

## BACKGROUND

On June 16, 2023, the Library Board of Trustees received a letter requesting a review of *Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan, as well as "other problematic titles" such as *You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things!* by Cory Silverberg (author) and Fiona Smyth (illustrator).

The Library's Collection Development Policy establishes a formal process for review requests:

*Community members or groups requesting removal of library material may fill out the Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials Form (see Appendix C) and submit it to the Library Director. The Library Director will review the request and the material in question per the criteria established in this policy and will make the decision to remove or retain the material. If the patron is not satisfied with the Director's decision, they may appeal in writing to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees will respond to such appeals in writing with the final decision.*

To date, no *Request for Reconsideration* forms have been submitted for these titles; however, given the nature of the letter, its address to the full Board, and the number of signatories (132), the Library's Executive Committee is proceeding with the review as if it were an appeal. To this end, the Executive Committee has requested the Library Director conduct a formal review for submission to the Board in advance of their final decision. This document contains a formal review of the titles in question and will address the following:

- Do these titles comply with the selection criteria as stated in the Library's Collection Development Policy for inclusion in the Library's Teen/Tween Room?
- Do the complaints as outlined in the letter dated June 16, 2023, warrant removal or relocation per the Library's Collection Development Policy?

The Library's Collection Development Policy identifies *Standards of Selection* and states,

*To build a collection of merit, materials are evaluated according to one or more of the following standards. An item need not meet all of these criteria in order to be acceptable.*

- *Literary quality as judged by reviewers, the staff, and the public*
- *Potential popularity among our readers*
- *Importance or interest of the subject*
- *Suitability of subject and style for intended audience*
- *The authority and accuracy of the author*
- *Relation to the existing collection and to other materials on the subject*
- *Representation of important movements, genres, or trends*
- *Artistic presentation and/or experimentation*
- *Representation of diverse points of view*
- *The quality and appropriateness of the format, including ease of use*
- *Titles recommended from standard bibliographies*

Library staff, operating under the supervision of the Director, apply these standards when evaluating materials for inclusion in the collections. The following pages serve as a review of the two titles through the lens of the *Standards of Selection* as set forth in the Library's Collection Development Policy.

## STANDARDS OF SELECTION REVIEW: *Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* by Erika Moen, Matthew Nolan

- Literary quality as judged by reviewers, the staff, and the public
  - The title in question has been positively reviewed by a wide-variety of professional review publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. Of these 4 reviews, two were starred reviews, denoting the highest possible critical acclaim.<sup>1</sup>
  - General public response is divided, but largely positive (Amazon: 396 reviews—75% 5-star, 15% 1-star, with an overall 4.1 score; Goodreads: 775 ratings—41% 5-star, 39% 4-star, 3% 1-star, with an overall 4.13 score).
- Potential popularity among our readers
  - The title in question has been popular generally and is widely available and well stocked in bookstores and other public libraries:
    - In-stock in 33 Barnes and Noble Bookstores within 100 miles
    - Available at 14 libraries within the LION consortium
    - Included in public library collections in all 50 states in the country.
- Importance or interest of the subject
  - The Library's Collection Development Policy explicitly supports sex education as a topic of importance to the age group in question.
- Suitability of subject and style for intended audience
  - The title in question is designated by the publisher for ages 14+ and includes “a teen's guide” in the title. Most public libraries queried shelve this title in the YA or Teen section (if they have one), and the Library of Congress has assigned “Sex instruction for children--Comic books, strips, etc.” as the subject heading.
- The authority and accuracy of the author
  - Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan are both full-time, professional cartoonists and comic book creators. Together they run a sex education focused webcomic called *Oh Joy Sex Toy*, which has won an assortment of accolades over the years and was featured in the Tate museum in London, England. They have also indicated, in an interview in *Publisher's Weekly*, that the publisher, *Random House*, “brought on sex education experts who reviewed the book—experts across varying identities, races, and sexualities, and we made changes according to their feedback to ensure *Let's Talk About It* was as inclusive and accurate as possible.”<sup>2</sup>
- Relation to the existing collection and to other materials on the subject
  - This is one of several titles acquired to update our collection to make it more inclusive and provide coverage of more modern topics. The title compliments the existing collection by providing material in a graphic novel format, a popular medium for teens.
- Representation of important movements, genres, or trends
  - The title in question includes relevant discussions of modern topics, including consent, boundaries, non-cis and non-heterosexual experience, sexting, pornography, and body image.
- Artistic presentation and/or experimentation
  - The title in question is credited as the first teen handbook on sex, sexuality, and relationships to be published as a graphic novel. The authors are also well-established artists.
- Representation of diverse points of view
  - The title in question covers a wide-variety of sexual preference, gender identities, and interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from professional review sources can be found at the end of this document.

