



Libraries are the heart of the school, the place where everything happens. From staff meetings and retirement parties, to classroom pictures and baby showers.

Why I Wrote about Libraries in My Debut Novel

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When I was a kid, the one thing I always wanted that I could never have was more time in my school library. It was not enough to scour the shelves and check out my haul; I wanted time to read books. This desire led to my sneaking novels in class when I was supposed to be paying attention and a spectacular report card comment that said, "Allison needs to learn that classroom time isn't library time." I never learned, but I did get better at reading undetected.

I loved books. Holidays and birthdays meant new books to read and add to my personal bookshelf. And every summer my mom would take my sister and me to our public library, where I'd enter the reading challenge, check out my first stack of books, and travel to as many places as the pages could carry me. At the end of the summer, I'd redeem my

book log for a pizza coupon. No other pizza has ever tasted so good. I spent the rest of my childhood with my nose in a book, blissfully unaware of the privilege I enjoyed by having fingertip access to books.

Years later, I became a teacher in a rural high school, and I quickly recognized the students' barriers to book access. Miles of farmland and winding backroads lay between some students and the nearest library. Many of my students were from low-income families and did not have books or Internet access in their homes, nor did they have transportation to the library. Little Free Libraries had not yet appeared, and the nearest used bookstore was eighteen miles away. The closest store selling new books was twenty miles away. For many students, their only access to books was through the school library and their teachers' classroom libraries.

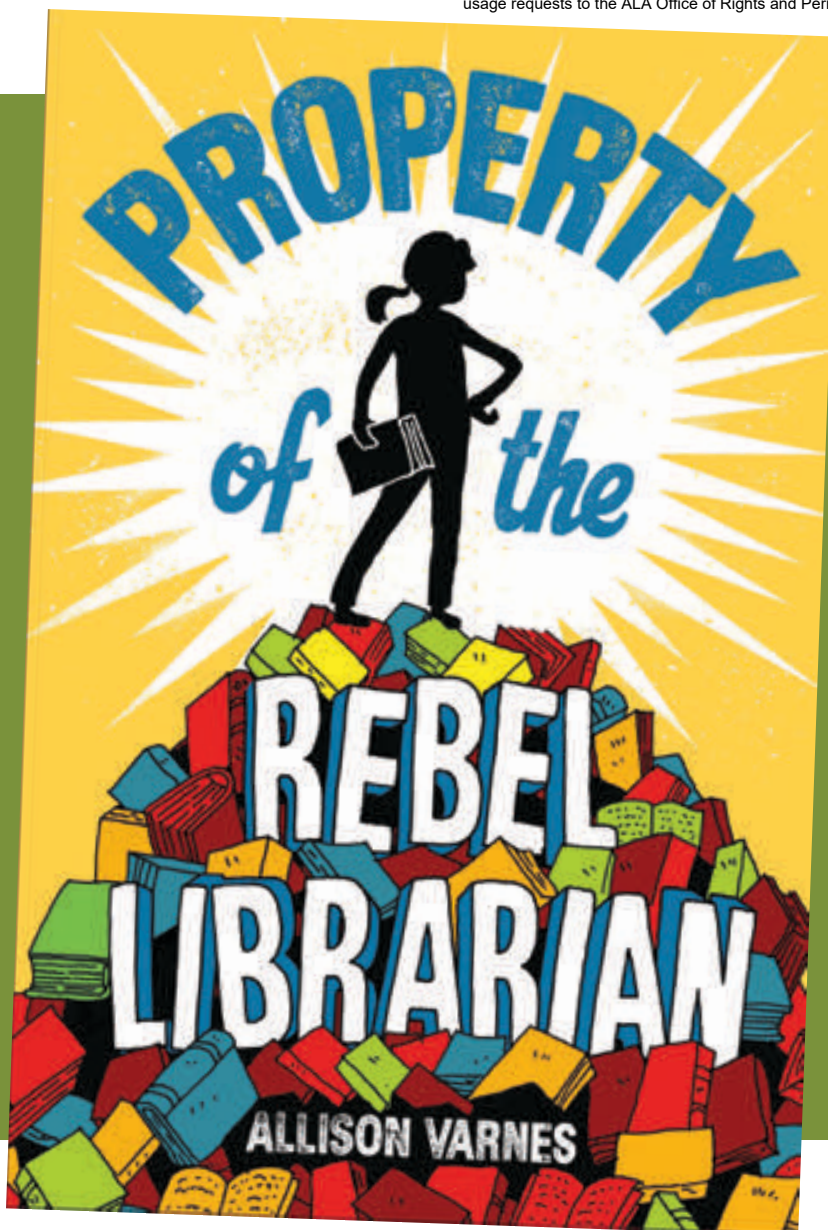
Because my students had learning disabilities, their situation was even more complicated than that of students in other classes. My students needed support and read-alouds to navigate novels. I pulled out all the stops with accents and voices, and I loved every second of it. I think my students did, too. Their favorite class-selected read was the *Harry Potter* series, which I began one semester and continued over the next school year with subsequent books. The students' joy was infectious, and I knew I was doing something right. Unsurprisingly, their reading comprehension levels soared over a short period of time, and some of them started hanging out in the school library!

