

## What do the US school book bans have to tell us?

\*What on earth is going on in the libraries of American schools? Of course, book bans in US schools are not particularly new. \*In 1963, Maurice Sendak's classic picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* was banned in multiple states because adults found it problematic that Max was punished by being sent to bed without dinner and also bristled at the book's supernatural themes. \**The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, which chronicles the true experiences of a young Jewish girl forced into hiding in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, has been challenged numerous times for supposedly sexually-explicit passages, and in 1983, the Alabama State Textbook Committee even called for rejecting the book because it was "a real downer."

Classic fairy tales are also frequent targets of adult disquiet. \*"Red Riding Hood" may contain the useful message that children shouldn't talk to strangers — especially those with big, shiny teeth. But in 1990, when school officials in Culver City, California, looked at an illustrated version of the tale by Trina Schart Hyman, they saw a different message: Alcohol is yummy! They were outraged that young Ms Hood was pictured with a bottle of wine in her basket, which her Granny later glugged down as a recipe for shock. \*In 1992 "Hansel and Gretel," a tale of two siblings who fall into the clutches of a cannibal witch as a result of their insatiable greed was challenged, not because it was frightening, but because two Wiccans said it gave witches a bad name. Literary merit offers no protection. \*Nobel prize winner Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a frequent target \*and in 1996, School authorities in Merrimack, New Hampshire, even withdrew Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* from all its schools because they feared that the cross-dressing and fake same-sex romances violated the district's "prohibition of alternative lifestyle instruction".

The popular 'Harry Potter' series by J.K. Rowling is possibly the most frequently attacked work, having been banned by the Vatican and \*publicly burned by groups as diverse as Baptists in Illinois and \*Transgender people in New York. \*Ironically this year *Ban This Book* by Alan Glatz about a fourth grader who creates a banned books library after her school board bans multiple titles was itself banned by the Indian River County School Board in Florida.

Even more chillingly, it may not always be human readers who make the banning decisions. An article in *Popular Science* has revealed that an Iowa school district recently used ChatGPT to screen and ban 19 book titles in compliance with a state law requiring that books in school libraries be "age appropriate" and free of any "descriptions or visual depictions of a sex act". Bridgette Exman, Mason City School District's assistant superintendent, defended the school's use of AI, telling the outlet, "it is simply not feasible to read every book and filter for these new requirements."

What is clear is that more books are being withdrawn from school libraries than ever before. The American Library Association (ALA) reported on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March this year that more books were banned in 2023 in US schools and libraries than any other year for which records have been kept. The group documented 4,240 unique book titles targeted for censorship in 2023, which was more than the previous two years combined: 2,571 in 2022 and 1,651 in 2021. Many of the books were targeted because they related to issues of LGBTQ+ communities or race, but the list was broad enough to include commonly taught novels such as *Lord of the Flies* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The book ban movement is continuing to grow across the US, particularly in Republican-led states, as religious-political activism gains strength. Last year, seventeen states saw attempts to ban more than 100 books: Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The intensifying suspicion of the printed word is now going beyond challenges to individual works. In 2024, school librarians and media specialists at 28 of Houston Independent School District's 274 campuses were not able to return to their former jobs because Houston Superintendent Mike Miles, who was appointed in June by the Texas Education Agency as part of a state takeover of the district, authorized the repurposing of former school libraries into "team centers," where students who misbehave will be sent to watch lessons virtually. That means 28 schools, most of them serving economically -disadvantaged student populations, do not have any access at all to school libraries this year.

Thirty years into our democracy, we may feel smugly proud that although the censorship board may still exist, relatively few books or films are now banned outright, but it is important to remember that there are other ways of suppressing books. Across

South Africa, the majority of state schools either have no library at all or have libraries that are locked up because the state no longer funds salaries for teacher librarians. Public libraries are poorly funded and the Johannesburg Public Library, a vital national resource for both researchers and inner-city children, has been shut for four years.

As someone whose mind was definitively reshaped by the Cathcart Public Library, I am outraged when apparently intelligent friends flip irritably past articles discussing school book bans, pausing only to indicate belief that it is just books with LBBTQ+ themes that are being challenged and that this is somehow acceptable or to chortle dismissively about how people can get so worked up over 'kids' books'. Such responses reveal a lack of awareness about both books and young readers.

At least those who ban books acknowledge their power. \*Books *are* the most dangerous objects that most of us will ever handle. Furthermore, books are possibly at their most potent in the hands of an adolescent reader. Richard Dawkins (1982:290) has proposed that, whereas the gene drives the evolution of the body, that of the mind is governed by the meme, which he defines as a unit "of cultural inheritance, hypothesized as analogous to the particulate gene". Building on this argument, Dennett (1999) and Blackmore (1999) argue that meme theory leads inescapably to the conclusion that the human mind is actually a complex of parasitic memes, a hive mind, and that any idea that we exert independent control over our ideas is entirely illusory. \*Kate Distin (2005:89) takes this even further by emphasising that memes may be found "both within human minds and outside them, in information stores like books and blueprints". This has obvious relevance for those interested in reading since it implies that the human mind can be developed by interaction with existing culture so that "external representations [such as books] play an essential role in memetic replication" (Distin, 2005:90). Since the capacity of the contemporary meme store, like our wonderful library, is almost infinite, it ensures that memetic innovation or intellectual mutation is more likely to occur in the reading child than the child whose exposure to cultural memes is limited to those stored only in the minds of his or her adult caregivers.

