

Ban Banning Books

Olivia J. Woodward

Department of English, Old Dominion University

ENGL 211C: Writing, Rhetoric, and Research

Professor Daniel Heck

March 15, 2024

Ban Banning Books

Do you remember your elementary's annual Scholastic bookfair? How exciting it was? Books lining the wall with fancy inclusions like necklaces and coloring books. You'd beg your parent to lend you "just an extra 5" so that you might be able to take home that finger pointer by the register. But the most exciting part was dissecting the book(s) you just bought. How it would transcend you into a different world and maybe – just maybe – leave you with a lesson that lingers in you still today. I doubt the kids of today have the same experience though. The influx of book ban proposals since the beginning of the 20s has caused school (and local) libraries to be lacking in their most important department: books. A majority of those supporting these proposals are those who believe that that books in question are not appropriate or do not represent America well. However, this argument contradicts the American Creed. By limiting the freedom of speech and silencing minority voices, book banning should be a prohibited practice in school and local libraries.

Freedom has been and will always be the number one priority for America. Since the beginning of America's founding, freedom has been a concept closely tied to its citizens. Americans wanted freedom from the suffocating Great Britain monarchy, so they fought for it. Many times throughout American history, the same formula has been repeated. We've seen it in poor male suffrage, abolition, women's suffrage, civil rights, and more. All of these different freedoms are now permanently shown to be significant in American society with their corresponding amendments to the Constitution. Even in recent years, there have been debates over the freedoms granted to Americans in the Constitution. An overwhelming amount agrees that because we are granted that freedom, we are allowed to keep it. Through American history and recent events, it is clear that freedom is a value that Americans hold close to their chest. But a freedom that has always been of utmost importance to us – shown in the way that it is written in the 1st amendment, made by the founding fathers, and not a later addition – has been the freedom of speech.

Although it is vague, the freedom of speech allows any book to be bought and accessed in any reading space, including libraries. The Constitution states that freedom of speech means no governmental

power is allowed to limit one's ideas. In the context of book banning if a book was no longer allowed to be circulated in a certain space due to a law made by a state or federal government (like a local library) that author's freedom of speech would be considered violated. Even though the author themselves is not physically restrained from writing books, the books themselves are their speech; therefore, banning their book is prohibiting them from sharing their speech to that space.

This prohibition is even more jarring when you notice how a majority of banned books seem to limit only certain communities. Most banned books either A. contain characters of certain minority communities such as people of color (POC), queer identifying people, and mentally or physically disabled people or B. have themes that relate to said minorities. These communities have had to work, protest, and turn to policy to achieve the same rights already given to the American majority. Limiting their freedom of speech not only violates their rights but acts as almost a slap in the face for them. This would cut off one of their major conduits to distributing the stories of their hardships, as literature is a universally accessible dissemination device.

This isn't to say that every book ever is appropriate for every space and age group. There are certain themes not suitable for children because of the possible negative effects it has on their mental state and behavior. However, it is also important for these books to be accessible because they may hold critical historical or societal value. There are many books that talk about the trauma of slavery, Native American assimilation, queer discrimination, and more. These topics deserve to be preserved because they are major pillars of American history. If we were to erase them from school and public libraries, then a chunk of our nation's history would be missing. Although these are uneasy topics, they are important to keep in libraries because they tell the story of how and why America is shaped how it is today. Not only that, but the books that do not hold this historical significance can hold other lessons worth learning for the child. A book can contain explicit content, but a child is able to take away the main premise of the book which might not even relate to violence, gore, or sex at all.

Another common argument from the opposition is that certain books are not "worthy" of being inside libraries because of their vulgar content. They see libraries as places exclusive to high-brow

literature and events, and anything less is looked down upon. This view is very flawed because it's true that historically libraries have been places only for academia, but their demographic has expanded into more of a community hub in recent years. Many libraries across the nation host more than just scholarly material. For example, my local library hosts many different events: a blood drive, arts and crafts hour, scavenger hunt, and a mini aquarium. If books with certain material should be banned for their lack of academic prowess, shouldn't these events be as well? It's not just the library but the books, too, that are more than just holders for research. Since the beginning of written language, writing simply for entertainment has been popular; like one of the first epics, *Gilgamesh*, found in Mesopotamia. Therefore, it makes no sense to ban books simply because they hold more entertainment value than academic value.

To make sure there are no books that are possibly inappropriate for the students, I suggest we make a "grading" system of sorts. This grading system will grade books based on content and apply only to school libraries. When a book is graded, it is graded like a movie, with "PG" being the tamest books and more likely to be suitable for children and "R" for books that are extremely explicit and not suitable. With this, parents are able to make a reliable assessment of whether the books their children are taking home are appropriate or not. If not, the school administration themselves can make that assessment whenever books get donated to the school. Although it is tedious for the guardians of children, it is well worth it in order to make the books schools provide safe for children.

For local libraries on the other hand, the solution requires a more nuanced approach. These libraries can be accessed by every age group, not just children. Despite this, the solution is very straightforward: self-monitoring. You don't have to pick up or look at any book that you deem inappropriate, you can just ignore it. Libraries are not places of any specific demographic, they are written by every type of person, read by every type of person, and interpreted by every type of person. People should be able to gauge whether or not they want to read a book, and parents should be able to monitor which books their children are picking up. In the end, it's up to you to decide what's best.

Within America, there has bloomed a curious contradiction in the literary world. Books are no longer seen as obsolete items thrown to the side as the technology era awakens; they are now grimoires

that host controversial ideas. But what witch hunters fail to realize is that banning books contradicts their cherished value of freedom. They prohibit authors' thoughts in place of their own and refuse to give them a chance because the themes in the books don't align to their own. This doesn't ignore the fact that some content simply isn't appropriate for younger age groups, but I thoroughly disagree with this being a sound reasoning for banning books. Books are spaces that hold significant historical, philosophical, and entertainment value. If any book were to be banned, it would erase a moment in history, whether it be major or minor. With this, we as citizens should use these same freedoms we hold dearly in order to defend against book banning. By going to local school boards, emailing your districts congressmen, and petitioning against book ban proposals, it is possible to slow or stop a majority of book bans since the main reason so many pass is because there is no pushback. Hopefully if we as a nation become more politically active, we will be able to prevent things like this from being so easily initiated.