**A Scrotum is a Scrotum: Speaking Notes on *The Higher Power of Lucky***

Tiffany Allen

Library and Information Studies Program, Old Dominion University

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Sue C. Kimmel

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**Speaking Notes**

Speaking notes are for a community meeting to discuss whether *The Higher Power of Lucky* should be moved from the children’s section to the young adult section in the public library.

* A concerned parent has asked for the book, *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron, to be relocated from the children’s section to the young adult section due to the use of the word “scrotum” on the first page. NoveList K-8 Plus lists *The Higher Power of Lucky’s* reading level as ages 9-12 (2022) while Scholastic lists reading level for the book as grades 3-6 (2021). A significant window of the reading level for this book is in elementary school (3rd, 4th, and 5th grade), which is contained in the children’s area that also houses a Tween section for children in grades 4-6, while the young adult area is usually considered for grades 6 and up.
* Merriam Webster defines the word scrotum as “the external pouch that in most mammals contains the testes” (2022), which is the context that *The Higher Power of Lucky* uses the word without it being sexual, and it is used in a matter-of-fact fashion. The scrotum is a body part like an arm or a leg. A participant in a study done by Hartsfield and Kimmel, where parents read controversial books, including *The Higher Power of Lucky,* said, “’I’d rather my child use the right words’” (2020, p. 383) and others found it had literary value separate from the reasons why it was challenged (2020, p. 381), while another study done by Hartsfield and Kimmel on graduate teaching and librarian students found that while some were uncomfortable with the use of the word, it was used correctly, was not used inappropriately, it was not a bad word, it could help build older elementary school student’s vocabulary, and at least it was not slang (2019, p. 340).
* Children’s Bureau’s statistics from 2020 indicate that 9.4% of all children (Children’s Bureau, 2022), which is almost 1 in 10 (Children’s Bureau Express Resources, 2021), are sexually abused. Correct terminology for body parts, taught age appropriately, and using them nonchalantly, which *The Higher Power of Luck*y does, is important in abuse prevention and education about sexual abuse (Bruni, 2013). Studies have found that using appropriate terms increases the rate at which children told about the abuse, increases their self-esteem, decreases them blaming themselves (Bruni, 2013) (Finkelor, 2009, p. 181), teaches them that these are not bad words, and helps make them less vulnerable to sexual abuse (Klass, 2016).
* Students/children do have First Amendment rights (Whelan, 2009). Further examination of this concept includes when a court ordered *Annie on My Mind* had to be returned to the high school library because it was “educationally suitable,” when a court ordered the “Harry Potter” series had to be returned to the Cedarville School District libraries, which had removed the books, only allowing those with written permission from parents access to read them (Whelan, 2009), when a Chicago library board refused to remove a children’s book on gay pride from the children’s section, (Mccoppin, 2017) and in Henrico Public Library’s Collection Management Policy that says, “The library upholds the right of every customer to access material and information, even if the content is controversial or unacceptable to others” (Henrico Public Library, 2020). Moreover, Ferguson found reading controversial books did not seem to cause criminal behavior issues and instead increased civic action and charitableness in children (2014, p. 357).
* If *The Higher Power of Lucky* were moved to the young adult section as opposed to keeping it in the children’s section, it would greatly shorten the window at which this book would be read seeing as the reading level is mostly in elementary school age children, which falls under the umbrella of the children’s section, and that would be against the ALA’s Bill of Rights that says, “Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (ALA, 2022). The reading level suggests this book is appropriate for older elementary school students as did one participant in the study of teaching and librarian graduate students (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2019, p. 340), and a child’s access to information should not be hampered as the point from the ALA Bill of Rights says and as Henrico County Public Library’s Collection Management Policy states with its use of the words, “every customer” (Henrico County Public Library, 2020). The proposal should be not to move the book to young adult, instead keep it in the children’s section, making *The Higher Power of Lucky* available in the Tween section of the children’s area for grades 4-6, which would hit the reading level window 3-6 for the book almost perfectly, and make it available to those children who wish to read it.

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**A Scrotum is a Scrotum: Speaking Notes on *The Higher Power of Lucky* Annotated Bibliography**

Buni, C. (2013. April 15). The case for teaching kids ‘vagina,’ ‘penis,’ and ‘vulva.’ *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/04/the-case-for-teaching-kids-vagina-penis-and-vulva/274969/>

Buni establishes that sexual abuse prevention experts believe that the use of correct terminology for body parts helps not hurts children. She talks with several experts, sees what they do, and the outcomes they have seen. Laura Palumbo, a prevention specialist with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, says age appropriately teaching children correct terms for body parts discourages those who would sexually abuse them and encourages self-confidence, body image positivity, and child to parent communication. She says it can also help with the accuracy of the reporting process if sexual abuse does occur because the child knows the correct term, not a euphemism. The use of the word scrotum in *The Higher Power of Lucky* is the correct term for what it refers to on a dog who was bitten by a snake. Scrotum is just a body part, and it is not used in a sexual way in the book nor is it emphasized. This article demonstrates that the use of correct terms can be helpful to children for prevention of sexual abuse, therefore, making a case that *The Higher Power of Lucky* should remain in the children’s department, not be moved to the young adult section for the use of a proper word. The article backs up that the matter-of-fact way in which the word is used in the book is a good way for children to see that it is not a big deal, also making a case for not moving the book out of the children’s section.

