

Stories That Challenge Us: Understanding Book Bans

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 Have you ever read a book that changed the way you think? Powerful ideas in books can challenge our beliefs and open our minds. They can also spark strong opinions. Certain books may even be seen as dangerous or inappropriate in particular settings. In some cases, people challenge or ban these books.
- 2 Book bans can take many forms. Bans can prevent certain books from being available in a local library. They might prevent certain books from being published or sold in a country. Historically, some book bans have even led to the burning or destruction of certain books. So, why might a book be banned? And who has the power to ban a book?

Book Bans Throughout History

- 3 Throughout history, books have been banned for religious, political, or moral reasons. In many cases, people or governments in power banned books to maintain their authority and suppress ideas they found threatening. For example, in ancient China, Emperor Qin Shi Huang ordered many books to be burned. He burned books of philosophy and history so he couldn't be compared to more successful rulers of the past. His goal was to destroy access to any ideas that challenged his rule.
- 4 Similarly, in 1559, the Roman Catholic Church created a list of forbidden books on topics including astronomy, science, and other religions. Catholics found with these books were forced out of the Church. The Church also stopped certain books from being published if they went against their religious teachings.
- 5 One of the first books to be banned in many U.S. states was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This 1852 novel showed the horrors of slavery and portrayed African American characters as brave and kind. Many Southerners who benefited from slavery were threatened by the book's themes, so many Southern states banned it. Despite the ban, thousands of people in the Northern states read this book. It influenced how many people thought about slavery and played a role in starting the U.S. Civil War in 1861.

- 6 In the 20th century, oppressive regimes also used book bans as a way to enforce their ideology. Under Nazi rule, the German government banned books they considered "un-German." This included books that went against Nazism, supported democracy, discussed homosexuality or transgenderism, or had anti-war messages; it also included books by Jewish, communist, and socialist authors. Nazi university students even publicly burned books as a symbol and warning of their intolerance for other ideas.

Book Bans in Recent Years

- 7 Recent book bans might not necessarily look like the examples from history, with nationwide bans and dictators burning books. However, censorship and bans still happen in different ways today. In the U.S., local book bans in schools and public libraries have taken center stage. The American Library Association (ALA) has been tracking book challenges and bans in the U.S. since 1990. It defines a "book challenge" as ["an attempt to remove or restrict access to materials based on objections from a person or group."](#) A successful challenge where books are removed is a "banning."
- 8 Recently, book challenges have become more frequent in the U.S. 4,240 different titles were challenged in schools and public libraries in 2023, a large increase from prior years. Most challengers argued that these books contained sexually explicit content or offensive language and were inappropriate.
- 9 One possible reason for this increase is a deepening political divide in the U.S. People have very different opinions about important topics like race, gender, and sexuality. Often, books that deal with these topics are challenged or banned. [According to the ALA](#), 47% of challenged books in 2023 represented the voices and experiences of LGBTQIA+ people or people of color. For instance, one book that has been challenged often is Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. This book explores issues like police brutality, racism, and identity. Many people praised the book for starting conversations about race and justice, while others objected to its use of swear words and portrayal of police violence. This book was eventually banned from certain school libraries.
- 10 Book challenges in libraries have increased as different groups debate about what content should be publicly available. Currently, most book challenges are made by parents or parent-focused organizations. These parents and organizations believe they must protect their children from content they view as harmful or age-inappropriate.
- 11 Therefore, one central question in today's debate about book bans is: how much power should parents have over which books are available in schools and libraries? Most parents want to make sure their own children are reading appropriate materials. How much should their choices affect what other students read?

- 12 According to [Pen America](#), *The Giver* by Lois Lowry has been challenged since it was published, despite earning critical acclaim and being consistently ranked as one of the most popular children's novels. Lois Lowry has responded to these challenges and attempts to ban texts, including her own, by saying: "I think banning books is a very, very dangerous thing. It takes away an important freedom. Any time there is an attempt to ban a book, you should fight it as hard as you can. It's okay for a parent to say, 'I don't want my child to read this book.' But it is not okay for anyone to try to make that decision for other people. The world portrayed in *The Giver* is a world where choice has been taken away. It is a frightening world. Let's work hard to keep it from truly happening."

The Debate Continues

- 13 People on both sides of the book-banning debate feel very strongly. On the one hand, people in favor of book bans or challenges cite several arguments:
- **Book bans protect students from harmful content that could affect their behavior.** A 2011 study by [the British Journal of Social Psychology](#) found that some people who were exposed to violence in literature were more aggressive after reading these pieces. [The American Pediatrics Association](#) also found that violence in media, like television, negatively impacted children's health. Some people who challenge books aim to limit children's exposure to violent themes.
 - **Book bans can preserve community values.** They can reflect the cultural, religious, or moral values of a community by removing content seen as inappropriate. According to [a 2024 study by the Knight Foundation](#), 57% of Americans believe parents should have a say in which books are in school libraries.
 - **Book bans can remove books that spread false or dangerous information, like hate speech or conspiracy theories.** For example, *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler is still banned in certain countries because of its racist and genocidal content that promotes violence against Jewish people. Banning books like this can help ensure public safety by preventing dangerous ideologies from reaching new audiences.
 - **Bans in libraries do not fully block access to those books.** Even if certain books are not available in schools or local libraries, people can still access and engage with them elsewhere.
- 14 By contrast, some people see book challenges as a form of censorship that goes beyond a parent's ability to decide what kinds of books their child should read. They argue that:
- **Book bans restrict people's right to freely express and read ideas.** [In a 1982 Supreme Court ruling](#), Justice William Brennan ruled that removing books from libraries violated students' constitutional rights. He wrote that school boards "may not remove books from school libraries simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books."

- **Book bans limit people's capacity for critical thinking and empathy.** When books with challenging ideas or complex characters are banned, people miss out on the chance to question ideas and develop informed opinions. They also miss out on an opportunity to build empathy. In fact, [a 2013 study by the New School](#) found that reading literary fiction helped improve skills in predicting and understanding other people's emotions, which are linked to higher empathy.
- **Bans can erase important historical lessons.** Books like Anne Frank's *The Diary of A Young Girl* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* offer valuable lessons about history, racism, and human rights. These books have been banned in certain places due to mature content and language. This prevents readers from engaging with powerful historical themes that remain relevant.
- **Banning books with diverse voices can hurt student learning.** "The more access you have to [. . .] a variety of books, the better reader you become," says Cynthia Hagan, who runs GiveBookJoy, a literacy nonprofit. "Students who can find books about their experience or lives [. . .] have far better educational outcomes than when censorship is used in school." Since many banned books feature stories about marginalized communities, removing them can isolate students who do not feel represented in school libraries.

- 15 Libraries are often at the center of these heated debates since they provide free, public access to books. They must balance providing access to diverse ideas while also carrying books that represent the values of the communities they serve. In schools, librarians, teachers, and parents can discuss how to protect young minds from harmful content while still helping them learn about the world by exposing them to different viewpoints.
- 16 In 2025, debates about book challenges and bans continue across the U.S. Some states, like Florida and Texas, have passed laws that make it easier for parents and school districts to challenge and remove books from schools and libraries. Many people support these laws, and many others oppose them. With the help of social media, both sides are pushing for change and gaining national attention. No matter the outcome, this debate will deeply impact how young people understand the world and their place in it.