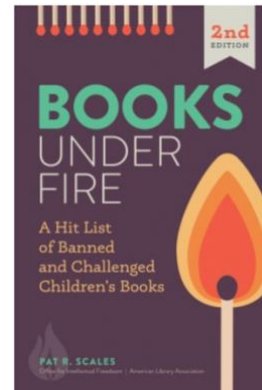
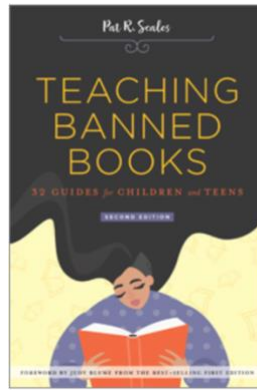
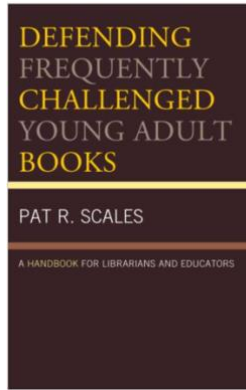


A Review of *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books*, *Teaching Banned Books*, and *Books Under Fire*



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This in-depth review of three of Pat R. Scales' books provides summaries of the books as well as insight regarding their value for educators and librarians given the current issues surrounding censorship.

The past few years have brought a series of unprecedented challenges for educators. From the uncertainty of teaching during an ongoing pandemic to the calls for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's murder, teachers have experienced both difficulties and opportunities when working with their students. The growing awareness of racial inequality prompted some institutions and educators to rethink their structures, curricula, and approaches to teaching in order to better reflect students' lives and backgrounds and prepare students for engaging in conversations on race, equality, and equity. Books such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Ibram X. Kendi's and Jason Reynolds's *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* made their ways onto library shelves and into classrooms to encourage students and teachers to confront these difficult and important topics.

This willingness to engage in discussions about race, injustice, equity, and activism has not gone without notice. Many applaud these measures and see them as being long-overdue, but a small but very vocal contingent have condemned these changes, charging that they are inappropriate and

divisive and citing parents' rights when it comes to deciding what students learn and encounter in school. One of the most prevalent forms that this outcry has taken is in book bans and challenges. According to the American Library Association (ALA), "attempts to ban books in the United States surged in 2021 to the highest level since [the organization] began tracking book challenges 20 years ago" (Harris and Alter, 2022, para 1). Jonathan Friedman, director of the advocacy group PEN America, has said that the current circumstance is "unprecedented in its scale, and in the proliferation of organized groups who are trying to remove whole lists of books at once" (Haupt, 2022, para. 2).

While the number of challenges is formidable, opposition to books is not new. Books used in schools and written for young readers have long been the subject of scrutiny and controversy, with many of the books on the ALA's 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books for each decade being children's and young adult texts. This grim reality can make selecting, retaining, and teaching children's and young adult books fraught for teachers and librarians. Fortunately, they have a great advocate in Pat R. Scales, a retired librarian and former chair of the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee. Her books include *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books*, *Teaching Banned Books: 32 Guides for Children and Teens*, and *Books Under Fire: A Hit List of Banned and Challenged Children's Books*, with the two latter texts having second editions. These books provide young adult scholars, educators, librarians, and readers with sound resources for considering the recent history of YAL book challenges and talking to students about the books themselves and the reasons some people want to suppress the ideas in them.

***DEFENDING FREQUENTLY CHALLENGED YOUNG ADULT BOOKS:
A HANDBOOK FOR LIBRARIANS AND EDUCATORS***

Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books: A Handbook for Librarians and Educators, published in 2016 by Rowman and Littlefield, offers information on 54 young adult books published from 1960s through the 2010s. As a result, classics like *The Chocolate War*, *The Contender*, and *Forever* are represented along with more recent titles including *Mexican WhiteBoy*, *Persepolis*, and *This One Summer*. Each chapter focuses on a YAL title, with information on the challenges, namely when, why, and where the challenge occurred, a summary of the book, and questions for talking with YA readers about the issues. Additionally, Scales includes other YA titles that have been challenged for similar reasons as well as a section entitled "Resources for Responding to Challenges,"

which has information on reviews and a list of awards and accolades the book has received. Sources with information on the author, further reading about the novel, and other media sources round out every chapter. This creates a robust overview of each title, the challenges it has faced, and the ways that teachers and librarians can advocate for and defend these books. The section on the challenges is especially helpful, since it allows readers to get a much better sense of what people have objected to and, in many cases, the outcome of the challenge, which offers precedent in terms of a school or library board's decision. Furthermore, having the major awards and recognitions that the book has received in one place is a powerful and convenient feature that might help convince others of the book's value.

