Speaker 1:

Hello and welcome to our third discussion in module one. We're talking about where we are now or what I like to call the presumption of progress. If you're still with me after listening to those first two discussions, thank you. An applause. I hope you've taken a break. Maybe gotten some water, right? This one's going to be actually quite short. I really just want to hammer home this idea of the presumption of progress because it is not good. It does not work in our favor, and it can trip up some folks who want to use it as a reason to not be as well-equipped both in policy, in process, in sort of personal conviction, ethics, etc. And it is this. So you can sort of think of this as the quote for this discussion, and again, this is adapted from a quote that I believe was posted to Twitter and was talking about racism and it fits so well for what we're seeing in these patterns around book censorship.

So again, something to sort of think about as you're encountering, as you're thinking through these resources, as you're encountering some of this thought leadership, listening to discussions that other folks have been having, listening and following some of the work and strategies that other folks have laid out. Even as you move through the other sections of ReadCon.

So this one says, "Myth: bigotry fueled censorship declines with reality." Excuse me, "Bigotry fueled censorship declines with time." That's the myth. The reality is bigotry fueled censorship adapts to prevailing norms and power structures, and we are seeing that unfold in real time, right? Not only do we have the historical evidence of huge, similarly enormous waves of book censorship, highly successful, disturbingly successful book censorship, but it is a mistake to think that just because it was successful in the past and just because we are so many decades away from when it was successful in the past, that somehow censorship that is again rooted in prejudice, rooted in entitlement, rooted in many cases in bigotry, that simply because our society has advanced along a particular timeline, that time has passed, that somehow censorship has simply declined as a rule, and in fact, it's quite the opposite.

Censorship is still with us for lots of reasons. We talked in the last discussion about this connection between book censorship and our reading culture as a whole, but also censorship, particularly censorship that is rooted in prejudice, adapts to prevailing norms and power structures. And when I say we are seeing that unfold in real time, what I mean is you can easily point at, right, all the things that you might want to say is unique to this moment. "Oh, well, we have social media, and so these attacks are far more wide reaching. The opinions of a relatively small group of people."

I want to say somebody, there was one report that said essentially 11 people were responsible for the massive book bans in 2021, 2022. This minority opinion that book censorship is a good thing, a minority held opinion. That minority's voice can be extremely loud and coordinated because of social media, because of setting up affiliate groups and chapters that are able to operate at the same time, because of the change in work habits because of the pandemic, folks that are able to still work from home or enjoy flexibility in their schedule are able to go to more school board meetings, to more... Other sort of local governance meetings where they can again, make their minority opinion loudly heard and many times scare the crap out of local leaders, local politicians and other parents, other parents and other community members who don't know what's going on.

This is that sort of taking advantage of prevailing power structures, prevailing norms. They are used to being the loudest voice in the room, the most listened to voice in the room, even when they are expressing a minority opinion, an opinion that does not hold sway with most people, but they don't need most people to agree with them. They just need the correct people who are currently in charge to agree with them or at least take them seriously enough to undermine the authority and expertise and processes that have long been in place in libraries, in schools, et cetera.

So we must not fall prey to the decline... The myths of book censorship's decline over time, but rather remember that it is always going quite strong within prevailing norms and power structures. Our current book challenge and banned trends, which you can see through some of the maps and graphs that so many different organizations have put together, who's doing the banning, what's being banned and all the supposedly why's haven't changed.

We talked about that in the previous discussion. They haven't changed. These trends are the same, right? So if the exact same rhetoric can get a book banned now as it did in 1950 and 1920 and 1980, then censorship is certainly not in a decline. At best, it is staying exactly the same and in staying exactly the same, it nevertheless is able to be successful and that should be alarming. There it is. I've used alarming again, and it's also probably worth saying that in many cases the books that are being targeted haven't changed. Of course new books have come out. Gender-queer is getting massive attention since it was published, but The Bluest Eye has been among the top 10 challenged books for decades. The same books are being challenged over and over again. This is a playbook that has not changed one iota and it is still getting results, which means if they don't have to change to get results, that means we do and we are seeing some other aspects that are unique or at least are exacerbated in our current historical moment.

