

## APPENDIX 9 *NINETEEN MINUTES: MY TAKE ON THE RECENT CONTROVERSY*

By Angie Miller  
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I was fourteen years old when I stood in front of our town's public librarian and signed out *Wanderlust* by Danielle Steele. I had read all of VC Andrew's books and this was my fifth Danielle Steele book. My young, idealistic teenage heart could not devour enough smutty romance headed by strong female protagonists who overcame struggle to live glamorous lives. I remember the green cover with the sweeping white letters on it as I handed the paperback to the librarian, and I remember her purple-wire-rimmed glasses as she looked up at me and with her nose a little wrinkled (I remember humiliation washing over me as I stood there in my dirty clothes and unwashed hair. It is amazing how adults can make kids from poverty feel so very small with just a wrinkle of a nose). And then her voice, dripping in judgment, cut the space between us. "Does your mother know you're reading this?" she asked, indicating that either I was sneaking around or my mother was one of loose morals—and at fourteen, I wasn't sure which was worse. But I also remember feeling appalled that she thought she could decide for me what I should be reading.

Twenty years later I stood in front of a group of fourteen-year-old eighth graders and collected 38 copies of Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* after a terribly-executed, yet successful censorship attempt in which (& I am paraphrasing the longest week of my life here) a parent photocopied eight passages from the book and distributed them to class parents, citing that it was pornographic and blasphemous. I saw the same expression on the kids' faces as they processed some of those same emotions: *How can somebody tell us that we shouldn't be reading this?*

And ten years later, I am now standing behind a circulation desk as high school students come in and sign out our last copies of Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes*. Last week, in a neighboring town, a parent was arrested and removed from a school board meeting while protesting the inclusion of this book in his 14-year-old daughter's English curriculum. Students bring me newspaper articles or tell me how it has made national news—it was even on *The View* last week. They tell me that their friends who go to this school are up in arms. They voice their own disgust and anger at the situation.

And then a friend sent me a message: *Can you comment on this, please?*

It's taken me all week to try to articulate how I feel about adults determining what students should and should not read. I've read all kinds of commentary, and here's what I ultimately have to say:

First of all, I am a huge proponent for student choice in reading—across the board, even in English class. I think there are very few instances in which a book should be a whole-class read, and that instead of focusing on strict curriculum choices and going for a one-size-fits-all approach that only disenfranchises students who either do not understand or enjoy the reading, we should be focusing on teaching reading and critical thinking skills while students self-select materials, guided by the teacher. It is a researched method that increases engagement, raises student achievement, and avoids controversies like this, but is largely ignored in schools.

That being said and my reading pedagogy set aside, if we focus on this particular incident, I believe it's all hogwash—everything from the protest to the arrest.

Page 313 from *Nineteen Minutes*, out of context, may feel like "pornography" if that's all you have read from the book. But if you have taken time to read the first 312 pages, and continue to read the other 151 pages, you will recognize that the female character is being

overpowered by her boyfriend and while it is not technically rape, as she never outright says no, his aggression makes her feel violated and afraid. It is a turning point in their relationship that is critical to the plot and speaks volumes about their characters, and sadly, it is what many teenage girls experience as they fall into serious relationships and struggle with the question: once you have sex with a boy, are you allowed to change your mind?

Authors write novels—they don't write excerpts. And readers read novels, not passages (although, thanks to this parent, page 313 is totally being read in isolation in my library, as students come in, grab our last copy and open it to that page). And English teachers teach issues and theme and voice and character development, not pornography. And anybody who has read this book *in its entirety* will recognize that it is not about sex. It is about everyday high school issues. In fact, this book so resonated with teens from NH, they awarded it with the distinguished 2009 Flume Award. And I guarantee that they did this because of the literary value of it, not because of page 313.

This book, like *The Chocolate War*, addresses issues that teenagers today (and 40 years ago—*The Chocolate War* was written in 1974) wrestle with: violence and bullying. It is irresponsible for educators not to give students materials that allow for discussion and reflection on modern-day, real-world concerns. If we want our youth to grow up and be strong, assertive, proactive, and healthy in every way, we must talk about difficult issues with them and not pretend that they don't exist. Because any adult who denies that their 14-year-old is thinking about troublesome issues, is closing him or herself off to ever helping that student. Teens will always turn to adults who are open and who accept reality, because they need to have someone who is honest and nonjudgmental.

Finally, any adult who tries to pull reading material from a child's hand, fails to understand the act of reading in so many ways. And this is where the Gilford parent, the parents I dealt with ten years ago, and the town librarian who once wrinkled her nose at me have gotten it all wrong. When reading a book, we bring our own meaning to the text.

Reading comprehension is intrinsically tied up with our own experiences. It is why as an eighth grader I deplored *The Red Badge of Courage*, yet as a college student fell in love with it. It is why as a parent, I and my students who have younger siblings, sobbed through *See You at Harry's*, while those who did not have younger family members sat alongside us, dry-eyed. It is why I, as a teacher who has spent a great deal of time teaching mythology, fell madly in love with *The Song of Achilles*, yet those who have little mythology background don't see it as being as exquisitely beautiful. It is why every time I read *Gatsby*, it is a new book to me. As adults, we read text through a very different lens than our 14-year-old students. And even within that age category, a 14-year-old girl who has had a sexual encounter will read page 313 very differently than one who has not.

Should the parent have been arrested? I wasn't there, but I do wish that this was not the focus of the controversy. I also wish that that father had had the decency to sit and have a civil, face to face conversation with the teacher prior to arriving at a public school board meeting. The fact that it catapulted so quickly into national news without the parent and teacher ever having had the chance to problem solve and come to a compromise as a team, speaks volumes as to how too many adults model conflict resolution for their children. A simple, honest conversation may have eliminated all of this (ironically, another message from the reading of *Nineteen Minutes*).

Read the book for yourself before you make any judgment. At this time, eighty percent of Gilford parents have supported the reading of *Nineteen Minutes*, and ten percent of them are unsure, leaving only ten percent saying no. In my own classroom, every parent who read *The Chocolate War*, ultimately put it back in his or her child's hands—and of my 38 8th graders, 36 of them brought in notes saying they wanted their child to continue reading it. And if you are

deciding to read only page 313, or the quotes that Fox News has decided to sensationalize, you should realize there are other passages from the book to consider like:

“But then again, maybe bad things happen because it’s the only way we can keep remembering what good is supposed to look like.”

or

“In nineteen minutes, you can mow the front lawn; color your hair; watch a third of a hockey game. In nineteen minutes, you can bake scones or get a tooth filled by a dentist; you can fold laundry for a family of five. In nineteen minutes, you can stop the world; or you can just jump off it.

or

“When you begin a journey of revenge, start by digging two graves: one for your enemy, and one for yourself.”

SOURCE:

<https://thecontrarianlibrarian.com/2014/05/10/nineteen-minutes-my-take-on-the-recent-controversy/>

### **OVER TO YOU**

1. Do you understand the controversy regarding the excerpt from page 313?
2. Does an excerpt from a book with vivid details of hard sex, make that pornographic material?