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## Wrangling over school literature

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BROOKSVILLE — Parents may not know Rob Thomas.

But many students do, especially in Hernando County, where his book "Rats Saw God" is in trouble with an advisory committee to the school board.

This Rob Thomas is not from the rock group Matchbox Twenty. He's a former teacher, author and screenwriter — the executive producer and creator of the network television series "Veronica Mars."

And recently, his work has been the object of a possible book banning in the county.

His book is found in Hernando, Central and Springstead high schools libraries, but it may never be on a shelf at Nature Coast Technical High School.

If school board members vote Tuesday to accept a book committee's recommendations, Thomas' book, "Rats Saw God" and possible another controversial book, "Boy's Life," could be taken off library shelves at all the county high schools.

Nature Coast's staffers' request to get the banned book was stopped cold in May.

At that time, the school board was asked to approve the purchase of 2,500 books. Forty-three book titles were on the list. Nine of them came under fire by school board member Sandra Nicholson.

"Because I had the audacity to question anything in print that is put in front of our students, I was told I'd be opening a can of worms," Nicholson said.

It took an hour to resolve what to do about the \$73,000 book purchase. Board members, school staffers and residents put the part of the purchase on hold after Nicholson read a portion of one of the books that was on the list.

"Hold still, you s--- -head!" board member Sandra Nicholson read; only she didn't delete the obscenities. "Where's the money, you m----- -f-----?"

School board chambers quieted after she read that excerpt from Robert McCammon's "Boy's Life."

That night, the board agreed to purchase only 34 of the books. The nine books with questionable content were pushed aside.

The board agreed to place those books under the microscope of the school district's policy of questionable material. A committee would review the nine books in question to determine if each were suitable for a high school library.

Five committee members

They spent the summer reading books for Nature Coast Technical High School's library. They met Sept. 1 to talk about the materials in question.

The school district said committee members were a high school English teacher, a high school media specialist, a high school principal, a Hernando County Public Library employee and a resident of Hernando County.

"Everyone had time to express their feelings," said Elaine Wooten, curriculum specialist for the school district.

Wooten said the book committee reviewed each of the nine books one by one. That process isn't new in the county, she said. Usually, parents voice their concern when they see a book that contains what they consider questionable material.

When a book has been challenged in the past, the board directed the school to place that book under a "special checkout situation," Wooten said. It could only be checked out if the child brought a note from their parent.

But this was different.

This time a school board member voiced her concern about nine books. The committee wanted to make sure they gave each book a thorough look-over.

"We struggled with whether or not we were given the appropriate time," Wooten said.

After they shared their opinions about each book, they took a hand vote. Seven of the nine books passed the committee's muster.

Those books are: "Are you in the House Alone" by Richard Peck; "The Bean Trees" by Barbara Kingsolver; "The Clan of the Cave Bear" by Jean Auel; "The King Must Die" by Mary Renault; "The Power of One" by Bryce Courtenay; "Rainbow Boys" by Alex Sanchez and "Sex Kittens and Horn Dawgs Fall in Love" by Maryrose Wood.

Three of the five committee members recommended that the book "Boy's Life" by Robert McCammon be accepted. Two members would like to see it banned.

Whether that happens is up to the school board Tuesday night.

"Boy's Life" was the book read by school board member Sandra Nicholson during the May 16 board meeting.

"I'm sorry," Nicholson said in May after reading the excerpt filled with obscenities. "But I'm not sorry to stand up for what I believe in. We have teachers in our classroom that complain about the words and language our students use and we say you shouldn't use this kind of language. And then we recommend they read these books."

"Boy's Life" is not one of the books shelved at any of the county's high schools. But "Rats Saw God" is. A student currently has the book checked out from respective libraries at Hernando and Springstead high schools.

Central High School's copy has been taken off the shelves until, "the controversy is over."

The book's presence in area high schools didn't prevent the committee from rejecting it at Nature Coast. Four of the five committee members believed that, "Rats Saw God," is not appropriate for a high school library.

It's unclear if the committee was familiar with author Rob Thomas. If they were, they would know that Thomas taught a high school journalism class in Texas for five years. He writes books for young adults. He's also written for the network show "Dawson's Creek."

But, that's not what he does now. He's the executive producer and creator of the television show "Veronica Mars."

Rob Thomas speaks

Thomas wasn't aware of the events surrounding his book in Hernando County. Some of the authors were. Maryrose Wood, author of "Sex Kittens and Horn Dawgs Fall in Love," was aware of the situation in the county.

Thomas wanted to know why the committee believed the book was inappropriate.

"(The book) is about getting better," Thomas said. "It's about the healing process."

The book starts off with the main character Steven York. He's high on drugs. By the end of the book, York works through his problems. He works through his parent's divorce.

Thomas said he hardly knows what to say about the book banning. He replayed in his mind one scene he wrote in the book. He wondered if the, "loss of virginity" scene drew the most criticism.

"The loss of virginity scene is played closer to comedy than it is to titillation," Thomas said. "To stick your head in the sand and say we don't have students that have sex. We don't have a drug problem. It's shortsighted."

Thomas said he's gotten scores of letters from kids across the country showing how much "Rats Saw God" helped them.

"I certainly don't think my book is an endorsement of drugs," he said.

Thomas said the book serves, "as a good moral lesson to the kids."

Since May, "Rats Saw God" and the other eight books have gotten publicity in Hernando County.

"I don't know if there's anything as bad publicity," he said. "More kids will seek the book out."

No final decisions have been made about the nine books. The book committee's recommendation will go before the school board on Tuesday. Then, the board will decide what happens to the nine books.

Since May, other school board members have voiced their opinions about the potential book banning.

"I can't personally ban a book from a shelf of our libraries," said school board chair Jim Malcolm at the May 17 meeting.

He later said that he didn't believe in censorship. He believes in academic freedom.

"I balance that with parents' (responsibility)," said Malcolm, a former teacher.

In the aftermath of the May meeting, school board member Pat Fagan questioned his vote.

"If I had to do it over again, I would re-think my vote," Fagan told staffers and other board members during a summer workshop. "I'm one of those individuals that feel that books should not be taken off bookshelves."

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