



Silencing
Voices

Book Bans, Cancel
Culture, and Other
Forms of Censorship

Robert Lerose



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Contents

Introduction	4
The Fight Over the First Amendment	
Chapter One	8
An Essential Right	
Chapter Two	18
The Movement to Ban Books	
Chapter Three	27
Censorship in the Classroom	
Chapter Four	36
Regulating Online Speech	
Chapter Five	45
Free Speech Battles on College Campuses	
Source Notes	55
Organizations and Websites	59
For Further Research	60
Index	61
Picture Credits	64
About the Author	64

The Movement to Ban Books

Suzette Baker loved being the head librarian at Kingsland Public Library in Llano County, Texas, about 65 miles (105 km) from Austin. She enjoyed putting up book displays tied to holidays or themes and helping library patrons find the perfect book for their interests. In November 2021 Baker got a disturbing order from library administrators. Bonnie Wallace, a member of the Llano County library advisory board, had demanded the removal of all books from the library that “depict any type of sexual activity or questionable nudity,” calling them “pornographic filth.”¹⁵

Among the books singled out for removal were *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen*; *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex and Sexual Health*; *Freakboy*; and *Larry the Farting Leprechaun*. Baker refused on the grounds that removing the books violated the First Amendment. “This was never about the books. This was never about protecting people. The books that they gave me to get rid of were books on racism. They were books on transgender and sexual orientation and questioning for teens,”¹⁶ Baker says.

She was subsequently fired in March 2022 for insubordination. Despite the personal and emotional toll on her life, taking a stand against this type of censorship was a no-brainer for Baker. “I know what I did was right,”¹⁷ she says. In April 2022 a federal lawsuit was filed by seven county residents who objected to the book ban. The following March an appeals court judge ordered eight of the seventeen banned books returned to the shelves, with nine books remaining off the shelves while the county con-

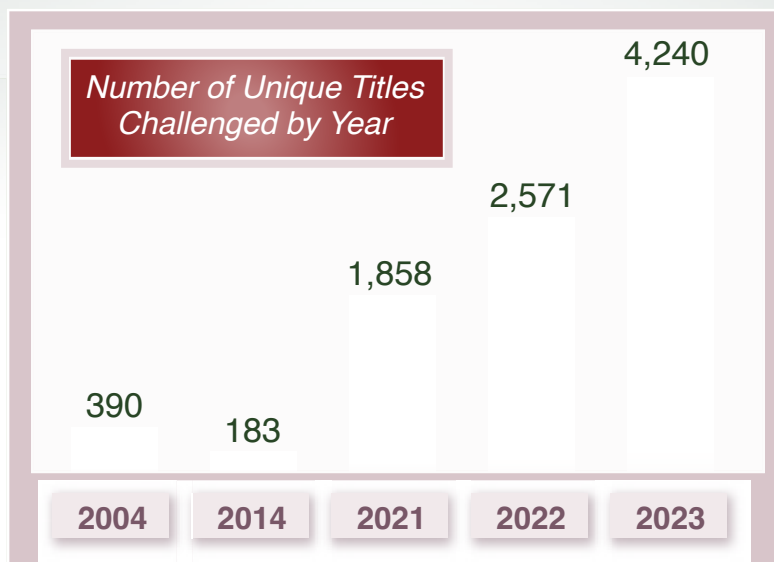
tested the ruling. A federal court of appeals began hearing oral arguments for the case in September 2024.

Book Bans on the Rise

Efforts to ban or restrict access to books are happening across the country in growing numbers. The American Library Association (ALA) has seen an uptick in book censorship in the past few years. In 2023 there was a 65 percent jump in the number of titles in danger of being removed from schools and libraries compared to 2022. This put 4,240 unique book titles at risk—a record number since the association began collecting this data. “Each demand to ban a book is a demand to deny each person’s constitutionally protected right to choose and read books that raise important issues and lift up the voices of those who

Book Bans Have Grown

Efforts to ban books have risen dramatically over a nineteen-year period. According to the American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom, relatively few books were challenged in the early 2000s. That changed starting in 2021. Between 2022 and 2023 alone, the number of challenges increased 65 percent.



“Each demand to ban a book is a demand to deny each person’s constitutionally protected right to choose and read books that raise important issues and lift up the voices of those who are often silenced.”¹⁸

—Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom

are often silenced,”¹⁸ says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom.