We are seeing massive agendas around parallel legislation, right? Folks that are proponents of book censorship are also often proponents of legislation that is anti-CRT or more accurately anti-history, anti-queer, anti-trans, literally some of the most eugenicist and even bordering on genocidal legislative rhetoric that we have seen in this century, but not so different from what we have seen in previous centuries in just the last one, just the 20th century, we've seen something very similar that again, we didn't outgrow just because time passed. Here it is again in a slightly different outfit. One thing that is if not unique, again, exacerbated in our current wave of book bans and book censorship is that the attacks on books are extending to libraries and librarians. We are seeing librarians getting fired now.

Now, I won't speak for those folks. A number of them have chosen to speak out about their experiences. Some of them are linked among our resources. Please go and hear directly from them about their experiences and what's going on. You can read in the news about a number of libraries that have quite literally been threatened with defunding. This group of parents riled up enough community members to say, "We want this book gone." The library said, "No, that's not how we work. All the reasons that you have given are not a reason for this book to be removed from access to the community and the library." And they have, the community has quite literally said, or these folks in power have quite literally said, "Well, then I guess we won't have a library. If I can't remove this book from my community's access, then I will remove a library from my community." That has been sort of the extreme to which folks are willing to take it.

It's not brand new, that certainly has existed before, but at the level that we're seeing, it is a lot. It seems to be connected to sort of this, well, what's the way to say it? In previous decades, previous instances of book ban flashpoints, we have seen people that are perfectly willing to be contradictory in their push for book bans as saying that they are, that a book band is somehow connected to their commitment to literacy, whatever. But it was not usual that someone in seeking to have a book removed from a library shelf was seeking to have empty a library, to dismantle a library. Far more often it was a targeting one particular book, and there really was this argument of like, no, it's actually in service of literacy. It is in service of what the library is supposed to be doing. It is in service of our young people to remove this book from access for this reason, this reason, this reason.

And we are seeing a shift in this motivation or in the contradiction that is sort of being embraced, the contradiction of, "I'm about parental rights. It is my right as a parent to not have my child have access to this book. And it does not matter if my parental right, as I have described it, is in direct opposition to the parental rights of literally any other parent in the school, except of course for the parents who happen to agree with me." That level of contradiction is a little new, the sort of outspoken anti literacy of I would rather these kids not learn how to read than be able to read and have access to this. And at the heart of it, the cruelty, the cruelty of, "I don't care if this book is affirming to a child who identifies with the characters in these pages."

"I don't care if by saying that this book is inappropriate, I am saying that there is an entire portion of the population, portion of my fellow humans that is also inappropriate and not just inappropriate for some, but inappropriate for all." The cruelty at the heart of that is the point. The contradiction, the anti literacy and the cruelty are the point, and that, again, it's not that that is brand new in book bans. That has certainly been present throughout the history of book bans in the US, but if only because we're living through it in this moment, it feels so acute, so heightened, so escalated, and so sort of off the charts where people... It just feels like it is being taken to extremes, even to the point where you literally will dismantle your community's library, you will destroy the library for everyone because you don't get your way, feels like an extreme that we haven't had to live through before, but maybe that's just because we're living through it now.

Now I won't sort of close the conversation on all the sad. I will also say that there is, if not a silver lining, I'm not sure if it's a silver lining or just a positive news, right? Not everything is negative news, so there is some positive coming out of this. Like yes, we're seeing terrible parallel legislation. Yes, we're seeing attacks on librarians and them getting fired, but we are also seeing anti-censorship legislation making its way through various state legislatures and successfully too. That is extremely heartening that the places that we think of as havens for intellectual freedom are, in fact, in many cases, are actually codifying it to make it so where the local jurisdiction and the local, no matter how big the local consensus is about the unacceptability of a book, that they simply are not empowered to remove that book from their community's access based on their personal objection to the content, et cetera, et cetera.

