

Last Day on the Library Shelves

Kayla Gourlay, Simon Fraser University

Malinda Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) is one of the many Queer stories that has been pulled from the shelves across the United States by parents and officials who do not want their children exposed to LGBTQ+ narratives, or what they refer to as "sexually explicit" content ("Banned Books by Malinda Lo - 2021 to 2024"). *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is set in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1950s and it follows teens Lily and Kath as they fall in love. Beyond the fact that several of her own books are being banned and challenged, Lo has close ties with the book banning movement as she is a co-plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state of Iowa's book banning law ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). In *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, Lo subtly uses metafiction and explores themes of secrecy through Lily, who must hide her sexual identity, in order to show how books can both uplift identities and give people the means to tear them down.

While book banning is on the rise now more than ever, it is not a new concept. What is more recent is the shift of book bans to focus predominantly on children's literature (Pickering 33), which came about after children's literature was no longer "designed solely to morally prime children into being 'good children'" (33). In the early twentieth century, authors of children's literature had to be wary of what they said or discussed in their books, or else risk not getting published (33). While there is now more room for a variety of books to be published with LGBTQ+ themes and characters, not everyone is able to access these books with the rise in book challenges and bans that target them.

As mentioned, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* has itself been a victim of the book banning movement, and also is the most banned of Lo's works. In the early months of 2024, it already received 50 cases of bans, challenges, or restrictions for the year, which is 16 cases higher than it was in October of 2023 ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). These statistics only reflect publicly accessible cases, so the number is likely much higher ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"). The total cases as of March 2024 for Lo's books was 64 ("My Books Keep Getting Banned"), which is an extreme increase from 26 in 2023, 15 in 2022, and 3 in 2021 ("My Books Have Been Banned"). However, it was *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* that was targeted by the well-known book banning group Moms for Liberty

in May of 2022 (“My Books Have Been Banned”), which likely contributed to the steady rise in bans for the book.

The community of book banners is widely made up of organized groups of parents. According to Laats, a professor of education and history at SUNY Binghamton, “the language of book banners has been the same for a century: ‘We have parents’ rights and we demand to exert those rights to dictate what goes on in schools’” (213). One large-scale book banning group that plays into this is Moms for Liberty, a group founded in Florida that largely appeals to the Republicans of America (Stanford 12). They are known for “contest[ing] schools’ COVID-19 precautions, advocat[ing] for schools to remove books—often those featuring LGBTQ+ characters, people of color, and others from marginalized groups—from their libraries, and flipp[ing] school boards to conservative control” (12). They are also assertive in their belief that parents—not schools—should control the kinds of sexual education their children receive (12), which becomes especially problematic as Moms for Liberty and other book banning groups often take sexuality out of context. This happens most often with books about LGBTQ+ characters which are often described as “pornographic,” perpetuating the harmful stereotype that LGBTQ+ equals oversexual and deviant (Pickering 35).

In an interview between Education Week and Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice, Justice condemns the role that schools play in giving agency to children over the way they identify at school. Justice is asked about cases in which children might not be comfortable with their parents knowing about their gender identity, and she compares the situation to teen pregnancy, saying that while it would be upsetting, it should not be something that the school should keep from the parent (Stanford 12). This statement suggests that teen pregnancy and exploring gender identity are comparable topics, again perpetuating the idea that queerness is equivalent to issues regarding children and sex. Justice finishes this thought by saying, “So this idea that schools are saying home might not be safe—unacceptable. Do not tell my child that home is not safe. My child does not need a sexual spirit guide at school” (12).

Contrary to Justice’s statement, the idea that a Queer child’s home might not be safe for them is a very possible reality, and for some children a school that encourages them to explore their identity might be vastly different than the situation they face at home. *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* depicts this when Lily is forced to confirm that she is a lesbian to her mother. Lily’s mother tells her, “There are no homosexuals in this family. [...] Are you my daughter?” (329). This

causes Lily to face homelessness out of the very real fear that returning home is no longer a safe option for her, and she must instead stay with Lana, who is essentially still a stranger to her. Although “sexual spirit guide” is not the right term, Lily being able to speak with Lana about her experiences is something she needs, because she is not able to do that with her own mother.

