

CONDEMNING CENSORSHIP

Staff Editorial

As sophomore Em Pawlak read more and more stories — often visiting the public or Prospect library on a daily basis — a pattern seemed to emerge: romance, romance, everywhere. Every book they read across all age categories and genres seemed to force its male and female main characters into a romantic relationship, something that Pawlak says does not mirror real life — much less their own.

However, after reading Gabrielle Zevin's "Tomorrow, Tomorrow, Tomorrow," Pawlak finally found a book that featured the everlasting strands of platonic friendship. While this often-overlooked form of relationship might be underrepresented, Pawlak says that their ability to access a wide variety of media allowed them to discover these gratifying nuggets of their own life-truths.

"Once I started finding books or characters with struggles I could relate to, who had relationships like I do, ... it made me feel a lot more seen in what I'm reading," Pawlak said. "[That] is something everyone should be afforded to feel."

Across the United States, young people's ability to access this affirming feeling of representation is being squashed in largely partisan battles over what books, themes and school curricula are suitable for school-aged kids such as the debate over the so-called "Don't Say Gay" law in Florida and the anti-Critical Race Theory House Bill 3979 in Texas.

According to PEN America, in the last school year alone, there has been a 40 percent increase in the banning of books from public schools and libraries, totaling 2,532 different books removed from shelves; the vast majority of these books feature BIPOC and LGBTQ+ characters or discuss topics such as racism in America or sex education. In fact, 41 percent of banned books explicitly address LGBTQ+ themes or contain queer protagonists, and another 40 percent contain protagonists of color.

This censorship of minorities' voices extends beyond the bookshelf. According to Senior Legal Council for the Student Press Law Center Mike Hiestand, parts of schools' curriculum — including history lessons about slavery or the civil rights movements — have been tiptoed around, or in some cases, outright removed.

One particularly egregious example can be seen in a newly-censored Studies Weekly textbook; published in Florida, the lesson now refers to activist Rosa Parks as merely "a nice lady" — not an outspoken leader in the battle against segregation and racism in America.

"In the last few years we've seen this explosion of book challenges and [various groups] going after curriculum," Hiestand said. "Can we really not talk about Rosa Parks anymore in this country?"

One main argument made to support such censorship hinges on the standard set by the 1969 Supreme Court case Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, which states that expression can only be limited in schools if it creates a material disruption to the classroom environment.

Examining the themes of the top 10 books banned during the 2021-22 school year highlights a pattern of what exactly constitutes a "disruption," according to data compiled by CNN: "Gender Queer: A Memoir" by Maia Kobabe explores gender identity and sexuality and was removed from bookshelves on 41 separate instances; "All Boys Aren't Blue" by George M. Johnson is a compilation of essays describing the author's experiences growing up as a queer, Black kid in New Jersey and was removed 29 times; and "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas follows a young adult navigating the loss of her friend due to police brutality and was removed on 17 occasions.

It is clear that the only "disruption" these books present to the classroom environment is the expression of ideas, identities and perspectives that concerned parents or targeted conservative groups — like Moms For Library and Power2Parent — disagree with.

"There is no First Amendment right to not be offended," Hiestand said. "... Really, the only type of speech that needs defending in the first place is speech that's not particularly popular."

We, KnightMedia, condemn book banning or reader censorship in any form, especially as it occurs across the country with increasing impunity and a blatant contempt for the basic principles of both education and democracy.

Whether through the vehicle of local, state or national groups, the very concept of banning books is inherently unjust as it attempts to restrict others based on the preferences of those calling for bans. Not only does this restrict access to a diverse range of stories and perspectives, but it also transmits messages of discomfort and intolerance to students of marginalized backgrounds and ultimately hampers schools' ability to fulfill their primary goal: the pursuit of education.

It is imperative that students learn to be curious, expose themselves to a range of perspectives and maintain the freedom to read as they climb the educational ladder. Reading about hard subjects might not be the most comfortable of experiences, but through this discomfort — paired with classroom conversations and curriculum flexibility — students can truly learn to empathize and foster diverse connections.

While Pawlak understands the discomfort that concerned parents may feel, they saw firsthand the educational and moral value that reading can have while reading "The Hate U Give" in middle school.

As a white kid growing up in the suburbs, Pawlak says they felt an itching sensation of uneasiness as blatant acts of racism unfolded. After reading, however, Pawlak expounded on that uncertain feeling by conducting research, reading books with similar themes and confronting their own biases.

"I did feel, quite frankly, uncomfortable," Pawlak said. "But from that discomfort, I was like, 'Why? Why does this make me uncomfortable?'"

This is the key difference in attitude that proponents of book banning lack. Rather than crying wolf at the very notion of discomfort, Pawlak believes that critically looking at books and the world that surrounds them can build bridges of

empathy in readers.