<sup>2</sup> Read the full interview with the authors on the development of the book:

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/86195-four-questions-for-erika-moen-and-matthew-nolan.html>

- The quality and appropriateness of the format, including ease of use
  - Again, the graphic novel format is especially popular and accessible among this age group.
- Titles recommended from standard bibliographies
  - Not applicable.

**STANDARDS OF SELECTION REVIEW: *You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things!* by Cory Silverberg (Author) and Fiona Smyth (Illustrator)**

- Literary quality as judged by reviewers, the staff, and the public
  - The title in question has been positively reviewed by a wide-variety of review publications, including *New York Times Book Review*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and a variety of Canadian resources including *The Toronto Star* and *CBC Arts* (the author is Canadian).<sup>3</sup>
  - General public response is divided, but overwhelmingly positive (Amazon: 226 reviews—87% 5-star, 3% 1-star, with an overall 4.7 score; Goodreads: 178 ratings—73% 5-star, 20% 4-star, 1% 1-star, with an overall 4.63 score). Please see end for excerpts from professional review sources.
  - The title in question has also received the *Doug Wright Award for Best Book* and is included in the American Librarian Association 2023 Rainbow Book List.
- Potential popularity among our readers
  - The title in question has been popular generally and is widely available and well stocked in bookstores and other public libraries:
    - In-stock in 13 Barnes and Noble Bookstores within 100 miles
    - Available at 3 libraries within the LION consortium
    - Included in public library collections in all 50 states in the country
  - The author was also interviewed by Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*.<sup>4</sup>
- Importance or interest of the subject
  - The Library's Collection Development Policy explicitly supports sex education as a topic of importance to the age group in question.
- Suitability of subject and style for intended audience
  - The title in question is designated by the publisher for ages 10+. Most public libraries queried shelve this title in the Children's or YA/Teen section (if they have one), and the Library of Congress has assigned "Sex instruction for children--Comic books, strips, etc." as the subject heading.
- The authority and accuracy of the author
  - Cory Silverberg is a sex educator, an author, and a self-described "queer person." Cory received a master's degree in education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Cory is the co-author of four books, including the ALA Stonewall Honor Book *Sex Is a Funny Word* and *What Makes a Baby*, both with Fiona Smyth.
- Relation to the existing collection and to other materials on the subject
  - This is one of several titles acquired to update our collection to make it more inclusive and provide coverage of more modern topics. The title compliments the existing collection by providing material in a graphic novel format, a popular medium for young people.
- Representation of important movements, genres, or trends
  - The title in question includes relevant discussions of modern topics, including sex education in social justice, covering not only the big three of puberty—hormones, reproduction, and development—but also power, pleasure, and how to be a decent human being. Other topics include body autonomy, pornography, trauma, masturbation, consent, boundaries and safety in our media-saturated world, and puberty and reproduction, all addressed in ways that include trans, non-binary, and intersex bodies and experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from professional review sources can be found at the end of this document.

<sup>4</sup> Listen to the interview or read the transcript: <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/25/1113437232/rethinking-the-sex-talk>.