But the momentum came to an abrupt halt when the school administration changed, and my classroom reading choices quickly landed me

in the principal's office. "Are you teaching witchcraft?" he asked. After I said, "No," I was instructed not to teach the series again. I replied, "I'll tell you what. If they're levitating by October, you can fire me." But it was no use. My class lost the freedom to read whatever they wanted. As a professional, I found the experience degrading and absurd. As the person responsible for sparking the joy of reading in my students, knowing that their futures as readers hinged on their access to and engagement with books, the experience was absolutely devastating. The tragedy of this situation went beyond censorship. Although some learners were able to read independently after several semesters of high-interest reading and continued the series, many of my students still couldn't read novels on their own. They did not have the option of checking out the books from our school library and reading them. They couldn't listen to the book on OverDrive at home because they did not have Internet access, computers, or audio equipment. They were stranded. In one swift decision, they were robbed of their opportunity to experience the *Harry Potter* series.

Time passed, and my outrage did not. I left the classroom for a doctoral program so I could explore the impact of educational reform policy on teachers. One night as I worked, I thought back on that time in my life when I was completely powerless, and I found myself wishing I could have done something to save what we lost. Two seconds later *Property of the Rebel Librarian* was born.

While I was dreaming up the story, I made a conscious choice not to have a public library within walking distance for the main character, June. I could have disrupted the narrative with the inclusion of a public library, and it would have been wonderful to give the characters another opportunity



Without [Ms. Bradshaw], the library where June always felt wonder and safety becomes a different environment. It changes the school, and it changes June herself. Robbed of her joy and driven by the injustice, she rises up and becomes the rebel librarian when she makes the difficult choice to operate a secret banned book library out of an empty locker.

for book access outside the realm of their school's control. However, that is not the reality that so many students experience. It certainly was not my students' reality. I wanted my characters' limited book access to mirror that of my students. And perhaps most importantly, I wanted to highlight the importance of school librarians in the lives of kids. For many students, their school librarians are the only librarians they will encounter during childhood. This is why the world grows much darker for June Harper and the kids at Dogwood Middle after Ms. Bradshaw is suspended. The impact is felt most by June, who has a strong relationship with Ms. Bradshaw. Without

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her, the library where June always felt wonder and safety becomes a different environment. It changes the school, and it changes June herself. Robbed of her joy and driven by the injustice, she rises up and becomes the rebel librarian when she makes the difficult choice to operate a secret banned book library out of an empty locker.

I believe libraries are safe spaces for kids not just because of the books on the shelves, but because

of the people who run them. Take the human touch away, and you're left with a room full of books without connection.

Libraries are the heart of the school, the place where everything happens. From staff meetings and retirement parties, to classroom pictures and baby showers. It's where I had a vision screening in fifth grade and found out that I needed glasses, and I knew that my life was *over*. That was a terrible day for me. Guess what I did? I sobbed on the shoulder of my school librarian.

There is a reason why I never wanted to leave my school library.

There is a reason why, when I was a teacher intern supervisor for my university, I always met with my students in their school libraries.

It's home. It's my safe space. And I will never, ever have enough time there.

Allison Varnes has fought for her students, like librarian Ms. Bradshaw in *Property of the Rebel Librarian* (Random House 2018). She taught English in special education for eight years and once had to convince administrators that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is not an endorsement of witchcraft. She's from a family of teachers and has a PhD in education from the University of Tennessee. And like heroine June, Allison is a former marching-band geek. When she's not writing, she howls along to the Hamilton soundtrack with a trio of Chihuahuas named after Peanuts characters. Find her on Twitter at @allisonvarnes or on Facebook at facebook.com/allisonvarnesauthor.

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