Are LGBTQIA+ Voices Being Pushed Out of Kid Lit?

by Marlaina Cockcroft
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Rejected manuscripts. Coded language. A churning industry rumor mill and painful content choices. There has been no public announcement that children's and YA publishing is pulling back from acquiring books with LGBTQIA+ characters and creators, but the anecdotal evidence is piling up and the impact is already being felt.

Marietta Zacker, co-owner and agent with Gallt & Zacker Literary Agency, describes "shifts in conversation" and coded language. Zacker says more conversations are held on the phone than via email, suggesting an attempt to stay off the record.

"I think part of the problem is that we are not having open conversations about what's really going on," Zacker says. Without that, the industry acquiesces to a new norm, "which is many steps backward from where we were."

There's a lot of fear, she says. "I think that's the intent of the people who are trying to stop these stories from coming to light."

In a December column for *SLJ*, publisher and co-owner of Lee & Low Books Jason Low wrote that he had "already heard through the grapevine that one big house is declining all manuscripts for children's books with diverse content."



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> —**Lee Wind,** author

More recently Low shared that while Lee & Low continue their work spotlighting marginalized voices, "Our salespeople have told us that books that feature a rainbow on the cover, even if the rainbow has nothing to do with a Pride flag, are being omitted from orders."

Tricia Lawrence, senior agent with Aevitas Creative Management, has also heard "through the grapevine" that there is a cooling on LGBTQIA+ and social justice content generally.

While many attribute the change to policies ushered in with the second Trump administration and its attack on the LGBTQIA+ community; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); and education, Lawrence says she noticed the change begin before the 2024 election.

"I was in an indie bookstore, and I was standing there staring at the middle grade shelf, and I was like, 'Why are these so straight and white?'" Lawrence says.

Authors and agents trace this change to the rapid increase in book banning attempts beginning in 2020–21. According to PEN America, during the 2024–25 school year, there were 6,870 instances of book bans across 23 states and 87 public school districts. And the group noted in a report that "books depicting same-sex and trans identities have been conflated as inherently 'sexual' " and removed from schools.

"It's about trying to create a chilling effect to make librarians and teachers and other people that are in gatekeeper positions afraid to bring in any books of diversity, including queer characters, in books for kids and teens," says author Lee Wind, whose books include *No Way, They Were Gay?.*

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It seems to be working. Wind, who is the director of education and programs at the Independent Book Publishers Association, says independent publishers focusing on diverse voices have seen sales to schools and libraries drop as much as 50 percent.

Jim McCarthy, a literary agent with Dystel, Goderich & Bourret, has also watched the industry reverse its recent progress.

“The publishers used to be pretty open about saying things like, ‘Oh, we already have a gay book, so there’s no room for another one next year,’” he says. “Then that changed. We saw a really incredible growth from publishers in terms of what they were willing to publish.... But in the past couple of years, I’ve felt a bit of a retraction.”

Zacker says many editors are still including queer stories and stories by queer authors and illustrators on their wishlists. “But I think perhaps that there’s more emphasis on other amazing work they want to publish,” and she’s not sure how enthusiastic publishing houses are to break out someone new, adding “I think it’s easier to have the conversation when it’s an established author,” because they’ve already connected with readers.

But even established authors are struggling. Alex London says this past year, a manuscript of his didn’t sell for the first time.

“I think what’s so insidious about this moment is for every case of a book being banned or a book being rejected because of gay characters, there are a hundred others where you’ll never know if that’s the reason,” says London, author of the “39 Clues” and “Battle Dragons” series, among other titles.

Adib Khorram—whose *Darius the Great is Not Okay* won the William C. Morris Award, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Literature, and a Boston Globe–Horn Book Honor—says about five queer author friends have had manuscripts rejected in the past year.

“Very few have had it said directly to their faces that it’s because it’s queer, but many of them have felt that the subtext was, it’s because it’s queer,” Khorram says.

YA author Julian Winters says when he checks *Publishers Weekly*'s Children's Bookshelf newsletter, he sees "every week, fewer and fewer stories being acquired with LGBTQIA+ themes by queer authors," or at least openly identified as such.

"It's become almost like a *Where's Waldo?*, like OK, which one of these *might* be a queer story that'll be for young adults and younger?"



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> —**Marietta Zacker,** co-owner and agent, Gallt & Zacker Literary Agency

Self-censorship

Along with the industry decision-makers navigating the current landscape, self-censorship is coming into play. An author told McCarthy that they were willing to stop writing queer characters.

"Everything in me tensed up," says McCarthy. "I felt so sad because I felt this person shutting themselves down, because it is just so vicious out there. We hear these stories of authors being called pedophiles and groomers. We hear about school visits getting canceled. We hear about people receiving death threats."

An editor recently turned down a queer historical project from one of his clients, saying "it was the kind of book that would really live or die on school library sales, and their fear was that, given the shocking rise in book bans over the past two years, they would have trouble getting placement in those accounts."

McCarthy doesn't think the editor realized "that she was essentially soft-banning this content.... It was a frightening moment for me."

Author Katherine Locke says they "have heard from editors that they have to take into account the current climate when they're thinking about offers that they can make. And that is both frustrating, as a queer author who writes a lot of queer books, and understandable. Publishing is a business, and it's frustrating to have something where it's become financially very difficult to pitch a book that is not going to sell in some major markets like Texas or Florida."

