Busboys & Poets faces racial discrimination suit after canceling event

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A Howard County author is seeking $7.5 million in damages against Busboys & Poets, alleging in a lawsuit that the local bookstore-cafe chain has engaged in discriminatory behavior and falsely advertised itself as a Black-owned business, which ownership denies.

According to Jordan Randall's August filing to the Howard County Circuit Court, he successfully applied to host a 2023 event at the Columbia Busboys & Poets, which has eight D.C.-Maryland-Virginia locations total and bills itself online as "a place where art, culture, and politics intentionally collide."

Randall had wanted to promote his then-new book, "Pinkface." The novel's Amazon e-book listing summarizes it as a story of a high school senior "who realizes that the world is not built for straight, white, cis men anymore," then "pretends to transition into a woman to stand out on college applications."

In an interview with The Baltimore Sun, Busboys & Poets CEO Andy Shallal said Randall was later informed that the event would be canceled, adding that he believes the book's subject matter is "disparaging to trans people."

"We had several people in our team who are trans. They looked at it; they said they don't like the book. ... It's not a thing we would support or want to have," Shallal said. "Apparently, [Randall] thinks the reason why we didn't do is because he's Black, which makes no sense at all. We have [events featuring] authors of all different types."

But the novelist told The Sun that the book event was only canceled after Randall, who identifies as a Black, cisgender man, sent his headshot to Busboys & Poets' directors of programming and operations. However, according to a November 2023 email thread he provided, they also received the cover, which features a graphic of the male sex sign with lingerie atop it, as well as the text "A High School Senior Fakes Transitioning Into a Woman."

"As soon as they saw it, they canceled my event," Randall said. "I got accused of being transphobic, and they also accused my book of being racist against Black people. I'm drawing attention to the things I experienced growing up."

In the thread, a then-director-of-operations at Busboys & Poets said the decision to host the event had been reversed due to the fact that "it is a book written about a marginalized experience that the author does not identify with."

"It does not have to do with the fact that you are a Black author. We would react the very same to a white author if they wrote PINKFACE, or any other similar situation," an email reads. "I understand this is a plot device-however, in this political climate where trans people are constantly questioned, under fire, harmed, and even killed by our transphobic society we do not find this acceptable."