- Artistic presentation and/or experimentation
  - The graphic style and high-color saturation are distinctly unique.
- Representation of diverse points of view
  - The title in question covers a wide-variety of sexual preference, gender identities, and interests. It is racially and ethnically diverse and covers cross-disability experiences.
- The quality and appropriateness of the format, including ease of use
  - Again, the graphic novel format is especially popular and accessible among this age group.
- Titles recommended from standard bibliographies
  - Included in the 2023 ALA Rainbow Book List which includes an array of diverse stories and identities representing the LGBTQIA+ youth experience published in 2022.

## RATIONALE FOR REMOVAL and/or RELOCATION

The rationale for removal and/or relocation, so far as I can discern from the letter, includes:

- An understanding, as defined by the letter writers, that the topics covered, specifically, “how to masturbate, have sex, conduct anal sexual activities, give and receive oral sex,” are not age-appropriate.
- An understanding, as defined by the letter writers, that “this material is not sex education.”
- “This material is not available in our schools” with the implied understanding that it is therefore inappropriate for inclusion in the Library’s collection.
- An understanding, as defined by the letter writers, that the title is “unbecoming of our community values.”

## RESPONSE TO RATIONALE

*Age-Appropriateness:* The Library’s Collection Development Policy identifies two main collections for non-adult patrons: the Children’s Room for children through elementary years and the Tween/Teen Room for youth middle through senior high ages. Aside from these broad age categorizations, the Library’s Collection Development Policy does not attempt to address the concept of “age-appropriateness” for a variety of reasons, the most noteworthy being that age-appropriateness is highly subjective—both in the sense that youth of the same age vary widely in developmental progress and in the sense that what one individual or cultural group considers appropriate another deems inappropriate. This latter point is aptly illustrated by the current debate occurring in the community as it pertains to the content in these books. Should one faction of the community, or for that matter one librarian, determine what is appropriate and made available for all others in the community? For these reasons, professional library practice avoids making judgments of appropriateness and instead focuses on the intention of the author/publisher and the relevance of the content to the intended audience when making placement decisions. In making decisions on collection placement, Library staff defer to the following professional markers:

- Intended audience as identified by the author and confirmed by the publisher during the professional editing and publication process.
- Intended audience as determined by standard bookseller marketing.
- Intended audience as validated by professional review(s) of the title.
- Subject headings as applied by the Library of Congress and peer libraries.

*Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* is intended for a teen audience (*The Teen’s Guide* is part of the title). The publisher categorizes it as a “Teen & Young Adult Nonfiction,” and it is marked as Grade Level 9-12 on a variety of book distributor sites. Professional reviews confirm the Grade Level 9-12 categorization. In addition, it is categorized as “Sex instruction for children--Comic books, strips, etc.”<sup>5</sup> by the Library of Congress and “Sex instruction for teens” by a variety of local libraries.

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the Library of Congress does not have a “sex education” subject heading; “sex instruction” is used in most cases. See <https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeLCSH/S.pdf> for details.

*You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things!* features middle school characters and is intended for ages 10 and up as indicated by the publisher and the author. It is marked as intended for Grade Level 5-9 on a variety of book distributor sites. Professional reviews confirm the ages 10+ intention, and it is categorized as “Sex instruction for children--Comic books, strips, etc.” by the Library of Congress and a variety of local libraries.

On a related note, there seems to be an implication from the letter writers that only titles intended for the youngest of middle schoolers be included in the Teen/Tween Room to shield them from content intended for older teens. This understanding is not in keeping with established Library practice, nor is it supported by the Library’s Collection Development Policy. In both the Children’s and Teen/Tween Rooms patrons will find materials for a wide range of ages and developmental stages. Indeed, this practice is standard amongst libraries—both school and public. This point was addressed very recently in an interview on June 26, 2023, with the Guilford School Superintendent regarding the recent review of a number of books in the Guilford School Libraries. He states, “We cannot take the position that we will only shelve books that are appropriate for the least mature youngest student with the most concerned parent. If we did that, we wouldn’t have a rich library.”<sup>6</sup> Nor, it should be added, would the Library be fulfilling its duty to serve all its patrons. Regardless, the Library’s Collection Development Policy clearly states, “Responsibility for children’s use of materials rests solely with their parents or legal guardians. Selection of material will not be inhibited by the possibility that items may come into the possession of children.”

