STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
BEFORE THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

IN RE: EMPIRE OF STORMS BY SARAH J. MAAS	**FINAL ORDER AND OPINION REGARDING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL** No. 2025-0007

SUMMARY OF ACTION REQUIRED

This Order of the South Carolina State Board of Education ("State Board") is the final agency decision regarding the following Instructional Material (the "Subject Material").

Title of Instructional Material:	**Empire of Storms**
Author:	**Sarah J. Maas**

As explained more fully below, the Subject Material includes descriptions of "sexual conduct" as that term is defined in Regulation 43-170 and South Carolina Code Section 16-15-305(C)(1). Accordingly, the Subject Material is not Age and Developmentally Appropriate and must be removed from all public-school classrooms, libraries, media centers, programs, reading lists, and school-controlled extracurricular activities in South Carolina. **All public schools, public school districts, public-school employees, and district boards in this State shall take immediate action to comply with this Order by removing the Subject Material. Additionally, public schools, public school districts, and district boards shall not acquire, obtain, or purchase the Subject Material, nor shall any public-school employee acquire, obtain, or purchase the Subject Material for use in or with any public-school program, classroom, activity, or instruction.**

BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

This matter was addressed in the first instance by the State Board's Instructional Material Review Committee ("IMRC") and later by the full State Board. The Subject Material was reviewed by the IMRC "of its own volition and on its own initiative" to "make determinations regarding the educational suitability or the Age or Developmental Appropriateness of specific Instructional Materials pursuant to the criteria and requirements of" Regulation 43-170(VI)(B). The IMRC took this step because a Complainant filed a Complaint Form with the Beaufort County School District Board of Education ("District") on December 13, 2024. (Exhibit A). Subsequently, the Chairman of the District submitted a letter requesting that the State Board take these materials up for consideration because the District's board had previously reviewed this material in 2023, prior to the enactment of Regulation 43-170. (Exhibit B). Accordingly, the IMRC and, later, the State Board, exercised its authority to review the Subject Material in the first instance consistent with the District's request and the State Board's authority.

On March 6, 2025, the South Carolina Department of Education (Department) notified the public of its upcoming review of the Subject Material by posting the IMRC hearing information and hearing agenda on its website. Consistent with governing requirements, the public was invited to sign up in advance of the hearing to provide comment regarding the Subject Material. At 1:00 PM on March 13, 2025, the IMRC's hearing of this matter occurred via Microsoft Teams and was conducted in accordance with Procedures for Review of Instructional Material, State Board Rule of Governance IFC, last revised October 1, 2024, and the South Carolina Administrative Procedures Act, S.C. Code Sec. 1-23-310, et seq. During this hearing, the IMRC received public comment regarding the Subject Material and the Department provided analysis and recommended removing the Subject Material entirely from South Carolina's public schools.

The IMRC reviewed and considered the Subject Material, excerpts from same, all public comments (written and in-person), and all documentation and testimony provided by the Department. Based on that review and consideration, the IMRC unanimously found that the Subject Material includes descriptions of "sexual conduct" as that term is defined by S.C. Code § 16-15-305(C)(1). Therefore, the IMRC found the Subject Material is not Age and Developmentally Appropriate as defined by S.C. Code Reg. 43-170 and recommended it be removed entirely from all public schools in South Carolina. On January 31, 2025, the IMRC issued a Report and Recommendation (attached as Exhibit C and incorporated by reference herein), which was provided to all members of the State Board and subsequently placed on State Board's website and made available to the public.

On March 25, 2025, the Department notified the public that this matter would come before the full State Board by posting the State Board's agenda and hearing information on its website. At 1:00 PM on April 1, 2025, the State Board held its regularly scheduled meeting, received public comment, and received reports from its various committees, including the IMRC.

At its April 2025 meeting, the State Board postponed consideration of this matter and nine others from the IMRC.[1] On March 25, 2025, the Department notified the public that this matter would come before the full State Board by posting the State Board's agenda and hearing information on its website. At 1:00 PM on May 6, 2025, the State Board held its regularly scheduled meeting, received public comment, and received reports from its various committees, including the IMRC. This matter is properly before the State Board pursuant to S.C. Code Reg. § 43-170.

Based on a review of all public comments (in person and written), the Subject Material, all documentation provided by the Department and interested parties, the IMRC's written Report and Recommendation, the IMRC Chair's Report, and the Department's report, we make the following findings of fact and conclusions of law.[2]

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[1] The April State Board agenda contained ten items from the IMRC for consideration. All ten were postponed to allow for the State Board to receive legal counsel on implementation of Regulation 43-170. The ten items were placed on the State Board's May agenda. The State Board received legal counsel on implementation of Regulation 43-170. Subsequently, during its May meeting, the State Board considered all ten items.

