

Imani Gandy

Hello, fellow law nerds! Welcome to a special episode of Boom! Lawyered, a Rewire News Group podcast hosted by the legal journalism team that encourages you to read banned books. I'm Rewire News Group's co-chief content officer, Imani Gandy.

Jessica Pieklo

And I'm Jess Pieklo, Rewire News Group's other co-chief content officer. Rewire News Group is the one and only home for expert repo journalism that supports band book authors and their works. And the Boom! Lawyered podcast is part of that mission. So a big thanks to our subscribers and welcome to our new listeners.

Speaking of listeners, Imani teed it up. We have a very special episode. We are thrilled to have with us Robin Stevenson.

She is an award-winning author and the heart and brains behind Pride Puppy, one of the nine LGBTQ picture books targeted for banning and the center of the Supreme Court case *Mahmoud versus Taylor*. Robin, welcome to Boom! Lawyered.

Robin Stevenson

Hi, thank you so much for having me here.

Jessica Pieklo

We are just thrilled to have you.

Imani Gandy

We're absolutely so thrilled. So for those who don't have kids or who may not be familiar with your book, *Pride Puppy*, can you give us an overview?

Robin Stevenson

Sure, yeah. So *Pride Puppy* is an alphabet book, so it's aimed at kids about age three to five. It looks like this. And it's illustrated by Julie McLaughlin. So it's lots of really gorgeous artwork. And Julie is also a Canadian illustrator. So the interior looks like this. It's very brightly colored and there's one letter on each page. And it's a book that tells the story of a family going to a pride parade with their dog and it very much reflects my experiences as a parent, going to Pride with my kid, meeting up with the grandparents, seeing friends, basically just a day out with the family. So it's not a complex plot. I mean, they go to Pride, they lose the dog, they find the dog, they go home. There's not, shouldn't be a lot of comprehension challenges there. It's aimed at really young kids. And it's just a very joyful, kind of bright, inclusive story.

Imani Gandy

So I just want to be perfectly clear. It's not a bondage manual for kindergartners like Justice Neil Gorsuch suggested during the *Mahmoud v. Taylor* oral arguments.

Robin Stevenson

No. It is definitely not. There's been a lot of misinformation about it, even prior to that, the past couple of years leading up to the court case. There's been a lot of misinformation pushed by the Christian law firm taking on the case that's been picked up by right-wing media. And that goes right back to the website of the lawyers that were representing the parents in this case. And so we've had a couple of years of people saying things about the book that were misrepresenting it. They were mostly less extreme than what we saw during the hearing. So for example, things like saying the book shows images of—this was a Catholic news group saying the book shows images or introduces children to images of leather and zippers. So there's an implication there about what leathers and zippers might mean and that that's somehow sexual.

Jessica Pieklo

Mm-hmm.

Robin Stevenson

But for example, the zipper in question is like a child's sweater. Kids know what zippers are and it's on the Z page and then on the L page there's a parent wearing a leather jacket. But so combining the words and the images in a way that sort of implies that there's some kind of salacious content. But no, it's a very simple book aimed for small kids with...

Jessica Pieklo

I was gonna say kids know a zipper.

Imani Gandy

Right?

Robin Stevenson

...many, many things on each page that start with the letter of the alphabet. So for the C page, for example, there's Sarah Isgur from, I guess, Dispatch and now SCOTUSBlog and formerly DOJ spokesperson back in January on her podcast claimed that the book was graphically sexual and that it had, that everyone in the book was wearing leather chaps. There are no leather chaps in the entire book.

Jessica Pieklo

Mm-hmm.

Robin Stevenson

But she claimed everyone in the book was wearing leather chaps and that C was for clamps. And again, this was back in January. C is in fact for car and Chevrolet. So there has been a lot of misrepresentation and lies about the book circulating. Having said that, I didn't expect what happened actually during the hearing.

Jessica Pieklo

Oh my god.

