

Sonya Sones is the author of the recently published L.A. Times Bestselling novel, *The Hunchback of Neiman Marcus*, as well as four award-winning young adult novels: *Stop Pretending*, *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*, and *What My Girlfriend Doesn't Know*.

Musings of a “Sexually Explicit” Author

I've been a card-carrying member of the dangerous authors' club since 2004, when my young adult novel, *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, landed on the American Library Association's list of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books of the year. I was thrilled when it made the list again in 2005 and 2010, and even more delighted when it earned the 31st spot on the ALA's list of the Top 100 Most Banned/ Challenged Books of the Decade—it's heady stuff to share list-space with the likes of Mark Twain, Ray Bradbury and Ken Kesey.

I wasn't always a young adult author. When I first started out I was just a young adult—a young adult with loads of rich friends who spent the summers at their country homes or at camp. But my family couldn't afford such luxuries, so I traveled to the library instead, letting books take me all the places I wished I could go.

Then, I discovered the steamy dreamy Diaries of Anais Nin, and became an avid journal-writer, often spending more time *writing* about my life than I actually spent living it. Even so, I never thought of becoming a writer. Instead, when I grew up, I became an animator, and, eventually, a film editor. When I had a couple of kids of my own, and began reading to them, it was my favorite time of day—the book in my lap and an arm around each of my enraptured darlings. That's why I decided to try my hand at writing for kids.

I didn't set out to write books for teens, but that turned out to be the voice that came most naturally to me. Lots of people talk about having an inner child, but *I've* got an inner teen. And she's right there with me, whispering in my ear whenever I sit down to write. In fact, she'd probably argue that *she* was the one who wrote my books, without any help from me at all. And you might even believe her. She can be very persuasive. Last week she almost had me convinced I should get my bellybutton pierced. Which is *not* a good look for someone my age...

Despite that inner rebel of mine, I never intended to write controversial books. And I was stunned when people wanted to ban them. But I decided not to let the foolish accusations of self-righteous people stifle the voices of my characters.

Though you've got to have thick skin to be a banned author. Parents from all across the country have written to me to rant about how disgusting and inappropriate they think my book is, and have filed formal complaints called “challenges” to attempt to get it removed from middle school and high school libraries. There are apparently legions of narrow-minded folks out there who feel that if a book isn't appropriate for their own child, then *no* child should be allowed to read it. It would be lovely if we could just ignore these people, but unfortunately, we have to give them the respect they don't deserve.

When a formal complaint is made, members of the community meet to discuss whether or not to comply with the request to remove the book, following the guidelines created by the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom. Librarians, teachers, students, and parents present their arguments in an open forum and reach a decision.

What's good about these meetings is that they get people talking about important issues—like freedom of speech. What's bad about them is that sometimes they lead to books actually being banned. And when a book is banned, everyone loses. Because, as the 2010 United States Ambassador of Children's Books, Katherine Paterson, once said, "All of us can think of a book...that we hope none of our children or any other children have taken off the shelf. But if *I* have the right to remove that book from the shelf—that work I abhor—then *you* also have exactly the same right and so does everyone else. And then, we have *no* books left on the shelf for *any* of us."

Why do parents think *What My Mother Doesn't Know* is so abhorrent? The Intellectual Freedom Committee cites "sexually explicit" as the reason most often given. This is pretty funny (or pretty depressing, depending on how you look at it) because nothing more than kissing happens in the book—not even the slightest grazing of a boob by a hand. I swear!

But the problem is that the people who try to ban books often don't actually read them. They just read the juicy parts. I can't tell you how many letters I've received from incensed parents telling me that they were horrified when they read "excerpts" of my book. If these people had taken the time to read the *entire* book, they'd have seen that when the narrator, 14-year-old Sophie, is pressured by her boyfriend to have sex, she refuses to let him push her further than she wants to go. In fact, his sexually aggressive behavior is the main reason that Sophie stops dating him.

This past year, there was a new complaint about my book. The Intellectual Freedom Committee cited "sexism" as one of the reasons it made the cut. How very weird and disturbing to be accused of such a thing...My theory is that the parent filing the official complaint checked off the word "sexism" because it had the word "sex" in it and that made it sound nasty. And, of course, she knew, from the *two* pages she had read of *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, that my book was indeed nasty. Just a theory, of course.

In truth, whenever the annual Top 10 list is published, I keep my fingers crossed that my book will be on it again. Not because this will increase sales (though it does) and not because it will lead to more teens discovering and reading my book (though it will). The reason I love being on the list is that when I *am*, I get invited to speak at schools about why books shouldn't be banned. Which is wonderful, because there is still the possibility that I can lead a child in the right direction, before they've been dragged too far down the wrong path by a misguided parent.

The last time I spoke on this topic, at the Pegasus School in Huntington Beach, I told the kids about the controversy that arose in Houston when Ellen Hopkins was *uninvited* to their YA Lit Festival after a parent complained about the content of one of her books. I explained that some of the other authors who were asked to speak at the festival decided to stay home, in order to show their solidarity with Ellen. Then, I asked the students what *they* would have done, if they'd been one of those other authors. A student instantly raised her hand and said, "I would have accepted

the invitation, but when I got there, instead of reading from my own book, I would have read from Ellen's." How magnificently devious!

But if being devious is what it takes to protect our right to read the books we choose to read, then so be it. We are, after all, living in a world where William Steig's illustrated story about a horse, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, was banned because the police happened to be depicted as pigs. 'Nuff said.

I think the great Irish playwright and critic, George Bernard Shaw, summed it up brilliantly: "Censorship ends in logical completeness when nobody is allowed to read any books except the books that nobody reads."