

The Resurgence of Banned Books in America

Olivia J. Woodward

Department of English, Old Dominion University

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Professor Daniel Heck

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With the outbreak of coronavirus ringing in the 20s, new trends uprooted due to mass quarantining efforts. Masks, increased social media use, remote working, and more. But the most interesting thing to come from the year of 2021 was the mass book banning in school districts across the nation. This sparked many debates not only in school libraries, but public libraries as well: does banning contradict free speech, what is too inappropriate for a child, what is the definition of censorship? Although there are those who fight for books to be banned due to their inappropriate topics, others disagree, claiming that banning books destroys the purpose of America's first amendment.

Book banning has been around forever, but one of the more modern influential book bans in America was that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. The book was full of abolitionist ideology, which was popular in the North, but looked down upon in the South because of the strong hold slavery had on their businesses. Southern plantation owners were outraged, and although the book was never officially "banned" in the South, copies were burned publicly, and booksellers run out of town (Parfait, 2007). This "ban" started an increase in other movements like it, official or unofficial, and often following a similar trend: books about minority identities or controversial ideologies in America. Books like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Hate U Give* are the most prominent examples of books that are read widely today but were tried because of their content. Eventually, people started to realize this banning was a violation of free speech and free press, silencing voices that were already so quietly heard. *Island Trees School District v. Pico (1981)* was a supreme court case that involved the Island Trees Board of Education and Steven Pico. Pico challenged the board when he found out they were issuing a motion that would remove books from its junior high and high school libraries that were

allegedly “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy” (“Board of Education”). The court ruled that “school libraries enjoy a special affinity with the rights of free speech and press. Therefore, the Board could not restrict the availability of books in its libraries simply because its members disagreed with their themes (“Board”). After this case, there was a peak in book bans that gradually declined as the 2000s and 2010s rolled around. That was until 2021, when proposed book bans skyrocketed with 729 challenges initiated in the year alone (Curcic, 2023). After that, bans have been exponentially increasing. With this, it was clear book banning had the spotlight once again.

The spark of this rekindled book banning spree all started with the American Library Association. Most libraries and literature aficionados are a member of the ALA; it’s a nonprofit organization that pushes for library issues and has played a big part in the book banning and censorship debate. The ALA has shown multiple times that it is a big ally of those against book banning. Many of their site’s articles include lists of famous banned books and banned book stats. They even have a site for banned and challenged books. The ALA, being a dominant figure in the American literacy world, has the power to set standards for libraries nationwide. They are often the source to look towards when describing terms such as “intellectual freedom”, “censorship”, and “banned books.” However, there are many arguments around whether the ALA should be the organization to deduce such standards. As of late, state library services have been cancelling their membership with the ALA, the latest being Alabama. They state this is because the ALA “[doesn’t] reflect Alabama values” (Davis, 2024). These values have been questioned lately because of parents’ increased worry about what their children are reading in school, most likely having more time to pay attention to such due to remote working and quarantining of 2020

-2022. The main concern being “Should sexually explicit content be accessible in school and public libraries?”

The ALA’s, and majority of anti-book banners’, believe explicit content should be available in libraries. This is because they believe libraries are sanctuaries for intellectual freedom. Defined by the ALA, intellectual freedom means “Every person has the right to access information from all points of view, in all formats, and without restriction.” (“Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A”). This means that any and all content – even explicit – is allowed to be read and accessed from a public library. They believe libraries are places of not only academia and research, but reading for leisure no matter the content. Groups against book banning rally behind the ALA in this sentiment, agreeing that libraries should be used as a resource for people searching for knowledge and entertainment. According to PEN America – a group that preaches freedom in literature – banning books in school and public libraries “threaten free expression and academic freedom in the classroom” (“Book Bans”). On the other hand, those who advocate book banning believe otherwise. They believe the censorship of explicit content in books precedes this intellectual freedom. This is because libraries should be seen as places where “worthy” and “intellectual” books are placed, as claimed in Greenhaus’s “Sex in the Stacks” article “it seems from the literature that entertainment, enjoyment, and pleasure are rarely considered as legitimate reasons for a library to collect sexually explicit materials” (Greenhaus, 2023). Not only that, but parents that advocate for book banning believe these vulgar contents shouldn’t be seen because they worry that their child will learn inappropriate behavior. An academic journal from assistant professor Emily Knox claims that parents hold a “fear [of] undisciplined imagination and worry that reading certain materials will lead to mimesis” (as cited in Greenhaus, 2023, p. 82). Parents think that if the child has access to the

sexually explicit books, it is likely they will eventually read it, and therefore imitate the actions done in the book.

One of the biggest topics in the banning discourse is identity. To those against book banning, representing identities is important for the progress of the nation. According to a report released by PEN America, a majority of books banned in American schools have to do with the queer community and people of color (POC) with 30% of titles banned being about race or have POC characters and 26% with queer characters or themes (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). With this number of authors from these communities being censored, those against the book banning campaign believe that this takes the nation back in time. A time where these communities were heavily discriminated not only socially but academically as well. For communities that preach banning books, they often believe that the identities in the books are not the problem, it is simply the ideas in those books that happen to occur when representing those identities. For example, a group called Moms of Liberty – a national group that advocates book banning in schools – claims that the books they seek to ban have harmful “gender ideology” and content that is unsafe for children and that they would rather help publish books that represent “[their] values and [their] understanding of reality” (Moms For Liberty). The discussion gets more convoluted from here, dipping into definitions of certain identities and whether or not certain identities should be validated and recognized in media. Overall, those who advocate book banning are solely focused on the ideology in books and, for the most part, have no problems with the identities represented in them.

The world of American literacy has been suddenly riled up in the past half century because of this discourse and has brought up interesting topics not talked about often prior. A resurgence in book banning not only shows a change in the importance of reading and books, but

a change in ideas and beliefs in modern America. It has brought up the discussion of how involved a parent should be in their children's education, how explicit content should be classified, and more. With this debate, there will be major changes in not only libraries, but how children are taught, what content will be allowed in media nationwide, and policy around literature.

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