



# OWWL LIBRARY SYSTEM

## BOOK CHALLENGE REVIEW COMMITTEE REPORT: FLAMER BY MIKE CURATO

### INTRODUCTION

#### Item Reviewed



**Title:** Flamer

**Author:** Mike Curato

**Publisher:** Henry Holt and Company (2020)

**Copies Owned:** Five physical copies are available in the OWWL catalog at member libraries. One eBook copy is available in OWWL Library Systems OverDrive collection.

**Shelving Location(s):** The physical copies available at member libraries are shelved in the “YA Graphic” sections. The OverDrive copy is available in the “Main” and “Teen” collections; not searchable in the “Kids” collection.

#### Book Description

*"It's the summer between middle school and high school, and Aiden Navarro is away at camp. Everyone's going through changes--but for Aiden, the stakes feel higher. As he navigates friendships, deals with bullies, and spends time with Elias (a boy he can't stop thinking about), he finds himself on a path of self-discovery and acceptance<sup>1</sup>."*

#### Reason for Review

Flamer by Mike Curato has been included on the list of the “Top 13 Most Challenged Books of 2022” by the American Library Association. According to the ALA, this title received 62 challenges because of “LGBTQIA+ content” and “claimed to be sexually explicit<sup>2</sup>.”

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<sup>1</sup> OWWL Library System Online Catalog, <https://search.owwl.org/Record/627132>

<sup>2</sup> American Library Association, Top 13 Most Challenged Books of 2022, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

## COMMITTEE REVIEW

### Committee Charge

A six-member committee comprised of Member Library Directors, a System Staff member, a System Trustee, and the System Executive Director read and reviewed this title. Due to schedules and illness, the committee exchanged email messages in order to share their opinions on this particular title.

### Committee Discussion

*Flamer* by Mike Curato is an incredibly relatable story of self-acceptance and growth appropriate for any teen. The book covers many topics including homosexual thoughts, religion, bullies, forgiveness, family trauma, friendship, love, shame, and expectations.

Comments from Committee Members:

- “I loved the character's vulnerability about his sexuality, weight, and race.”
- “...there were mentions of sex but nothing I found explicit especially considering all the characters are teen boys.”
- “I think this would be a helpful read for anyone who feels like they don't fit in or feel uncomfortable which is probably every teenager.”
- “Some young teens, especially boys, may relate to what the main character is going through. Real life situations. Overweight boy, feminine tendencies, gets bullied, struggling going to a new school, struggling going to high school as a freshman. Lack of friends. All of these things are felt at some point by nearly every new teenager. It's a great book to justify those feelings and know that you're 'normal.'”
- “It's a self-help story.”
- “Aiden is like any other teenage boy trying to figure out how he fits in with his peers. He carries the weight of other people's opinions of him throughout the story and almost lets them overtake him at one point, however, it ends with him realizing he is loved and accepted by the people who matter most in his life.”
- “People of any age can take messages away from this story. For example: Teens may realize that they are not the only ones feeling alone, misunderstood, and bullied. Adults may better understand how to support teens who are navigating the complex feelings associated with growing up.
- “I liked the simple changes in color for the times that Aiden was experiencing events and emotions that were intense. The reds, and oranges highlight Aiden's emotional turmoil.”
- “This book is well placed in our YA section.”

Because of the positive messages in this story, the committee feels this book should remain in young adult sections of public libraries. There is no explicit content. There are minor instances of “teenage boy humor” and suggestions of homosexual thoughts and suicidal thoughts. However, the overall messaging of the story is positive for young readers.

