

A wave of book-banning in the US

A Pre-reading

What books have had an influence on you – either positively or negatively?
Would you recommend them to others? Why or why not?

B Reading

The number of books being banned from libraries in the US, predominantly for children and teenagers, is on the rise. According to PEN International, an organization which protects writers and their freedom of expression, there were at least 1,477 documented attempts to ban 874 individual book titles within the first half of the 2022-2023 school year (Texas had the highest number of removals). The American Library Association (ALA) reported that attempts were made to ban a total of 2,500 books in the US in 2022. That is a 40% increase compared to the previous year. There are at least 50 groups across the US working to remove books. One of these groups is called “Moms for Liberty”, which educates parents by helping them defend their rights at all levels of government. These groups propose bills to state legislatures regarding book removals. Some have been passed in Arizona, Iowa, Texas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Individual books have been challenged by liberals for racist language. However, most voices demanding book bans are those of conservatives, directed at works by queer and non-white voices, to limit classroom discussion of gender identity and race.



The situation in the state of Illinois looks different. The Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker claimed that banning books puts the US on a level with regimes like Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and the Taliban. In response to the wave of book-banning in the US, Illinois has become the first state to pass a law that bans book-banning. The law even cuts funds to schools or libraries that proceed with the practice despite the new law, which takes effect on January 1, 2024. It is also a way to protect the rights of librarians, many of whom have been harassed and have even left the profession as a result. The new law requires libraries in Illinois to abide by the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, which states that books and other materials should not be removed from libraries due to anyone's political views or because someone rejects the ideas they contain. In simple terms it means that there should be no censorship. Illinois citizens should have the right to read whatever they please in state-funded libraries and schools.

However, the situation in many other states is different. The list of criticized and banned books seems almost endless, and the reasons for their removal are often questionable. Even some classics of American literature, including *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* show up on these lists again and again. The groups advocating for the removal of certain books are convinced that they are protecting the innocence of their children. In the following, three banned works are presented: a children's book, a novel based partly on true experiences, and a well-known poem.

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***And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell**

This children's picture book was written by two men and is based on a true story about two male penguins at Central Park Zoo who together raised a penguin chick named Tango. It is a story about difference, love and acceptance, and many claim it has the potential to spread a message of tolerance and equal treatment among young children.

And Tango Makes Three has been banned under the pretense of the "Parental Rights in Education" law in Lake County Florida for children from kindergarten to third grade. This law prohibits classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity, thus also dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law.

However, by withholding this book from its audience, namely young children, the parents behind the ban are also keeping their children from learning about bias and acceptance of people other than those they wish to think of as their kind. On top of that, and this argument can be applied to almost any book ban, the withholding law infringes on the author's right to freedom of expression, as well as students' right to receive a wide range of age-appropriate information. Therefore, this poses a violation to the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Other comparable children's books about raising children by heterosexual (animal) parents have not been criticized and don't appear in discussions on book banning. This clearly shows that children are being denied access to information based on the beliefs, biases, or political views of others.

***Sold* by Patricia McCormick**

This novel is about a young girl from Nepal who was sold into prostitution in India. It was challenged with a claim of pornography in the Fauquier County School Division in the state of Virginia, due to a scene about a 13-year-old girl who was sexually assaulted by an older man. However, there is no explicit sexual content throughout the entire novel and such scenes are not meant to arouse the reader but to shed light on the reality of child-trafficking.

Patricia McCormick based this book partly on interviews she conducted with young girls in India and Nepal, who shared their experiences of sexual abuse, slavery, and child-trafficking. By banning this book, one is dishonoring these girls' real-life experiences and the courage it took to share them with others. In addition, it robs teenagers of a legitimate starting point for discussion about their own experiences with sexual abuse. *Sold* shows the reader how to maintain hope and a sense of self, even while facing horrific experiences and circumstances. Furthermore, declaring rape as being *per se* pornographic material, as has been done in Fauquier County, significantly increases the sense of shame surrounding sexual abuse. That, in turn, makes it more difficult to talk about such abuse and find help.

In general, it is important for teenagers to see their experience or similar ones reflected in print so that they do not feel alone. Even for teenagers who have not had such negative experiences, books like *Sold* can provide a window into the lives of their peers and can enhance empathy and understanding. Reading about these kinds of stories helps students acquire essential coping, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Banning books robs students of this learning opportunity.

A wave of book-banning in the US

The Hill We Climb by Amanda Gorman

When she was just 22 years old, Amanda Gorman impressed her audience with the power of her poem *The Hill We Climb*, which she read at President Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021. The poem is both a political and personal poem which speaks of national unity and strength. But this poem was taken from the K-5 library shelves after a single complaint by a mother near Miami, Florida, who claimed Gorman's poem was not suitable for young children. The woman claimed that the material is non-educational, contains indirect hate messages and thus indoctrinates students, without specifying which parts were offensive. The poem was moved to the middle school shelves due to the complaint of single parent, who also wanted four other books banned. Florida has become known for its growing conservatism, a trend that has helped support the state governor's bid to become the next Republican presidential candidate.