[2] Excerpts from and an explanation of the applicable sections and definitions of Regulation 43-170 are found in the IMRC's Report and Recommendation, which is attached as Exhibit C, and, for the sake of space, will not be duplicated herein.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Subject Material was challenged by a parent or legal guardian of a student in the District. The Chairman of the District board submitted a letter requesting that the State Board take these materials up for consideration.
2. The Subject Material is available to students in public schools in South Carolina.
3. The Subject Material contains the content listed and described in Exhibit A of the IMRC's Report and Recommendation.[3]

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Constitution, South Carolina law, and precedent uniformly permit the State Board to review and determine the appropriateness of books and other instructional materials for use or availability in public schools. *See* SBE Final Order and Opinion No. 2024-0001 (In re: *Damsel* by Elena Arnold) at page 3 (collecting and citing statutes and cases). That authority arises, at least in part, from the fact that the selection, curation, purchase, use, and management of public-school curricula and library materials is government speech that the Free Speech Clause does not regulate. *See id*. at 3-4 (citing cases). The state's authority in this context is particularly robust when, as here, the state seeks to shield minors from access to or use of inappropriate sexual content. *See id*. at 3-4 (citing *United States v. Am. Library Ass'n*, 539 U.S. 194 (2003)).

Under Regulation 43-170, "Instructional Material is not 'Age and Developmentally Appropriate' for any age or age group of children if it includes descriptions or visual depictions of 'sexual conduct,' as that term is defined by Section 16–15–305(C)(1)." S.C. Code Reg. 43-170(I)(A).

The IMRC's Report and Recommendation includes passages from the Subject Material. The excerpts from the Subject Material, which are included in Exhibit C, constitute clear violations of Regulation 43-170 by presenting plainly before the reader express, detailed descriptions of "sexual conduct" as specifically defined in Code sections 16-15-305 (C)(1).

Having carefully considered the Subject Material, all public comments (in person and written), all documentation provided by the Department and interested parties, the IMRC's written Report and Recommendation, the IMRC Chair's Report, and the Department's report, we find that the Subject Material includes descriptions of "sexual conduct" as that term is defined by S.C. Code § 16-15-305(C)(1). While our review of the Subject Material is not limited to the excerpts provided by the Department, those excerpts establish a clear violation of the regulation. Therefore, the Subject Material is not Age and Developmentally Appropriate as defined by S.C. Code Reg. 43-170 and must be removed immediately from all public-school classrooms, libraries, media centers, programs, reading lists, and school-controlled extracurricular activities in South Carolina.

(*Signature on following page*)

[3] Exhibit A to the Report and Recommendation, which is attached to this Final Order and Opinion for ease of reference, contains excerpts which are representative of questionable or violative material contained in the Subject Material. The State Board's review and Order is not limited to the excerpts contained therein.

In Re: *Empire of Storms* by Sarah J. Maas
Order No. 2025-0008
May 30, 2025

s/*Rita Allison*_____
Rita Allison
Chair
South Carolina State Board of Education
May 30, 2025

Exhibit A

Empire of Storms by Sarah J Maas

South Carolina Instructional Materials
Uniform Parent Complaint Form

Your Name: Elizabeth Szabai

Title & Author of Contested Material *(one per form)*: Empire of Storms by Sarah J. Maas

School Where Contested Material is Located: Bluffton Hilton Head Island HS

Location of Contested Material *(library, classroom, etc...)*: Library, possibly classroom, and DISCUS

Contested Material is *(select one)*: [X] **Printed** [ ] **Audio/Visual** [ ] **Online Resource**

[ ] **Other** *(please describe)*: _____

I request that this Contested Material be *(choose one of the following)*:

- [X] Removed from all schools/facilities in this District.
- [ ] Restricted to the following grade levels in this District: _____.
- [ ] Restricted to a student whose parent/legal guardian provides consent and is enrolled in the following grade levels in this District: _____.

Describe Your Reason for Contesting This Material *(attach additional pages as needed)*:

Empire of Storms is in violation of Regulation 43-170 because it contains touching of genitals, masterbation, and sexual intercourse. Please see below excerpts from the book.

December 1/5

I, Elizabeth Szabai *(insert your name)*, **hereby certify that:**

- I am a parent or legal guardian of a student who attends a school within this District.
- I have read, watched, or otherwise reviewed the material I am contesting.
- I have made a good faith effort to address my concerns with School or District staff.
- I have not filed more than five (5) instructional material complaints (including this complaint) in this calendar month.
- I believe that this Contested Material is not suitable for use, availability, and/or unrestricted access in this District, pursuant to the requirements and definitions in Regulation 43-170, which are summarized on the following instruction page.

Signature: _____ **Date:** 12/13/24

This form is produced by the South Carolina Department of Education in compliance with Regulation 43-170 and may not be altered by any other party. It is effective beginning August 1, 2024 until further notice.

