

Noni and the Book Ban

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Connections

Writing

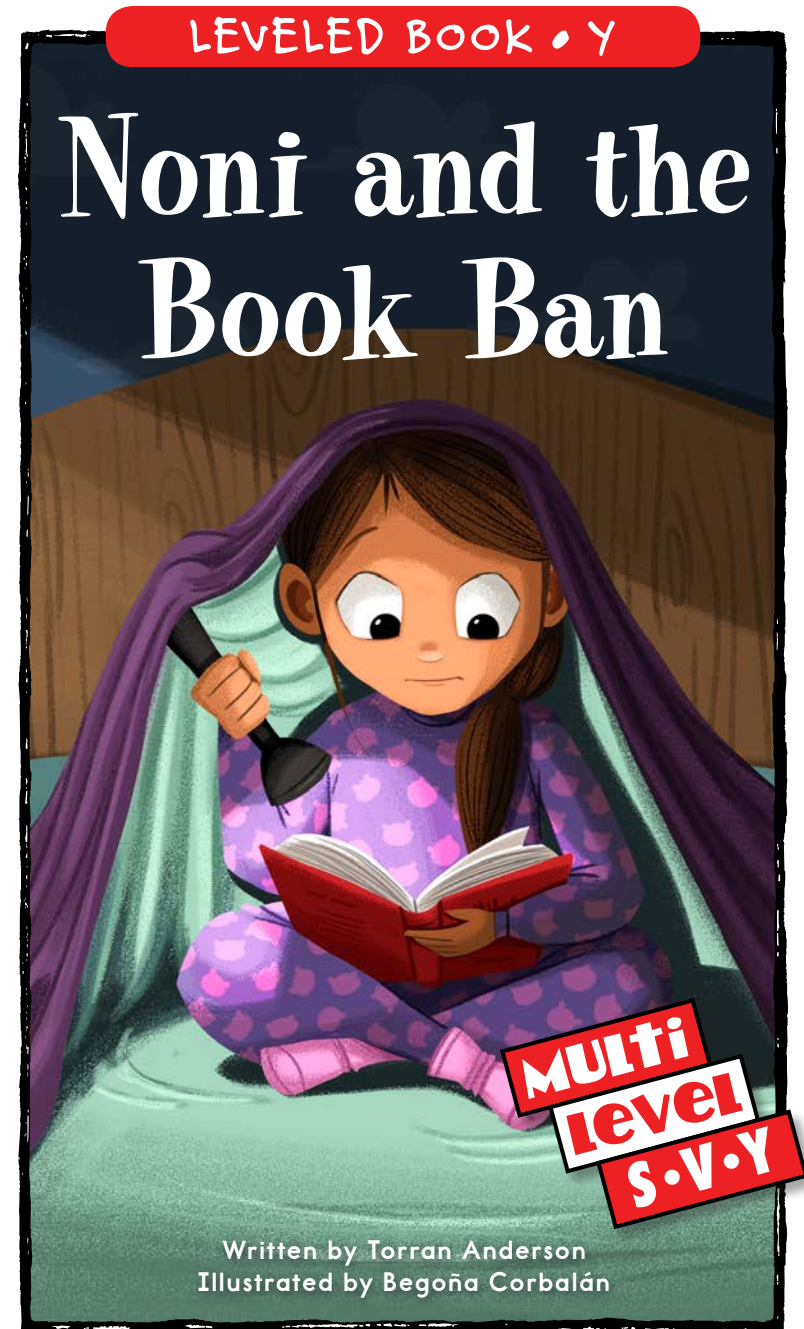
Do you think the Sergeant Rotten Teeth series should be banned from the school library? Why or why not? Write a letter to Mrs. McGuinness stating your position.

Social Studies

The First Amendment is part of the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution. Research the Bill of Rights and why it was created. Discuss your findings as a class.

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Written by Torran Anderson
Illustrated by Begoña Corbalán

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Focus Question

What does Noni learn about freedom of speech?

Words to Know

banned	satirical
cause	school boards
column	scrutiny
intolerance	Supreme Court
perspectives	tiers
representative	vulnerable

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Correlation

LEVEL Y

Fountas & Pinnell	T
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



We stared at a space on the library shelf where a dozen books used to be.

“No!” screamed Miguel. “All twelve of the Sergeant Rotten Teeth books are missing—this is a travesty.”

Was it? I hadn’t read them, but I knew they featured a less-than-superhero with decaying teeth who vanquishes bad guys with his bad breath—not exactly my cup of tea.

The library door squeaked open, and in stepped the school librarian.

“Good morning, Mrs. McGuinness.” I held up my handmade press badge. “I’m Noni Lopez, staff reporter with the *Whitmore Weekly*, and this is Miguel, one of the paper’s coeditors. Would you be willing to comment on the whereabouts of the Sergeant Rotten Teeth series?”

“We had a parent complain about the series, so I pulled the books until they can be reviewed more closely.”

“What about our First Amendment rights?” I asked.

