

Checklist for Material Challenge Review Committee

Title: *Assassination Classroom Vol. 1*

Author: Yusei Matsui Book - Manga Graphic Novel (See below)

Committee Members;

Administrator - Jamie Nixdorf (Skyview Assistant Principal)

Teacher - Erick Meyer (ELA at Career Center)

Librarian - Julie Whitworth (Will James)

Parent - Emily Romrell

Decision: We, the Billings Public School Materials Review Committee, recommend that the Superintendent and Board of Trustees uphold the librarian's decision to have *Assassination Classroom* as a part of the literary collection for both Billings Senior High School and Billings West High School.

Purpose:

1. What is the purpose, theme or message of the material?

Thematically, there is a difference between the entirety of this series in its theme and the single work that was challenged. If we are isolating the first volume, the theme would be : Not everything is as it seems. The students who are seen as society's problems are that way because the true monsters are those who are preoccupied with a failed system that dehumanizes. We quickly see that the humans supporting a broken system are far more cruel than the alien threat. The one called a monster might actually be the only real human in the room. The theme is an attempt at inverting normal positions to analyze the harms of certain systemic models in place.

Themes - power of self-belief

2. How well does the author/producer accomplish this purpose?

The purpose is accomplished decently, considering that Manga is intended to be read in its entirety and this is only one small piece of a larger whole.

3. Will the reading and/or viewing and/or listening to the material result in a more compassionate understanding of human beings?

Yes. The characters in the story consist of a classroom composed of underachieving misfit students and a super-power, alien, octopus teacher who makes it his mission to turn this classroom of 'rejects' into self-believing, confident students. Throughout the arc of the story, the reader is introduced to the issues and problems of the students both at home and school. Though the students are challenged with assassinating the alien teacher before he destroys the earth, the students gain insight into themselves and each other in the unconventional lessons he imparts on them. These lessons include believing in oneself, the power of teamwork, and things aren't always as they appear.

4. Does it offer an opportunity to better understand and appreciate the aspirations, achievements, and problems of various minority groups?

Yes.

5. Are any questionable elements of the story an integral part of a worthwhile theme or message?

Yes

6. In what ways does the material contribute to the educational objectives of the district?

**MONTANA CONTENT STANDARDS FOR LIBRARY MEDIA AND INFORMATION
LITERACY FOR NINTH - TWELFTH GRADES**

LM.EF.9-12 Exercise freedom to read and demonstrate the ability to pursue personal interests

LM.EF.9-12.1 select a variety of types of materials based on personal interests and prior knowledge

LM.EF.9-12.2 read, listen to, and view information in a variety of formats and genres to explore new ideas, form opinions, solve problems, and to connect to real-world issues

LM.EF.9-12.3 routinely read, view, and listen for personal enjoyment, to learn, to solve problems, and to explore different ideas

LM.EF.9-12.4 read widely to develop a global perspective and understand different cultural contexts

LM.EF.9-12.5 identify the rights of self and others to access information freely and pursue the right to read, view, and listen

RL.11-12.5 - Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

RL.11-12.6 - Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement), including works by and about American Indians.

Content:

1. Does the story give a realistic picture of life?

This book is in the genre of Science Fiction Manga. Sci Fi Manga is speculative fiction which builds on the imagination. It explores the ideas of "what if things were different", with imagined technological advancements, settings, and characters that don't exist in the present day. The alien octopus teacher possesses super powers that make him invincible to the students' assassination attempts. The story is presented in a light-hearted, fantastical way.

This isn't a new theme in literature. The themes of good vs. evil, of children taking on authority figures, are universal and pervasive in children and young adult literature. We see it in Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Ender's Game, Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief, Little Women, Peter Rabbit, etc.

2. Does the story avoid an oversimplified view of life, one which leaves the reader with the general feelings that life is sweet and rosy or ugly and meaningless?

Yes.

3. When factual information is part of the story, is it presented accurately?

Yes. Again, the genre is Sci Fi Manga.