Page 17
She was delicately built, small enough that he might have thought her barely past her first bleed were it not for the full breasts beneath her close-fitting leathers.

Page 23
(Violates the Regulation with description of touching a female breast and a penis in a turgid state being felt through clothing, description of masterbation,
"Tempting as it might be," Rowan said, nipping her ear in a way that made it hard to think, "I need to be on my way in an hour." To scout the land ahead for any threats. Featherlight kisses brushed over her jaw, her cheek. "And what I said still holds. I'm not taking you against a tree the first time."
"It wouldn't be against a tree—it'd be in a pool." A dark laugh against her now-burning skin. It was an effort to keep from taking one of his hands and guiding it up to her breasts, to beg him to touch, take, taste. "You know, I'm starting to think you're a sadist."
"Trust me, I don't find it easy, either." He tugged her a bit harder against him, letting her feel the evidence pushing with impressive demand against her backside. She nearly groaned at that, too.
Then Rowan pulled away, and she frowned at the loss of his warmth, at the loss of those hands and that body and that mouth.

Page 177
His eyes traveled from her feet to her head, and he frowned again. "Bigger tits won't prove or hide anything."
Her cheeks heated. "Perhaps they'll keep men distracted just enough that they won't ask questions."
With that, she started upstream, trying not to think about the men who had touched and sneered in that cell. But if it got her safely across the river, she'd use her body to her advantage. Men would see what they wanted to: a pretty young woman who did not bristle at their attention, who spoke kindly and warmly.

Page 349
(Violates the Regulation with touching of genitals through fabric, touching and kissing of breast, description of a penis in a turgid state, description of oral sex, placing a finger in the vagina, description of sexual intercourse.)
She chuckled, starting to feel the cool kiss of the water on her naked body. "As far as memory serves, Prince, it was that insufferable swagger that won your cranky, immortal heart."

Rowan leaned into the thin veil of flame now melting into night-sweet air and nipped her lower lip. A sharp, wicked bite. “There’s my Fireheart.”
Aelin let him pivot her in the surf and sand to face him fully, let him slide his mouth along her jaw, the curve of her cheekbone, the point of her Fae ear.
“These,” he said, nibbling at her earlobe, “have been tempting me for months.” His tongue traced the delicate tip, and her back arched. The strong hands at her hips tightened.
“Sometimes, you’d be sleeping beside me at Mistward, and it’d take all my concentration not to lean over and bite them. Bite you all over.”
“Hmmm,” she said, tipping back her head to grant him access to her neck.
Rowan obliged her silent demand, pressing kisses and soft, growling nips to her throat.
“I’ve never taken a woman on a beach,” he purred against her skin, sucking gently on the space between her neck and shoulder. “And look at that—we’re far from any sort of … collateral.” One hand drifted from her hip to caress the scars on her back, the other sliding to cup her backside, drawing her fully against him.
Aelin spread her hands over his chest, tugging his white shirt over his head. Warm waves crashed against them, but Rowan held her fast—unmovable, unshakable.
Aelin remembered herself enough to say, “Someone might come looking for us.”
Rowan huffed a laugh against her neck. “Something tells me,” he said, his breath skittering along her skin, “you might not mind if we were discovered. If someone saw how thoroughly I plan to worship you.”
She felt the words dangling there, felt herself dangling there, off the edge of the cliff. She swallowed. But Rowan had caught her each time she had fallen—first, when she had plummeted into that abyss of despair and grief; second, when that castle had shattered and she had plunged to the earth. And now this time, this third time … She was not afraid.
Aelin met Rowan’s stare and said clearly and boldly and without a speckle of doubt, “I love you. I am in love with you, Rowan. I have been for a while. And I know there are limits to what you can give me, and I know you might need time—”
His lips crushed into hers, and he said onto her mouth, dropping words more precious than rubies and emeralds and sapphires into her heart, her soul, “I love you. There is no limit to what I can give to you, no time I need. Even when this world is a forgotten whisper of dust between the stars, I will love you.”
Aelin didn’t know when she started crying, when her body began shaking with the force of it. She had never said such words—to anyone. Never let herself be that vulnerable, never felt this burning and unending thing, so consuming she might die from the force of it.
Rowan pulled back, wiping away her tears with his thumbs, one after another. He said softly, barely audible over the crashing waves around them, “Fireheart.”
She sniffed back tears. “Buzzard.”
He roared a laugh and she let him lay her down on the sand with a gentleness near

