



OWWL LIBRARY SYSTEM

BOOK CHALLENGE REVIEW COMMITTEE MEETING: ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE BY GEORGE M. JOHNSON

INTRODUCTION

Item Reviewed



Title: All Boys Aren't Blue

Author: George M. Johnson

Publisher: Farrar Straus Giroux for Young Readers; Imprint of Macmillan Publishing

Edition(s) Reviewed: 1st ed. (2020)

Copies Owned: OWWL Library System circulates seven physical copies and one audiobook copy in our OverDrive collection.

Shelving Location(s): These items are discoverable in the Teen OverDrive and Main OverDrive collections. This title is available at member libraries and is shelved in the "TEEN" or "YA" sections.

Book Description

In a series of personal essays, prominent journalist and LGBTQIA+ activist George M. Johnson explores his childhood, adolescence, and college years in New Jersey and Virginia. From the memories of getting his teeth kicked out by bullies at age five, to flea marketing with his loving grandmother, to his first sexual relationships, this young-adult memoir weaves together the trials and triumphs faced by Black queer boys. Both a primer for teens eager to be allies as well as a reassuring testimony for young queer men of color, All Boys Aren't Blue covers topics such as gender identity, toxic masculinity, brotherhood, family, structural marginalization, consent, and Black joy. Johnson's emotionally frank style of writing will appeal directly to young adults¹.

¹ All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto by George M. Johnson, OWWL Library System Aspen Catalog, <https://search.owwl.org/Record/622867>

Reason for Review

This title was brought to the OWWL Library System Book Challenge Review Committee because it is one of ALA's Top 13 Most Challenged Books in 2022. The primary reasons for challenges include: "LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit²."

This title was also challenged and removed from a school district within the OWWL Library System's service area³.

COMMITTEE REVIEW

Committee Charge

A six-member committee comprised of Member Library Directors, a System Staff member, a System Trustee, and the System Executive Director met on August 31, 2023 to discuss the book's content and identify any actions to respond to challenges for this title.

Committee Discussion

The committee views *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson as a positive memoir about a boy, his family, and the difficulties faced when growing up with characteristics outside social norms.

In this book, George M. Johnson tells personal stories and struggles about growing up queer and black. This collection of experiences aims to create a resource for young people that the author himself did not have as a young man. In writing this book, he aims to tell his story and craft anecdotal vignettes for people to learn from. Or, at the very least, relatable stories so young people in these situations may find comfort in a shared experience.

Challenges to *All Boys Aren't Blue* most likely come from two specific chapters: "Boys Will Be Boys..." and "Losing My Virginity Twice." The situations portrayed in these two chapters may make some individuals uncomfortable. The topics discuss sensitive issues, including incestuous rape and descriptions of sex. However, viewing these two chapters in the context of the entire work adds to the overall story that Johnson is trying to communicate. As mentioned above, his goal is to share experiences in a way that may be helpful to others in similar situations.

A difficult truth about the instances portrayed in this book is that they happen to young people every day. Johnson's stories weave in and out of the good, bad, and disturbing circumstances of day-to-day life that typically go undiscussed by the general population. Bullying, rape, stereotypes, and prejudices are all themes that young readers should know about and be prepared to handle as best they can.

² American Library Association, Top 13 Most Challenged Books of 2022,

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

³ Clyde-Savannah agrees to pull contested books, https://www.fltimes.com/news/clyde-savannah-agrees-to-pull-contested-books/article_19a7f224-3ba7-11ee-babf-7366c6e56cd1.html

Other conversation points the committee made regarding *All Boys Aren't Blue* include:

- This is a wholesome story based on family and learning from one another;
- This book was not terribly concerning, nor did it discuss topics that are not prevalent in other books;
- Reading about the harmful impacts of bullying is a strong narrative for young readers to consider;
- The way masculinity is described and how it can be broader than playing sports is not as prevalent in other literature; and
- The storyline highlighting how family cares for you, then you care for your family, is a strong message for younger readers.