4. Is prejudicial appeal readily identifiable by the potential reader?

Yes

5. Are concepts presented appropriate to the ability and maturity of the potential readers?

Yes, this book is only in the high school libraries. The professional journals recommended audience is grade 9 and up. (School Library Journal)

6. Do characters speak in a language true to the period and section of the country in which they live?

Yes

7. Does the material offend in some special way the sensibilities of women or a minority group by the way it presents either the chief character or any of the minor characters?

No

8. Is there preoccupation with sex, violence, cruelty, brutality and aberrant behavior that would make this material inappropriate for students?

No, this material is appropriate for students grade 9 and older. The violence is similar to, and less graphic than some other works of literature for this same age group.

9. If there is use of offensive language, is it appropriate to the purpose of the text for children? Young Adults?

Children - No; Young Adults - Yes

10. Is the material free from derisive names and epithets that would offend minority groups? Children? Young Adults?

Minority Groups - Yes; Children - No; Young Adults - Yes

11. Is the material well written or produced?

Well written - Yes; Produced - Yes

12. Does the story give a broader understanding of human behavior without stressing differences of class, race, color, sex, education, religion or philosophy in any adverse way?

Yes

13. Does the material make a significant contribution to the history of literature or ideas?

This book is Manga. Manga is the term used for graphic novels written and published in Japan. There are many genres within manga including fantasy, science fiction, comedy, and romance. It is read back to front and left to right, consistent with Japanese literature. In Japan, a manga series is released chapter by chapter in manga magazines. These chapters are collected and finally published into volumes once the series is completed. This manga series, *Assassination Classroom*, comprises 180 chapters in 21 volumes. In volume 1, the reader is introduced to the central characters and plot. Students read the volumes in chronological order.

Assassination Classroom is a Shonen manga, targeted at tween and teen boys. The themes in this style typically focus on action, adventure, friendship, and coming of age. The illustrations in manga art are black and white and often very exaggerated.

Pagan, Amanda. "A Beginner's Guide to Manga." *The New York Public Library*, 27 December 2018, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2018/12/27/beginners-guide-manga>. Accessed 3 November 2023.

14. Are the illustrations appropriate and in good taste?

Appropriate - yes;

Good taste - yes consistent with the genre of manga and comic books.

15. Are the illustrations realistic in relation to the story?

Yes

16. Did the committee read a variety of reviews about the book? If yes, please list the reviews.

School Library Journal

MATSUI, Yusei, and Andrea Lipinski. "Assassination Classroom." *School Library Journal*, 1 April 2015, <https://www.slj.com/review/assassination-classroom>. Accessed 30 October 2023.

School Library Journal

Henderson, Lori, and Rebecca T. Miller. "Review: Assassination Classroom Volume 1." *School Library Journal*, 1 October 2015, <https://www.slj.com/story/review-assassination-classroom-volume-1>. Accessed 30 October 2023.

Additional comments:

Dissenting Opinion:

I want to start this with gratitude for the opposing view. Our committee was made up of people with many different backgrounds and reasons for their stances they took. The decision made by the majority was not one made lightly. After much deliberation, they did come to a consensus after considering many policies, laws, and the needs of students. However, I could not come to the same conclusion. It was not on any one page of the text. It was an overall stance I took on this work of fiction because of the loss in translation, and normalizing of issues that need not be, and the standard by which we decide if it is worth having. The fact that this work is built around a plot of students needing to assassinate their teacher is concerning to me. I have come to the rare conclusion that banning this book from the libraries of our district is the right choice.

The issues brought up in the text might never happen in Japan, the nation of the author. However, gun violence, school shootings, students wanting their five minutes of fame, and persons in authority abusing their powers are all issues we deal with regularly in our nation. Normalizing the idea of gun violence in schools is not even likely a topic in a nation like Japan, but it is a real issue here in America. If we take a zero tolerance to school shootings, why are we normalizing it, even if the text comes from a nation that may not have that intent? It does not translate well because these issues are a problem in America.

