

Off-color book stirs debate at Old Rochester junior high

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MATTAPOISETT — The classic debate over what's appropriate for school children to read and when has a new local chapter — at Old Rochester Regional Junior High School and in the pages of "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian."

A few parents are scheduled to meet with staff and School Committee members today about their concerns over the book's assignment, for the second year, in eighth-grade English. Penned by Sherman Alexie, the novel is a New York Times best-seller, a National Book Award winner and, according to the American Library Association, was one of the top 10 banned or challenged books of 2010.

"I'm a Constitution guy. ... But the First Amendment doesn't say (that) freedom of speech means that a teacher can bring in whatever they want and assign it," said James Babineau, an eighth-grade parent who helped sound the alarm after reading the book and said that when he first approached administrators about it, they hadn't read it.

"I don't want it pulled out of the library. I just didn't think that it was eighth-grade appropriate," Babineau said.

Through the journey of a young Spokane Indian named Junior, "The Absolutely True Diary" explores themes of triumph, racism and loss, the influence of one's environment and the power to reach beyond expectations.

It's also narrated in the voice of a teenage boy, whose "sex life" is what one might expect — a lot of talk and not much action. Topics include masturbation and erections, and words include sexual and racial slurs and curses. The book also drops the "N" word, in one of many pages Babineau flagged in a letter to the editor in the Oct. 13 issue of "The Wanderer," a tri-town newspaper.

The scene is an instance of harassment by a white classmate, prompting Junior to call it the "most racist thing I'd ever heard in my life."

But Alexie also sprinkles in pearls of wisdom, such as Junior's observation when watching his mother mourn the loss of her mother: "... all of us are always five years old in the presence and absence of our parents."

The slew of comments on "The Wanderer's" Facebook page on this issue range from people who echo Babineau's concerns and appreciate his input to someone who calls the novel a "great little book."

Regardless, "we should not hide ourselves from the literature," said Thomas Shire Jr., who represents Marion on ORR's School Committee. "That includes bad language and bad things and people doing bad things to other people." Although noting that certain material should be shielded from elementary-age readers, Shire said racism in literature helps inform people to recognize it in real life.

And when asked whether he would draw a distinction between removing a middle school reading assignment versus taking it out of a library, he said, "I do not want censorship of any kind, or

restriction of any kind, no more than I would prohibit the reading of Mark Twain's books."

Another Facebook commenter points out that despite all of the book's language, today's middle schoolers have probably heard worse.

But, "I don't want to dumb our reading ... and say that 'Oh well, this is how they talk in the hallway, so this is the type of book we're going to give them,'" Babineau said.

As part of ORR's curriculum review process, a standards committee consisting of School Committee members will hear parents' concerns today along with feedback about the book's merits and learning value, according to Elise Frangos, ORR's director of curriculum and instruction, who said she, the assigning teacher and a librarian will be in attendance.

She said even before people raised a concern, a letter about the book was slated to be sent home to parents and, regardless, "another choice was going to be offered if the parent's philosophical, religious or cultural belief did not make for a comfortable use of this book."

At ORR, "A basic belief system is respect for all and sensitivity for all," said Frangos, who said she expects the standards committee to make a decision today. "Because we embrace that model, we really believe that we need a thoughtful, sensitive process with regard to curriculum adoption and then curriculum challenges."

ORR is hardly the first school district to confront these issues, or even grapple with them over this particular book. After "The Absolutely True Diary..." was assigned as summer reading to incoming eighth-graders at Fairhaven's Hastings Middle School, parental concerns and the lack of a warning or other option led to a quick swap, according to Principal Wayne Miller, who noted that "some of the language "» is not what I would want my children to be reading at this level."

In July, Alexie responded to the swell of criticism his and other young adult books had generated in a blog for the Wall Street Journal.

"I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that," he wrote. "I write to give them weapons — in the form of words and ideas — that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed."