

# CENSORSHIP AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM, READING RIGHTS, & READING ACTIVISM

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*For this special issue of Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature, we welcome guest editor, Dani Kachorsky, who created the call and worked diligently to usher in the scholarship of educators and researchers from all contexts. At Dr. Kachorsky's suggestion, we opened up the journal to other scholarly genres and we are delighted to offer them here.*

According to the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations (*Terms and Definitions Related to Intellectual Freedom & Censorship*, 2022), a division of the American Library Association, censorship is “a decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person’s or group’s disapproval of its content or its author/creator” (p. 1). This definition calls to mind dystopian images of book burnings and shadowy government branches violently suppressing the speech of their citizens as well as their access to literature. Big Brother lurks in this definition alongside the firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* and the Nazi regime of World War II. For most of my life, this sort of censorship was widely considered a thing of the past, showing up mostly as a cautionary tale in literature or film.

Of course, censorship is not always obvious or violent. In schools in particular, less explicit forms of censorship abound. For instance, students are sometimes discouraged or outright barred from engaging with certain types of texts, such as comic books and graphic novels, because teachers, administrators, and parents perceive these texts to be non or less academic in nature. Afraid of backlash from administrators, parents, and community members, teachers and school librarians often engage in self-censorship by never purchasing potentially controversial books. Even the

adopted curriculum can be a form of censorship when we consider whose voices and stories are embraced or privileged and whose are suppressed. While prevalent in my own experiences as a student and a teacher, these forms of censorship have always felt to me to be a place of negotiation. A strong argument, a solid research backing, and a few award-winning titles were often enough to topple such strictures. Today, however, is a different story.

## CENSORSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY

When this issue was first conceptualized in 2022, the censorship landscape in the United States had undergone a seismic and alarming shift. The American Library Association reported an “unprecedented” number of book bans and challenges in 2021 with multiple challenges being reported daily (Hlywak, 2022). PEN America, a non-for-profit organization and advocacy group that tracks censorship, identified 2,532 instances of book banning across 1,648 titles during the 2021-2022 school year (*Banned Book List: 1,648 Books in 2021-2022*, 2023). The 2022-2023 school year did not fair any better with book bans increasing 28% in the Fall of 2022 (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Despite the rapidly increasing number of book bans and challenges, 71% of voters in the United States oppose censorship efforts as do the vast majority (74%) of parents (Hlywak, 2022). Interestingly, only 30% of all book challenges and bans are initiated by parents of school-aged children (*Censorship by the Numbers*, 2023). Most bans are spearheaded by activist/advocacy groups (20%) and political officials (25%) or were enacted as a result of organized legislation (31%) (Meehan & Friedman, 2023).

While in the minority, those who are seeking to remove books from libraries and schools are particularly vocal and effective in their efforts. In Texas, for example, Republican representative Matt Krause compiled a list of 850+ books that he believed “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex” and asked school districts to report if any of the books on the list were present in schools (Chappell, 2021). The majority of these titles featured LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, sex and sex education, or race and racism (Ellis, 2021). The Texas Governor, Gregg Abbott, took up Krause’s gauntlet by calling on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to investigate the presence of pornography in schools and to prosecute any offenders (Lopez, 2022). Texas leads the way in book banning efforts with 93 attempts in 2022 to restrict access to over 2,300 titles (*Censorship by the Numbers*, 2023) and 438 bans in 2023 thus far (Meehan & Friedman, 2023).

Not to be outdone, other states have seen their share of book bans and challenges. Under the guise of parental rights, legislation in Florida now “prohibits instruction that could make students feel guilty or responsible for the past actions of other members of their race” as well as instruction in sexual orientation and gender identity (Mazzei et al., 2023). Additionally, all books, regardless of their role in classroom instruction, now must be vetted by a certified media specialist prior to use with noncompliance potentially resulting in a third-degree felony (Mazzei et al., 2023). The result of such legislation has been the wholesale removal of texts from school classrooms and libraries and a climate of fear among school employees (Mazzei et al., 2023; Meehan & Friedman, 2023). To make matters worse, Florida is the home of Moms for Liberty (M4L), a parental rights activist group that opposes mask mandates in schools, diversity positive school policies, and LGBTQ+ content and critical race theory in school curricula and literature (Day, 2023). Since the group’s inception in 2021, M4L has launched 200 county-level chapters nationwide and is over 200,000 members strong (Day, 2023).

