

Professional Submission: “Young Adult Book Bans Will Not Be Taken Quietly”

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Young Adult Book Bans Will Not Be Taken Quietly

As book challenges increase, it's impossible not to notice that most target young adult books and minority groups. However, teens are not taking this quietly.

[A photograph of two teens standing next to a pile of banned books with library shelves seen behind them.]

Kayleigh Pendrick is a bookseller at an independent bookstore in Virginia. She is pursuing her Master of Library and Information Studies at Old Dominion University. She hopes to work in young adult services in public libraries. Kayleigh and her myriad of plants enjoy young adult and middle grade books, romances, and anything featuring LGBTQIA+ characters. When not reading physical books, Kayleigh can be found working on puzzles while listening to audiobooks.

In 2021, the American Library Association reported 681 challenges to library materials, targeting 1,651 titles. This year, the numbers are even higher (American Libraries Magazine, 2022). The Office of Intellectual Freedom reports that the three most common reasons cited for challenging materials are accusations of being “sexually explicit,” containing “offensive language,” and being “unsuited to any age group” (American Library Association, 2022a). The goal of most book challenges is to “protect” children, but many young adults (ages 12-18) are unhappily watching as their intellectual freedom is threatened. They recognize that their right to access all library materials is being attacked by people and groups across the country. While they may not have much power in this fight, they do have voices (Calkins, 2014). Joselyn

Diffenbaugh, the 14-year-old founder of Kutztown, Pennsylvania's Banned Book Club, says, "[I]t's kind of frustrating to see the bans, especially because a lot of adults are banning it, but they're not asking teenagers our opinion on these books" (Gabbatt, 2022).

Book challenges and bans most directly affect young adults, who make up a significant percent of library users (Calkins, 2014). In 2021, nine of the ten most challenged books were written for young adults. The tenth book, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, is a book assigned in many high school English classes (American Library Association, 2022c). In 2020, seven were children's and young adult books and the remaining three were also staples of high school English classes (American Library Association, 2022c). Parents, school board members, library stakeholders, and activist groups have long lists of why these books should be banned, such as having "LGBTQIA+ content" (*Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe), "promot[ing] an anti-police message and indoctrination of a social agenda" (*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas), "conflicting with a religious viewpoint, and not reflecting 'the values of our community'" (*George* by Alex Gino), and "contain[ing] 'selective storytelling incidents' and...not encompass[ing] racism against all people" (*Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds) (American Library Association, 2022c). This information is accessible, and young adults are able to connect the dots. The pattern is simple: the books most attacked are about and written by LGBTQIA+ people and BIPOC, especially those who are Black (American Library Association, 2022c).

"I didn't want little kids growing up in the district to feel as if African Americans don't matter because our books are not on the shelves," says Christina Ellis, a 17-year-

old who led demonstrations against book bans in Pennsylvania (Natanson, 2022). In 2021, three of the ten most challenged books were about Black characters and Black authors. In 2020, they made up half the list (American Library Association, 2022c). These numbers have coincided with the protests following the murder of George Floyd. In 2020, *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice* by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard, and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas were all challenged for “promot[ing] anti-police views, “divisive language,” and containing “too much of a sensitive matter right now” (American Library Association, 2022c).

However, challenges and bans do not stop young adults from seeing what is happening in the world around them. Taking away the books does not take away their reality. Reading these books can actually help them process the events they experience or see. Books about the experiences of others help teens develop empathy and curiosity about people outside themselves (Chiesa, 2022). For BIPOC themselves, a lack of representation prevents them from feeling seen and respected. In reference to books about BIPOC, Cailah of City Charter High School says: “They help educate on racism and discrimination. And it seems to me that the parents and politicians who voted for these books to be banned don’t want their children to be educated on these subjects” (The Learning Network, 2022).

The other population most targeted by book banners is the LGBTQIA+ community. Five of the ten most challenged books in 2021 feature LGBTQIA+ characters (American Library Association, 2022c). “A notable feature of these

challenges is an effort to frame any material with LGBTQIA+ themes or characters as inherently pornographic or unsuitable for minors” (American Library Association, 2020). Instead of focusing on the characters and stories being told, these books are slapped with the charge of being “sexually explicit” (American Library Association, 2022a).

These accusations have real-world consequences. According to the Williams Institute at UCLA, 9.5% of 13-17-year-olds identify as LGBTQIA+ (Conron, 2020). For some LGBTQIA+ teens, reading books about LGBTQIA+ characters is the first time they have the chance to connect to people like them. An anonymous student shared,

Erasing LGBT+ people and experiences from literature creates a sense of otherness for queer and trans people, especially queer and trans youth...If I had books [before middle school] with LGBT+ characters or were about real LGBT+ people, my feelings would have been validated much earlier. (The Learning Network, 2022)

Book challenges that paint all LGBTQIA+ books as being “unsuitable for minors” showcase the homophobia and transphobia of the challengers. The proliferation of this view can both spread more lies and intolerance to the public and add to shame and internalized homophobia in LGBTQIA+ teens.

Two of the American Library Association’s core values are to reflect the diversity of their patrons through their collections and to “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (American Library Association, 2022b). This means that many libraries are truly stepping up in the face of book challenges. It is important for libraries to have clear policies and procedures to follow

when it comes to book challenges (Johnson, 2018, p. 247). In a lot of cases, this means that challenges can be reviewed quickly. However, we have seen recently that even if challenges are defeated, this does not necessarily mean that intellectual freedom has won. In Jamestown, Michigan, residents voted to decrease library taxes after a conservative campaign “called the librarians ‘groomers’ who were ‘indoctrinating’ children because they refused to take LGBTQ books off the shelves” (Community, 2022). This means the library will likely close soon. In a country where the word “groomer” is incorrectly thrown around to attack LGBTQIA+ people and allies, freedom of access can be seen as a threat to “the children” and paint libraries as harmful institutions.

Teens, however, are still stepping up to fight. “Banned book clubs” where teens gather to read and discuss banned books have formed in several states (Gabbatt, 2022; Natanson, 2022). They have filed lawsuits and held protests, with one group in Pennsylvania even convincing administrators to reverse the decision to ban 300 library items, “the majority by Black and Latino authors” (Natanson, 2022). This generation of young adults has grown up watching protests and online movements make big changes. Although what libraries can say can be limited by school administrators and stakeholders, teens can raise their voices. Ava, a student in Philadelphia, said, “By banning books you’re banning knowledge, banning opinions, banning our future” (The Learning Network, 2022). Teens are not willing to give up their books without a fight.

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