

GUEST ESSAY

# I Read Banned Books. So Does Almost Everybody Else.

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During my grade school years in the early 1970s, I read everything. Books, of course — books about dogs and teen detectives and gruesomely martyred saints — but also the morning newspaper and the evening newspaper, a long-dead relative’s ancient encyclopedias, my father’s Reader’s Digest, my mother’s Southern Living. In the time-honored tradition of nerds everywhere, I read the backs of cereal boxes with the same rapt attention that I devoted to Old Yeller and Nancy Drew. If there were words before me, I read them.

By sixth grade, I had exhausted the school library’s appealing options and moved on to the county bookmobile. When children’s books proved too short to hold me through the long, unoccupied days of summer, I started choosing books from the adult sections, too — just to have enough to read until the bookmobile came back. The driver, unsure how to manage this wondrously ecumenical but often wildly inappropriate range of titles, asked my mother to sign a form that gave me official permission to check out anything I cared to read.

My mother didn’t hesitate to sign it and then paid no attention to the books I chose. If she had, she would have discovered that tucked among books like “Dracula” and “All Creatures Great and Small” and “The Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe” were titles like “The Stepford Wives” and “Valley of the Dolls” and “Jaws.” I doubt Mom would have been thrilled to discover that in learning about great white sharks, I was also picking up some unexpected information about what adults in the midst of an extramarital affair could do with their hands in the front seat of a moving car, but the subject never came up.

As Banned Books Week gets underway, I’ve been thinking again about that bookmobile. My parents were Goldwater Republicans who sent their children to Catholic school. And yet for them the very idea of policing my reading was laughable. What parent, left or right, doesn’t want to raise a reader? My parents trusted that I understood the difference between fiction and my own life, and I did.

Among today’s conservatives, this attitude is almost impossible to imagine. During the 2022-2023 school year, PEN America, an advocacy organization that defends free expression, recorded 3,362 instances of book banning, a number that represents an increase of 33 percent in just one year. “Overwhelmingly, book bans target books on race or racism or featuring characters of color, as well as books with LGBTQ+ characters,” notes the organization’s report.

Although some liberals want books banned, too — for them it’s often classic titles like “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and “To Kill a Mockingbird,” which treat race in a way that is problematic — most bans are instigated by conservatives who increasingly target not just school libraries but classroom book collections and public libraries as well.

These efforts are taking place within the context of a much larger Republican tyranny of the minority.

Book bans belong to the same categorical crime against democracy as denying red-state citizens the full range of medical care available to the citizens of blue states. The same crime against democracy as denying L.G.B.T.Q. people their full civil rights. And the same crime as rewriting textbooks to avoid the reality of white violence against Black people. Republicans are doing everything possible to prevent an entire culture from moving toward inclusiveness, diversity and freedom. And their terror campaigns can be very effective.

Libraries have always been welcoming places for Americans, particularly American children. A library is a safe space for exploring the full range of human experience and human thought, all under the supervision of knowledgeable and loving adults. Librarians are the heroes who love books *and* the human beings who read them, and who know how to help the readers find the books they need.

You wouldn't know any of that from the culture wars. Without defining what is meant by these terms, laws have been enacted in the red states that would send librarians to prison for "providing sexually explicit, obscene or 'harmful' books to children," notes an analysis by The Washington Post. "I've been called a pedophile. I've been called a groomer. I've been called a Communist pornographer," one librarian told Xochitl Gonzalez of The Atlantic. The attacks have been so relentless and so demoralizing that some 300,000 teachers and librarians have left the profession.

It's important to note that most Americans — including a majority of Republicans — support teachers and librarians and oppose book bans. The attacks are the work of a minuscule minority of conservatives. When The Washington Post analyzed 986 complaints against specific books filed during the 2021-2022 school year, it found that the majority were issued by the same 11 people. (You read that right. 11.) Across the red states, hundreds of popular titles have been removed from public school and community libraries, in many cases on the basis of a single complaint.

Americans are finally beginning to fight back, and the pushback isn't coming only from advocacy organizations like the American Library Association and PEN America. Authors and artists are fighting back. Students are fighting back. Parents are fighting back. If everyone who opposes book bans got involved, the whole effort would die overnight. Book banners do not have numbers on their side.

They don't have reality on their side, either. These days books exist in forms that cannot be reduced to ashes. If your library is no longer allowed to offer a particular title, there's a good chance you can get it online from the Digital Public Library of America, which just launched an initiative called The Banned Book Club. Banned titles are available through a free e-reader app.

The relationship between writer and reader is a unique form of intimacy. Every reader brings to the reading a self that is marked by time and place, a self that can never be replicated, not even on a second reading. Conservatives who presume to understand how a particular book will affect a particular child profoundly misunderstand how children actually read, how anyone reads.

In the end, great books will always be their own best defense. Imaginative literature does not survive by merely communicating information, and even less by attempting to inculcate a worldview. A truly great book tells a story that allows readers to place themselves, safely, into the larger world.

Human beings are storytelling creatures, and reading books is one way we come to understand our own part in the entire, expansive, miraculous human story. A book reminds us that we are not alone, that our own lives, which too often feel small and insignificant, are part of a story that can be terrible and full of pain, but also astonishing and often magnificent. Children instinctively understand that truth about the books they read, whether their parents want them to or not.

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