True to its title, *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Literature* primarily focuses on providing readers with information on combatting challenges to the books. Besides the 54 chapters, Scales includes several appendices on topics related to YA book challenges, such as ideas for teaching teens about the First Amendment and censorship as well as professional resources on the freedom to read. However, responding to censorship isn't the book's only focus, and much of the information would be valuable for teachers who are looking for ideas and resources on teaching the text itself. For example, the discussion questions for *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* address topics of family influence and freedom as well as the influence that form (in this case, a graphic novel) can have on understanding and interpreting the content. The information on the author and the further reading about the novels also provide resources that are not necessarily about the challenges themselves.

For YA scholars, particularly those interested in looking at YAL that has been challenged or banned, this book can serve as a helpful resource since it includes some of the history of the challenges the different titles have faced. Culled from a variety of resources, including the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, the lists of challenges do not claim to be exhaustive but still provide an overview of the challenge logistics.

Like any book of this nature, this book's main limitation is that it is somewhat dated. This is understandable since recent years have seen an influx in new YAL being published and much has changed since the book's publication in 2016. Scales acknowledges this, noting that "censorship cases in schools and libraries are a moving target. By the time this book is published, there will be new challenges" (p. xi). The upside to having a list frozen in time is that it can serve as reminder of where YAL has been in terms of challenges. With new challenges against books dominating the

news, it can be easy to forget about earlier instances of censorship, particularly with YA titles that are not as well-known now. This book can serve as a reminder of previous controversies regarding YAL and allow for research and ideas on how to respond to current book challenges.

TEACHING BANNED BOOKS: 32 GUIDES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS (2ND EDITION)

Of the three titles reviewed here, *Teaching Banned Books: 32 Guides for Children and Teens* (2nd edition) is by far the one most focused on pedagogy. The 32 titles, which consist of chapter books for ages 8 and up, are divided into six thematic sections such as “The Bully and the Outcast,” “Racism and Bigotry,” and “The Past and the Future.” As the sections indicate, the titles span a number of topics, time periods, and intended audiences, with classics from children’s literature such as *My Brother Sam is Dead* alongside modern young adult books like *The Hate U Give*. For each title, Scales includes a plot overview, suggestions for read-alikes, ideas for before reading, group discussion questions and topics, and writing prompts and activities. A preface by Judy Blume establishes the need for this text while an introduction on studying the First Amendment prepares teachers and students to engage in discussions on the freedom to read.

For teachers looking for ideas on how to approach and teach these different books, Scales (2020) provides helpful topics and questions. The format of each chapter resembles a truncated version of other recent YAL pedagogy books that offer before, during, and after reading activities. While *Teaching Banned Books* is not as detailed as some pedagogy texts, it offers a solid foundation to help with the genesis of a unit. For example, Scales suggests teaching students about dystopias and utopias before reading *The Giver* and having them discuss how “reading about a dystopian society [might] make one thing about a more utopian world” (p. 150). The extension ideas include creative and analytical writing prompts. While some teachers might want more details, this straightforward and succinct approach makes for a manageable starting point for planning.

Although this text focuses on teaching, issues of censorship and intellectual freedom suffuse the chapters. As with *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books*, Scales (2020) does not shy away from engaging young readers with these topics. She establishes the need for frank discussions in the introduction, stating that “We must teach students about their First Amendment rights rather than restrict their use of particular books and materials. And we must encourage them to express their own opinions while respecting the views of others” (p. xx). She goes on to encourage

her readers to “provide a forum in which students can express their views regarding book censorship... And, help them understand their personal options regarding the use of books and materials that might offend them” (p. xxi). The chapters likewise reinforce the need to engage students with topics of censorship, with the “Group Discussion” and “Writing Prompts and Activities” sections often including questions that directly address why a book has been challenged. For instance, in the chapter on Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*, Scales notes that the book’s inclusion of violence, profanity, and racism have contributed to the challenges it has faced, and she includes questions to have students discuss these issues and how they might contribute to the story.