In Tennessee, the local M4L chapter requested that 31 books be removed from Williamson County schools, claiming the books’ content was not age appropriate (Borter, 2021; Papenfuss, 2021). Many of the challenged texts, including *The Story of Ruby Bridges* and *Martin Luther King Jr. and the March on Washington* which are part of the second grade curriculum, focused on historical moments fraught with racism (Borter, 2021). According to Steenman, leader of the M4L chapter, such texts focus too much on “the country’s segregationist past, making kids feel uncomfortable about race” (Borter, 2021). Given the speed at which conservatives have taken a stance against the teaching or use of Critical Race Theory in schools, this argument, while uninformed and biased in its own right, is perhaps unsurprising. However, other titles are a bit more unexpected: *Sea Horse: The Shyest Fish in the Sea*, an informational picturebook that is part of the first grade curriculum, was challenged (Kasprak, 2023) because it discussed sea horse mating rituals (Papenfuss, 2021). Subsequent hearings revealed additional objections to the book such as normalizing gender fluidity because the male sea horse carries the species’ young. In an unrelated challenge, the McMinn County School Board in Tennessee voted unanimously to ban Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, citing the use of curse words and nudity as being inconsistent with the board’s policies (Hernandez, 2022). It should be noted that there are only eight curse words in *Maus*—there are at least as many in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*—and

the single nude image in *Maus*, which depicts the suicide of Spiegelman's mother, is roughly the size of quarter.

While book bans and challenges are on the rise in the United States, these efforts to restrict access have not been met with wholesale acceptance. Rather, teachers, students, authors, publishers, and others are pushing back on censorship in a myriad of ways. When the Central Bucks School District board in Pennsylvania voted 6-3 in favor of a policy that restricted allegedly pornographic material, an allegation that has been routinely leveled at LGBTQ+ texts across the country, Lily Freeman, a transgender student and activist in the district, launched Project Uncensored, a Tik-Tok and Instagram campaign that reviews commonly challenged titles and explores the importance of reading such texts (Ullery, 2023). Other school districts in Pennsylvania have used the Central Bucks policy as a model for enacting their own restrictions on LGBTQ+ literature (Ullery, 2023). Like Lily Freeman, students in these districts have pushed back on these policies by staging walk outs and creating banned book book clubs (Ullery, 2023).

In Florida, a group of students have joined the authors of *And Tango Makes Three* in suing a Florida school district which restricted access to the picturebook along with 39 other titles mostly featuring LGBTQ+ characters and themes (Harris & Alter, 2023b). The district removed these titles in response to Florida's bout of legislation preventing instruction in gender identity and sexual orientation. When signing this legislation, Governor Ron DeSantis stated, "Parents have every right to be informed about services offered to their child at school, and should be protected from schools using classroom instruction to sexualize their kids as young as 5 years old" (Ron DeSantis, 46<sup>th</sup> Governor of Florida, n.d.). However, as author Justin Richardson explained in an interview with *The New York Times*, "there is no sexual implication or language" in the book; like *Make Way for Ducklings*, two birds raise a family together, yet only *And Tango Makes Three* is being banned (Harris & Alter, 2023b). The lawsuit aims to challenge the Florida legislation as unconstitutional because it limits the First Amendment Rights of students who would like access to the text for a variety of reasons.

Similar lawsuits have been filed in response to legislation and book bans in other states. As of September 2022, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is engaged in censorship battles in 10 states, including filing lawsuits in Florida, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, Missouri, and Virginia (Lehrer-Small, 2022). In Arkansas, publishers, bookstores, and libraries filed a lawsuit citing the unconstitutionality of a recent law that "requires any material that might be 'harmful' to minors... be

shelved in a separate, ‘adults only’ area” thereby stigmatizing and restricting access to these materials (Harris & Alter, 2023a). In Llano County, Texas, a judge recently ordered that a number of books containing LGBTQ+ content and characters, discussions of racial inequality, and flatulence be returned to library shelves and that libraries remain open while a lawsuit unfolds (Montgomery & Alter, 2023). This suit alleges that the removal of such titles violates the First Amendment rights of library patrons while defendants claim they are trying to remove pornographic materials from libraries. In Florida, PEN America, Penguin Random House, and a group of authors whose books have been removed from classrooms, have filed a suit against the Escambia County School District and Board. The suit alleges that the First Amendment rights of publishers, authors, and students have been violated by the removal of books “based on ideological objections to their contents or disagreement with their messages and themes” (*PEN America v. Escambia County School District*, 2023), noting that the books that have been singled out are “disproportionately books by non-white and/or LGBTQ authors, or which address topics related to race or LGBTQ identity” (*PEN America v. Escambia County School District*, 2023)

Lawsuits, protests, and social media campaigns are not the only ways people are fighting book bans and challenges. On Monday, June 12th of 2023, Illinois became the first state in the nation to effectively ban book bans (Yip & Chavez, 2023). According to the legislation, libraries will be required to adopt the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights—or create their own—in order to receive public funding (Mayorquin, 2023; Yip & Chavez, 2023). According to the Library Bill of Rights (*Library Bill of Rights*, 2006), libraries are obligated to challenge censorship by not excluding materials based on “the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation” or “because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” of their content. While signing the bill, Governor J.B. Pritzker reminded witnesses that censorship flies in the face of democratic values as well as marginalizes people, ideas, and facts (Yip & Chavez, 2023). A similar bill is in consideration with the New Jersey Legislature (Mayorquin, 2023).