Lily’s situation is not an extreme, but something that is experienced by many LGBTQ+ youth. According to Walters, the Branch Manager of the West Indianapolis branch of the Indianapolis Public Library, “many factors can account for homelessness of LGBTQIA+ youth, but family conflict is the primary cause, which is disproportionately due to a lack of acceptance by family members of a youth’s sexual orientation or gender identity” (20). This knowledge that she will not be accepted is what puts Lily off from telling her family for so long. She is afraid that they “will never look at [her] like this again” (*Last Night at the Telegraph Club* 325), and instead will come to only look at her in “disgust” (329).

When Lily first finds *Strange Season*, a book about two women in love, she is forced to read it in secrecy. Lily “itched to return to *Strange Season*, but she didn’t dare read it while the clerk was so nearby – and she could never, ever buy it” (41). Similarly, Walters shares that there are young patrons at the library who cannot borrow LGBTQ+ books because they are afraid of the reaction at home: “these are young people who have to hide who they are from their family” (20). When groups such as Moms for Liberty attempt to shield their children from LGBTQ+ themes, they are effective on wide-scale removals of books they deem sexual, but Lily is proof that children will still find a way to access the reading material they want. Having access to these materials in a safer space such as at school or home with room for conversations around sexuality and gender is a far better option for children. Reading *Strange Season* alone and without someone to discuss it with, Lily is subject to seeing the love between two women being referred to as “unnatural” (40) and “shameful” (41), becoming the default narrative of Queer people in her mind and confirming the way she thinks her parents will react to her coming out as lesbian.

Lo incorporates other scenes to allude to situations between parents and their LGBTQ+ children, speaking to what Justice says. After Lily runs away from home she is told, “[Your Mother is] having a hard time right now because you’re not what she expected. But we’re never what our parents expected. They have to learn that lesson” (339). Pushing children to be a certain way does not accomplish what parents hope it will. If Lily presents herself as straight as her mother wants, she will never be able to be her true self or experience happiness as she deserves.

Oftentimes, when parents do not accept the identity of their children, it leaves the children in a place where they have to decide between being unhappy for the rest of their lives or severing their relationship with their parents. Lo includes this scene in *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* as a way of reassuring teens who are feeling rejected by their parents that there is likely someone outside of their family that will understand what they are going through, and that with time it is still possible for parents to grow to understand them.

A concern that these book banning groups may have is that reading LGBTQ+ can supposedly “make” their children queer, and that might be a point of contention they have with *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. For example, one group of challengers called BRACE (Botetourt Residents Against Child Exploitation) are pushing back against libraries that they believe “confuse [children] about gender” (“My Books Keep Getting Banned”). After reading *Strange Season*, Lily thinks about Kath, “*Are you like the girls in the book too? Because I think I am*” (100, italics in original), which makes it seem as though it is the book that makes Lily think she might be lesbian as well. However, a book does not have the capability of making someone Queer, though it can help people put words to what they are feeling, which is what happens to Lily. With *Strange Season*, Lily “felt as if she had finally cracked the last part of a code she had been puzzling over for so long that she couldn’t remember when she had started deciphering it” (42). Through this scene, Lo is telling her readers and also her challengers that this book will not change who someone is, but it can help them understand themselves or other Queer children better. This sentiment is also echoed in Pickering’s article: “Reading a book about being gay does not make the reader gay, any more than reading a book about menstruation will not make the reader menstruate if that is not what their body does. What advocates argue is that these books might teach the reader about what a person experiences, which may lead to more empathy” (37).

The non-acceptance and censorship of children’s reading materials is not exclusive to parents. Censorship is now happening at a larger scale and oftentimes lawmakers are even involved (Pickering 32). With the involvement of lawmakers and politicians in book banning, it becomes increasingly difficult for librarians and teachers to push back against the book banning movement without facing repercussions. There are several cases of librarians refusing to remove books from their shelves or pushing back against policies and as a result their public libraries are defunded (Pickering 36). Library staff are being mistreated and threatened, or forced to remove books in order to not face punishment (36).

Rises in book banning often correlate with larger political events, such as “divides over the Trump presidency, the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, and increased support for LGBTQ+ communities” (33–34). Book banning was also prevalent during the time that *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* itself takes place, which Lo says was “a period when the U.S. government persecuted people it believed were communist sympathizers, including Chinese American immigrants and gay people” (“My Books Have Been Banned”). Lo speaks directly to this issue with Lily’s understanding of the ways in which she is not treated the same as others: “America had given her so much in the four years since she arrived, but it also regularly reminded her of how it saw people like her” (305). On Lo’s blog, she points out this metafictional (in the sense of books commenting on books and publishing) aspect of her writing, saying she is “alarmed that people who call themselves Americans are taking a page from China’s authoritarian handbook” (“My Books Have Been Banned”), meaning that the book banning movement seeks to erase the truth in stories like Lily’s, essentially ignoring “America’s complex history of racism and inequality” (“My Books Have Been Banned”).