Scales skillfully balances the distinct but often related demands of describing how to teach the books’ themes, ideas, and craft while also providing ideas on how to address the books’ challenged status. From a YAL standpoint, it would have been helpful to have some more books designated for the upper range of adolescent literature since the majority of texts are middle grade. However, this is a minor issue. Additionally, for teacher educators who have YA and children’s literature classes, the book selection might offer opportunities as to why children’s and young adult literature tends to be subject to so many challenges and invite students to hypothesize why books intended for certain age groups might be more vulnerable than others.

BOOKS UNDER FIRE: A HIT LIST OF BANNED AND CHALLENGED CHILDREN’S BOOKS (2ND EDITION)

Published in 2021, *Books Under Fire: A Hit List of Banned and Challenged Children’s Books* is the most recent of the three books reviewed here, and the book selection reflects this, since “all the books included in this volume have been challenged since 2015” (Scales, 2021, p. xiii). Even with a focus on more recent challenges, the 34 titles in *Books Under Fire* are a mixture of recent children’s and young adult books like Raina Telgemeier’s *Drama* and long beloved (and challenged) texts like Alvin Schwartz’s *Scary Stories* series. Although the title states that this list is of children’s books that have been banned or challenged, the books are a mix of picture books, children’s chapter books, and YAL for middle grade onward. Rather than taking the pedagogically-centered approach in *Teaching Banned Books*, the book echoes *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books* in that the focus is on the challenges the titles in it have faced as well as resources to help respond to these challenges. Each chapter includes a book summary, a list of challenges the title has faced, major awards the book has won, sources for further reading, and five discussion questions for young

readers. Scales also includes brief information on two other books that have been challenged for similar reasons.

While *Books Under Fire* is the least YAL-focused of the three books, it still has much to recommend, especially for librarians and teachers who are looking for guidance when curating their school and classroom library collections, contending with challenges, or looking for information on children's and YA literature that have been challenged or banned. Since Scales includes reasons for the books' challenges, it is interesting to see how the same issues and concerns can occur across titles, formats, and intended audiences. For instance, both the picture book *Something Happened in Our Town* and *The Hate U Give* have been challenged due to their depictions of the police. Noting this connection with students could lead to worthwhile conversations about police brutality and why its portrayal, particularly in children's and YA books, can lead to censorship.

CONSIDERING THE BOOKS AS A WHOLE

Given the similar nature of the books' topics, some overlap is inevitable. However, the texts have some marked differences that prevent them from being redundant and allow them to work in tandem with each other. For one, the books often discuss different YA and children's titles, and the three books together directly address 101 disparate titles, not including the books challenged for similar reasons. Only one title, Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, appears in all three books, though several titles appear in two of the three. As a result, together the three texts provide a robust collection of frequently challenged books.

Another benefit of having the three texts is that they provide a sense of what books are being challenged at different times. The titles here, both the ones that only appear once and the ones that show up repeatedly, offer a snapshot of which books attracted controversy in a particular time. The titles along with the listing of challenges found in *Books Under Fire* and *Defending Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books* could be especially useful to YAL scholars seeking to learn more about issues of censorship with young adult literature. A notable aspect of these texts is the inclusion of pedagogical ideas. The advantage of this is clear, since it gives librarians and teachers resources for talking to young readers about difficult topics. While these topics can be fraught, they are important for young readers to explore, since this sort of engagement can aid with the development of empathy and critical thinking. Additionally, talking with them about these issues can help prevent the fear that can lead to book challenges. Naturally this focus means that something else gets less

attention. An area that would benefit from further exploration is an overarching look at the top reasons why children's and YA books are challenged and why books for children and teens are especially susceptible to challenges. However, this would certainly change books' intentions, and given the ongoing controversy, the books' current focuses and resources are greatly needed.

In the current climate, Pat Scales' work meets a pronounced need. Librarians and teachers will undoubtedly find the titles, ideas, and resources here helpful when it comes to defending and discussing books that have been challenged. Furthermore, Scales provides YA researchers with invaluable information regarding texts that have been subjected to challenges, which can supply a foundation for future scholarship. As we continue to grapple with book challenges and heated discourse, I am glad that we have advocates like Pat Scales who seek to prepare educators to handle these contentious matters, and I look forward to seeing what work regarding challenged and banned YAL comes out of this difficult period.

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