character triumphed against evil, you felt a surge of joy. Such heroes inspire our imaginations - and we need heroes that represent the rich diversity of humanity that is part of the fabric of our nation. Yet, even today, most books published today lack protagonists of color, protagonists whose religion is not Christian, or protagonists who are from the LGBTQ2+ community. Children and youth who come from BIPOC, LGBTQ2+ and non-Christian backgrounds deserve to see themselves represented in the books they read.

And the few books that do showcase protagonists or themes in which such readers may see their heritage mirrored are currently being systematically targeted for removal from bookshelves - for example, picture books about religious celebrations like Ramadan being celebrated around the world.

For those of you who have heard the argument that the books coming under attack are in some way pornographic, please let us note that books may not be removed unless the Miller Test is administered - and the bar for book bans set by the Miller Test is very high. Among other things, it requires that a book, taken as a whole, must lack any kind of scientific or literary merit and solely cater to the prurient interest. I am quite certain that none of my colleagues write books fitting this category - honestly, if we wanted to write such books, we'd be better off targeting the adult pornographic market - we would make a whole lot more money! Writing children's books is not a path to financial security. One of my novels sold nearly a quarter of a million copies, but the next, released in the current climate of censorship did not do nearly as well - book banning has financial repercussions and keeping public libraries

open to stocking our books will help authors who depend on the small business of book sales. So yes, I have a very personal stake in this cause. But there is so much more to this problem than merely money.

Why do we write for children? While I cannot speak for all my colleagues, I became an author for children after first acquiring a doctorate in oceanography and then conducting post-doctoral research at Johns Hopkins University. Why did I give up a successful career in science to write for children? Because I care about young people and believe they deserve excellent literature - in which the rich diversity of humanity is reflected with honor and respect. And I write because I know that books save lives.

My novel, BORN BEHIND BARS, which was challenged in Pinellas county, has, as its main character, a boy who is born in jail. Last year I heard from a reader who said he had teased a classmate whose parent was incarcerated; after reading my novel, he promised he would never bully anyone again. Books engage our empathy and can make us better human beings. After reading my novel, THE BRIDGE HOME, in which domestic violence is dealt with in an age-relevant manner, not only children but even some adults who were in unsafe situations have moved themselves into safer environments. And another reader said, after reading about the homeless children in those two novels, he decided he would do something about hunger and poverty in his neighborhood - both rightaway, and later, when he grew up. Books empower us to create positive change.

Yet books are now being removed from public libraries in some states even if a few adults raise an objection to it. Youth librarians are the experts in the field. We need to trust them to curate collections that serve their patrons, and respect their knowledge, rather than being swayed by the arguments of a few.

A cursory look at the lists of books banned and challenged will clearly show that the books being attacked are overwhelmingly those written by BIPOC and LGBTQ2+ authors - in some cases, even if the characters are not themselves BIPOC or LGBTQ2+. It seems as though those who rail against books wish to erase the identities of those who have not traditionally been part of the powerful majority. If we let their cries to ban books be heard and heeded, we are moving down a path lit by hatred. We are taking a step back in history, to a time when the authors of books were burned.

As for parental rights, which is another clause often invoked in this discussion, I would like to say that being a wife and a mother are more important to me than being an author. I have a teenager. I worry about her all the time. But as for the dangers she unfortunately will face in our world - books are the least of them. Unlike electronic games, books aren't addictive - and if a book offends, it is the easiest thing to slap the book shut. I know my daughter will come across ideas that my husband and I don't endorse or subscribe to in the books that she reads. But when that happens, it is my duty as a parent to take the time to discuss the issues of the world with her, and help her see that differing views exist. As the proud citizen of our democracy, I cannot storm the public libraries and demand that every book that doesn't conform to my ideas be removed from the shelves. Or worse, that any book written by a person who does not look like me, pray like me, or live like me, should be wiped from the record.

I became a citizen because I believe in our nation's dedication to freedom - and that includes the freedom to read and write without censorship. I urge you to vote in favor of this bill, and demonstrate your dedication to the cause of freedom, by giving public libraries and librarians your unswerving support.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Padma Venkatraman
Narragansett, RI