Denying access to a book can take a few forms. Most of the time when a book is restricted or removed, it usually refers to a title found at a public or school library or on the reading list of a

school curriculum. The ALA draws a distinction between a challenge and a banning. According to the ALA, “A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others.”¹⁹

Typically, anyone can challenge a book at a public library by submitting a formal complaint. The library staff reviews the complaint and then determines how the matter should be handled. Sometimes the book might be removed from the shelf and placed in a restricted area. Other times, the objection to the book could be turned down and the book returned to open circulation. To object to a book in a public school library, the requirements may vary. Some districts allow only parents who have children in the school system the option of filing an unlimited number of complaints. Citizens without children in attendance may be restricted in how many book complaints they can make.

Common Content Targeted

An individual or a group that challenges a book can do so for almost any reason. Still, there do seem to be certain objections that come up often in these complaints. PEN America, an organization founded in 1922 that fights to protect free expression and the rights of creators, looked at the books that were banned in the 2022–2023 academic year. According to its findings, these titles were removed primarily because the content contained themes

of violence or abuse; dealt with issues of mental health, bullying, suicide, or substance abuse; described the sexual experiences of characters; explored issues of race and racism; dealt with LGBTQ characters or themes; or described episodes of grief or death. “Book bans are targeting narratives about race and sexual identities and sexual content writ large, and they show no sign of stopping. The bans we’re seeing are broad, harsh and pernicious—and they’re undermining the education of millions of students across the country,”²⁰ says Sabrina Baêta, Freedom to Read program manager at PEN America.

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—Sabrina Baêta, Freedom to Read program manager at PEN America

Schools and libraries are dealing with an unprecedented surge in censorship of reading materials. From July 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023, PEN America recorded book banning activities in forty-two of the fifty states. In some of these instances, state governments have made it significantly easier for the complaint process to result in the removal of a title. A prime example is a new law in Utah that went into effect in July 2024. Under the new law, a book



Censorship of books and other reading material has been growing in schools and libraries in many parts of the nation. These efforts are limiting students’ freedom to read about a wide array of topics.

“This is a big win because now I can send my kid, you can send your child to school and know that these 13 titles which went through a very rigorous process are no longer available to kids in that school.”²²

—Corinne Johnson, president of Utah Parents United

can be banned in schools statewide if only three school district boards object to the book because in their view it contains material that lacks “literary, artistic, political or scientific value for minors.”²¹

Within a month of the law’s passage, thirteen books were removed from school library shelves, including works by popular authors such as Judy Blume, Ellen Hopkins, and Sarah J. Maas. The law required that the books be disposed of permanently. Also, the law stipulates that only a member of the Utah State Board of Education could request a hearing to consider returning a banned book. Supporters of the book ban celebrated the new law. “This is a big win because now I can send my kid, you can send your child to school and know that these 13 titles which went through a very rigorous process are no longer available to kids in that school,”²²



Writer Judy Blume appears at the 2023 movie premiere of her popular young adult book, Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. Under a 2024 Utah law, books by Blume and other popular authors were removed from school libraries.

The Librarian and the Death Threat

Amanda Jones was proud to be a middle school librarian in her hometown of Watson, Louisiana. She was upset when she heard that the local public library was considering banning LGBTQ books, and she understood the hurtful impact it would have on LGBTQ students. On July 19, 2022, she addressed the library board at a public meeting and “reminded them, regardless of their own beliefs on the topic of book content and location, to think about this: no one on the right side of history has ever been on the side of censorship and hiding books.” About three weeks later, she got an email that used abusive language and warned, “You have a LARGE target on your back.” Jones was petrified. She could not understand how a stranger would threaten her life because she stood up for other people’s right to read, but felt she had an obligation to continue to speak out. “I figure if people are going to label me an activist, I might as well act like one and show them what I’m made of—grit and perseverance,” she says. “Hell hath no fury like a librarian scorned.”

Quoted in Amanda Jones, “I Spoke Out Against Library Book Bans. Then the Death Threats Started,” Oprah Daily, August 27, 2024. www.oprahdaily.com.

says Corinne Johnson, president of Utah Parents United, an advocacy group for parental rights.

But others saw the law as an infringement on young people’s freedoms. “Allowing just a handful of districts to make decisions for the whole state is antidemocratic, and we are concerned that implementation of the law will result in less diverse library shelves for all Utahns,”²³ says Kasey Meehan of PEN America.

Parental Rights Groups and Censorship

Many of the efforts to ban books are being spearheaded by so-called parental rights groups, such as Utah Parents United. These groups are dedicated to giving parents more information about what their children are being taught, the reading material assigned in the curriculum, and the books available in public school libraries and classrooms. With this information, they believe, parents can have a greater voice in their children’s education and the content they are exposed to.