“Well, **school boards** have the power to determine which books belong in public school libraries. Last year, Deerfield removed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because their review board didn’t like the language and felt that it wasn’t inclusive for all readers. All kinds of people, from all different **perspectives**, want to remove books for a variety of reasons.”

“But that’s a classic,” Miguel said, “just like Sergeant Rotten Teeth.”

“Can we talk to the parent?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “but you can contact the school book review committee—they’ll give the books a hearing so that everyone can share their views.”

Miguel sighed. “You’re the librarian; can’t you just make them keep Sergeant Rotten Teeth?”

“It’s not up to me,” Mrs. McGuinness said with a smile, “but I’m glad you’re taking an interest.”



The First Amendment

An amendment is an addition or change to the U.S. Constitution. The first ten amendments are known as the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment gives Americans several important freedoms, freedom of speech among them. The courts regard books as a type of speech, and readers have a right to “hear” that speech.

Miguel and his coeditor, Ashley, stormed into the Monday newspaper meeting, arguing as usual.

“The Sergeant Rotten Teeth books are the best books ever written!” Miguel shouted.

“Are you kidding me?” Ashley huffed. “Those books made my mom and me want to barf.”

“Your mom?” I asked. “Did she complain?”

“Absolutely. She’s a dentist, you know.”

“Well, I don’t want your mom telling me what I can’t read,” Miguel said.

“Look,” Ashley sighed, “my mom is *protecting* us! Those books are putting bad ideas into kids’ heads. We’re young and venerable.”

“**Vulnerable**,” I corrected her.

“Absolutely,” Ashley said.

“Ashley,” Miguel said, “what if I **banned** all the books from the library that *you* like to read? Anyway, we’ll find out on Wednesday who agrees with me because I’m staging a protest.”

He took a stack of papers and slammed them down on the table.



Save Sergeant Rotten Teeth!

Meet Wednesday morning in front of school to protest the book ban and sign our petition. Come in costume, and we will recreate the final scene from

Sergeant Rotten Teeth 4

Zombie Annihilation: Plaque Attack!

I decided to cover the protest for the newspaper, but first I needed to read that series, so I borrowed it from Miguel and read under the covers until almost midnight. By book seven, the hero’s teeth have all fallen out, and he’s lamenting the fact that he didn’t care for them. I wondered, *Are these crazy books actually using reverse psychology to get kids to brush their teeth?*



Tuesday morning I located the webpage of Dan Eaton, the author, and explained the whole situation. That afternoon, he wrote me back!

I might not like Dan Eaton's books, but I liked Dan Eaton. Here's why:

Dear Noni,

You're right—I wanted to create a character who would promote dental hygiene in a fun, **satirical** way. Even if you hate my books, though, the First Amendment guarantees that you cannot prohibit the expression of an idea just because people find it disagreeable. There are several First Amendment cases that support the right to keep my books (and many others) in your library, but here's a quote from the most recent:

With “. . . the unique role of the school library as a place where students (may) engage in voluntary inquiry,” the removal of the library materials “must withstand greater **scrutiny** within the context of the First Amendment than would a decision involving a curricular matter.”

If Whitmore bans my books, kids in your school lose that opportunity for “voluntary inquiry”—in other words, the opportunity to think, question, and decide issues for themselves.

Best wishes,

Dan



“Save Sergeant Rotten Teeth! Save Sergeant Rotten Teeth!” Miguel chanted. He was dressed like his hero, with what looked like salad greens stuck in his teeth.

A dozen kids dressed as zombies chanted around him, stumbling and mumbling to themselves, “Breath mints, breath mints.”

Miguel breathed on the zombies, who crumpled to the ground, pinching their noses and groaning. I tried to interview different zombies to get their reactions to the books, but apparently zombies don't take time to explain what books mean to them . . . maybe because zombies can't read.

"I can't stand the stench," moaned one zombie as he shook his head violently from side to side. "My brain is melting . . . curse you, Rotten Teeth!"

I shook my head, too—I doubted this protest was helping their **cause**. Then behind them, I spotted Ashley. She was dressed like a giant tooth, and two of her cronies flanked her with oversized toothbrushes.

"Ban Sergeant Rotten Teeth! Ban Sergeant Rotten Teeth!" Ashley screamed.

Miguel marched up to Ashley. "Go find your own protest!" he shouted. "This one is taken!"

"My mom and I have every right to voice our opinion," Ashley said.

"Did you even read the series?" he asked.

Ashley hesitated. "We read enough."

"You want to ban books you know nothing about!" Miguel fumed.

The zombie protesters booed and surged forward. Ashley's friends brandished their gigantic toothbrushes. I guess a good reporter would have stayed on the sidelines, but instead I stepped in between the two groups. "These books are satire."

"So?" Ashley said.

"So Dan Eaton is relying on us to figure out his real message."

Ashley scoffed. "How do you know what his real message is?"



"Because he told me." I held up a printed version of his email.

For a moment, Ashley's mouth gaped open. So did Miguel's, salad greens and all.

"This guy's *manipulating* us?" croaked Miguel.