## IN THIS ISSUE

Against this backdrop of rampant censorship efforts, this issue aims to support scholars, teachers, and readers who are engaged in fighting such efforts. We have gathered a collection of empirical and critical studies, pedagogical articles, interviews, and book reviews all focused on aspects of censorship in relation to young adult literature.

This issue begins with a poem, “Instructions” by R. Joseph Rodríguez. Using a laundry motif throughout, Rodríguez describes the cycle of book banning while simultaneously sharing different reading treatments, ways literature can improve and sustain human experience. Sprinkled with quotes from famous authors whose work has been historically banned or challenged, this poem continues an equally long history of American Protest Poetry.

In what follows, empirical, critical, and pedagogical articles provide insights for teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other interested stakeholders. The opening empirical article, “Teacher use of Diverse Literature in Secondary English Language Arts Classrooms: District Barriers and Resistance Strategies” by Rosa Nam, presents results from a teacher perception survey that focused on teachers’ use of diverse literature in their classrooms and those factors that prevent such use. Findings reveal not only teachers’ concerns related to direct censorship, but also censorship of omission such as funding issues that prevent teachers from updating reading selections and outdated district mandates and approved reading lists. Findings also demonstrate how teachers resist such limitations providing insights that may be helpful to others facing similar situations.

Elsie Lindy Olan and Kia Jane Richmond use Critical Discourse Analysis in “Narrative of Deficit and Authentic Portrayals of Mental Illness and Cultural Sensitivities in Young Adult Literature” to examine and critique representations of mental illness in Young Adult Literature, demonstrating the power that such representations have to perpetuate and disrupt stigma related to mental health. While the article does not specifically focus on censorship, the literature exemplars used in the analysis feature *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sanchez, a book that has been challenged and banned repeatedly for its negative representations of faith ([Solis, 2023](#)), and *The Impossible Knife of Memory* by Laurie Halse Anderson, a young adult author who is no stranger to censorship. By featuring these titles and these authors, Olan and Richmond demonstrate the importance of ensuring readers have access to books that speak to the myriad of human experiences.

Several articles in this issue focus on what we call Pedagogy Plus, articles that focus on pedagogical practices or pedagogical implications while being grounded in educational research and theory. In the first of these, insights into “Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach Young Adult Literature in Conservative Contexts” are provided by Megan M. Van Deventer. Using her own classroom practices as examples, Van Deventer walks teacher educators through strategies and

approaches for reframing the narrative around banned books and supporting the development of preservice teachers' antibias pedagogy.

In "The War on Books: Educator and Parent Perspectives," Abbey Bachmann and Aimee Tellez explore an attempted ban of Jerry Craft's *New Kid* in the state of Texas. Through the lens of Tellez' experiences reading this graphic novel with her 5th grade son, the authors demonstrate the importance of reading diverse texts with youth to promote empathy and understanding. Furthermore, these authors dismantle the oft-touted concept that Critical Race Theory is being taught and/or leveraged to make White kids feel bad or guilty as a reason to ban such books from schools.

In alignment with Van Deventer's article, "Banish the Bans: The Teacher Educators' Role in Promoting Book Access and Choice," Kim Stevens Baker, Gina M. Doepker, Johna Lee Faulconer, Linda D. Green, Laura E. Jacobs, and Jess Smith offer teacher educators a four actions they can take in support of preservice and inservice teachers. The recommendations include building background knowledge about book bans and challenges, modeling effective instructional strategies around the use of commonly banned and challenged books in classroom spaces, introducing pathways of advocacy, and providing a community of support. Within each of these categories, the authors provide "actionable steps" that teacher educators can use alongside a plethora of resources that will prove useful to teacher educators as well as inservice and preservice teachers.

Additional actionable steps and practical resources for teachers are shared by Lara Searcy, Brogan Spears, Karrine Ortiz, Kevin Shank, and K. Emerson Foster in "Should I Teach This Text? Creating Text Complexity Rationales" present a reflective questioning exercise around the question of "to teach or not to teach" controversial or banned texts. These authors provide multiple perspectives that are grounded in research, theory, and best practices that can assist teachers in making reasoned and practical decisions. Additionally, the authors demonstrate how to create Text Complexity Rationales which can support teachers and administrators in the event of attempted censorship.