We have to deal with the reality that normalization of terrible events means people will eventually grow desensitized to them. Though not an issue in Japan, school shootings are an issue we deal with here. The news media already forces this upon us as if it is very normal for a mass shooting to happen at a school. I remember the terror I felt the day they made us watch the aftermath of Columbine in my classroom. Now, as we hear about these things happening, it does seem more normal. Why are we allowing dark comedy

about the subject matter? Should we also allow dark comedy about drug use, broken homes, and sexual assault? Certainly not! But this series does that. Why take away any normalcy children still have? Ultimately, this normalization is not desensitizing or conditioning a school shooter. It's desensitizing and normalizing it for children, especially because we have this available, as if we condone the normalization of the topic.

I understand that we need to rejoice when a child begins to love reading. It is a pleasure that builds intellect and value in life. Interesting people read because they are interested. However, if our standard is simply that this graphic novel will get some kids reading, then why not rejoice when a child enjoys reading forums on Stormfront or reads a copy of *Mein Kampf* because they agree with the arguments? Should we then rejoice if a student begins learning how to research if they listened to Alex Jones all the time and wanted to prove his views correct on every conspiracy theory? If our standard is simply that a child is reading, then we must adopt that standard across the board. It cannot be one that is only acceptable on one level but not another. There are some things I simply would never put in front of a child to read. I don't say this to offend but to consider the standard. The standards that I find acceptable are allowing a child to read that which is true, good, and beautiful.

If my child were to tell me about a student reading this in class, and if I had no idea what it was about, I would immediately be calling the head of the school to deal with this. If nothing were done because this is an accepted book on the shelves, then I would want my child out of that classroom. This is a very real reaction we have to think about happening. If children don't feel safe with this type of idea being normalized, then we need to consider the consequences of how they will feel about their safety.

My final appeal is this. Why is this story targeting teenagers? Why are we condoning a product that takes issues we struggle with in our nation to be sold to teenagers as the primary audience? We are teaching them that we condone the normalization of these problems by turning them into a dark comedy. I understand that there are many views on these issues, but I must appeal to the authority of my convictions if I am to truly take my stance. In my faith, I cannot support bringing hopelessness and the normalizing of these tragedies in America to children. It would be better for me to have a millstone tied around my neck and to be cast into the sea. For these reasons, I chose to be the dissenting voice. I understand and respect that the others disagree.

I have appreciated everyone on this committee. They were open-minded individuals who were so wonderful to work with. They all showed such deep care for the community.

Majority Rebuttal

We, the Billings Public School Materials Review Committee, recommend that the Superintendent and Board of Trustees uphold the librarian's decision to have Assassination Classroom as a part of the literary collection for both Billings Senior High School and Billings West High School.

While there are many reasons for this recommendation, and we could rebuttal the dissenting opinion point by point, for brevity we will focus on two main points: 1) this book is appropriate for the intended audience according to literary industry experts and when compared to other works, and 2) community violence experts agree that school shooters are not created by one aspect of a person's life, such as a book they read, but rather, by a collection of circumstances.

1) This book is appropriate for its intended audience

The selection of this book followed the Billings Public Schools Collection Development Policy #2330 and #2308. This policy serves as a guideline for library media specialists in the selection of materials for school libraries. Specifically, in the opening paragraph of the Collection Development Policy it states, "The Board of Trustees, Billings Public Schools, recognizes that in order to educate each student to the fullest, a wide variety of materials and technology must be provided to meet curriculum needs and the greatest possible diversity of student interest." Student interest is at the heart of this selection. The genre of Manga speaks to a specific group of students who frequent the library to read each and every volume of an entire series. These students are often reluctant readers and manga is a gateway to reading more traditional literature. This book was recommended and selected for grades 9 and up. This book is only in the high school libraries, consistent with our selection policy.