Ferguson, C. J. (2014). Is reading “banned” books associated with behavior problems in young readers? The influence of controversial young adult books on the psychological well-being of adolescents. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, *8*(3), 354-362. <http://doi.org/10.1037/a0035601>

Ferguson did a study trying to determine if the reading of banned/controversial books decreased any civic behaviors, increased mental health issues and criminal behaviors, and decreased academic performance. Youth were asked if they had read 30 books on the American Library Association’s commonly challenged book list from the last decade. Measures were then taken by the youth and their caregivers to assess their behaviors, mood, and civic mindedness along with grade point average. Grade point average did not seem to be affected by reading banned books, but mental health symptoms did seem to be possibly increased. The study found that reading controversial books was related to higher rates of interest in politics, elections, and charitable cause involvement. Therefore, civic mindedness was raised. Neither violent nor non-violent criminality was increased by the reading of banned books. These three outcomes were cited in the notes to show that reading *The Higher Power of Lucky*, despite its controversial use of the word scrotum, would not harm children. It was also used in the notes to point out that there might be some benefit to reading a book that had controversial issues raised about it with the increase of civic action. Also, this was cited to make the case for keeping the book in the children’s section as it would not seem to be harmful to children to read banned/controversial books.

Hartsfield, D. E. & Kimmel, S. C. (2019). “It was…the word ‘scrotum’ on the first page”: Educators’ perspectives of controversial literature. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *70*(1), 335-346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117751126>

Kimmel and Hartsfield did a study on graduate students who were pre-service teachers and pre-service librarians. These students had read *The Higher Power of Lucky* in a class and had discussions about the book. The researchers read the discussions and drew some conclusions about their reactions to the book and the use of the word scrotum among other topics. Most of the students did react unfavorably to the use of scrotum. But at least one student found the word was proper and was glad slang had not been used. This was used in the notes because the author could have used slang or used it in a sexual way, but that is not the way it was used. It was written in context, not emphasized, and was used correctly. Another student pointed out the word scrotum is not a bad word, it is just a word, which was used in the notes to show scrotum is not a word to be avoided. Another point put in the notes was that at least one graduate student felt that older elementary school students could benefit from the vocabulary that could be built by discussing the word scrotum. This backs up the older elementary school reading levels suggested for the book and appropriateness of the word in the context it was used. This presented the position the book should not be moved to young adult section and should stay in the children’s section in the Tween area for older elementary school students.

Hartsfield, D. E. & Kimmel, S. C. (2020, July). “Please let this be the crassest thing my child reads!”: Exploring community perceptions of challenged children’s literature. *Reading Psychology*, *41*(5), 369-402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2020.1768983>

Hartsfield and Kimmel conducted a study where they organized a book club with a group of adults, had them read a challenged children’s book, and got together to discuss the book. They wanted to investigate adults’ beliefs about challenged children’s books. One of the books read was *The Higher Power of Lucky.* They found that while the participants could name why a book might be challenged, the treatment of the topic was often considered appropriate. Participants also commented on how well written the books were, especially *The Higher Power of Lucky*, that there was a literary value beyond why the book was challenged. When reading *The Higher Power of Lucky*, a parent is quoted as talking about preferring her son to use the right word as the book did, and that she then made sure her son knew the word scrotum. This was central to the notes about *The Higher Power of Lucky* staying in the children’s department because a parent reading it saw nothing age inappropriate about that word for the book’s intended audience. Also, the point that there was literary value to the book in theory to add to the children’s section added to the notes about keeping the work in the children’s section.

Klass, P. (2016, November 1). Teaching children the real names for body parts. *The New York Times*,<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/well/family/teaching-children-the-real-names-for-body-parts.html>

Klass is a doctor, who has written an article about teaching children the correct terminology for all body parts including those that are the “private parts.” Unfortunately, Klass cites a study in 1992 by Wurtele in which Head Start students knew real body part names for other areas of the body, but mostly referred to genitalia as slang or in euphemistic terms. Wurtele also postulates that knowing the correct terms makes children less vulnerable to sexual abuse because the child who is comfortable with the correct terminology can talk about what was done to them in terms that are not easy to be misunderstood, and that this child’s parents have obviously been willing to talk to them about these subjects. This was cited in the notes as a reason that *The Higher Power of Lucky* should stay in the children’s section because it uses the term appropriately, and children who know appropriate terms are less likely to fall prey to sexual abusers. Also, when proper terminology is left out, the article suggests it leads to the idea that these words are things we can not talk about. This was also used in the notes to emphasize that the book should stay in the children’s section because scrotum is not a bad word, nor is it something that cannot be discussed, it is just a word.

Whelan, D. (2009, February 2). A dirty little secret: Self-Censorship. *School Library Journal*. <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=a-dirty-little-secret-self-censorship>

Whelan provides an overview of self-censorship and the reasons why librarians censor the books on the shelves by their lack of purchasing controversial materials and by their decisions where books go on the shelves. Several books, including *The Higher Power of Lucky*, are discussed that have been affected by this and have been targeted by book banning. The article contains a run-down of court cases that have upheld children/students do have First Amendment rights. This included the case where *Annie on My Mind* was ordered to be returned to high school libraries by a U.S. District Court justice because it was educationally suitable. Another case mentioned the return of Harry Potter by a federal judge to the shelves of Cedarville School District libraries that had made it available only through written parental permission. Both cases cemented part of the notes that *The Higher Power of Lucky* should stay on the children’s shelves, not be moved to young adult, nor have parental permission required to check it out because of the use of the word scrotum. Whelan also talked about that if a book was age appropriate, then it became a constitutional issue to remove it because of content that was disapproved of. The age appropriateness of *The Higher Power of Lucky,* discussed in its reading levels of 3rd to 6th grade, was central to the position of keeping it on the children’s shelves and a possible shift to Tween, which is still in the children’s section, but is aimed at children in 4th to 6th grade, a perfect fit for *The Higher Power of Lucky*. This fit in with Whelan’s idea of age-appropriate materials being available.