

Steven Sepe

From: Padma Venkatraman <venkatraman.padma@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 31, 2025 10:49 AM
To: Rep. Shekarchi, K Joseph; Rep. Blazejewski, Christopher R.; House State Government and Elections Committee
Subject: Testimony FOR RI Freedom to Read Bill H5726

Dear honorable representatives:

I left India at the age of 19 with empty pockets and a heart full of dreams. In America, my dreams came true. I became a naturalized citizen and Penguin Random House has published six of my award-winning novels for young people.

Unfortunately, the recent climate of censorship has been a nightmare I never expected. I was recently told by a Rhode Island librarian that a school was nervous about inviting me to speak and do writing workshops with their students merely because the heroine of my latest novel, *Safe Harbor*, is an immigrant Indian girl (who rescues a stranded seal). The reason: they were afraid to feature a novel that had a brown immigrant as a hero. It is a reason that has been echoed by other schools; and five out of my six novels have now been censored across our nation. I have received threats of physical violence because of the stories I write. And even after the tsunami of censorship reared its ugly head, I didn't think it would affect our blue ocean state.

I beg you to understand that censorship is not some theoretical threat that is only affecting other states. It is a real problem that impacts RI book creators like me, by drastically reducing our income (my earnings from authors events, keynotes and book talks has dropped 75% since the rise in censorship); and by threatening to restrict our freedom of creative expression and destroy our community.

Authors like me provide librarians and teachers with the diverse literature that constitutes and honors the wide range of voices and opinions that represent our nation. Without us, book shelves would be empty. We need and deserve protection.

Passing H 5726 will not change the climate nationwide. However, once you pass it, keeping intact its protections for authors, it will show that we want to ensure that our state is a safe harbor for Rhode Island authors, illustrators, editors, translators, and others who create books.

Supporting H5726 in its entirety with protections for book creators, will build a firewall that enshrines existing constitutional protections for freedom of expression in our state law. Rhode Island citizens who are engaged in the creative economy will feel encouraged to continue creating excellent literature without fearing that we will be demonized by our neighbors due to ideological differences.

Moreover, H 5726 will protect book creators from flippant lawsuits by establishing a standard procedure for acquiring and challenging books. And, it will send a strong message that hate, prejudice and bias will not be tolerated in our state.

Finally, I want to add that the only thing in the world that means more to me than being an award-winning author is the love of my family. I am a mother. I support parental rights for my child to access stories written by hitherto marginalized voices, so she may grow up believing and acting in accordance with the principles of our democracy which state that all human beings are to be treated with justice and equality and respect. I certainly want to shelter my child from material that is not age-relevant, as all good parents do, I believe. And H 5726 will support our parental rights to protect our children, too, by helping to define what constitutes pornographic literature. If a parent wishes to remove a title, they will now have clear steps that can follow, and established procedures to engage in a good-faith discussion about it.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration, and for your thoughtfulness in supporting this important piece of legislation.

With gratitude,
Padma

(Dr. Padma Venkatraman, author and oceanographer)