"Not very well," Ashley said. "Kids are going to take these books the wrong way and ruin their teeth. Cavities are forever!"

"Cavities aren't what's at stake," I said. "Freedom of speech is. That's what allows these books to be in our library—even if you don't like them."

"This is a *grade* school, Noni. What if our library had books about how to make bombs?"

"Not all books belong in our library," I said, "but don't forget what Thomas Jefferson said." I glanced down at my reporter's notebook. "Error of opinion is okay ' . . . where reason is left free to combat it.'"

Everyone was gaping at me now—zombies and toothbrushes alike—but then Miguel broke the silence. "Who's Thomas Jefferson again?"



Wednesday afternoon, Miguel, Ashley, and I were seated in Mrs. McGuinness's office. "We wanted to ask you about freedom of speech," I said.

"Freedom of speech doesn't mean you can say just anything," Ashley said, "and it doesn't mean you can put just any book in our school library."

"No," Mrs. McGuinness agreed, sipping her tea. "The **Supreme Court** has divided First Amendment rights into three **tiers**. Depending on the situation of the book in question—where and how the book is being used—the court would apply a different tier of scrutiny."

"Scruti-what now?" Miguel asked.

"In this case, scrutiny is the degree to which the school board can interfere with your right to read and get information. Before a book can be banned, some situations require more rigorous review than others."

"So what kind of scrutiny does Sergeant Rotten Teeth get?" I asked.

"These books deserve our strictest scrutiny because they are books in a school library—books that students are choosing for themselves."

"Strictest scrutiny," Ashley said. "You mean, those books are the easiest to ban."

“Just the opposite. You see, in the library, you’re practicing what’s called *voluntary inquiry*,” Mrs. McGuinness said.

Dan Eaton had mentioned this, too! “The opportunity to think, question, and decide issues for ourselves,” I quoted.

She nodded. “In cases of voluntary inquiry, freedom-of-speech rights are strongest.”

“What if it’s a book on how to build bombs?” Ashley asked.

“That probably wouldn’t need a big review process to ban, because it presents a clear danger.”

“But Sergeant Rotten Teeth is dangerous to our teeth,” Ashley said.

“Part of our book review process is to hear different perspectives about the books in question. If you object to them, Ashley, we’d like to hear why.”

“Gladly,” Ashley said.

“And Miguel here can say why he thinks the books should stay in the library,” she added.

Under his breath, Miguel muttered something in disgust. It sounded like *dental hygiene*.



That Friday’s *Whitmore Weekly* was dedicated to the controversy over the potential book ban. I had coeditor Ashley write a **column** in support of the ban and coeditor Miguel write one in opposition. I ran Dan Eaton’s email. I ran an interview with Mrs. McGuinness detailing the book review committee process and how students could share their thoughts on what should happen with the books. And I wrote an intro to the entire package that included a quote from another former president, Lyndon B. Johnson: “Books and ideas are the most effective weapon against **intolerance** and ignorance.”

Before school let out, Mrs. McGuinness told me she wanted a student **representative** on the committee—namely, me.



"There's one catch," she said apologetically.
"You'll need to read all twelve books."

"Ten down, two to go," I said.



Six weeks later, a shorter follow-up story appeared. Miguel or Ashley really should've written it, under the circumstances, but Miguel has lost interest in the series, and Ashley was just too mad about the way the vote turned out.

The Return of Rotten Teeth

By Noni Lopez

The sergeant is spared. On a vote of 3-2, Whitmore's book review committee decided Monday to restore the Sergeant Rotten Teeth series to the library shelf. Student representative Noni Lopez cast the decisive vote.



I went on to include lots of quotes from people on the board and student reactions, but the story opened with the news itself. You could say I'm giving myself a pat on the back—sure you could—but what can I tell you? A good reporter has to tell it like it is.

Glossary

banned (<i>v.</i>)	said that something was not allowed; forbade (p. 5)
cause (<i>n.</i>)	a belief, an idea, or an aim supported by a group of people (p. 9)
column (<i>n.</i>)	a portion of a magazine or newspaper devoted to a particular subject or the opinions of a particular writer (p. 14)
intolerance (<i>n.</i>)	an unwillingness to let others have opinions, beliefs, or ways of behaving that are different from one's own (p. 14)
perspectives (<i>n.</i>)	different people's mental outlooks or points of view (p. 4)
representative (<i>n.</i>)	a person chosen to speak, vote, or otherwise act on behalf of an individual or group (p. 14)
satirical (<i>adj.</i>)	using wit, irony, or sarcasm to make fun of people or social systems in order to call attention to their faults (p. 7)
school boards (<i>n.</i>)	groups of people who make important decisions about the management of local schools (p. 4)
scrutiny (<i>n.</i>)	the act of examining closely and carefully (p. 7)
Supreme Court (<i>n.</i>)	the highest court of law in the judicial system of the United States (p. 12)
tiers (<i>n.</i>)	rows or levels arranged above another one; levels in a system's organization or hierarchy (p. 12)
vulnerable (<i>adj.</i>)	able to be hurt easily (p. 5)