This book is in the genre of Science Fiction Manga. Sci Fi Manga is speculative fiction which builds on the imagination. It explores the ideas of "what if things were different", with imagined technological advancements, settings, and characters that don't exist in real life. The alien octopus teacher possesses super powers that make him invincible to the students' assassination attempts. The story is presented in a light-hearted, fantastical way. The characters in the story consist of a classroom composed of underachieving misfit students and a super-power, alien, octopus teacher who makes it his mission to turn this classroom of 'rejects' into self-believing, confident students. Throughout the arc of the story, the reader is introduced to the issues and problems of the students both at home and school. Though the students are challenged with assassinating the alien octopus teacher before he destroys the earth, the students gain insight into themselves and each other in the unconventional lessons he imparts on them. These lessons include believing in oneself, the power of teamwork, and things aren't always as they appear.

This isn't a new theme in literature. Many of the books in our libraries consist of the good vs. evil theme, children overpowering figures of authority. We see it in fantasy often in the likes of Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Enders Game, Lord of the Rings and Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief to name a few. We also see this theme in classics like Little Women, East of Eden, Peter Rabbit, and classic fairy tales. Additionally, we have realistic fiction novels on our shelves that pertain to school and mass shootings. As stipulated in the BPS selection criteria policy:

"The librarian must place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in the selection of materials of the highest quality in order to assure a comprehensive collection appropriate for users of the library. Material selected should be considered for the impact of each work as whole, not in part."

Finally, the themes present in "Assassination Classroom" are similar to other graphic novels in our collection including Spiderman and Batman. The themes of heroes vs villains, identity, power, sacrifice, comedy, and fantastical and superhuman powers resonate across this genre. Many students are drawn to this genre because of the characters' supernatural abilities. As with many superhero graphic stories, underneath the comedy, fantastical powers and violence lies the heart of the story. "Assassination Classroom" is about a class of misfit kids who connect with an alien super-villain disguised as a teacher who ultimately shows them their self-worth and empowers them to believe in themselves.

As stated earlier, the selection of this book supports the **Montana Content Standards for Library Media and Information Literacy and English - 9th - 12th grades.**

2) Insight from community violence experts

The FBI report titled The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective, provides a list that identifies 46 behaviors, personality traits and family, school and social dynamics that may be associated with violence. This section of the report comes with several warnings, which are applicable to this book challenge, including:

- "No one or two traits or characteristics should be considered in isolation or given more weight than the others."
- "Any of these traits, or several, can be seen in students who are not contemplating a school shooting or other act of violence. The key to identifying a potentially dangerous threatener... is that there is evidence of problems on a majority of the [46] items in each of the four

areas.” [The four areas being personality of the student, family dynamics, school dynamics and the student’s role in those dynamics, and social dynamics.]

- “It should be strongly emphasized that this list is not intended as a checklist to predict future violent behaviors by a student who has not acted violently or threatened violence. Rather, the list should be considered only after a student has made some type of threat.”

Additionally, this report cautions American’s that, “News coverage magnifies a number of widespread but wrong or unverified impressions of school shooters. Among them are... unusual or aberrant behaviors, interests, hobbies, etc., are hallmarks of the student destined to become violent.”

For both legal and ethical reasons, Billings School District should heed these cautionary statements from the FBI and ensure we do not operate out of misinformed or misguided perspectives. One misguided perspective in this book challenge is that the reading of this one book will encourage or accelerate someone’s pathway to violence. In reality, someone’s pathway to violence could entail any number of aspects, and may not even include this book or any book.

“Fascination with violence-filled entertainment” is mentioned in the FBI report, but it is just one of 46 warning signs. Additionally, the FBI elaborates on this fascination in ways that are meaningful to this challenge. Notably:

- 1) The emphasis in media of all forms, not just printed books. Arguably, more weight and focus is placed on digital media such as games and the internet.
- 2) The emphasis of hatred which is absent in Assassination Classroom. The villain, alien, octopus supports and encourages his students and the students, in turn, develop tender feelings towards him.
- 3) The emphasis that people on a pathway to violence will focus more on the violence than the video game [or in this case, book]. Assassination Classroom’s violence is fantastical and superhuman. Because the villain’s superpowers enable him to withstand many types of attacks, the suffering as a result of the student’s assassination attempts is nearly non-existent. People who enjoy violence and the suffering that comes from it, will struggle to find that joy in this book.

