



# **BANNED BOOKS**

**The Controversy Over  
What Students Read**

Meryl Loonin

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# Book Bans, Culture Wars, and the Freedom to Read

Every fall, librarians, booksellers, publishers, free speech advocates, and avid readers across the country prepare for Banned Books Week, an annual celebration of the freedom to read. There are catchy slogans, “I read banned books” posters and T-shirts, and library displays of the books that the ALA identifies as the most challenged titles of the year. The books are wrapped in caution tape—or their covers are concealed—to evoke the spirit of rebel readers around the world who have risked imprisonment or even death to read and discuss literature while living under repressive regimes. Many public libraries and bookstores host Banned Books Week events, including Stand for the Banned Read-Outs, which are dramatic readings of excerpts from banned books, and Dear Banned Author letter-writing campaigns, which encourage readers to write, tweet, or email a favorite author whose books have been banned. The events may seem lighthearted, but the purpose behind them is serious: to raise awareness of the dangers of censorship and protect freedoms that are at the heart of American democracy—to access information and express ideas.

Banned Books Week got its start in 1982, at a time when the country was embroiled in another culture war. Republican president Ronald Reagan was serving in the White House—and the Moral Majority, a right-wing evangelical Christian group, exerted growing influence over the nation’s politics and

culture. The ALA and other free speech groups were alarmed by a sharp rise in book-banning attempts in US schools, public libraries, and bookstores. They launched Banned Books Week to call attention to the growing censorship threat. Decades later, with book banning once again on the rise, librarians say Banned Books Week has become more vital than ever before.

Over the years, works by many critically acclaimed authors have appeared on the ALA's annual list of the most challenged books. Award-winning author Jason Reynolds writes popular hip hop-infused, young adult (YA) books with narratives that center on Black teen boys. When his books are challenged and banned, he worries about the young readers who lose access to stories with diverse characters and perspectives. "It's painful to me because what I know is that when these books are banned, there are going to be thousands and thousands of young people who will not get these books,"<sup>5</sup> he says.

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—Jason Reynolds, children's and YA author

## **Bans, Challenges, and Soft Censorship**

The ALA first began tracking instances of book banning in 1990. The organization counts both the number of times a book is banned outright and removed from library shelves and when it is challenged—meaning someone attempts to ban it. Most school and public libraries have formal procedures in place to handle book challenges. The person or group seeking a book's removal submit a form explaining the objections. This triggers a formal review process. Usually, a committee made up of librarians, teachers, school administrators, and community members read the book and consider the motivations for the challenge before making a final decision.

In 2021 the ALA reported more books being challenged than at any time since it began tracking: 729 separate efforts to censor almost 1,600 different books. In a typical year there are 300

to 400 challenges, and most are lodged against a single title. The bulk of these challenges occur in public schools. PEN America, an advocacy group that defends freedom of speech and expression, conducted its own in-depth survey of book banning in US public schools over nine months in 2021 and 2022. The group reported 1,586 separate book bans, including “removals of books from school libraries, prohibitions from reading them in classrooms, or both, as well as books banned from circulation.”<sup>6</sup> These were carried out in eighty-six different school districts in twenty-six different states.

But these numbers are just the tip of the iceberg, because most book challenges and bans—as many as 90 percent, according to the ALA—go unreported or take place out of the public eye. Books for young people are far more likely to fall prey to soft censorship. “Soft censorship is that dirty little secret,”<sup>7</sup> says *School Library Journal* book reviewer Kiera Parrott. It happens when a book is quietly removed from school library shelves and disappears. A book may also be flagged to restrict access, or schools may require a parent’s permission before students can borrow it. Sometimes books are hidden in a locked cabinet or behind the reference desk, so students are forced to ask the librarian to retrieve them. The most widespread type of soft censorship occurs after national headline-grabbing book bans. These may cause a school administrator to quietly remove a book, librarians to think twice before adding it to their collections, or teachers to omit it from the curriculum, because they fear stirring up controversy in their own communities.

### **What Makes the New Wave of Book Banning Different?**

Many young people today have access to instant information online. By their late teens, many have been exposed to misinformation, hate speech, sexual content, violence, and profanity via their smartphones, TV, social media, and video games. Yet conservative parent groups and politicians are focused on removing books from schools and libraries. In their view, books in schools pose a

# The Ten Most Challenged Books of 2021

Every year the American Library Association (ALA) tracks challenges to books and other materials in libraries, schools, and universities. In 2021 the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 such challenges involving 1,597 books. The ten most challenged books, and the reasons for the challenges, appear below. For all ten, the challenges led to bans.

## *Challenged and Banned: The Top Ten*

	<b>Book and Author</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
<b>1</b>	<i>Gender Queer</i> by Maia Kobabe	LGBTQ content, considered to have sexually explicit images
<b>2</b>	<i>Lawn Boy</i> by Jonathan Evison	LGBTQ content, considered to be sexually explicit
<b>3</b>	<i>All Boys Aren't Blue</i> by George M. Johnson	LGBTQ content, profanity, considered to be sexually explicit
<b>4</b>	<i>Out of Darkness</i> by Ashley Hope Perez	Depictions of abuse, considered to be sexually explicit
<b>5</b>	<i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas	Profanity, violence, thought to promote an anti-police message and indoctrination of a social agenda
<b>6</b>	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie	Profanity, sexual references, use of a derogatory term
<b>7</b>	<i>Me and Earl and the Dying Girl</i> by Jesse Andrews	Considered to be sexually explicit and degrading to women
<b>8</b>	<i>The Bluest Eye</i> by Toni Morrison	Depicts child sexual abuse, considered to be sexually explicit
<b>9</b>	<i>This Book is Gay</i> by Juno Dawson	Sexual education, LGBTQ content
<b>10</b>	<i>Beyond Magenta</i> by Susan Kuklin	LGBTQ content, considered to be sexually explicit

Source: "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists," American Library Association. [www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10).

particular threat to young people. NLTE founder Elana Fishbein declares that her group “is standing up against activist educators who are placing obscene, pornographic, racist, and hateful material in the hands of children.”<sup>8</sup>

Free speech advocates say that book banning is an attack not only on books but also on the democratic institutions—public schools and libraries—where free access to ideas and information is a core value. And although it is books that are being challenged, the culture war itself is waged on newer media, as parents share book titles and strategies on social media platforms and among chapters of national conservative parent groups like NLTE. The outrage spreads faster and further than anyone living through the book-banning surge of the 1980s could have imagined.