PROFESSIONAL REVIEWS⁴

Booklist – February 7, 2020

With this title, Johnson offers his memoir-manifesto of growing up queer before he had the language to know exactly what that meant. Split into three parts, Johnson's book shares intimate stories of his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as he navigates family, friends, and the performance of masculinity. Discussion of his stories includes theory and statistical information that tie his ideas and struggles in with a larger intersectional identity. Johnson struggles with finding his YA voice. Though it's clear that his stories and experiences are formative to his identity as a Black queer boy (now man), they pour out with an intensity that may lead readers to feelings of confusion about the main point of the book. The severe lack of #OwnVoices books from Black queer men makes this title an absolute necessity, but it may fall to the wayside for cultural outsiders. Nevertheless, the personal stories and the healing and reconciliation of self in this title are all undeniably honest and relatable—a reminder of our shared imperfection and humanity.

Kirkus Reviews – April 28, 2020

Centers the experiences, desires, and agency of a queer black boy navigating his evolving selfhood and the challenges of society's conditional love for his truthful existence. Queer black existence has been here forever, and yet rarely has that experience been spotlighted within literature aimed at black boyhood. This is the context in which this "memoir-manifesto" begins, as Johnson, a still relatively young 33-year-old journalist and activist, debuts his unfolding life story within a vacuum of representation. These stories wrestle with "joy and pain...triumph and tragedy" across many heavy topics—gender policing, sexual abuse, institutional violence—but with a view to freedom on the horizon. Through the witnessing of Johnson's intimate accounts, beginning with his middle-class New Jersey childhood and continuing through his attendance at a historically black university in Virginia, readers are invited on their own paths to healing, self-care, and living one's truth.

⁴ All professional reviews were retrieved on August 31, 2023 from Syndetics Unbound, a catalog enrichment service connected to the OWWL.org online catalog, https://search.owwl.org/Record/622867#unbound_reviews

Those who see themselves outside the standpoint of being black and queer are called in toward accountability, clarifying an understanding of the history, language, and actions needed to transform the world—not in pity for the oppressed but in the liberation of themselves. This title opens new doors, as the author insists that we don't have to anchor stories such as his to tragic ends: "Many of us are still here. Still living and waiting for our stories to be told—to tell them ourselves." A critical, captivating, merciful mirror for growing up black and queer today. (Memoir. 14-adult).

Publishers Weekly – April 20, 2020

Billed as a "memoir-manifesto," Johnson's debut is a collection of heartfelt personal essays revolving around themes of identity and family. Growing up black and queer in New Jersey and Virginia, Johnson feels a tension between these two identities, even before he's fully conceptualized what makes him stand out from others in his close-knit family. The loving Elder/Johnson clan, led by witty matriarch Nanny (whose take on familial loyalty and intimacy is "You might have to wipe my ass one day"), includes Johnson's cousin Hope, a trans woman who models pride and self-determination. Johnson makes impassioned declarations about the importance of community and inclusive sex education, and the freedom to define oneself outside of society's conditioning. Though at first glance the book lacks the synthesizing call to action that "manifesto" would imply, its "be yourself" message remains a radical stance for doubly marginalized individuals. Johnson's writing is a stylistic hodgepodge of anecdotes ("story time," he periodically declares) and letters to relatives. In a publishing landscape in need of queer black voices, readers who are sorting through similar concepts will be grateful to join him on the journey. 14–up. (Apr.).

