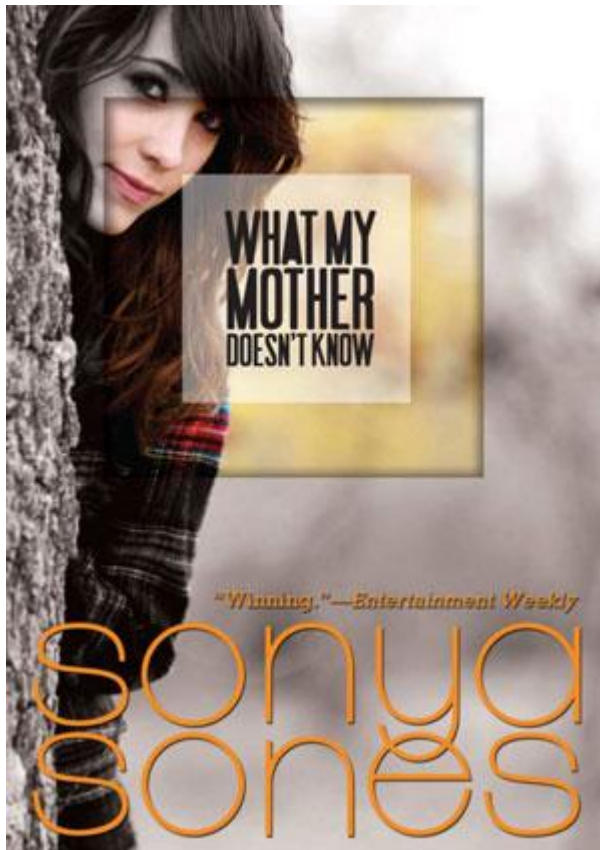


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Op-Ed

Banned in Bakersfield

The author of "What My Mother Doesn't Know," an acclaimed young-adult novel, reflects on the criticism levied at her and her writing and why parents resort to censorship.



The novel "What My Mother Doesn't Know" has received a number of accolades, including being chosen an American Library Assn. "best book for young adults." (Simon & Schuster)

By Sonya Sones

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In 2001, I wrote a novel in verse called "What My Mother Doesn't Know." It received a number of accolades, including being chosen an American Library Assn. "best book for young adults."

But the acclaim wasn't universal, as my mail made painfully clear.

"Our young people should not have to be exposed to your erotic thoughts and feelings," one irate parent from Iowa wrote. "Your book should be removed from all junior high media bookshelves. That's what we will attempt to do here in Algona. We strive as a community to keep high morals and values."

And there were many other letters, including this one from a Texas woman:

"I am a 6th grade teacher, and had the unfortunate experience this past week of having your book discovered by a student in my classroom library. On any given page, vulgarity and filth can be found!... Freedom of speech and press doesn't give anyone the right to corrupt young, impressionable minds! I feel sorry for your children. Please stop writing such filth!"

What was the nature of this filth and vulgarity? Most of my critics cited one poem, in which an adolescent girl contemplates her changing body. It's called "Ice Capades," and it goes like this:

Sometimes

on chilly nights

I stand close to my bedroom window,

unbutton my nightgown,

and press my breasts

against the cold glass

just so I can see

the amazing trick

that my nipples can do.

The mother of an 11-year-old middle school student in Wisconsin was so disturbed by this poem that she went to the school board to try to get the book removed from the school library.

"I was deeply appalled," she told them, "when [my daughter] brought this book to my attention and read me a poem in here about getting undressed and taking your bare chest and sticking it up against a winter window." As a result, the board voted to restrict the book to those in seventh grade or higher.

Because of the poem — just one small piece of a coming-of-age novel — "What My Mother Doesn't Know" made the American Library Assn.'s list of the Top 10 Most Frequently Challenged Books in 2004, 2005 and 2010. It also was on the ALA's list of the Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009. It's been the subject of controversy in Texas, Indiana, Arizona, Virginia, Wisconsin, Florida, Kentucky and California. It's been banned in Bakersfield.

That has such a great ring to it, doesn't it? Banned in Bakersfield!

Why did I put such an "appalling" poem in my book? Its main character, Sophie, is at an age when her body is going through enormous changes, and she is hyper-aware of them. In reflecting, for example, on how quickly her breasts have developed, she says, "It is pretty astonishing / how my molehills / have turned into mountains / overnight."

I hope that girls who stumble across this moment in the book will feel less alone, less embarrassed by the curious and confused feelings they're having about the sudden transformations in their own bodies.

I'm not the first writer to face controversy, and I won't be the last. J.D. Salinger, John Steinbeck and Maya Angelou, to name a few of the writers I most admire, have all had their books attacked.

But there is also a strong movement to condemn such attacks. Each year, during the last week of September, bookstores and libraries across the country celebrate Banned Books Week, holding events to highlight the problem of censorship — and its absurdity. For instance: "In The Night Kitchen," by Maurice Sendak, was removed from some library shelves because baby Mickey loses his clothes in the middle of the night. "A Light In the Attic," by Shel Silverstein, was banned because it has an illustration that suggests children could avoid washing dishes by breaking them. I kid you not. Even the American Heritage Dictionary of the English

Language has faced censorship because it contains "39 objectionable words" such as the slang terms "knocker" and "balls."

Judy Blume, who writes for young adults and has taken heat for her honest portrayal of their concerns, is eloquent on the topic of censorship: "I believe that censorship grows out of fear.... This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. (Parents) want to believe that if their children don't read about it, their children won't know about it. And if they don't know about it, it won't happen." But of course that's just plain dumb.

One mother of a 12-year-old daughter wrote me to crow about her success in having "What My Mother Doesn't Know" banned in Virginia. "I saw to it that the school took this book off the shelf, as well as all the others that you have written," she wrote. "I am not a book burner, but this book does not belong in middle school and maybe not even in high school!"

I don't have a problem with her forbidding her daughter to read my book. But imposing her personal beliefs on every child at the school makes her no better than a book burner. As the playwright and journalist Clare Booth Luce once put it: "Censorship, like charity, should begin at home; but unlike charity, it should end there."

Sonya Sones is the author, most recently, of the novel "The Hunchback of Neiman Marcus." She has also written four award-winning novels for young adults.