

Book Banning

Opposing Viewpoints Online Collection, 2017
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Book banning occurs when access to a book, in whole or in part, has been restricted by the government or another authority. The censoring authority may issue an official doctrine explaining why the book has been banned. Some bans have involved burning physical copies of books, ensuring that the offending text will not be read or making a symbolic gesture toward that end. Alternately, a book may be quietly removed from library shelves. Censors ban books to prevent the dissemination of thoughts and ideas they have deemed dangerous, and a book may be banned due to moral, religious, or political motivations. Opponents of book banning argue that readers should be free to make their own decisions about what they read.

Book banning is also considered to be a method of exerting authority over the way a group thinks, a practice that has been criticized as contrasting the democratic ideals of the United States. Many critics identify book banning as “un-American” and associate the practice with authoritarian governments such as those in Nazi Germany and Communist China. Others contend that restricting access to certain books can protect young people from offensive content and promote social order.

In the colonial United States, the first book bans were ordered by the Puritans, migrants who fled England to escape religious persecution, in the Massachusetts Bay colony. Despite their own experience with persecution, the Puritans targeted the authors of these books for having different [religious beliefs](#). A federal ban on the sale and distribution of literature considered obscene came into force in the United States in 1873 with the passage of the Comstock Law. Though the Supreme Court deemed the Comstock Law unconstitutional in 1983, the law was used for more than a century to suppress literature that included references to premarital sex, homosexuality, and birth control. The US government has not banned a specific work of fiction since Edmund Wilson’s *Memoirs of Hecate County* in 1946. However, the policies of certain public and private institutions such as [libraries](#) and bookstores may restrict a book’s availability. Critics of book banning worry that such challenges to books, whether by governments, book sellers, or activist groups, can lead authors to censor their own ideas.

Books Challenged in Schools and Libraries

Libraries and classrooms have become the primary battleground for challenging books. The American Library Association (ALA) reported that 46 percent of book challenges occurred in [public libraries](#) in 2016, while 22 percent occurred in school libraries and 32 percent were related to school curricula. Most contentions have been resolved at the local school board level, while other challenges have been decided by the US Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court ruled on one such case in 1982 in *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico by Pico*, which is considered to be one of the most important decisions

regarding First Amendment rights and school libraries. The US Supreme Court responded to the New York school district's board of education's removal of several books from school libraries. The board had come under attack for removing the books without the recommendation of an appointed committee as per the protocols for removing a book from a school's collection. Furthermore, the board had refused recommendations to return the books after a committee had been appointed. The Supreme Court determined that the board must consider the students' First Amendment rights when deciding to remove a book and that restricting the availability of a book based on its content violated those rights.

In a similar case, the US District Court for the District of Kansas ruled in 1995 that the Olathe Unified School District's decision to ban Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* was unconstitutional and had been based on personal objections to the book's themes of homosexuality. The members of the school board had claimed that the decision was made because the work was "educationally unsuitable." In 2003, the US District Court for the Western District of Arkansas ruled that students' First Amendment rights were violated when the Cedarville School District required students to obtain parental permission before reading books in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which the Cedarville school board worried promoted witchcraft, disobedience, and disrespect for authority. The court determined that obtaining parental permission created an undue burden on the students trying to access the books.

Banned Books Week

The ALA launched the first [Banned Books](#) Week in 1982 to celebrate banned books and publicize challenges to the freedom to read. The annual celebration has attracted the support and sponsorship of many national organizations, including the American Booksellers Association, the Association of American University Presses, the Authors Guild, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Freedom to Read Foundation. Individuals can celebrate Banned Books Week by reading or sharing challenged books, and formal celebrations are frequently hosted by schools, public libraries, bookstores, community centers, and cafes. Each year the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) publishes an annotated bibliography of frequently challenged books and issues a list of the Top Ten Most Challenged Books, compiled from reports received from schools and libraries as well as stories in the media, to raise awareness about contemporary attempts at [censorship](#).

The removal of books from school libraries or curriculum can have a lasting impact on future decisions and discussions regarding book purchases. According to the ALA, as many as 85 percent of book challenges go unreported each year. Moreover, the number of books that are simply passed over for inclusion in collections because of fear of controversy cannot be estimated. Instead of drawing attention to specific banned books, the objective of Banned Books Week is to draw attention to the context in which books are challenged and the larger implications of these challenges. Most book challenges, according to the ALA, are initiated by parents, but some are initiated by library patrons, religious groups, and educators. The most commonly stated reason for challenging a book is sexually explicit content, with other common complaints focusing on offensive language, same-sex relationships, occultism, and portrayals of [violence](#) and self-harm. Concern that material may not be appropriate for certain age groups is frequently cited as a reason to restrict access to a book.

Among the organizations that sponsor Banned Books Week, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) specializes in the defense of comic books and other works of sequential art that have been challenged. In 2013, Jeff Smith's comic book series *Bone* became the first comic book series to appear on the Top Ten Most Challenged Books list. With each subsequent year, additional comic books and graphic novels, including *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and the space opera *Saga* by Brian K. Vaughn and Fiona Staples, have appeared on the list. Comic books have a long history with censors dating back to psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham's sensational book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which led to a Senate investigation on the dangers posed by comic books as well as decades of self-censorship by comic book publishers in the form of the Comics Code Authority. Challenges to comic book material in libraries occur for the same reasons as text-only books. However, the visual element of comic books has led to further criticisms, as graphic depictions of sexuality and violence may be considered more explicit than written descriptions. Additionally, some educators and parents support the removal of these books because they believe the medium inherently lacks cultural or academic value.

Corporate Decisions Influence Availability

Book banning also occurs outside of public and school libraries. In the larger context, a company's decision on which books to sell may be interpreted as corporate censorship. Online retailer Amazon and big-box competitors such as Walmart and Target have become dominant forces in book sales, as many independent bookstores have closed their doors in the face of competition. Some argue that private [corporations](#) are free to do as they wish. Opponents argue, however, that as available book purchasing options shrink, the choice to sell or not sell a book can determine its success. In 2015, Walmart garnered media attention for its decision not to carry professional fighter Ronda Rousey's autobiography *My Fight/Your Fight* because of its violent content. Additional controversy was generated when the *New York Times* initially failed to place the book on its best seller list despite the book selling more copies than other books in the nonfiction hardcover category. After being met with accusations of intentionally omitting the book, the *New York Times* ultimately included Rousey's book on its list.

Online book sales bring another host of challenges. Amazon and other [Internet](#) retailers have substantial control over what products are shown when a customer performs a subject search. Books are usually shown according to their sales ranking, with best sellers at the top of the list. Amazon also categorizes books by format and age group. The company has come under fire, however, for excluding certain books from searches and making some books especially difficult to find, especially books of an erotic nature. Critics of this practice argue that self-publishers, small publishing houses, and creators of same-sex erotica are more vulnerable than mainstream publishers. Although Amazon has not been accused of banning such books, they have been criticized for restricting their availability. In 2017, Amazon came under fire from historians for including books on Holocaust denial, works of revisionism that mainstream historians reject as factually inaccurate propaganda motivated by hate. Calls to remove these books, not only from the history category but from the Amazon website itself, have been protested by those who argue that doing so amounts to a book ban.

Publishing houses also wield considerable influence over what is available to read. In 2017, Simon & Schuster withdrew an offer to alt-right media personality Milo Yiannopoulos after a tape surfaced of

Yiannopoulos making comments construed as a defense of pedophilia. Yiannopoulos, his supporters, and several supporters of free speech who typically disagree with Yiannopoulos' opinions accused the publishing house of suppressing Yiannopoulos's expression and denying readers access to his work.

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