The situation has impacted their writing, they say.

“It’s hard to not self-censor,” says Locke, who coedited *This Is Our Rainbow*, a 2023 middle grade anthology. “It’s hard not to be like, ‘Would this book do better if this character isn’t queer?’”

Locke, though, stresses they have not given in and changed characters.

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Sales and school visits

LGBTQIA+ authors like Locke are frustrated, less confident, and feeling under attack as they struggle to publish children’s books with queer content. They aren’t hearing directly that queer content is an obstacle, but manuscripts are rejected, published books are losing sales or going out of print, and school visits have dwindled, if not disappeared.

“School visits have completely dried up,” Locke says. “They just don’t exist anymore for LGBTQ authors.”

Rebecca Bendheim’s middle grade novel *When You’re Brave Enough* published in April, but she’s afraid to promote it in her home state of Texas.

“I just know that there are a lot of school districts that aren’t going to be allowed to have my book, or even if they are allowed, it could be contested,” Bendheim says.

Because the book features lesbian and transgender characters, it would be against district policy for her to speak at these schools or for them to have her book.

Still, she’s requesting school visits. “I want them to have to say no, rather than just obeying in advance.”

She’s also scheduling visits at private schools, which won’t face liability for having her there.

“But to me that’s really sad,” says Bendheim, “because I think public school students deserve to see themselves in books just as much as private school students do.”

Khorram says most children's book sales are at schools and libraries, "so when all these schools and libraries stopped buying queer books, demand for them certainly went down."

With that, royalties dwindled, too.

"One of my books, I think the royalties just nosedived 70 percent from one statement to the next," he says, adding that friends with books out for 10-plus years that were steadily earning royalties have seen those books suddenly go out of print after they were targeted for bans.

London experienced this as well. His 2013 YA novel *Proxy* sold consistently, but after it was added to a book ban list in Texas, "the numbers just started dropping dramatically. My school visits disappeared. I used to speak in Texas all the time. And within a few years, the book went out of print." He's since found a new publisher for the book, Open Road Media.



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Persisting through resistance

Noting queer middle grade and YA form a large percentage of his list, McCarthy says, "The fight has not gone out of me. I want to press only harder than I have before. But I see that it is affecting people on both sides of the industry."

Allies still exist, some say, but are not as outspoken.

"I think editors for sure are still standing firmly behind publishing widely and diversely and [being] truly inclusive in every way," Zacker says. "But it definitely feels like they're being asked to not be so in your face about it."

And authors still want to reach young readers.

"People that work in children's literature tend to be very mission-driven, and tend to care a lot about young people, are still working really hard to acquire queer books, get queer books published, get queer books into the hands of kids," Khorram, who is on the board of Authors Against Book Bans, says. "But that mission has gotten a whole lot harder."

For many of these authors, it's personal.

"I'm trying to write the books that would've changed my life when I was a young, closeted, gay Jewish kid," says Wind.

Winters is also thinking about his younger self.

"Growing up as a queer teen, I didn't have a lot of stories that I could relate to," says Winters, whose books include *Running with Lions*. "My biggest concern is, how do I get the stories that I know queer teens need? How do I continue to give them that message of hope and that things will be great and there are ways to live your life happily if we're not acquiring certain types of queer stories?"

Some in the industry are looking for ways to help. Wind runs the We Are Stronger Than Censorship program through the IBPA, which raises money to buy two books for every book challenged and donate them to partner organizations to be delivered to readers. In 2025, the group bought and donated 2,000 books, Wind says.



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Lawrence is one of the leaders of Publishing Professionals Against Book Bans, which launched in 2025. The group keeps track of legislative updates, educational approaches, and messaging, and looks for ways to keep authors safe.

Locke, also on the board of Authors Against Book Bans, thinks creating inclusive "right to read" policies in school districts "can really be game-changing."

People should thank their school board, principals, and librarians for having inclusive literature, because they may only hear from "two or three parents in a district that are really mad about queer books on shelves," Locke says. "But the reality is that there are probably hundreds of parents who are perfectly fine having queer books on shelves."

Librarians play a critical role in including these books, says Wind, because books create empathy, building a future where “empathy is a good thing, where diversity makes us better, where community means we’re not all the same and we celebrate those differences. That’s the future I want.”

The cultural movement that’s using book bans as its “current vehicle of choice” is not sustainable, Locke says, and with advocacy and legislation and court wins, “we will get through it.”

They hold on to “the belief that queer kids still need queer books, that cishet kids also need queer books, that there’s a place for these books, and eventually, we’re going to be past this moment in history and those books will be needed and will be sellable and should be on shelves.”

But Locke worries about queer kids who don’t have access to books and authors whose careers won’t survive this stretch, however long it lasts.

“The readers of LGBTQ+ and diverse titles have not gone anywhere,” says Low. “For the time being, institutional sales have been disrupted by book bans, but we must remain vigilant. The moment we are all living through can be temporary if we work toward making it temporary.”

In the meantime, London has found that lifting other people up has the knock-on effect of lifting himself up. “Show up for the queer books, show up for the queer authors, and show up for the queer students and teachers and the affirming spaces. Just keep showing up for each other.”

Marlaina Cockcroft is a freelance writer and editor.

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