School Library Journal – May 1, 2020

Gr 9 Up—Journalist and activist Johnson takes readers through his life from childhood through young adulthood, reflecting on how his identity as a queer Black boy was shaped, refracted, and often suppressed for his own safety. Growing up in New Jersey, Johnson recounts becoming aware of his "difference" and how it necessitated choices between who he was and who he felt pressured to be. Part memoir and part manifesto, the text infuses personal reflections with observations about white supremacy, toxic masculinity, homophobia, and how these concepts affected him, whether as a boy forced to choose football over double dutch at recess or as a fraternity pledge struggling to come out on campus. Separated into acts, the book describes different members of his community (family, teenagers, friends)—a stylistic demonstration of his valuable support system that occasionally makes the narrative choppy. Still, the various tangents don't detract from the book's power, and the conversational tone will leave readers feeling like they are sitting with an insightful friend. There are a few detailed depictions of sexual situations and an incident of sexual abuse by a family member. Johnson handles the painful, complicated feelings around this experience with an honesty and tone appropriate for the intended audience. VERDICT This young adult memoir is a contemporary hallmark of the blossoming genre. Johnson anchors the text with encouragement and realistic guidance for queer Black youth. Recommended for YA nonfiction collections where autobiographical and social justice titles are popular. — Ashleigh Williams, School Library Journal.

APPROPRIATE AGE LEVEL

The publisher recommended age sets *All Boys Aren't Blue* as a Young Adult Nonfiction title for ages 14 to 18.

The Grade Level indicated by Accelerated Reader⁵ ranges from grades 9 through 12.

OWWL Library System does not offer a recommended age range or title restrictions. We encourage parents and guardians and their children to discuss their reading habits in the context of their goals to determine if this title is appropriate.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

Item Location

All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson appears in the Main and Young Adult OverDrive collection. The physical copies are shelved in member libraries in “TEEN” or “YA” sections. Both the digital and physical versions are in appropriate locations given the content and recommended age range by the publisher.

Item Copies

OWWL Library System will purchase an eBook version of the *All Boys Aren't Blue* for our OverDrive collection as well as a physical copy to be used to fill holds across the System.

Concerned Parent Actions

A minor's access to materials is the responsibility of that minor's parents or guardians. According to the American Library Association:

The mission, goals, and objectives of libraries cannot authorize libraries and their governing bodies to assume, abrogate, or overrule the rights and responsibilities of parents and guardians. As “Libraries: An American Value” states, “We affirm the responsibility and the right of all parents and guardians to guide their own children’s use of the library and its resources and services.” Libraries and their governing bodies cannot assume the role of parents or the functions of parental authority in the private relationship between parent and child. Libraries and their governing bodies shall ensure that only parents and guardians have the right and the responsibility to determine their children’s—and only their children’s—access to library resources. Parents and guardians who do not want their children to have access to specific library services, materials, or facilities should

⁵ Reading Level retrieved from Syndetics Unbound,
https://search.owwl.org/Record/622867#unbound_readinglevel

*so advise their own children. Libraries and library governing bodies should not use rating systems to inhibit a minor's access to materials.*⁶

To aid parents and guardians in addressing title access in OWWL Library System's OverDrive collection, the default collection can be changed under account settings.

To accomplish this, log in to an OverDrive account at <https://owwl.overdrive.com/> › click on My Account › Settings › Content Preferences › Audience(s). An account can be limited to All Audiences, Juvenile, Young Adult, General Adult, and Mature Adult.

Physical collections cannot be changed to restrict a minor's access to materials. Instead, please follow the American Library Association's recommendation noted above.

CONCLUSION

Future Reconsideration Requests

This report shall appropriately respond to any challenge or request for reconsideration of *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson until September 13, 2025. At that time, should a formal challenge or request for reconsideration be received by the OWWL Library System, the Executive Director shall once again form a committee to review the title and use this documentation and all other professional material as the foundation of that discussion.

System Policies and Resolutions

For additional information on the selection of System materials, please review the Selection and Reconsideration of Materials Policy and the Resolution on the Freedom to Read by visiting <https://owwl.org/freedomtoread>.

Report Approval

OWWL Library System's Board of Trustees reviewed and approved this report on September 13, 2023.

Approved: September 13, 2023

⁶ Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/minors>