That is a positive note, and again, it should never have happened in the first place, but the librarians that have suffered job loss or any other kind of harassment, et cetera, who have been able to pursue lawsuits in reaction, we are seeing positive results coming from those lawsuits as well. Either return of their jobs or some kind of compensation, et cetera, and that, again, while it should not have happened in the first place, it is very heartening to see those folks getting their measure of justice is very heartening.

And I'll leave you, it's not quite bookending with a quote, but I do want to leave you again as you consider this idea of the presumption of progress as you resist the presumption of progress, as you resist that myth that censorship ever declines, but rather is always sort of thriving and the ways that it's connecting to what we're seeing happening right now, and therefore how it connects to how we can be the most effective in pushing back.

I'll leave you with this. So, two perspectives to also bear in mind, I'm a big fan of nuance. I don't think anything is achieved by stripping nuance from a situation, especially one like this, but rather to investigate it, to get a good handle on that nuance and include that nuance in your strategies. Address, find strategies that address many pieces of what's going on at once so that you're effectively putting out this fire rather than simply spraying water at one tree and then the rest of them are still going up.

So two perspectives to keep in mind and to help sort of frame the nuance that's important here. So one is, that is what I'm calling what Mr. Rogers would say. Folks familiar with Fred Rogers, excellent human being, extreme proponent of literacy and reading and childhood education and a deep respect for children, that book censorship in many cases is the exact opposite of. Mr. Rogers would say, and folks have probably heard this quote, that when something big is happening, something big and scary and bad, something where a lot of grownups are upset and often not able to explain to younger kiddos what exactly it is that's going on and why it's scary and not able to tell them why it will be okay, because maybe they're not sure it will be. Mr. Rogers says, "When that big, scary, bad thing is happening, you should look for the helpers," that that is a way to stay grounded, to push through being afraid, to cope.

"Look for the helpers." That means something specific for kiddos, but for grownups, for us, I think what it sort of means is yes, look for the helpers, look for the work that is currently being done to address this. How can you contribute to it? How can you best organize your time, again without disrupting other things that you have to do? And what is your lane within this fight? How can you apply your strengths to fighting back and how can you follow the lead of those who are most effective... Most affected, rather, and how can you make sure that you are amplifying the voices of those most affected, and making sure that their thought leadership on strategies to push back is being widely adopted, et cetera? Look for the helpers. That is an important aspect of this fight. It is an important aspect of resisting that presumption of progress.

It is an important way to disrupt censorship's adaptation and use of prevailing norms and power structures. We can disrupt it if we look for the helpers and throw our weight behind them. Now, the other thing that's important to remember is yes, what Mr. Rogers would say, but also what a firefighter would say. I can't find a better metaphor than this. Mr. Rogers would say, "If a big building is on fire and it's big and it's scary, look for the helpers, look for the firefighters, and take heart in the fact that that work to address the situation is happening and they are trying to make you as safe as possible." Now, that's lovely, but what a firefighter would say is, "If a big scary fire is happening around you, your job is to get out of it. Yes, yes, take heart, yes, take action, but also secure your safety."

A firefighter does not want you to run behind him with a hose, doesn't want you to turn on faucets. A firefighter wants you to drop to the ground below the smoke, wants you to get to an egress that you can actually exit safely and wants you to get as far away from the building as you can. And it is the balance between these two that is so essential.

Self-preservation is absolutely part of this fight. Look for the helpers. Take heart and take action, but also take care. Take excellent, very good care, mitigate your risk if you are someone who is at an elevated level of risk in this particular fight, either because you are a librarian who's being specifically targeted within sort of a storm of book challenges, et cetera. If you are a marginalized librarian for any number of intersections of identities and you're finding that the challenging of content in book bans is also somehow challenging your existence in the library, if you simply cannot be safely on the front lines and also prioritize your self-care, then please step back, meet your needs, take good care.

Your self-preservation is just as essential as any other element of this fight, and you'll find some self-care resources among the other sections of ReadCon. You'll find some resources linked here. Please do take note of them. Please make a bespoke, and I do mean bespoke, just for you, a just for you plan of what is right for you, what meets your needs, allows you to take heart, to take action, and take care.