reverence. His sculpted chest heaved slightly as he ran an eye over her bare body. “You …are so beautiful.”
She knew he didn’t just mean the skin and curves and bones.
But Aelin still smiled, humming. “I know,” she said, lifting her arms above her head, setting the Amulet of Orynth onto a safe, high part of the beach. Her fingers dug into the soft sand as she arched her back in a slow stretch.
Rowan tracked every movement, every flicker of muscle and skin. When his gaze lingered on her breasts, gleaming with seawater, his expression turned ravenous.
Then his gaze slid lower. Lower. And when it lingered on the apex of her thighs and his eyes glazed, Aelin said to him, “Are you going to stand there gawking all night?”
Rowan’s mouth parted slightly, his breathing shallow, his body already showing her precisely where this was going to end.
A phantom wind hissed through the palms, whispered over the sand. Her magic tingled as she felt, more than saw, Rowan’s shield fall into place around them. She sent her own power tracing over it, knocking and tapping at the shield in sparks of flame.
Rowan’s canines gleamed. “Nothing is getting past that shield. And nothing is going to hurt me, either.”
Something tight in her chest eased. “Is it that different? With someone like me.”
“I don’t know,” Rowan admitted. Again, his eyes slid along her body, as if he could see through skin to her burning heart beneath. “I’ve never been with … an equal. I’ve never allowed myself to be that unleashed.”
For every bit of power she threw at him, he’d throw back at her. She braced herself on her elbows, lifting her mouth to the new scar on his shoulder, the wound small and jagged—as broad as an arrowhead. She kissed it once, twice.
Rowan’s body was so tense above hers she thought his muscles would snap. But his hands were gentle as they drifted to her back, stroking her scars and the tattoos he’d inked over them.
The waves tickled and caressed her, and he made to settle over her, but she lifted a hand to his chest—halting him dead. She smiled against his mouth. “If we’re equals, then I don’t understand why you’re still half clothed.”
She didn’t give him the chance to explain as she traced her tongue over the seam of his lips, as her fingers unlatched the buckle of his worn sword belt. She wasn’t sure he was breathing.
And just to see what he’d do, she palmed him through his pants.
Rowan barked a curse.
She laughed quietly, kissed his newest scar again, and dragged a finger down lazily, indolently, holding his gaze for every single inch she touched.
And when Aelin laid her palm flat on him again, she said, “You are mine.” Rowan’s breathing started again, jagged and savage as the waves breaking around them. She flicked open the top button of his pants. “I’m yours,” he ground out.
Another button popped free. “And you love me,” she said. Not a question.

“To whatever end,” he breathed.
She popped the third and final button free, and he let go of her to toss his pants into the sand nearby, taking his undershorts with them. Her mouth went dry as she took in the sight of him.
Rowan had been bred and honed for battle, and every inch of him was pure-blooded warrior.
He was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. Hers—he was hers, and
“You are mine,” Rowan breathed, and she felt the claiming in her bones, her soul.
“I am yours,” she answered.
“And you love me.” Such hope and quiet joy in his eyes, beneath all that fierceness.
“To whatever end.” For too long—for too long had he been alone and wandering. No longer.
Rowan kissed her again. Slow. Soft. A hand slid up the plane of her torso while he lowered himself over her, his hips nestling against hers. She gasped a bit at the touch, gasped a bit more as his knuckle grazed the heavy, aching underside of her breast. As he leaned down to kiss the other.
His teeth grazed over her nipple, and her eyes drifted closed, a moan slipping out of her. Oh, gods. Oh, burning, rutting gods. Rowan knew what he was doing; he really goddamned did.
His tongue flicked against her nipple, and her head tipped back, her fingers digging into his shoulders, urging him to take more, take harder.
Rowan growled his approval, her breast still in his mouth, on his tongue, his hand making lazy strokes from her ribs down her waist, down her thighs, then back up. She arched in silent demand—
A phantom touch, like the northern wind given form, flicked over her bare breast.
Aelin burst into flames.
Rowan laughed darkly at the reds and golds and blues that erupted around them, illuminating the palms that towered over the edge of the beach, the waves breaking behind him. She might have panicked, might have been mortified, had he not lifted his mouth to hers, had those phantom hands of ice-kissed wind not kept working her breasts, had his own hand not continued stroking, closer and closer to where she needed him. “You’re magnificent,” he murmured onto her lips, his tongue sliding into her mouth.
The hardness of him pushed against her, and she bucked her hips, needing to grind herself against him, to do anything to ease the building ache between her legs. Rowan groaned, and she wondered if there was any other male in the world who would be so naked and prone with a woman on fire, who would not look at those flames with any ounce of fear.
She slid her hand between them, and when she closed her fingers around him, marveling at the velvet-wrapped steel, Rowan groaned again, pushing into her hand.