The new wave of book banning is a departure from the past in other ways, too. In earlier book bans, demands that titles be removed from school libraries usually started with concerned parents in the local community. In contrast, during the nine months covered by the PEN America survey, more than 40 percent of book bans were linked to directives from state officials or elected lawmakers. The survey’s authors say this is a disturbing trend: schools often respond to these directives by ignoring their own review procedures and overruling the professional judgment of teachers and librarians.

Free speech advocates are also deeply concerned about a spate of restrictive censorship laws that make book banning eas-

ier and limit what teachers can discuss about race and LGBTQ issues in the classroom. “There’s a meaningful difference,” writes *Atlantic* journalist Emma Sarappo, a critic of the new laws, “between parents communicating concern directly to schools and the government stepping in with sweeping intimidation tactics.”<sup>9</sup>

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—Emma Sarappo, *Atlantic* magazine journalist

## Upholding Students' Freedom to Read

When students at a New York high school learned that the school board had secretly removed eleven books from their school library, they sued the school district. Their case, *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*, eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled in the students' favor in 1982.

The lawsuit, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of Steven Pico and five other students, contended that the removal of the books violated the students' First Amendment rights. The books had all appeared on a target list compiled by a conservative parent group. Among them were *Slaughterhouse-Five*, an anti-war novel by author Kurt Vonnegut; an anthology of short stories by Black writers edited by Harlem Renaissance writer and poet Langston Hughes; and *Go Ask Alice*, a YA novel billed as the real diary of a teenage girl in which she described her harrowing downward spiral into drug addiction.

The 1982 central ruling in *Pico* still holds today. It says, "Local school boards may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to 'prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.'"

*Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, 457 US 854, 1982.

## Under Fire: Diverse Young Adult Books

In another striking shift from the past, the books that have been most fiercely targeted in recent years are YA titles that amplify once marginalized voices and explore racially diverse and LGBTQ issues and perspectives. In 2020, the year of George Floyd's killing by police and of the Black Lives Matter protests, the ALA reported that many of the most challenged books of the year dealt with racism and Black American history. In 2021 the list was made up largely of books dealing with LGBTQ issues.

Many of these books would not have existed just a decade ago. In recent years the publishing industry has grappled with its own racial and diversity reckoning. Change has been slow, but today young people have access to more diverse titles than ever before. Among the most challenged books of 2020 and 2021 are *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson, a series of personal

*A student looks for a book in her school library. More books were challenged in 2021 than at any time since tracking began—and most of those challenges occurred in public schools.*



essays, in which the author describes growing up queer and Black; *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, a novel about a Black teen girl who finds her voice after witnessing a friend's killing at the hands of police; and *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez, a historical novel set in 1930s Texas that centers on a forbidden interracial teen romance, child sexual abuse, and a deadly school gas explosion. These books do not shy away from frank portrayals of sex, violence, mental health struggles, and other edgy topics. But free speech advocates say it is no coincidence that they feature racially diverse and LGBTQ characters and experiences and address many of the same issues that fuel the larger culture war.

## **Canceling Culturally and Racially Insensitive Books**

Conservative parents and politicians are behind the latest wave of book banning. Yet liberal activists, cultural critics, and others on the left have also challenged books. These challenges target books that they perceive as culturally or racially insensitive, or that

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# ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

## **American Library Association (ALA)**

[www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)

The ALA supports public and school libraries and librarians across the country and defends against censorship. Its website provides a link to the Unite Against Book Bans campaign, resources to fight censorship in every US state and territory, its annual Most Challenged Books lists, and a form to report book-banning incidents in local school and public libraries.

## **Banned Books Week**

[www.bannedbooksweek.org](http://www.bannedbooksweek.org)

Every September, the ALA and a coalition of free speech and human rights groups host Banned Books Week to celebrate the right to read. The site features news, events, ways to get involved, printable flyers and posters, and a link to a Virtual Readout YouTube channel in which authors and their fans read excerpts from favorite banned books.

## **Cato Institute**

[www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org)

This libertarian public policy research organization believes that government should have a limited role in US society and individuals should be free to act as they choose so long as they do not hurt others. The site links to articles and blog posts by Cato scholars and offers a libertarian perspective on issues such as censorship, critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and book banning in schools.

## **Comic Book Legal Defense Fund**

<http://cblddf.org>

The Comic Book Legal Defense works to protect the First Amendment rights of comic book and graphic novel creators, publishers, and readers by providing information and legal support. Its “Resources” page includes articles on the history of comic book censorship, printable “Know Your Rights” posters, and lists of comics, manga, and graphic novels that have recently been challenged or banned.

## **Fandom Forward**

[fandomforward.org](http://fandomforward.org)

Fandom Forward works to turn fans of diverse books, comics, and manga into joyful activists. Its Book Defenders campaign promotes actions such as speaking out against book bans, creating art that celebrates a banned book, sending emails to support teen activists in other communities, and donating used books to a community in need.

# FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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