

Committee Report
Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials for the library book
Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age
edited by Ariel Schrag. New York: Viking, 2007. 224 pages.

Date: 23 October, 2009

Contact: Ann Smith, 367-7923

Committee Members: Pam Hanneman, Parent; Lynn Fjallanger, Parent; Judy Hilleson, 7th grade teacher; Dori Nelson, Instructional Coach; Mike Moore, middle school assistant principal, Ann Smith, Library Coordinator, convener (non-voting).

Executive Summary

On Sept. 28 a parent of a sixth grade student at Patrick Henry Middle School filed a formal Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials concerning the library book *Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics from an Unpleasant Age* edited by Ariel Schrag. The parent expressed concern that the book contained repeated foul language, sexual references, and pictures of teenagers smoking. Pursuant to Policy KEC, Assistant Superintendent Fred Aderhold appointed a review committee. The committee met twice: on October 6 and again October 21. Lynn Fjallanger was not present at the Oct. 21 meeting but received a draft copy of the report and concurred with the committee's recommendation.

Prior to the Oct. 21 meeting, committee members read the book and published reviews of the book. Following a discussion of the values and faults of the book and the parent's specific concerns, the committee voted unanimously to recommend that the book be placed in the professional section of the library where only teachers will be able to check it out.

The Role of the book in the Middle School Instructional Program

Stuck in the Middle is an example of the graphic novel genre. Research conducted by literacy specialists has shown that middle school students will read graphic novels when they will not read anything else. This particular book is an anthology of seventeen comics by sixteen different cartoonists. Each cartoon addresses an issue chosen by the author as an example of a struggle they remember from middle school. Issues addressed include peer pressure, bullying, fitting in, dating, independence, and the physical changes that accompany adolescence. The book is not required reading in any class.

Summary of Reviews

Four reviews of this book have been published in standard review sources. Three of the reviews were positive. The review published in the November/December 2007 issue of *Library Media Connection* recommends the books for students in grade 9-12, declaring it "a perfect vehicle for discussion of sensitive topics." *Booklist* recommends it for grades 7-10, calling it an "acutely perceptive compendium of cartoon black humor." The *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* recommends it for grades 7-12, observing that "a few of the

stories have an adult sensibility or nostalgic tone." *School Library Journal* recommends it for grades 7-9, warning that "the recurring vignette format prevents most of the offerings from providing much in the way of a discernable message or point beyond the evocative emotional content." The cartoonists include Terry Zwigoff, whose *Ghost World* has been adapted into an Oscar-nominated film; Lauren Weinstein who won the Ignatz Award for promising new talent; and Jim Hoover who is the Assistant Art Director for Viking Children's Books.

Response to specific objections

Authors who strive to create believable, authentic stories set in modern culture sometimes use language that, when pulled out of the context of the story, may seem objectionable. The committee does not feel that the presence of foul language alone is sufficient cause to remove a book from a school library. However, as an anthology of short vignettes, the two or three selections in this book that do contain objectionable language do not have a positive resolution that would offset the language. The committee questions whether most middle school students have the emotional maturity to see beyond the language and infer the message that, if they are facing similar situations, they can survive and become successful, well-adjusted adults.

Books provide an avenue for students to vicariously experience the negative consequences of actions so that they will know to make better choices in their actual lives. Having books in the school library that include situations that involve teens smoking, screaming in rage, or experiencing sexual attraction does not mean that educators are encouraging young people to engage in those activities. This book describes issues that are very real to some middle school students and that could serve as powerful discussion starters. However, the committee agrees that the book would be more effective if a teacher chose specific selections and guided student discussion of those vignettes.

Recommended Action:

The committee recommends that *Stuck in the Middle: Seventeen Comics for an Unpleasant Age* remain in the middle school library, but that it be moved to the professional section where only teachers will be able to check it out.