She pulled her mouth from his, staring into those pine-green eyes as she slid her hand along him. He lowered his head—not to kiss her, but to watch where she stroked him.
A roaring wind full of ice and snow blasted around them. And it was her turn to huff a laugh. But Rowan gripped her wrist, drawing her hand away. She opened her mouth in protest, wanting to touch more, taste more. “Let me,” Rowan growled onto the sea-slick skin between her breasts. “Let me touch you.” His voice trembled enough that Aelin lifted his chin with her thumb and forefinger.
A flicker of fear and relief shone beneath the glazed lust. As if doing this, touching her, was as much to remind him that she had made it today, that she was safe, as it was to pleasure her. She leaned up, brushing her mouth against his. “Do your worst, Prince.”
Rowan’s smile was nothing short of wicked as he pulled away to run a broad hand from her throat down to the juncture of her thighs. She shuddered at the sheer possession in the touch, her breath coming in tight pants as he gripped either thigh and spread her legs, baring her fully for him.
Another wave crashed, parting around them, the cool water like a thousand kisses along her skin. Rowan kissed her navel, then her hip.
Aelin couldn’t take her eyes from his silver hair shining with salt water and moonlight, from the hands holding her wide for him as his head dipped between her legs.
And as Rowan tasted her on that beach, as he laughed against her slick skin while her hoarse cries of his name shattered across palm trees and sand and water, Aelin let go of all pretense at reason.
She moved, hips undulating, begging him to go, go, go. So Rowan did, sliding a finger into her as his tongue flicked that one spot, and oh, gods, she was going to explode into starfire—
“Aelin,” he growled, her name a plea.
“Please,” she moaned. “Please.”
The word was his undoing. Rowan rose over her again, and she let out a sound that might have been a whimper, might have been his name.
Then Rowan had a hand braced in the sand beside her head, fingers twining in her hair, while the other guided himself into her. At the first nudge of him, she forgot her own name. And as he slid in with gentle, rolling thrusts, filling her inch by inch, she forgot that she was queen and that she had a separate body and a kingdom and a world to look after.
When Rowan was seated deep in her, trembling with restraint as he let her adjust, she lifted her burning hands to his face, wind and ice tumbling and roaring around them, dancing across the waves with ribbons of flame. There were no words in his eyes; none in hers, either.
Words did not do it justice. Not in any language, in any world.
He leaned in, claiming her mouth as he began to move, and they let go entirely.
She might have been crying, or it might have been his tears on her face, turning to steam amid her flames.

She dragged her hands down his powerful, muscled back, over scars from battles and terrors long since past. And as his thrusts turned deeper, she dug in her fingers, dragging her nails across his back, claiming him, marking him. His hips slammed home at the blood she drew, and she arched, baring her throat to him. For him—only him.
Rowan's magic went wild, though his mouth on her neck was so careful, even as his canines dragged along her skin. And at the touch of those lethal teeth against her, the death that hovered nearby and the hands that would always be gentle with her, always love her—
Release blasted through her like wildfire. And though she could not remember her name, she remembered Rowan's as she cried it while he kept moving, wringing every last ounce of pleasure from her, fire searing the sand around them to glass.
Rowan's own release barreled through him at the sight of it, and he groaned her name so that she remembered it at last, lightning joining wind and ice over the water.
Aelin held him through it, sending the fire-opal of her magic to twine with his power. On and on, as he spilled himself in her, lightning and flame danced on the sea.
The lightning continued to strike, silent and lovely, even after he stilled. The sounds of the world came pouring back in, his breathing as ragged as the hiss of the crashing waves while he brushed lazy kisses to her temple, her nose, her mouth. Aelin drew her eyes away from the beauty of their magic, the beauty of them, and found his face to be the most beautiful of all.
She was trembling—and so was Rowan as he remained in her. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and shoulder, his uneven breath warming her skin. "I never ...," he tried, voice hoarse. "I didn't know it could be ..."
She ran her fingers down his scarred back, over and over. "I know," she breathed. "I know."
Already, she wanted more, already she was calculating how long she'd have to wait.

Page 358
(Violates the Regulation with reference to intercourse and oral sex.)
Rowan didn't know whether to be amused, thrilled, or slightly terrified that he'd been blessed with a queen and lover who had so little care for public decency. He'd taken her three times on that beach—twice in the sand, then a third out in the warm waters. And yet his very blood was still electrified. And yet he still wanted more.
They'd swum into the shallows to wash off the sand crusted on them, but Aelin had wrapped her legs around his waist, kissed his neck, then licked his ear the way he'd nibbled hers, and he was buried in her again. She knew why he needed the contact, why he'd needed to taste her on his tongue, and then with the rest of his body. She'd needed the same.
He still needed it. When they'd finished after that first time, he'd been left reeling, to pull his sanity back together after the joining that had ... unleashed him. Broken and remade him. His magic had been a song, and she had been ...

He'd never had anything like her. Everything he'd given her, she'd given right back to him.
And when she had bit him during that second coupling in the sand … His magic had left six nearby palm trees in splinters as he'd climaxed hard enough that he thought his body would shatter.
But once they were finished, when she'd actually made to walk back to Skull's Bay in nothing but her flames, he'd given her his shirt and belt. Which did little to cover her up, especially those beautiful legs, but at least it was less likely to start a riot.
Barely, though. And it'd be obvious what they'd done on that beach the moment they stepped within scenting range of anyone with a preternatural sense of smell.

