

## Archie Comic Move: Is NLB Bowing to Pressure?

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AS THE National Library Board (NLB) decides whether an Archie comic book should still remain on its shelves, some people wonder if it might be bowing to public pressure.

Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, said that if the comic book is subsequently withdrawn, the NLB could be seen as "capitulating to a group that is making strong demands".

"The seemingly inconsistent actions by the NLB do lend weight to the belief that it is somewhat sensitive to public complaints about books in its collection that do not conform to community norms," he said.

"The NLB may now have opened the door for different interest groups to lobby for the removal of titles that they object to, citing 'community norms'."

Archie: The Married Life Book 3 features a gay couple getting married. It was yanked off the shelves of the Kinokuniya bookstore after its content was deemed to have breached the Media Development Authority's (MDA's) content guidelines for imported publications.

The MDA said it reviewed the comic book after receiving a complaint.

In the light of the MDA's decision, the NLB, which said last week it will pulp three children's books that "do not promote family values", said it would also review the comic book, which is still in the library's catalogue.

Pointing to the NLB's inconsistencies, MP for Tampines GRC Baey Yam Keng said that he was concerned with the NLB's about-turn in bringing in and then withdrawing books.

"It must have been an informed decision. Why is it now not standing by its earlier decision and how has public feedback changed that?" asked Mr Baey, who is also deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Communications and Information. He said the NLB should be more transparent in the way it makes such decisions.

On Wednesday, MP Hri Kumar Nair was the first from the People's Action Party to speak out against the NLB's decision, saying in a Facebook post that he did not believe homosexuality falls in the category of issues which should be excluded, such as racism.

Yesterday, some 100 writers at the Asia-Pacific Writers' and Translators' Association conference at The Arts House also weighed in on the debate.

Led by novelist Suchen Christine Lim, local and international writers were asked to stand and show support to all the children in Singapore whose families do not fit into the official mould of "one man, one woman and their children".

Lim said the library board's action disregarded the feelings of alternative families and amounted to "telling these children that they and their families don't count".

The MDA had said earlier that the importation and distribution of publications is largely self-regulated and book retailers refer to its content guidelines for imported publications, taking into account community norms.

When asked if the MDA's guidelines are arbitrary, sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "I doubt they are intentionally arbitrary, but given that things are not always so clear-cut, and may involve a judgment call, inconsistency is always a possibility."

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**Additional reporting by Thrina Tham**