*Sex Education:* Sex education materials are explicitly supported by the Library’s Collection Development Policy for the Tween/Teen Collections. The letter writers “do not believe that material is in any way sex education.” Given what the letter writers list as topics they evidently consider objectionable, the letter writers’ understanding of sex education appears to not include sex instruction. It may be that the letter writers consider sex education to be synonymous with education in the biology of human reproduction (which is covered in the titles under review), but this is not explicitly stated. For the purposes of a public library, this understanding of the term sex education appears unreasonably and impracticably narrow, biased in favor of a particular set of values, and lacking currency and relevance, especially when viewed in light of other subjects of interest outlined in the Library’s Collection Development Policy for Tweens/Teens such as mental health and popular culture.

*Availability in Local School:* The letter writers imply that because these titles are not available in the local school they are not appropriate for inclusion in the Library. The Library’s collections for children, tweens, and teens are in no way intended to replicate those found at the local school. While an attempt is made to support local school and home-school curriculum, the Library does not base collection development decisions on the collections found in the local school. The Library operates with the understanding that the role of the school library and the public library are not synonymous. Indeed, the role of the Library is in part to provide resources and information beyond that offered in the local school.

*Community Values:* The letter writers insist on the application of community values, as defined by this select group of people, in the development of the Library’s collections. The Library’s Collection Development Policy explicitly protects against the removal/relocation of items based on these factors and others like them with the following statements:

- Materials are not excluded or included in the collection based solely on subject matter or on political, religious, or ideological grounds. In building collections, staff are guided by the principle of selection, rather than censorship.
- The Old Lyme-Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library recognizes that many materials are controversial and that any given item may offend some patrons. Selection of materials will not be made on the basis

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<sup>6</sup> Read the full interview: <https://ctexaminer.com/2023/06/26/freeman-speaks-out-on-challenged-books-in-guilford/>

of anticipated approval or disapproval, but solely on the basis of the principles stated in this selection policy.

- Works which present an honest picture of some problems or aspect of life are not excluded because of coarse language or frankness.
- The over-all value of an item, rather than freedom from defects, is the chief criterion in selection.
- Staff will include materials that represent the broad range of human experience, reflecting the ethnic, religious, racial, and socio-economic diversity, not only of the region it serves, but also the larger global perspective.

In addition, the Library's affirmation in the Library's Collection Development Policy of the American Library Association's *Freedom to Read Statement* and the *Library Bill of Rights* establishes the Library's commitment to inclusive collections free from censorship, even by majority values or opinion.

## DECISION

*Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan, and *You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things!* by Cory Silverberg (Author) and Fiona Smyth (Illustrator) both comply with the Standards of Selection identified in the Library's Collection Development Policy. It is the Director's determination to keep both titles in the Library's Teen/Tween Room.

**<sup>1</sup>Review Excerpts:** *Let's Talk About It: The Teen's Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan

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*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

*Moen and Nolan (Oh Joy Sex Toy, a collected volume of their webcomic, for adults) apply their signature corny humor and straightforward handling of sex to this accessible guide that covers the "in-between stages" of intimacy, "from having a crush to... putting a condom on something." In bite-size sections that each begin with a question ("What is... aftercare?"), teen characters engage in meaningful and nuanced dialogues about aspects of identity and physicality (e.g., body image, gender and sexuality, kinks, and safe sex). Via realistic scenes and conversational dialogue balloons, characters create a blueprint for exploring their own vulnerability ("I haven't done anything before? At all??") and supporting others' ("I'm really glad you told me"). Responsibly representing a wide array of anatomically diverse "generally estrogen-rich" and "generally testosterone-rich" bodies, this guide's pale-hued art also showcases variations in ability, body shape, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, and pairings, creating a refreshingly inclusive read that takes individual desires and needs into account. Though some text-packed pages can be difficult to digest, they nevertheless provide vital information, embracing the complexity of relationships ("We're all constantly learning and growing") and offering comprehensive, no-nonsense information on sex and sexuality. Useful back matter suggests further reading and resources. Ages 14-up. Agent: Monika Verma, Levine Greenberg Rostan Literary. (Mar.)*