Page 492
But he leaned forward, and despite the marshes, despite what gathered in the world, for the first time in ten years, Elide found herself not at all afraid as Lorcan caressed her lips with his own. Not afraid of anything as he did it again, kissing one corner of her mouth, then the other.
Such gentle, patient kisses—his hands equally so as they stroked the hair back from her brow, as they trailed over her hips, her ribs. She lifted her own hands to his face and dragged her fingers into his silken hair as she arched up into him, craving the weight of his body on hers.
Lorcan's tongue brushed against the seam of her mouth, and Elide marveled at how natural it felt to open for him, how her body sang at the contact, his hardness against her softness. Lorcan groaned at the first caress of his tongue against her own, his hips grinding against hers in a way that made heat scorch through her, made her own body undulate against his in answer and demand.
He kissed her deeper at that request, a hand sliding down to grip her thigh, spreading her legs a bit wider so he could settle fully between them. And as all of him lined up with her …
She was panting, she realized, as she ground herself against him, as Lorcan tore his mouth from hers and kissed her jaw, her neck, her ear. She was trembling—not with fear, but with want as Lorcan breathed her name over and over onto her skin.
Like a prayer, that was how her name sounded on his lips. She took his face in her hands, finding his eyes blazing, his breathing as ragged as her own.
Elide dared to run her fingers from his cheek down his neck, right beneath the collar of his shirt. His skin was like heated silk. He shuddered at the touch, head bowing so that his inky hair spilled onto her brow, and his hips drove into hers just enough that a small gasp came out of her. More, she realized—she wanted more.
His eyes met hers in silent question, her hand pausing over the skin above his heart. It was a raging, thunderous beat.
She lifted her head to kiss him, and as her mouth again met his, she whispered her answer—

Page 573
(Violates the Regulation with touching of breast, mouth on breast, feeling of genitals through clothing, description of vaginal sex.)
Let him lean in to brush his mouth against her bare neck, right under her ear.
Manon arched slightly at that caress. At the tongue that flicked against where his lips had been. Then he pulled back. Away.
Even as those phantom hands continued to trail up her hips, over her waist. His mouth parted slightly, body trembling with restraint. Restraint, where most males took and took when she offered it, gorging themselves on her. But Dorian Havilliard said, "The Bloodhound was lying that night. What she said about your Second. I felt her lie—tasted it."
Some tight part in her chest eased. "I don't want to talk about that."
He stepped closer again, and those phantom hands trailed under her breasts. She gritted her teeth. "And what do you want to talk about, Manon?"
She wasn't sure he'd ever said her name before. And the way he'd said it …
"I don't want to talk at all," she countered. "And neither do you," she added with a pointed glance.
Again, that dark, edged smile appeared. And when he stepped close once more, his hands replaced those phantom ones.
Tracing her hips, her waist, her breasts. Unhurried, indolent circles that she allowed him to make, simply because no one had ever dared. Each brush of his skin against hers left a wake of fire and ice. She found herself transfixed by it—by each coaxing, luxurious stroke.
She did not even consider objecting as Dorian slid off her shirt and surveyed her bare, scarflecked flesh.
His face turned ravenous as he took in her breasts, the plane of her stomach—the scar slicing across it.
That hunger shifted into something icy and vicious: "You once asked me where I stand on the line between killing to protect and killing for pleasure." His fingers grazed the seam of the scar across her abdomen. "I'll stand on the other side of the line when I find your grandmother."
A chill ran down her body, peaking her breasts. He watched them, then circled a finger around one. Dorian bent, his mouth following the path where that finger had been. Then his tongue. She bit her lip against the groan rising up her throat, her hands sliding into the silken locks of his hair.
His mouth was still around the tip of her breast as he again met her eyes, sapphire framed with ebony lashes, and said, "I want to taste every inch of you."
Manon let go of all pretense of reason as the king lifted his head and claimed her mouth.

And for all his wanting to taste her, as she opened for him, Manon thought the king tasted like the sea, like a winter morning, something so foreign and yet familiar it at last dragged that moan from deep in her.

His fingers slid to her jaw, tipping her face to thoroughly take her mouth, every movement of his tongue a sensuous promise that had her arching into him. Had her meeting him stroke for stroke as he explored and teased until she could hardly think straight.

She had never contemplated what it would be like—to yield control. And not have it be weakness, but a freedom.

Dorian's hands slid down her thighs, as if savoring the muscle there, then around—cupping her backside, grinding her into every hard inch of him. The small noise in her throat was cut off as he hoisted her from the wall in a smooth movement. Manon wrapped her legs around his waist while he carried her to the bed, his mouth never leaving hers as he devoured and devoured her. As he spread her beneath him. As he freed her pants button by button, then slid them off.