In an effort to develop a deeper understanding of censorship and to provide additional resources to educators, Waters and Unsicker-Durham share annotated bibliographies of academic scholarship and publicly available media (e.g., new reports and social media posts) in "The Hydra Nature of Book Banning and Censorship: A Snapshot and Two Annotated Bibliographies." Through their searches for relevant media, these authors discovered that current book banning

efforts in the United States have become Hydra-esque, with new ban attempts popping up as soon as others are resolved. While intended to call to mind the monstrous mythological serpent which generates two heads for every head cleaved from its body, for me—as a comics scholar—this metaphor is even more apropos. For me, images of Marvel’s Hydra—a shadowy, terrorist organization that finds its roots and ideologies in Nazi Germany—come to mind. As the Nazis were famous for their censorship of books, this should come as no surprise.

In line with Bachman and Tellez’ article, a parent perspective on censorship and book banning is presented alongside that of a teenager in “Fahrenheit 450: A Conversation through Poem Used to “Cool Down” the Discussion of Banned and Controversial Books.” Arts-based researcher Zach Urquhart collaborates with his middle-school aged daughter, Pearson Urquhart, on this duoethnography in which the two meditate and reflect on Pearson’s experiences reading banned and controversial books through poetic verse. This explores the notion that reading banned or controversial material can be harmful or distressing to young adults. However, the Urquharts’ piece complicates and challenges this assumption in a unique and thought provoking way.

Following the Pedagogy Plus section of this issue, readers will find a series of interviews. The first, “Focus Always on the Child.’ A Conversation with Pat Scales”, features our own Terri Suico in conversation with Pat Scales, the former chair of the American Library Association’s Intellectual Free Committee. In this interview, Scales reflects on the current state of book banning in the United States against historical backdrop, pointing out similarities between now and the 1980s. She discusses the differences between today’s bans and those of the past, contrasting the severity and scope. Additionally, practical suggestions for librarians and teachers are provided as Scales reminds us that ultimately, educators of all kinds are meant to serve all students.

“Teacher Round Table—A Conversation Inspired by Ashley Dallacqua’s ‘Reading When the World is on Fire: Teaching with Comics and Other Multimodal Text Sets” features a discussion organized by our own Shelly K. Unsicker-Durham with several middle school and high school teachers, Scott Bevill, Brooke Bianchi-Pennington, Kamrin Green, Ray Robinson, and Paul Sausville. As the title conveys, the conversation focuses on an empirical study by Ashley Dallacqua that appeared in a previous issue of *Study & Scrutiny*, but also addresses current issues of censorship around diverse titles. The teachers share their concerns related to teaching potentially controversial texts, but also offer creative ways around such concerns. Similar concerns are addressed in “Should I Teach This Text? Creating Text Complexity Rationales,” where Dr. Lara Searcy and four of her



graduate students were invited to write up the scholarship they shared at the 2023 YAL Summit. In a question-and-answer format, readers will explore best practices for selecting, teaching, and using controversial, challenged, or banned texts in educational contexts. The authors provide an excellent resource for recreating a rationale for controversial titles.

This issue culminates with several book reviews curated by Terri Suico. In “A Review of *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books, Teaching Banned Books, and Books Under Fire*,” Suico reviews three books written by Pat Scales that are intended to support teachers and librarians who are working with banned and challenged Young Adult Literature. Each review provided a summary of the text as well Suico’s insights on how the text can be of use to educators. These reviews are followed by reviews that focus on frequently banned or challenged books alongside books about book bans and challenges. Anne Marie Smith examines Jerry’ Craft’s *New Kid*, a multiple award-winning graphic novel that explores what it is like to be the new kids, as well as the new Black kid, at an elite private school. Liza A. Hazlett shares insights into Jonathan Evison’s *Lawn Boy*, a novel about new adult landscaper Mike Muñoz who must learn to navigate a world that is unaccepting of his working poor, biracial, and gay identity. Kathryn Caprino reviews *Attack of the Black Rectangles* by Amy Sarig King which explores students’ outrage over censorship when it occurs in their own classrooms and communities. Finally, Anita Dubroc examines *You Can’t Say That!*, a work edited by Leonard S. Marcus which provides a brief history of book banning in the United States and collects interviews with authors whose work has been challenged or banned. All of these reviewers help articulate the beauty and benefits of these narratives for readers and classrooms while also providing some suggestions for how these texts may be used in classroom spaces.

## MOVING FORWARD

We hope that this issue provides its readers—teachers, librarians, readers, students, parents, administrators, and other educational stakeholders—with practical approaches to dealing with potential challenges as well as resources for teaching these texts. We hope this issue provides historical and present context as well as empirical evidence to support stakeholders as they continue to engage with the texts. Beyond the practicalities, it is our profound hope that this issue of *Study & Scrutiny* does more than bring attention to the current state of book banning in the United States. Rather, we hope this issue helps all those who value intellectual freedom realize that they are not alone, that there are others out there fighting against censorship, that there is hope in these challenging times.

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