

Noni and the Book Ban

A Reading A-Z Level V Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,267

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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Focus Question

What does Noni learn about freedom of speech?

Words to Know

ban	issues
cause	object
column	perspectives
committee	petition
decisive	protest
intolerance	vulnerable

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Correlation

LEVEL V

Fountas & Pinnell	R
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



“Good morning, Mrs. McGuinness,” I said to the school librarian. “I’m Noni Lopez, staff reporter with the *Whitmore Weekly*, and this is Miguel, a coeditor. 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. All kinds of people, from all different **perspectives**, want to remove books for different reasons.”

“Can we talk to the parent?” I asked.

“No, but you can contact the school book review **committee**—they’ll give the books a hearing.” Mrs. McGuinness smiled at us. “That way everyone can share their opinion.”



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.

I hadn't read them, but I knew the hero had disgusting teeth and used his bad breath to fight off bad guys.

"Are you kidding me?" Ashley huffed. "The pictures alone made my mom and me want to barf."

"Your mom?" I asked. "Did she make the complaint?"

"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! These books are putting bad ideas into kids' heads. We're young and venerable."

"**Vulnerable**," I corrected her.

"Absolutely."

"Not me," Miguel said. "As a matter of fact, 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 his teeth. 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 deal. That afternoon, he wrote me back!

Dear Noni,

*You're right: I wanted to write some books that would promote dental hygiene in a fun way. Even if you hate my books, though, the First Amendment supports the right to keep the Sergeant Rotten Teeth (and many other) books in your library. If the school bans them, students lose the opportunity to think, question, and decide **issues** for themselves.*

Best wishes,

Dan

I let out a little cheer. I might not like Dan Eaton's books, but I liked Dan Eaton.

The First Amendment

An amendment is an addition or change to the U.S. Constitution. The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution are known as the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment gives Americans several important freedoms, freedom of speech among them. The courts consider books to be a type of speech. From time to time, libraries and courts must also consider how far the right to "hear" that speech (reading) should reach.



"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, "Breath mints, breath mints."

Miguel breathed on the zombies, who fell 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 smell," said one zombie as he shook his head from side to side. "My brain is melting . . . curse you, Rotten Teeth!"

I shook my head, too—I wasn't sure this protest was helping their **cause**. Then behind them, I spotted Ashley. She was dressed like a giant tooth, and two of her friends followed her with enormous 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!"

"Your teeth will thank me later," Ashley said.





Her friends waved their giant toothbrushes. The zombies booed and waved their arms. I stepped in between the two groups. “These books don’t encourage cavities,” I said. “Dan Eaton is relying on readers 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.

Ashley’s mouth gaped open. So did Miguel’s, salad greens and all.



Wednesday afternoon, Miguel, Ashley, and I sat in Mrs. McGuinness’s office.

“Kids are going to take these books the wrong way and ruin their teeth,” Ashley said. “Cavities are forever!”

“Cavities aren’t what’s at stake,” I said. “Freedom of speech is—the First Amendment. That’s what allows these books to be in the library—even if you don’t like them.”

“Freedom of speech doesn’t mean you can say just anything,” Ashley said, “and it doesn’t mean you can put any book in the world in our *grade school* library.”

Mrs. McGuinness took a slow sip of her tea before she spoke. “Here’s the thing about books in a school library: they’re books that students choose for themselves.”

“Exactly,” Ashley said. “Those books should be the easiest to ban.”

“Actually, it’s just the opposite.”

“Because in the library”—I grabbed Dan Eaton’s email and quoted from it—“we have . . . the opportunity to think, question, and decide issues for ourselves?”



Mrs. McGuinness nodded. “In that case, 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 all about the possible 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 that explained 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 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 that she wanted a student 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. Since I'm in the story, Miguel or Ashley really should've written it, 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 committee member 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

ban (n.)	an official order that forbids something (p. 6)
cause (n.)	a belief, an idea, or an aim supported by a group of people (p. 9)
column (n.)	a portion of a magazine or newspaper devoted to a particular subject or the opinions of a particular writer (p. 14)
committee (n.)	a group of people who consider or decide on a course of action (p. 4)
decisive (adj.)	ending in a clear or obvious way; producing a settled and unquestionable result (p. 15)
intolerance (n.)	an unwillingness to let others have opinions, beliefs, or ways of behaving that are different from one's own (p. 14)
issues (n.)	important topics or subjects (p. 7)
object (v.)	to express disapproval of or opposition to something (p. 13)
perspectives (n.)	different people's mental outlooks or points of view (p. 4)
petition (n.)	a formal written request, usually signed by many supporters (p. 6)
protest (n.)	an action done to express strong disagreement or disapproval (p. 5)
vulnerable (adj.)	able to be hurt easily (p. 5)