\*Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting that Carlsen (1980:40) indicates that the peak of interest in reading often comes between the ages of twelve and fourteen, a fact that would appear to support John Abbott and Terry Ryan's suggestion as recorded

by Waller (2009:190) that adolescents may be particularly open to new memes since changes in the teenage brain seem designed to encourage young adults “to question authority, challenge earlier ways of learning, fear less and risk more”, thus quickening the pace of cultural adaptation.

Does this mean that I am in favour of book bans? No - but I do want to suggest that the culture wars raging in school libraries are not merely frivolous or the product of deranged thinking. Instead the book banning movement in the USA implicitly recognises the power of books in very familiar ways. It is clear that whenever societies fail to cohere around an agreed core of cultural values, approaches to books and readers reflect these fissures. One only has to consider 17<sup>th</sup> century England, Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia or South Africa both before and after 1994. “Red Riding Hood” was attacked by conservative teetotallers; “Hansel and Gretel” by liberal Wiccans. \*A report recently released by the Freedom to Read program manager at PEN also makes it clear that the campaign to ban books in US schools is active in both red and blue districts.

There are, however, at least three aspects of the war on books in America that *are* new and that thus provide vital information about contemporary cultural trends in the developed world. \*The first of these is that the book bans don’t seem to be effective. To some extent, this has always been the case with censorship. Powerful ideas and the books that express these are almost impossible to contain, but what we see in the USA today is that books no longer exist only as material objects. \*In a world linked by the internet, books as pdfs can be downloaded at the press of a button. As all parents know, forbidding anything only makes teenagers more eager to try it and the world wide web is only too happy to help them find not just the books their schools or parents may mistrust, but far more unreliable sources of information too. Yet the web also provides a platform for resistance and the PEN report finds that opposition" to book banning is on the rise. For example, in Missouri, two students filed a lawsuit against their district for culling eight books from school libraries. In Pennsylvania, students held daily protests outside their high school last autumn until administrators reversed their decision to ban more than 300 books, films and articles. \*The Brooklyn Public Library’s Intellectual Freedom Teen Council, formed last year, meets once a week on a video call to plan ways students can

combat book removals. Early ideas include a newsletter offering a list of tips and resources. The library also offers a free digital membership, granting access to its 350,000 e-books, to any American age 13 to 21.

The second change involves a shift in the nature of book production. \*Individual printers and small publishing houses are no longer the norm. \*\*Corporate mergers in recent years have seen the emergence of massive publishing conglomerates with real economic clout and just last month several of these came together to challenge Florida book bans in the courts. Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Club, Harper Collins, Macmillan, Simon & Schuster and Sourcebooks are appealing for a restoration of professional standards and evidence-based decision-making when books are in danger of being banned. If the publishers succeed, they will set the stage for other economic powers to fight back against new restrictions to constitutional rights that impact public life and corporate policies.

\*The third change is the one that troubles me the most and it can be seen in the grounds for this law suit as contained in a statement from the office of the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, which states: “Florida does not ban books.... Instead, the state has empowered parents to object to obscene material in the classroom.” That observation is more than a little misleading. Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, and parents have always been empowered to object to anything. The issue is what happens afterward. The Florida law, HB 1069, stipulates that any objection over “sexual content” triggers the removal of the given reading material from classrooms and libraries within five days, followed by an unspecified period for resolution of the complaint. It does not require an objector to possess any qualifications for describing the complex issue of sexual content. As a result, books can be taken out of circulation indefinitely based solely on the personal opinion of a single individual.

The seamless transfer of personal opinion to state-ascribed action allows the publishers’ consortium to assert that the Florida law violates a 1973 Supreme Court obscenity test. The decision, *Miller v. California*, requires the opinion of “the average person” to be assessed in reference to wider community standards and state law around obscene speech, along with an assessment of the entire work — not just a

line or two — to determine if it lacks “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.” “The lawsuit focuses on restoring the discretion of trained educators to evaluate books holistically to avoid harm to students who will otherwise lose access to a wide range of viewpoints”.

What this shows is that there has been a disturbing cultural shift away from reasoned argument and the recognition of expertise in communal life. Increasingly, authors, publishers, librarians and teachers are no longer considered any more able to assess the value of a work than a single angry individual parent. This ties in with a wider global tendency to present informed scholarship as being of no more worth than a single egocentric opinion, which has led not only to large scale book banning, but vaccine resistance, innumerable conspiracy theories and a significant rise in home schooling.

\*Though book bans may have always been a familiar tactic in culture wars, today the cultural triumph of egocentric thinking attacks not just books but even libraries. As Annalee Newits writes in *The Washington Post*: “There is power to be gained by sowing information chaos. Libraries, on the other hand, are free, publicly funded places that exist to clear away the fog of uncertainty by providing patrons with access to primary sources, a diversity of recorded experiences and a calm place to consider them” (July 24, 2024). The library is a place of information without coercion. We need to preserve our libraries and the books they hold, partly to figure out who we are and where we came from. But perhaps more pressingly, we need to preserve them as both a refuge from our own South African culture wars and a template from which to rebuild a shared cultural life. Without them, we may have no way to teach our young readers to share ideas, instead of battling each other forever<sup>i</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to *The Washington Post* for many of the facts reported here.