Culture
Book Reviews



"Flamer," a coming-of-age story written semi-autobiographically by author and illustrator Mike Curato, is among the most banned books of 2023. (Courtesy graphic)



by Jim McDermott

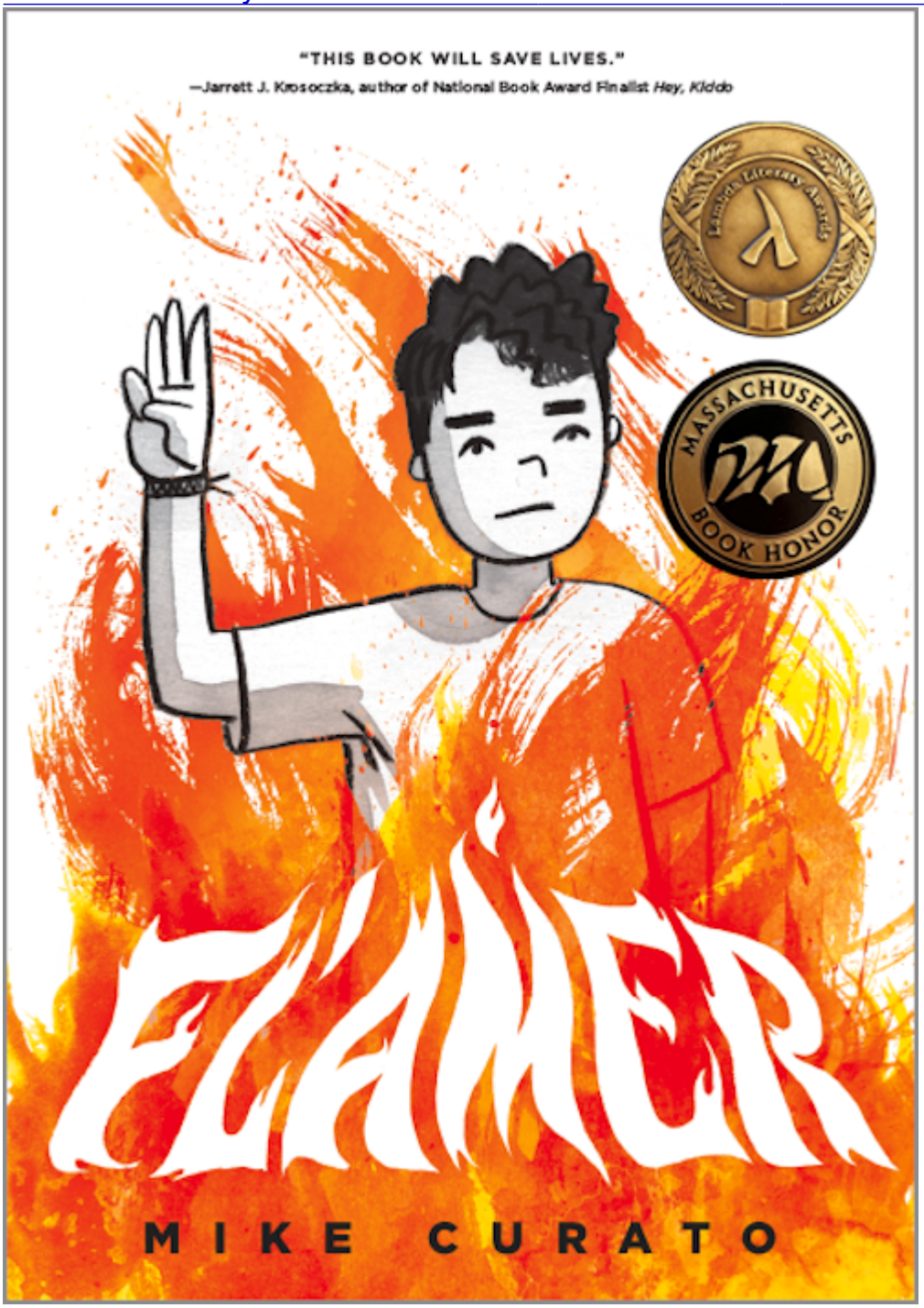
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Flamer

Mike Curato

368 pages; Macmillan Publishers

Purchase for $26.99 »

Raised in the 1980s and '90s in a Catholic home just outside of New York City, Mike Curato is a gay Filipino-American illustrator. After producing the award-winning *Little Eliot* series of children's books, in September 2020 he released a semi-autobiographical graphic novel, *Flamer*. The novel tells the story of Aiden Navarro, a 14-year-old Filipino-American kid spending his last week at Boy Scouts summer camp before starting high school.

Flamer struck a chord for its touching portrayal of a Catholic boy earnest to fit in and "be good," struggling to come to terms with bullying and his own unexpected feelings for another boy. Upon release it won universal accolades, including the Lambda Literary Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature in 2021. It has also recently become one of the most banned novels in America.

NCR spoke to Curato about *Flamer* and his experiences growing up Catholic. The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.



Mike Curato is the author and illustrator of the "Little Elliot" series of children's books and the young adult graphic novel "Flamer," among other works. (Photo courtesy of

Paul Specht)

NCR: How long had the idea of doing a semi-autobiographical memoir been with you?

Curato: I had ideas about wanting to pay some kind of homage to camping and maybe scouting. Then, during the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign I listened to legends like Toni Morrison saying, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." And I realized there was such a lack of books that I needed when I was young.

I made it a comic because that is the medium that I read at that age, that is what I connected to. So I thought it would be the best tool to use to speak to young people.

How would you describe the books you wish you'd had as a child?

