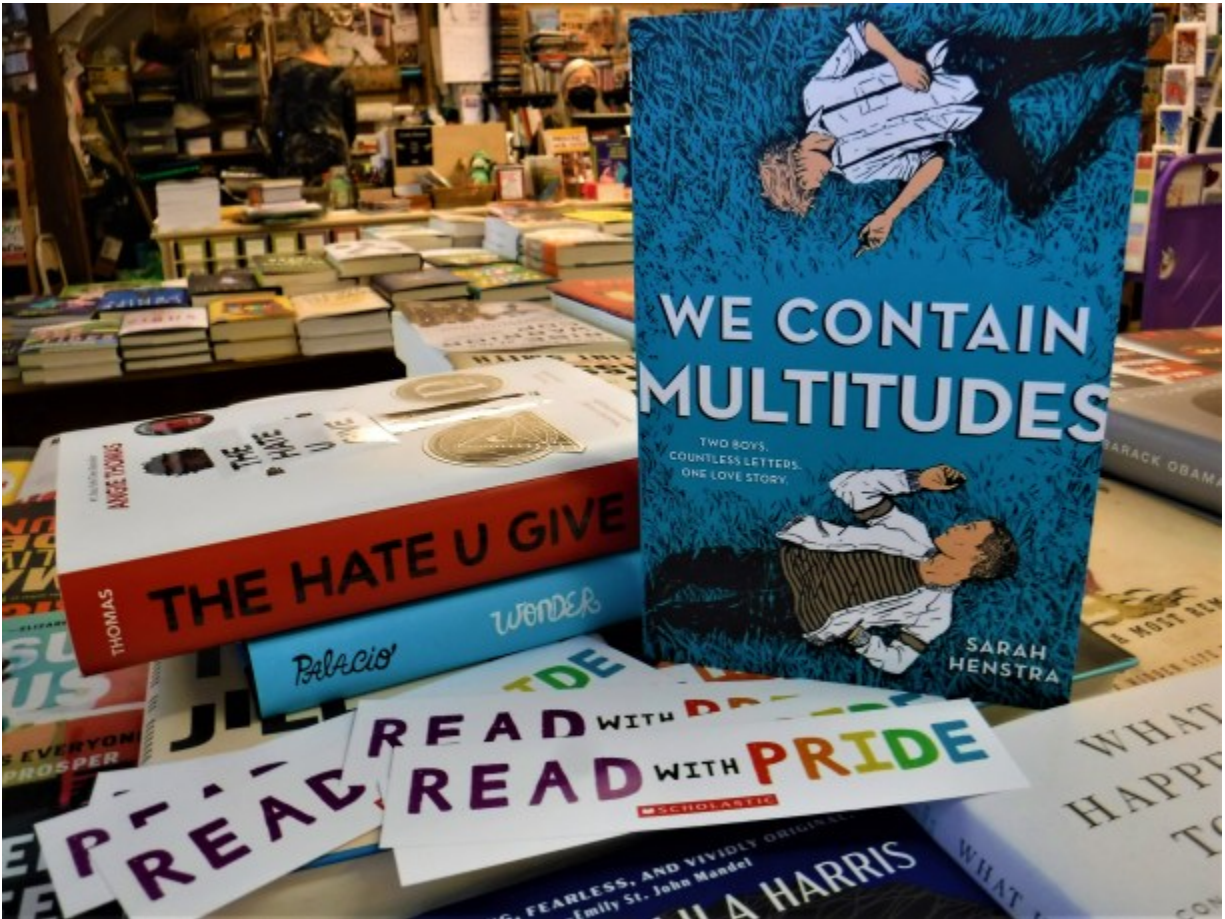


Amid book bans, Vermont Reads finds no news about first LGBTQ+ title is good news

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The young adult novel “We Contain Multitudes” is the current selection of the Vermont Reads program. Photo by Kevin O’Connor/VTDigger

When the Vermont Reads program unveiled its first LGBTQ+ selection this past year, it didn’t anticipate a record number of nationwide calls to ban such books.

“What we’re seeing right now is an unprecedented campaign,” the American Library Association’s Deborah Caldwell-Stone recently told The New York Times.

But as sponsors at Vermont Humanities prepare to welcome the author of the selected young adult novel “We Contain Multitudes” at several public events this week, the biggest related news is the lack of any.

“Certainly a debate is raging nationally and gaining steam, but we haven’t heard pushback,” said Ryan Newswanger, program director for the statewide affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Vermont Reads aims, figuratively and literally, to put community, school and library groups on the same page by encouraging them to study the same book.

The two-decade-old program originally featured titles about past challenges, be it Montpelier author Katherine Paterson's "Bread and Roses, Too" about turn-of-the-century labor strikes, Brattleboro writer Karen Hesse's "Witness" about the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s or Saint Michael's College graduate Loung Ung's "First They Killed My Father" about her 1970s escape from war-torn Cambodia.

But recent picks have tackled the present — such as last year's Black Lives Matter-inspired "The Hate U Give" by Mississippi writer Angie Thomas and the current selection "We Contain Multitudes," a tale of two teenage boys by Canadian author Sarah Henstra.

"The novel contains many strands relevant to current community conversations, including economic disparities, how veterans return from war, domestic violence, opioid addiction, bullying and coming out," Vermont Humanities sums up the latter book. "But lest it sound too heavy, it is also a beautiful story of friendship, poetry, coming of age and aspiring to move beyond social expectations."

The program has offered 4,000 free copies to eligible groups, as well as support from partners that include Outright Vermont, Recovery Vermont and the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.

"Young people are hungry for stories that reflect their lives," Outright Associate Director Amanda Rohdenburg said. "This book doesn't shy away from all of the hard things they're navigating."

Vermont may pride itself as being the first in the nation to adopt same-sex civil unions in 2000 and full marriage rights by a legislative vote in 2009, but the state's Youth Risk Behavior Survey continues to find students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning facing higher rates of bullying, alcohol and drug use, and suicidal thoughts.

"We haven't heard anything about this particular book being banned," Rohdenburg said, "but we have heard plenty about so-called concerned citizens scrutinizing the books that youth are bringing home."

Although the current Vermont Reads selection has yet to spark questions, past ones have. Last year's "The Hate U Give," for example, had some Black residents wondering if a book set in a Southern inner city reflected their small-town lives. Other readers, in turn, asked why recent titles often have focused on race.

"We don't intentionally want to create controversy, but we're also not going to steer away from books that are centered on topics that require discussion," Newswanger said. "We see our role as helping to engender conversations."

The author of "We Contain Multitudes" is set to present an online discussion for middle and high school students on Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. as well as in-person public lectures on Wednesday at 7 p.m. at the Essex Junction Senior Center and Thursday at 7 p.m. at Middlebury College's Dana Auditorium.

Vermont Reads organizers are pleasantly surprised this year's biggest challenge has been the Covid-19 pandemic rather than any direct criticism. But they know concerns linger.

"I don't think we're immune to what's happening in other parts of the country," Vermont Humanities Executive Director Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup said. "Over Town Meeting, there were plenty of candidates out there who were making either coded or direct references to wanting to censor what kids are taught in public schools or what books they have access to."

Even so, the program is set to announce its next selection on April 30 at the Vermont Book Awards in Montpelier.

"The work that's getting done has been really heartwarming and important," Kaufman Ilstrup said. "People who are reading books should be able to look through windows and see worlds that are different from their own, be able to look in mirrors that reflect their own lives, and be able to step through a sliding glass door and live in somebody else's shoes."

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