## PROFESSIONAL REVIEWS<sup>3</sup>

### Booklist – September 25, 2020

*In his powerful debut graphic novel, Curato, best known for the Little Elliot picture books, tells the story of one transformative week of Boy Scout camp in 1995, in which chubby, awkward Filipino American Aiden wrestles with the growing realization that he's gay. Spare panels with simplified, black line work and gray ink washes relay the bulk of the story, following Aiden through activity-packed days and the whiplash-inducing highs and lows of summer camp social interactions, not only navigating friendships on the cusp of high school but dealing with aggressive homophobic and racist bullying. Curato carefully and thoughtfully uses fiery orange-and-red ink washes to accent the black-and-white artwork, not only around the ubiquitous campfire but to indicate moments of intense emotion—anger, naturally, but also fear, hope, and ultimately strength. A lot happens to Aiden over the course of the week, including a desperate moment of suicide ideation, and the transformation of the visual metaphor of fire beautifully crystallizes his growth and resilience in that time. Just as his deft artwork meticulously balances between blazing feelings and quiet contemplation of natural beauty, Curato gives Aiden a poignantly well-rounded character: for all the homophobia and racism inherent in institutions like the Boy Scouts and the Catholic church, Aiden still defiantly finds inspiration and strength there. Masterfully nuanced and stunningly told, this is visual storytelling at its finest.*

### Horn Book Magazine – October 31, 2020

*Aiden is not looking forward to starting public high school in the fall; his Catholic schooling heretofore has had its challenges -- "jerks" -- but at least it had become familiar. A summer at Boy Scout camp provides a break from his squabbling parents and a chance to breathe ("Everything is so quiet" in the woods) before school starts. Not so fast: camp also has bullies, whose taunts referencing Aiden's presumed sexual orientation are only exacerbated by Aiden's growing love for another camper, the athletic and sweet-natured Elias. Grownup LGBTs will know exactly what Aiden is going through, but this book speaks so well to those kids currently undergoing the ordeal. The graphic novel takes its time to fully pull readers into Aiden's psyche and his setting, which provides the pleasures of summer and friendship and nature along with the rewards of Scout activities. (Orienteering!) The drawing is expertly cartooned, and the palette is black and white with occasional, and then increasing, daubs and splashes of red whenever passions -- of many kinds -- ride high. The variation of small, storytelling panels and full-page and double-page spreads for big moments is wonderfully effective, and the climax -- Aiden in a literal dark night of the soul in the outdoor chapel -- is high drama indeed, emotionally powerful, proudly and extravagantly spiritual (and as Catholic as any Graham Greene epiphany). He comes through it to have one perfect day at camp to sustain him going forward. If you will forgive the editorial intrusion, I wish I had had this book fifty years ago. Roger Sutton*

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<sup>3</sup> All professional reviews were retrieved on October 27, 2023 from Syndetics Unbound, a catalog enrichment service connected to the owwl.org online catalog, [https://search.owwl.org/Record/627132#unbound\\_reviews](https://search.owwl.org/Record/627132#unbound_reviews)

November/December 2020 p.97(c) Copyright 2020.

Kirkus Reviews – September 1, 2020

*The last week at Scouting camp highlights accomplishments and humiliations that last a lifetime. Aiden, a fat, biracial (Filipino and white), soon-to-be high schooler, is in his last week of Boy Scout camp in 1995. Each day documents events, from bonding over fireside songs and learning important skills to the micro- and macroaggressions that follow an adolescent boy of color who presents as effeminate and is queer. As the week moves on, readers learn more about Aiden and his life, from his stressful home with an emotionally abusive father to his love of Catholicism and being an altar server. The stress of a new school, bullies who are ever present, and struggles with identity drive Aiden to a breaking point, one that's familiar to many young people. The monochromatic illustrations, sometimes highlighted with red, orange, and yellow, are timeless moments of a remembered childhood. The use of red to highlight the tangible (firelight, a Swiss Army knife) and represent the intangible (passion, sorrow, and hope) is a master class in simplicity. But the true star of this book is the writing, which describes a boy who could live in any decade on his journey of self-discovery. This is a story that will be read and reread, and for some, it will be the defining book of their adolescence. Buy it. Read it. Share it. (afterword, resources) (Graphic fiction. 12-18)*