Some of these groups are national in scope. Founded in January 2021, Moms for Liberty is a nonprofit organization whose

Source Notes

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4. Quoted in Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter, “With Rising Book Bans, Librarians Have Come Under Attack,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2023. www.nytimes.com.
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15. Quoted in *Little v. Llano County*, No. 23-50224 (5th Cir. 2024).
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Organizations and Websites

American Library Association

www.ala.org

This long-standing organization works to enhance and ensure access to information for everyone. Its website has extensive news and data on issues such as banned and challenged books, literacy, and diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)

www.eff.org

The EFF is focused on defending the rights and liberties of individuals online. Its website has resources to help visitors learn more about their digital rights, including free speech, privacy, transparency and innovation, and illegal surveillance.

Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)

www.thefire.org

FIRE is an organization committed to defending and promoting free speech rights and free thought for all Americans. The FIRE website provides a vast resource library, tool kits, reports, and databases and guides on academic freedom, religious liberty, and due process.

Institute for Free Speech (IFS)

www.ifs.org

The IFS is an organization centered on promoting and defending the First Amendment rights of all citizens, particularly political speech rights. Its website has an indexed library of research and academic writing on topics such as the right to protest, content-based discrimination, and internet speech.

Knight First Amendment Institute

<https://knightcolumbia.org>

The Knight First Amendment Institute protects free expression and freedom of the press through legal action, research, and public education, particularly as these pertain to the digital age. Its website offers blog posts, video content, a podcast, research papers, and articles on First Amendment issues.

PEN America

<https://pen.org>

PEN America is a long-established organization dedicated to preserving the right to free expression and defending human rights through the power of the word. Its website has up-to-date resources on campus free speech guides, ways to fight books bans, the threat of disinformation, and more.

For Further Research

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Index

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Abrams, Samuel J., 51
- academic freedom
- censorship of classroom materials and, 25
 - vs. regulation of teachers, 49
 - restrictions on, 52–54
- African American history, 28–30
- American Civil Liberties Union, 41, 44
- American Library Association (ALA), 5, 59
- on book bans vs. challenges, 20
 - on rise in book bans/challenges, 19, 26
- American Psychological Association, 38
- anti-apartheid protests, 45
- anti-Semitism, 46, 51
- on campus, House Committee on Education and the Workforce, hearings on, 51
- anti-war protests
- Israel-Hamas war, 46, **47**
 - Vietnam War, 11, 46
- Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Blume), 22
- Baer, Elizabeth, 11
- Baêta, Sabrina, 21
- Baker, Suzette, 18
- Batley, Maysoun, 46
- Bennet, James, 15
- Bennett, Millie, 25
- Biden administration, 41
- Black, Hugo, 14
- Blume, Judy, 22, **22**
- Bonta, Rob, 35
- Book, Lauren, 5
- book bans, 54
- banned by Orange County (FL) Public Schools, **5**
 - vs. challenges, 20
 - in Florida, 4–5, 18–19
 - focus on young adult titles, 26
 - number of titles challenged, by year, 19
 - parental rights groups and, 23–24
 - students challenging, 24–26
 - subject matter targeted by, 20–23, 25
- Boone, Brock, 32
- Brandenburg, Clarence, 12
- Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), 12–13
- Brookings Institution, 28
- Caldwell-Stone, Deborah, 19–20
- campus protests, 6–7, 11
- cancel culture, 51–52
- censorship, 7
- of criticism of government, 42
 - parental rights groups and, 23–24
 - vs. public safety, 40–41
 - recent increase in debate over, 54
 - schools/libraries facing surge in, 21
 - self, among teachers, 34–35
 - See also* book bans
- Chemerinsky, Erwin, 50
- classroom discussions
- of “divisive concepts,” restrictions on, 28
 - of gender/sexuality topics, 31–32
 - of race/racism, 29–30
- “clear and present danger” doctrine, 12
- critical race theory, ban on teaching of, 35
- Culves, Sherry, 33
- curriculum committees, inclusion of parents on, 31
- curriculum transparency bill (House Bill 1467, FL), 4–5
- cyberbullying, 39
- Dai, Patrick, 46
- Davis, J.D., 31
- DeSantis, Ron, 4, 29
- Diaz, Manny, Jr., 29
- disinformation
- about Haitian immigrants, 36–37
 - vs. misinformation, 38
- Diversity Awareness Youth Literacy Organization, 25
- divisive concepts, states enacting policies on, 32
- due process, 9
- Eckhardt, Christopher, 11
- Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), 59
- Ellsberg, Daniel, 13
- Espionage Act (1917), 11