Naturally, parents should have a say in their children's education. Most teachers appreciate parental support in this area, but banning books hinders children from learning to make up their own minds and use their own voices, as Gorman, a young black woman, has. Literature can show how it is possible for young people to raise their voices, to be recognized and heard. Banning literature seems to try to stop this from happening.

C Post-reading

1. Which rights do you think parents have regarding what their children read? Explain where you think parents' rights fit in with this discussion on book bans.
2. To what extent can the comparison of book-banning in America be compared to book-burning in other historical (and even current) contexts?
3. Using the text, compile a list of reasons why people or groups want books banned.
4. Find out what the First Amendment to the US Constitution says. Explain if you believe the First Amendment is being violated by book bans.
5. Explain how reading about peer experiences may help young people understand themselves and others better.
6. Watch Amanda Gorman perform her poem at President Biden's inauguration and/or read the poem. Look for passages where the mother mentioned might have found reasons to complain. Discuss how you interpret these passages.

D A step further

1. After parents filed a complaint, a school district in Utah has banned the Bible in compliance with a 2022 state law that forbids books with pornographic or indecent content in Utah schools. What is your reaction to this situation?
2. Is book-banning political censorship? Discuss the difference between book-banning and book-burning.
3. Choose a book, one you've read on your own or maybe even required reading for school. Discuss it critically.
 - a) List reasons that people might find for banning it. Outline what some people could find offensive or problematic for young readers.
 - b) Explain reasons why it should not be banned.
4. Research: The groups PEN and Moms for Liberty are mentioned in the text. Which other groups in the US are involved in the subject of book banning? Do research alone or in small groups and report back to your class on what you found out.

C Post-reading

1. Suggested discussion points:

- parental influence should be limited to home
- parents should be involved in reading selection at school
- parents should trust schools' and teachers' judgement
- parents know what is best for their children/know their children's needs and interests best
- parents should be allowed to protect their children from bad influences
- it's important for children to be exposed to new ideas in order to develop their own opinions
- parents' tax money should be used for literature they agree with
- parents' tax money should go towards general education for everyone
- special interest groups shouldn't override decisions of public institutions, such as public libraries or schools

2. Possible solutions:

- certain books are no longer available to the broader public in either situation
- book bans in the US are limited to counties or states and don't affect the entire country
- it's usually not the government banning the books in the US, but rather special interest groups
- even the extremist governments mentioned had seemingly harmless, limited beginnings
- the US has a strong history of democracy
- the book bans in the US are often limited to certain age groups
- any censorship is bad censorship

3. includes racist language; written by queers or non-whites; could encourage discussion of gender identity and race; offers political views; someone rejects the ideas in the book; protecting the innocence of their children; discusses sexual orientation or gender identity; based on beliefs, biases, or political views; includes pornography; non-educational; contains indirect hate messages; indoctrinates students

4. First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Book banning or censorship are only unconstitutional if instigated by the government. Some law experts say these bans are a violation of the First Amendment because they deny people the right to access ideas and information. In 1982, the US Supreme Court ruled that state schools may not remove books just because officials find certain ideas offensive. However, technically this only applies to libraries and not to the school curriculum. What does violate the First Amendment is if public schools censor what students say either on or off school property, unless it is causing a large disturbance.

5. The author places importance on peer experiences. She believes that reading about peer experiences can empower people in similar situations to share their stories, seek help, and to stay hopeful.

6. It was difficult to find passages that could be interpreted as hate messages. Perhaps the use of the word “beast” could be seen as negative in referring to the country. The Black Lives Matter movement often uses the slogan “no justice, no peace”, so perhaps the mother associated the words in Gorman's poem with this movement, which she may disagree with.

Gorman also describes herself as a descendant of slaves. While this is a historical fact, perhaps the mother was offended by the mention of slavery.

The poet describes the US as being imperfect and having flaws, but she is just being objective here and goes on to say that the country and the people are trying their hardest to make things better.

I see her poem as more unifying than dividing. She uses the pronoun “we” quite often and offers hope that the country is not broken but instead not finished evolving and developing. I especially like the lines where she is acknowledging that just being born an American isn't a reason to be proud but instead working to make the country better, fixing the country is a reason for pride.

Even when Gorman talks about the storming of the capitol on January 6, 2021, which perhaps the mother also understood as a hate message, she doesn't use hateful or confrontational language but instead finds more descriptive words. And then she again looks forward to a time of healing together, never mentioning separation.

For further research:

When are book bans unconstitutional? A First Amendment scholar explains ([theconversation.com](https://www.theconversation.com)) 

A selection of other books and stories that have been banned:

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher

Looking for Alaska by John Green

Drama by Raina Telgemeier

How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi

We Are the Ants by Shaun David Hutchinson

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Animal Farm by George Orwell

Gone With the Wind by Margaret Mitchell

The Cask of Amontillado by Edgar Allan Poe