Publishers Weekly – July 13, 2020

*“Before transitioning from a private Catholic middle school to a public high school, Aiden Navarro, 14, wants to enjoy Boy Scout summer camp. As in school, however, Aiden can’t escape the things he’s so often been bullied for: his weight, his Filipino heritage, and his effeminate voice. He endures relentless taunts rooted in toxic masculinity from his camp peers for these things and the way he always seems to act differently than others—in one memorable moment, Aiden spontaneously riffs a Valley girl rendition of a campfire song. As Aiden feels true friendship with pen pal Violet and explores his growing feelings for tentmate Elias (“Gay boys like other boys. I HATE boys. They’re mean,” Aiden asserts) and his religious upbringing, his sense of isolation compounds. Through straightforward, thick-lined art, Curato interweaves surrealistic, emotionally charged moments, as when Aiden’s emotionally abusive father assails his family as a large talking head. Throughout the story, the color red coalesces around fires literal and figurative, as when a camper pushes Aiden to a point of volcanic rage. Emotional and raw, Curato’s story plummets Aiden deep into despair, including suicidal ideation, juxtaposing powerful moments of burning, fiery hope. Ages 14–up. Agent: Brenda Bowen, the Book Group. (Sept.)”*

**APPROPRIATE AGE LEVEL**

The publishers recommended age sets *Flamer* by Mike Curato as a Young Adult novel for ages 14

to 18 (Grades 9-12)<sup>4</sup>.

OWWL Library System does not offer a recommended age range or title restrictions. We encourage parents and guardians and their children to discuss their reading habits in the context of their goals to determine if this title is appropriate.

## FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

### Item Copy Actions

*Flamer* by Mike Curato is available at five libraries in the System. OWWL Library System will purchase an additional copy to include in its Freedom to Read collection available to place on hold for library users.

OWWL Library System owns the eBook version; no audiobook version is available to purchase through OverDrive at this time.

### Concerned Parent Actions

A minor's access to materials is the responsibility of that minor's parents or guardians. According to the American Library Association:

*The mission, goals, and objectives of libraries cannot authorize libraries and their governing bodies to assume, abrogate, or overrule the rights and responsibilities of parents and guardians. As "Libraries: An American Value" states, "We affirm the responsibility and the right of all parents and guardians to guide their own children's use of the library and its resources and services." Libraries and their governing bodies cannot assume the role of parents or the functions of parental authority in the private relationship between parent and child. Libraries and their governing bodies shall ensure that only parents and guardians have the right and the responsibility to determine their children's—and only their children's—access to library resources. Parents and guardians who do not want their children to have access to specific library services, materials, or facilities should so advise their own children. Libraries and library governing bodies should not use rating systems to inhibit a minor's access to materials.<sup>5</sup>*

To aid parents and guardians in addressing title access in OWWL Library System's OverDrive collection, the default collection can be changed under account settings.

To accomplish this, log in to an OverDrive account at <https://owwl.overdrive.com/> › click on My Account › Settings › Content Preferences › Audience(s). An account can be limited to All Audiences,

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<sup>4</sup> Reading Level retrieved on October 27, 2023 from [https://search.owwl.org/Record/627132#unbound\\_readinglevel](https://search.owwl.org/Record/627132#unbound_readinglevel)

<sup>5</sup> Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/minors>

Juvenile, Young Adult, General Adult, and Mature Adult.

Physical collections cannot be changed to restrict a minor's access to materials. Instead, please follow the American Library Association's recommendation noted above.

## CONCLUSION

### Future Reconsideration Requests

This report shall appropriately respond to any challenge or request for reconsideration of *Flamer* by Mike Curato until November 8, 2025. At that time, should a formal challenge or request for reconsideration be received by the OWWL Library System, the Executive Director shall once again form a committee to review the title and use this documentation and all other professional material as the foundation of that discussion.

### System Policies and Resolutions

For additional information on the selection of System materials, please review the Selection and Reconsideration of Materials Policy and the Resolution on the Freedom to Read by visiting <https://owwl.org/freedomtoread>.

### Report Approval

OWWL Library System's Board of Trustees reviewed and approved this report on November 8, 2023.

*Approved: November 8, 2023*