Jessica Pieklo

Well, first of all, I am so sorry at that level of misrepresentation because I mean, that is just absolutely willful. But what has it been like to have this going on for the last couple of years to have your work targeted like this? And it's not just you. There's a community of authors, right? And so can you talk about that community and what you all have been going through thanks to the Christian legal movement?

Robin Stevenson

Yeah, yeah, it's been surreal, really. I don't think that any of us would have anticipated it—probably most of us, so there's nine books that were involved in this case. So there's a larger group of authors and illustrators whose books have been part of this case over the last couple of years. weren't really connected, most of us weren't connected with each other until more recently, until once the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, the group of us did connect. And that's been fantastic.

Jessica Pieklo

Mm-hmm.

Robin Stevenson

We've been calling ourselves the SCOTUS Book Club. we've been, you know, that group has been such a source of support and there's just been so much humor and, you know, it's been really great to have that, to be connected with that group of people who are kind going through the same thing.

But yeah, it's been, it's been very frustrating, I think, because it's very hard to counter that kind of misinformation once it's picked up by right-wing media and by Fox News and Moms for Liberty and so on. And, you know, that sort of right-wing echo chamber that just amplifies and spreads this misinformation. And it is very hard to counter that. And I think, well, I'll just speak for myself. I won't speak for the whole group, but I think it's definitely been very time consuming and it's definitely taken a lot of energy, which is energy we would probably all rather be putting into writing books and talking to kids about books. So, yeah.

Jessica Pieklo

Well, thankfully, our listeners are smart enough not to exist solely in the right-wing media echo chamber. So here is an opportunity to let folks know anything that you would want them to know about this work and this experience. Like you mentioned the fact that this is taking so much time. I imagine you've been subject to some harassment as well. You're a children's author. What do you want our listeners to know about this?

Robin Stevenson

I guess just that these books are really important and that they're, you know, that we hear from so many parents who read these books with their kids and who really value these

books and who want books that show families that look like theirs. You know, when my kid was born, there were just very, very few books out there that showed families that looked like ours. So I wanted to write books with two moms, books that just showed a really diverse community of people celebrating pride and the parents that I hear from.

Jessica Pieklo
Mm-hmm.

Robin Stevenson

I get lovely messages from people who say, you know, our kids are so excited to see people that look like us in a book. And Julie, illustrator, you know, the illustrations are just really wonderfully inclusive in so many ways. And so we often hear from kids who are very pleased about a particular image, you know, something where they do sort of see themselves. So for example, there's one of the groups in the book has a sign that says queer farmers. And we actually heard from a family who are queer farmers, who are like, our kids were so excited. They never thought they would see queer farmers in a book. And so, you know, there's lots of that. And we hear from a lot of teachers as well, because obviously teachers are the ones who are trying to teach classrooms that include all kinds of kids. So both kids from queer families and kids from more conservative families, including some of the folks who might be opposed to their kids learning about LGBTQ plus people and so on—you know, those teachers who have these classrooms or kids that are really diverse and that have to make sure that all of those kids feel seen and welcome and included and supported. Books are a really helpful resource for them to be able to have those conversations and to help the kids understand more about each other and understand that there are lots of kinds of families and that regardless of what their own views and family's views are, that they are in a classroom together and that they need to be able to support each other and get along with each other. So I feel like taking these books away from teachers and schools takes away a resource that is really very much needed.

Jessica Pieklo
Were you surprised by all the attention and backlash?

Robin Stevenson

Not entirely. mean, this because it once it was sort of, you know, going to the Supreme Court, obviously, there was a level of attention that I hadn't experienced before, but I've had many of my other books have been challenged. So I had a book called Pride Colors, which was a board book that came out, I think, back in 2019. And really a simple book. It's a color concept board book for zero- to two-year-olds. It's basically a sort of caregiver reading to a child. So this is the sort of message of, know, it starts a bright red heart, a little star, I love you just the way you are. So it's that kind of book, but it follows the colors of the pride flag. And the families that are shown in the book are families with two moms or two dads. And that book was challenged in Virginia at a public library a few years ago by a group that challenged, I think about 130 LGBTQ plus children's books, calling them pornographic and sexually explicit.

