

My Book Is Horrifying. My Book Is a Lifeline. My Book Is Banned.

May 7th, 2023, by Patricia McCormick in The New York Times (adapted)

Last year, a parent at a Virginia school board meeting stepped up to a microphone and read a passage from my book, “Sold.” The scene she chose to read, informed in part by my own experiences of sexual abuse, describes the sexual assault of a 13-year-old girl by an older man. There is no graphic language or obscenity in the passage; the story is told from the point of view of a child — in the words of a child — and conveys her confusion, terror and physical pain. The passage, this parent claimed, was “pornography.”

Pornography, according to the Cornell University Law School, is defined as “material that depicts nudity or sexual acts for the purpose of sexual stimulation,” or in many other accepted definitions, “intended to arouse.” And many people have struggled to define pornography — most famously Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who said, “I know it when I see it.”

At the start of the 2022-23 school year, “Sold” was one of the most banned books in the United States. It made the list thanks, in part, to Moms for Liberty, a right-wing organization that has created a playbook that’s been used across the country — by people who in some cases are not even parents — to lobby to have books removed from libraries and classrooms.

These challenges are not grass-roots responses to books coming home in students’ backpacks; they are campaigns orchestrated by a national clearinghouse with shadowy funding and apparent links to groups such as the Heritage Foundation. “Moms” in Texas, Florida, Idaho, Pennsylvania and elsewhere have all read the same passage and have used similar language to challenge the book.

While the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Island Trees School District v. Pico* reinforced limits to the state’s authority to remove books from school libraries “simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books,” it still left plenty of room for groups like Moms for Liberty to maneuver on grounds of “inappropriate” content or obscenity.

To ban this book, which is based on interviews I conducted with girls in India and Nepal who had been sold into slavery, is to dishonor their real-life experiences and the courage it took for them to share their stories. These girls didn’t share their experiences of rape to “arouse” or “stimulate” anyone. They did it to shed light on child trafficking.

To ban this book is also disrespectful to the teenagers who want and in some cases need to read it. I’ve visited classrooms and juvenile detention centers all over the country since the book came out in 2006. At nearly all the visits, students come forward to say that they have been sexually abused or are being sexually abused — and that seeing their experience rendered in a book finally emboldened them to say so. One girl and I walked to the guidance counselor’s office together.

But a surprising number of readers — boys and girls — open up right in class. I always brace for a nervous or inappropriate reaction from the other children in the classroom. I wait for someone to laugh or scoff or gasp. They never do. They unfailingly treat such painful revelations with respect and empathy.

That’s what is consistently missing in the national conversation about book banning: the voices of those children and teenagers who see their experiences in print and finally realize they aren’t alone. And the ones who, fortunately, are not suffering such trauma, but who now have a window into the lives of their peers who do. We talk at them. And we talk about them. We try to control what they can read, think and do. What we don’t do is listen to them.

There is, without a doubt, a place for thoughtful debate about the appropriateness of books like mine. In response to parental concerns, many school boards are adopting protocols to determine, for instance, if access to a book ought to be restricted by age. Alas, this isn’t the case in the Virginia school district where “Sold” was challenged.

Meanwhile, children and teens are facing a mental health crisis. Rates of depression and suicide are alarmingly high; resources to help them are depressingly limited. It would be wonderful if the time and energy spent organizing and arguing for book bans at school board meetings across the country were directed at getting these students the help they need and deserve. Books are not the problem. They are part of the solution.