*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

*A multiethnic set of realistic teen cartoon characters representing a wide diversity of body types (sizes, abilities, genders) have illuminating and honest conversations in this informative guide. The first chapter focuses on what sex is, how varied sexual expression can be, and what consent means. The second chapter nonjudgmentally explores various kinds of relationships, including monogamous, polyamorous, open, and companionate. Subsequent chapters discuss gender and sexuality (with joyful and varied illustrations), body image (featuring loving representations of many body types), anatomy (including outstanding drawings that are inclusive of trans and intersex people), masturbation (with how-to ideas presented), and thorough coverage of birth control and STI prevention. The book is rounded out with chapters on what to think about before*



having sex; orgasms; ground rules for sexting; kinks, fantasies, and porn; jealousy and rejection (including guidance on recognizing abusive patterns); potential impacts on friendship; and more. The tone throughout this colorful, visually appealing, and easy-to-read volume is honest, normalizing, and sex positive as it offers readers excellent and reassuring information. The married co-authors are known for their sex-education-related comic collaborations. While the dialogue can occasionally feel stilted as it conveys comprehensive content, the work is still crisp, breezy, effective, and noteworthy in a crowded field for its holistic emphasis on human, emotional aspects of sexuality.

Puts the graphic in the graphic-novel format, in the best and most educational way. (further reading, authors' note, index) (Nonfiction. 13-18)

#### Booklist

*A frank and open-minded look at sex, relationships, and self-understanding.*

#### School Library Journal

*Gr 9 Up-Don't be afraid. Yes, there are drawings of naked bodies in this book (mostly in the "Body Image" section), and, yes, readers will learn about some of the ways the human body is wired for pleasure. And the detailed drawings of genitals are not solely in service of explaining how babies are made. But every panel of this book, every anatomical drawing, every conversation over tea or in a tent, is loaded with crucial information about consent, respect, consideration, and boundaries. A magnificently varied cast of characters confess their insecurities to their best friends, siblings, crushes, lovers, and hookups and in return receive reassurance, information, and practical advice. Readers will learn about a laundry list of activities, including sexting, masturbation, gender, and fantasies, along with health issues such as safe sex and a couple of the less pleasant aspects of relationships: jealousy and rejection. Moen and Nolan have been making comics about sex for years-their comic *Oh Joy Sex Toy* has even been exhibited at the Tate Modern in London. Moen's richly individualistic characters keep the pages turning, despite some fat word balloons-the result of personality-rich dialogue and precision, which is important when it comes to topics like identity and relationships. A palette of browns, pinks, and grays continues the celebration of bodies of all shades and shapes. A sprinkling of profanity (including the odd F-bomb) must be noted as it may affect a school library's ability to shelve it. VERDICT Real talk about relationships and sex.*

**3Review Excerpts:** *You Know, Sex: Bodies, Gender, Puberty, and Other Things!* by Cory Silverberg (author) and Fiona Smyth (illustrator)

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#### Kirkus Reviews

"In what many readers will recognize as their signature approach, they tackle often confusing topics (you know, sex) against a delightfully diverse backdrop of skin tones, body sizes, and abilities in a fun, text-heavy style infused with warmth, humor, and emotional intelligence. . . . A necessary invitation for young people to explore."

Link to full text of NYT Book Review: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/27/books/review/you-know-sex-bodies-gender-puberty-and-other-things-cory-silverberg-fiona-smyth.html?searchResultPosition=2>

New York Times Magazine: *The Books About Sex That Every Family Should Read* link to full article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/28/magazine/sex-ed-books-teens-parents.html>