Despite it being seven decades after the time that *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* takes place, many LGBTQ+ students are still in a similar situation as Lily, where they do not see themselves represented at school and in literature (Altobelli & Lambert 25). Pickering’s findings indicate that the “greatest numbers of challenges aim at books concerning gender queerness, Queer sexuality, and those that reflect the Black experience” (Pickering 37), which presents a greater problem when most children’s and young adult literature is already lacking in representation (37). However, there are more varieties of Queer stories now that can provide children with a lens in which they can see themselves represented positively, and such a story can really make an impact on a Queer child who has not experienced that. This is especially critical when Queer narratives of the past—and present—feature characters who are “assaulted, contemplating or completing suicide, being murdered, dying alone” (Walters 19). Furthermore, beyond LGBTQ+ children seeing themselves represented, straight/cis-het children reading Queer stories can help them to build empathy and understanding as well as knowledge that they are not the default identity (Pickering 38).

Lo’s biggest qualm with challengers of LGBTQ+ books is that they are most often seeking to shame the readers and writers of these books. Lo says that in most cases her work is taken out of context by people who have not read her books in full, but found scenes that they took issue with (“My Books Have Been

Banned”). She highlights a particular case where the challenger said “I don’t need this kind of garbage in my mind. And neither does any child. Pornography!” (@wcvafreedom2read). The “Request for Consideration Form” that the library patron fills out in order to create a case against a book asks the challenger to make specific references to issues they have with the book, but in this case the patron cites “Everything!” as the problem with the book, and makes no other specifications other than referring to “the selection [they] saw,” (@wcvafreedom2read) indicating that they have not read the full material. Lo also responds to this on her blog:

There is a heavy element of shaming involved in these book bans. When intimate scenes from my books are pulled out of context and put in a table format alongside the accusation that they are pornographic, it’s clear that the book banners are declaring my work shameful—and by extension, they’re trying to shame me. (“My Books Have Been Banned”)

This again plays into the stereotype that Queer equates to sexually deviant or explicit, and there are several cases in which children’s books with LGBTQ+ characters or themes are taken out of context or are described as being about sex, even when there are no sexual elements involved in the novels at any point (Altobelli & Lambert 25).

When Lily is forced to come out to her parents, she is also no longer able to see Kath or spend time at The Telegraph Club, the place where she finally gets a glimpse of the Queer community in San Francisco. Lily’s mother taking this away from her does not change the fact that Lily is lesbian, but instead forces her into a space of deep loneliness and hurt. As put by Saundra Mitchell, author of several challenged Queer books, “Removing us from books, movies, websites, textbooks, documentaries—removing us from schools and libraries—will not erase us. It will only mean that your children, the children of your community, your families, your flesh, who have been so fearsomely, wonderfully made—will suffer the way we did in decades past” (1). Book banning of LGBTQ+ narratives is increasing, and so is the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ children in schools. Walters reports “four in five LGBTQIA+ students...feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics compared to six in ten from two years previous” (20). These two issues are not separate, but go hand in hand.

When Lily’s family sends her away in an attempt to rid her of her desires for Kath, the distance does not do what her parents hope it will. Rather, Lo’s text says very little about what happens to Lily while she is away, instead moving straight

into the epilogue in which Lily is back in San Francisco. It is as though Lo is saying that this time away does not change Lily's story; removing her from San Francisco does not change who she is or what her feelings for Kath are, especially as the book concludes with the two girls back in each other's company.

While the challenges mentioned in this paper are in libraries and schools in the United States, Canadian librarians are also witnessing this happen more frequently in their libraries (Wong). These challenges also "primarily involve opposition to books that deal with sexuality, 2SLGBTQ+ themes or gender diversity" (Wong). Consuming media wherein various identities are represented can help to create psychological safety for youth, especially if they are discovering or struggling with their identity, and this should be the priority of caregivers and lawmakers when deciding what books to include in a school or library. With this goal in mind, libraries can strive to reach the point at which there is no way to exclude media that represents LGBTQ+ identities because they will be as acceptable as heterosexual identities.

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