Here is the text from the FBI report:

“Fascination with Violence-Filled Entertainment

The student demonstrates an unusual fascination with movies, TV shows, computer games, music videos or printed material that focus intensively on themes of violence, hatred, control, power, death and destruction. He may incessantly watch one movie or read and reread one book with violent content, perhaps involving school violence. Themes of hatred, violence, weapons, and mass destruction recur in virtually all his activities, hobbies, and pastimes.

The students spend inordinate amounts of time playing video games with violent themes, and seems more interested in the violent images than in the game itself.

On the Internet, the student regularly searches for web sites involving violence, weapons, and other disturbing subjects. There is evidence the student has downloaded and kept material from these sites.”

According to an NPR article (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/02/10/690372199/school-shooters-whats-the-ir-path-to-violence>), which is congruent with many other industry expert perspectives, people on a pathway to violence become school shooters because of “multiple failures in their lives.” The list of failures is lengthy and does not mention access to age-appropriate violent books. Eventually, despair turns to anger and the FBI consultant advising on this article points out how easy it is for people on a pathway to violence to begin studying past shooters. It is noteworthy that this expert does not mention that people on a pathway to violence who are turning to anger regularly begin studying Manga graphic novels, novels generally, or even books.

Finally, we encourage all readers of this report to review what violence experts agree actually prevent school shootings (resources cited below), which include, but are not limited to the following (and take special note as to the absence of suggestions of book bans):

- Safe storage of firearms,
- Education of students, staff and parents, about warning behaviors,
- Increased mental health providers on school campuses, and
- Social Emotional Learning in classrooms.
- Anonymous and trusted reporting avenues

Conclusion

According to all objective and standardized criteria, this book is appropriate for high schoolers. Additionally there is no evidence that banning a book will result in safer schools nor intervene when someone is on a pathway to violence. Banning a book that is age appropriate and less graphic in violent content than other books for this same age group, when we have **no** evidence to support positive implications of a ban of this nature, is a violation of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. Infringing on the Constitution in this manner would create a domino effect in which we must critique our entire literary collection, leading to gross censorship and undermining the entire purpose of a library. Additionally, Billings Public Schools Collection Development Policy 2308-P1 explicitly supports the American Library Association’s “Library Bill of Rights” and the “Freedom to Read Statement” in attempts of censorship. We believe that parents have the right and the responsibility to guide their own children’s selection of books in the library. The school staff and community cannot assume this right nor take

away the right of choice from others. Billings Board Policy #2308 states: “Because individual values and standards vary so widely, and the levels of development and understanding differ greatly among library users, it is solely the right and responsibility of parents or guardians to determine what is suitable material for their children and to enforce those decisions” (p.2).

For these reasons, and many others, it is our formal recommendation that Assassination Classroom remain in high school libraries.

Resources for further reading on preventing school shootings:

Beach, Bradley D. “How can we stop school shootings in America?” *Police1*, 10 June 2023, <https://www.police1.com/preventing-school-shootings/articles/how-can-we-stop-school-shootings-in-america-VtuDiXnSEDwyhZVD/>. Accessed 6 November 2023.

“17 Facts About Gun Violence And School Shootings — Sandy Hook Promise.” *Sandy Hook Promise*, <https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/blog/gun-violence/facts-about-gun-violence-and-school-shootings/>. Accessed 6 November 2023.

Pierre, Jeffrey, and Cory Turner. “What schools and elected officials can do to prevent school shootings.” *NPR*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/26/1101571302/what-schools-can-do-to-prevent-school-shootings>. Accessed 6 November 2023.