This was the attitude of AP Language and Composition teacher Jill Corr, along with fellow AP Lang teachers Matt Love and Elizabeth Joiner, when they reworked their literature unit last school year to include more diverse voices. "Kindred" by Octavia Butler, "Homegoing" by Yaa Gyasi and "American Dirt" by Jeanine Cummins extend the classes' curriculum beyond works written by "dead white guys," according to Corr, opening up students to new perspectives.

"You might think you know a little something about a topic, but any good book is going to make you think a little differently about something," Corr said. "I won't say it has to challenge all of your preconceived notions, but ... hopefully you come away from it and be like, 'Oh I hadn't thought about that.'"

Whether you yourself must confront the reality presented in books like "The Hate U Give," "Kindred" or "Homegoing" in your day-to-day life or not, it is an indisputable fact that many people in the United States face racism. Banning books doesn't erase that reality; instead, it invalidates a very real experience while

destroying a crucial learning opportunity. There is even legal precedent that protects the right of schools to possess books that give voice to these "uncomfortable" viewpoints: Hiestand cites the 1982 Supreme Court case Island Trees School District v. Pico, which states that students' right to read is implied by the First Amendment and that libraries — even ones in schools — are places for "voluntary inquiry," meaning that school boards do not have the right to oversee their contents.

The promotion of this inquiry into unfamiliar and diverse topics is important, though further action is needed to address the censorship crisis currently at hand. Combating book banning starts at a local level, which is why in February of this year, Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias proposed House Bill 2789, the Right to Read Bill. The bill passed through committee on March 8 and will make its way to the full House for consideration.

If passed, it would go into effect on Jan. 1, 2024 and tie state funding of public schools and libraries to policies that explicitly prevent the banning or restricting of access to books and other educational materials.

Advocating at a grassroots level, reaching out to local representatives in support of legislation like the "Right to Read Act" and engaging in classroom conversations about diversity, however inconsequential as it may seem, are small, positive strides in the right direction.

"Having young people speak up and say, 'This is not right; this is not something that I'm willing to just look the other way on,' is very, very important," Hiestand said. "... I think that they don't quite realize sometimes the impact that their voices truly can have."

With the proper tools, the issue of book banning can remain where both Hiestand and Pawlak agree it belongs: the past.

"Looking at those historical examples where they not only banned books but straight burned them, it hasn't ended well for them," Pawlak said. "Censorship doesn't end well for anyone involved: for those being censored or those doing the censoring." ➤

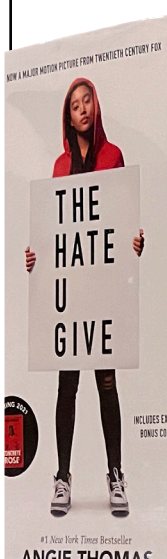


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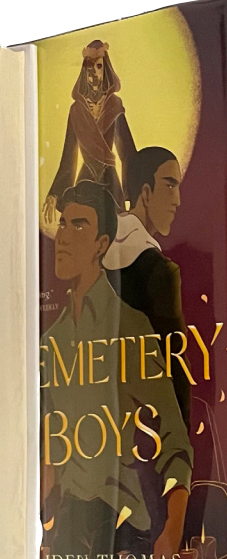
2,532

BOOKS WERE BANNED IN THE 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR, ACCORDING TO PEN AMERICA

"The Hate U Give"
This book is regularly banned due to race-based themes, profanity and explicit content.



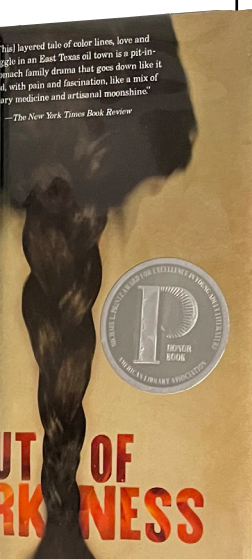
"Cemetery Boys"
Though often cited to be banned for alcohol, profanity and Satanism, the most obvious reason for this book's banning is its inclusion of queer and trans characters.



"Becoming"
Texas parents pushed for this biography to be banned because it "unfairly" portrayed former president Trump as a "bully."



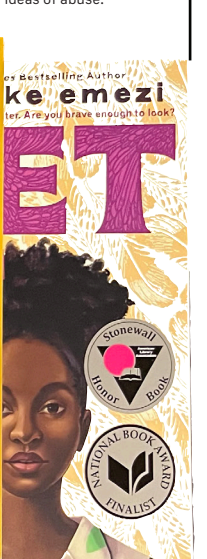
"Out Of Darkness"
Following the love story of a Mexican-American girl and a Black boy, this novel was at the receiving end of complaints revolving around violence, racism and sexually explicit content.



"Homegoing"
Said to have too blunt of a description of slavery's legacy in America, it is banned because of violence and brutality.



"Pet"
Challenged and often banned because of LGBTQ+ themes and ideas of sexuality, parents wanted to "protect" children from ideas of abuse.



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