Jessica Pieklo
Mm-hmm.

Robin Stevenson

So when you can have a book that has like probably about a hundred words and photos of babies and have people saying that it's pornographic and sexually explicit, you know, so I know books are lied about and misrepresented and I, and definitely this sort of epidemic of book challenges and book bans that's been happening over the last few years has been ongoing. So this didn't come out of nowhere. So in that sense, no, it wasn't a surprise at all. But certainly having it end up at the Supreme Court, that was definitely a surprise.

Imani Gandy

It seems to me that kids are really resilient. And so in your view, do you think that it is more the parents that are driving this sort of propaganda? Do you think that children are falling for it? Do you have any suggestions to parents in schools with queer parents or parents with queer kids and how it is that they can navigate this sort of propagandistic society that we live in where they're just blatantly lying about a book that anyone can go pick up and read and see is not pornographic or sexually explicit?

Robin Stevenson

Yeah, Yeah, I mean, I think they have to lie about the books, right? Because the alternative to lying about the books is to say, we don't want kids to see any books that include people like some of the people in your school. And I don't think that's a message that's going to be very easy to sell. So it's easy to say we don't want, you know, books about gay sex in kindergarten, right? There aren't any. That doesn't matter. You know, it's still a message that they can sell.

Jessica Pieklo
Mm-hmm.

Jessica Pieklo
Yes.

Robin Stevenson

The schools that are actually dealing with this, I think are very much aware of the complexities and the nuance and that this is not a simple issue and it's not an issue that there's gonna be a sort of rule that can apply to every school in every situation. That when you're talking about actual teachers with 25 kids sitting in front of them and they know that this particular child's family feels this way and that this particular child's family has this particular composition and that this child is trans and that this child's parents say they need to leave the classroom if anyone talks about LGBTQ issues. And, you know, they're dealing with that day in and day out. And I think that they are in a position to be able to

engage with those kids and those families in a much more complex way than media headlines or court rulings really account for.

Imani Gandy

So how can our listeners support your work and the work of other authors who have been targeted like this? Because our listeners love an action item.

Jessica Pieklo

Yes, they do.

Robin Stevenson

Yeah, I mean, challenging misinformation is huge. I think there's so much of the push from the right that focuses on we need to get these pornographic books out of schools and so on. So I think challenging misinformation is huge. Also, though, I mean, a lot of the book banning does focus on books for teens, right? So this is about a picture book. Obviously, it's not sexual, but also it is appropriate for teens to be able to read about sex. And most of the book bans have targeted young adult books. So we're talking about, you know, books for people who may be in sexual relationships themselves. These are people who are on the verge of adulthood, who should be able to get information, who should be able to read about sex. So I think it's also important not just to defend books from book bans by saying, but they're not about sex. Because regardless, you know, book bans are wrong. Most people don't support book bans.

Jessica Pieklo

Yes.

Robin Stevenson

Kids have a right to read, teens have a right to read. Schools have a responsibility to meet the needs of all their students and provide the books that those students need. And book bans hurt students. So I think challenging this idea that somehow these people are protecting children or protecting teens. Children do need to be protected, but not from books. I think children need to be protected from the kind of hate and discrimination and bigotry that is being pushed by some of the proponents of book bans like Moms for Liberty. and so on. So I think just continuing to speak up in defense of books and defense of freedom to read, in defense of the rights of young people, that this language of parental rights really erases young people as a group that also has a right to information and to reading and to representation. And I think that all of those messages are so important, I think, for people to be continuing to stand up and push back and fight for those things.