But Dorian pulled back at last, leaving her panting as he surveyed her, utterly bare before him. He caressed a finger along the inside of her thigh. Higher. "I wanted you from the first moment I saw you in Oakwald," he said, his voice low and rough.

Manon reached up to peel off his shirt, white fabric sliding away to reveal tan skin and sculpted muscle. "Yes," was all she told him. She unbuckled his belt, hands shaking. "Yes," she said again, as Dorian brushed a knuckle over her core. He let out an approving growl at what he found.

His clothes joined hers on the floor. Manon let him raise her arms over her head, his magic gently pinning her wrists to the mattress as he touched her, first with those wicked hands.

Then with his wicked mouth. And when Manon had to bite his shoulder to muffle her moaning as he brought her over the edge, Dorian Havilliard buried himself deep inside her.

She did not care who she was, who she had been, and what she had once promised to be as he moved. She dragged her hands through his thick hair, over the muscles of his back as it flexed and rippled with each thrust that drove her toward that shimmering edge again.

Here, she was nothing but flesh and fire and iron; here, there was only this selfish need of her body, his body.

More. She wanted more—wanted everything.

She might have whispered it, might have pleaded for it. Because Darkness save her, Dorian gave it to her. To them both.

He remained atop her when he at last stilled, his lips barely a hairsbreadth above hers—hovering after the brutal kiss he'd given her to contain his roar as release found him.

She was trembling with … whatever he'd done to her, her body. He brushed a strand of hair out of her face, his own fingers shaking.

She had not realized how silent the world was—how loud they might have been, especially with so many Fae ears nearby.
He was still atop her, in her. Those sapphire eyes flicked to her mouth, still panting slightly.
"This was supposed to take the edge off."
She kept her words low as his clothes slid over, hauled by phantom hands. "And did it?"
He traced her lower lip with his thumb and shuddered as she sucked it into her mouth, flicked it with her tongue. "No. Not even close."
But that was the gray light of dawn creeping into the room, staining the walls silver. He seemed to notice it at the same moment she did. Groaning softly, he pulled himself off her.
She tugged on her clothes with trained efficiency, and only when she was lacing up her shirt did Dorian say, "We're not done, you and I."
And it was the purely male promise that made her bare her teeth. "Unless you would like to learn precisely what parts of me are made of iron the next time you touch me, I decide those things."

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Manon was awake when Dorian stormed into her room an hour before dawn. He ignored her unlaced shirt, the swell of those lush breasts he'd tasted only yesterday, as he said, "Put your clothes on and follow me."
...While they'd debated and readied for the past day, he'd contemplated Manon's warning, after she'd made his very blood sing with pleasure. Unless you would like to learn precisely what parts of me are made of iron the next time you touch me, I decide those things.

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"Take off your shirt."
Aelin hesitated—realizing where this was going.
Why Cairn's belt carried a whip.
"Take off your shirt."
Aelin tugged her shirt out of her pants and slung it over her head, tossing it in the sand beside her. Then she removed the flexible cloth around her breasts.
"Varik, Heiron." Two Fae males came forward.
Aelin didn't fight as they each gripped her by an arm and hauled her up. Spread her arms wide. The sea air kissed her breasts, her navel.

Exhibit C

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
BEFORE THE SOUTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL REVIEW COMMITTEE IN RE: EMPIRE OF STORMS BY SARAH J. MAAS	**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

This is a matter in which Instructional Material is being addressed by the Instructional Material Review Committee ("IMRC") of the S.C. State Board of Education ("State Board") pursuant to S.C. Code Reg. 43-170. The hearing of this matter occurred via Microsoft Teams on March 13th, 2025 at 1:00 PM.

Title of Instructional Material: **Empire of Storms**
Author: **Sarah J. Maas**

BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The "Subject Material" listed above is reviewed by the IMRC pursuant to its authority to review materials that have been appealed from a local district board. In this case, Complainant filed the South Carolina Instructional Materials Uniform Parent Complaint Form (Exhibit A) with the Beaufort School District Board of Education on December 13th, 2024. The Chairman of the Beaufort Board requested that the State Board of Education take these materials up for consideration, pursuant to Regulation 43-170 VI.C., as the Beaufort Board had previously reviewed this material in 2023, prior to the enactment of Regulation 43-170. As further described below, this Regulation authorizes the State Board to take certain actions related to Instructional Material. The Complainant requested that the State Board remove the Subject Material entirely from South Carolina's public schools.

The Department notified the public of this matter via posting hearing information and the hearing agenda on its website on March 6, 2025. Consistent with governing requirements, the public was invited to sign up in advance of the hearing in order to provide comment regarding the Subject Material. The Hearing was conducted in accordance with Procedures for Review of Instructional Material, State Board Rule of Governance IFC, last revised October 1, 2024, and the South Carolina Administrative Procedures Act, S. C. Code Section 1-23-310 et. seq. The State Board's Rule of Governance was designed and adopted to provide a full and fair process for Instructional Material reviews under Reg. 43-170.