Books that validated my experience and told me I'm OK being myself. We're told as kids, "Just be yourself and everything'll be fine." But I didn't see myself anywhere. I didn't see myself in books or on TV or in movies. And other kids my age told me that there was something wrong with me. How can I just "be myself," when all these people seem to have a problem with that? It began this self-erasure, like maybe I'm not supposed to be here.

I went to Catholic schools and we were taught that we're all God's children. But it seemed to me like maybe he likes some children more than others. Or at least people do. I did not feel like one of God's children a big portion of the time.

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What was your experience with the Catholic Church?

I specifically remember religious textbooks in middle grade talking about homosexuality as a sin and as a choice. And it was a new textbook; it wasn't like some old dusty thing. This was modern day Catholic teaching. So I've got teachers reading from this textbook to me, and I've got classmates calling me the f-word. Even things I'm hearing my father say about gay people, it's like, OK, noted. And I grew up during the AIDS crisis. So I felt like, I can't be one of them, I'll be dead.

There wasn't a lot of hope for a happy future for me.

I was a devout Catholic. I was an altar boy for many years. Just like Aiden (my protagonist), I continued past the normal time, into high school. So I thought, I will be good. I'm excelling in church because I'm an altar boy. I'm getting good grades. I'm an obedient son. I will find someone to marry and we'll have children and we'll be good people. We'll go to church and I'll be good.

Would you say that concern to "be good" created anxiety in you?

Yes. It was constant. Like, every day. "Don't mess up!" I think that is a very common experience for little gay boys. They overcompensate. I'm going to be stellar at everything that I can get right, because I can't get being straight right.

I would try to be more butch sometimes. I tried sports, I tried dating girls, I tried being aloof and playing down my flamboyance. I tried to paint a veneer, and I thought maybe I'll get a pass to get into heaven if God sees that I'm trying so hard.



An illustration from the graphic novel "Flamer" depicts a young teenage boy struggling to make sense of his sexual identity while attending a Catholic school.

(Courtesy graphic)

You weave together Catholic and pop culture imagery throughout Flamer in really interesting ways, like having the comic book X-Men character Phoenix, who sacrifices her life to save the universe, show up in a chapel just as Aiden is considering killing himself.

What I love about the Phoenix saga is the self-sacrifice. She's like, "I'm all powerful but I'm going to save people around me by destroying myself." And then she gets to come back anyway.

There's this sort of wanting and emptiness that Aiden experiences with church and the mysteries around it. Like when he's talking about confirmation and how he's really ready and waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend on him, but then he didn't feel anything. That was very real for me. I was like, "OK, I guess I'm confirmed."

I don't know if you noticed the imagery at the end: when he wakes up from this experience with the Phoenix, where he's been speaking with his own soul, he has the tongue of fire.

Oh wow, I missed that.

That is Aiden's real confirmation, when he faces himself. I feel like that is how we experience God's love, showing up for yourself and accepting your whole self. In doing that, you are accepting God's love.

I love the word confirmation. "You're confirmed." You're here and you deserve to be here.

Another thing about the book that stood out is the way you avoid vilifying Aiden's bullies. There are a couple times where the main bully gets ridiculed for picking on Aiden, and you draw him looking so shaken. I was really impressed by the empathy you show there.

There's that saying, hurt people hurt people. We don't know what we don't know. Oftentimes with bullying it's a projection. Obviously I don't condone that, but we're all human beings. And I was a shitty kid too sometimes. I said things to people that I feel bad about now or that I don't even remember. We can all be that guy.

After this book came out, I got an Instagram message from one of my bullies. He was like, "Hey Mike, I read your book, and I wanted to say I'm truly sorry for the things I put you through. I have kids now and I'm trying to raise them to be different from how I was." I said I really appreciated that and I'm glad you're raising your children differently.

It was a pretty cool moment. And it gives me more empathy for people. We're all walking around with these untold stories. If we knew everyone's story there would be a lot more compassion in the world and a lot more patience. That's why there needs to be more quality books, not fewer.

> "This is sending a message to queer children, too. By removing a book about them, they're saying 'we don't want you here.' "
>
> — *Mike Curato*
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You've been put through the ringer the last few years, with school districts banning Flamer and people calling it pornographic, which is so bizarre. It's like they're talking about a completely different book. How has that all been for you?

For the first year and a half it was all positive feedback. I didn't get one negative thing. Then that Texas lawmaker came out with his McCarthy-era list of books which mostly consisted of queer and BIPOC stories and/or creators. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see what's going on here. And it worked. In this age of hoaxes, I was like, y'all have been bamboozled.

It's sickening to watch some angry person holding my book up and saying these awful things, reading passages out of context and trying to paint me like some kind of deviant.

How do you find peace in the midst of it?

It's very challenging. It's taken up so much of my time and energy and peace of mind. I have to call on my community to support me. I have nightmares sometimes about this.

It seems like that's all part of their goal.

Absolutely. They want to scare people, to make people think twice about buying a book like this for your library, about creators trying to make a book. They're trying to send a warning to publishers: don't do this or you'll have to deal with us. It's the old school fascist playbook. You find the weak communities and you use them to your own gain.

This is sending a message to queer children, too. By removing a book about them, they're saying "we don't want you here." And it's all done in the name of protecting the children. I'd like to know which children they're trying to protect. It doesn't seem like all of them.

Does religion or God play any role in your life today?

I believe in God and the universe, but I don't really identify as Christian anymore. There's a lot of things I love and cherish about my Catholic upbringing. I feel like it's part of who I am and part of what made me who I am today. But I don't feel like a part of the church.

I like believing in the mystery more. You think about the vastness of the universe. We don't even know how big it is. There's so much beyond our understanding. I don't need to know if it's the Catholic God or it's some other one. I just know there's a greater power and that's enough for me. I feel comfort in just knowing that.

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