Jessica Pieklo

I'm really so glad that you broadened the scope of that answer because I do really, I think it's important for our listeners to understand the book bans are coming and coinciding with attacks on comprehensive sex ed and that this is all part and parcel and framed in a parental rights framing. And it's all part and parcel of information control and that as the

digital age advances, and that escapes and the ability to keep that contained for the Christian conservative movement in particular is an increasing threat. We, I think anticipate their response to be accordingly and teens are often left out of this conversation because probably from both sides, it's easier to focus on the younger kids books, right? But whether it's the misinformation or the, my God, you guys, this has nothing to do with, as you said, sex. It is just a straight up, active censorship targeting an unpopular group according to the Christian legal movement. So I really appreciate that because teens get short shrift across the board.

Robin Stevenson

Yeah, absolutely. I can just make a little plug for a book that just came out in the spring. It's called Banned Together, Our Fight for Readers' Rights. And it's an anthology aimed at teens. And it's all essays and short pieces, fiction, graphic comics. It's by authors whose books have been banned about banned books and fighting for readers' rights. it's it's...I'm blanking on the... Holiday House is the publisher. It came out in March.

Jessica Pieklo

Yeah.

Robin Stevenson

and Ashley Hilt Perez was the editor. And there's some fantastic pieces in that collection. But I think that, yeah, teens are a really important part of the conversation. And when I was working on my essay for that book, I had the chance to meet with groups of teens and talk to them about their thoughts about book banning. And they were just so thoughtful and articulate and inspiring. And several of them said things that, you when I'm talking now to groups of teachers or librarians, I keep quoting these kids because, you know, they were amazing.

And one 13-year-old said, when you never see people like yourself in books, you start to think that you're weird or there's something wrong with you, and that these people who are banning books are hurting people. And they were so passionate about it. And they talked so clearly about how helpful books are in navigating difficult things. That being a teenager is complicated, and there's lots of things that are hard, but that books are actually one of the things that help them to navigate that. So yeah, I feel like when we can center young people's voices in this discussion, it's really important because the large majority of the books that are actually being banned and taken off shelves are books from high school libraries.

Jessica Pieklo

That is such a lovely point to close on. Robin, thank you so much for joining us and for the work that you do. Where can our listeners find your work and support it?

Robin Stevenson

Yeah, so my website's robinstevenson.com and all my books are listed there and I've got a page there about the SCOTUS case with some links there. There's a fantastic link to the illustrator's website where she debunks some of the misinformation and I would love for folks to share that. It's really good. her website is What Would Julie Draw? So you can find it there, yes. But yeah, think, yeah.

Jessica Pieklo

Oh, I love that.

Robin Stevenson

Buy books, talk about books, buy them from independent bookstores if you can. And just keep speaking up for freedom to read and for young people's rights.

Imani Gandy

Well, this has been delightful. I'm so pleased that you were able to join us. And I really like the points that you've made specifically about how, you know, that teens do have a right to read and learn about sex. And we need to listen to teens because, you know, they're not born, people aren't born into bigotry, right? Bigotry is taught. And so the fact that you are interacting with groups of teens who are resisting, this sort of prevailing narrative in society that LGBTQ is bad and we need to ban anything related to it. That's really inspiring. And so I really appreciate you coming to talk to us today.

As Robin said, if you want to find her work, you can find her at robinstevenson.com. If you want to read more of Rewire News Group's work, you should go to rewirenewsgroup.com. You should definitely check out the podcast that we did on the oral arguments in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*. I'm still very just disappointed and confused by Neil Gorsuch lying about having read this book, right?

Jessica Pieklo

He so clearly has not read this book. Can we send him a copy?

Imani Gandy

Like we should expect more. Right. We should expect more.

You should follow Rewire News Group on Blue Sky, on Instagram, on TikTok, and you know, really support banned book authors, support banned books, support teens. And on that note, what are we going to do, Jess?

Jessica Pieklo

Yeah.

We're going to see on the tubes, folks.

Imani Gandy

We're going to see you on the tubes, folks. Thank you so much, Robin.

Robin Stevenson

Thank you.