Based on a review of all public comments (in person and written), the Subject Material, all documentation provided by the Complainant and interested parties, the IMRC makes the following findings of fact and conclusions of law.

APPEARANCES

Complainant providing testimony in favor of removing the Subject Material:
Elizabeth "Ivie" Szalai
Providing public comment in favor of retaining the Subject Material:
Gabrielle Zurlo
Providing public comment in favor of removing the Subject Material:
Michael Covert
On Behalf of South Carolina Department of Education:
Robert D. Cathcart, III, Esq., Policy and Legal Advisor

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Subject Material was challenged by the Complainant in the Beaufort County School District on December 13, 2024.
2. Beaufort County School District Officials informed Complainant that the Board had previously considered the Subject Material and returned the material to its shelves. The Chairman of the Beaufort County School District Board of Education requested the State Board of Education to review the material without the Beaufort Board reviewing the Subject Material under the Regulation..
3. The Subject Material is available to students in the Beaufort County School District.
4. The Subject Material contains the content listed and described in Exhibit A[1].

APPLICABLE LAW

1. Regulation 43-170 authorizes the State Board to take certain actions related to Instructional Material. The State Board can (1) remove the Subject Material entirely, (2) discontinue use of the Subject Material for any grade level or age group for which such use is inappropriate or unsuitable, (3) limit the Subject Material's availability to a student where the school district has received the consent of the student's parent, or (4) permit the continued use of the Subject Material for all grade levels or age groups.

2. Regulation 43-170 defines "Instructional Material(s)":

   "Instructional Material(s)" means materials used in a South Carolina K-12 public school classroom, made available in a public school library/media center, or included on a public school's reading list, whether adopted and/or purchased from the state-adopted instructional materials list, adopted and/or purchased through a district instructional materials program, or otherwise purchased, donated to the school, or made available to students through other means, including but not limited to digital platforms. See S.C. Code Ann. Section 59–19–10. The term ''Instructional Materials'' as used herein includes any collection of books or materials purchased, acquired, or kept on public school grounds by any teacher or other public-school employee and made available to students, regardless of how or by whom such materials are acquired or purchased.

[1] Exhibit A contains excerpts which are representative of questionable or violative material contained in the Subject Material. The IMRC's review, report, and recommendation is not limited to the excerpts listed on Exhibit A.

Reg. 43-170(I)(A).

3. Regulation 43-170 defines "Age and Developmentally Appropriate":

   "Age and Developmentally Appropriate'' means topics, messages, materials, and teaching methods suitable to particular ages or age groups of children and adolescents, based on developing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacity typical for the age or age group. Instructional Material is not ''Age and Developmentally Appropriate'' for any age or age group of children if it includes descriptions or visual depictions of ''sexual conduct,'' as that term is defined by S.C. Code Ann. § 16-15-305(C)(1).

4. Regulation 43-170 authorizes the State Board to establish "a committee comprised of at least five of the State Board's members… [and to] conduct a public meeting" consistent with the Regulation's requirements. Reg. 43-170(IV)(E). Furthermore, it requires the committee to "provide a report and recommendation to the full State Board to be considered and either adopted or rejected by the State Board at its next regularly scheduled meeting." *Id*.

RECOMMENDATION

The State Board has established that, when Instructional Material "present[s] plainly before the reader express, detailed… descriptions of 'sexual conduct' as specifically defined in S.C. Code Ann. § 16-15-305 (C)(1)(b), (d), and (e)," it is a clear violation of Regulation 43-170 and the Subject Material must be removed entirely from all public school in South Carolina. *See* SBE Final Order and Opinion No. 2024-0001 (In re: Damsel by Elena Arnold) at page 3. Having carefully considered all public comments (in person and written), the Subject Material and/or excerpts in question from the Subject Material, all documentation provided by the Department, and all comments made by those appearing before the IMRC, we unanimously find that the Subject Material includes descriptions of "sexual conduct" as that term is defined by S.C. Code § 16-15-305(C)(1).

While the IMRC's review of the Subject Material is not limited to Exhibit A, the excerpts contained therein establish a clear violation of the regulation. Therefore, the Subject Material is not Age and Developmentally Appropriate as defined by S.C. Code Reg. 43-170 and must be removed entirely from all public schools in South Carolina.

The IMRC recommends that, considering all the circumstances *Empire of Storms* by Sarah J. Maas be removed entirely from all public schools in South Carolina, beginning on the date of the signing of any Final Order issued by the South Carolina State Board of Education.

*/s/Dr. Christian T. Hanley, Jr.*__
Christian T. Hanley, Jr.
Chairman
Instructional Material Review Committee
January 25, 2025