

PAGE-TURNER

WHAT ARE WE PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM BY BANNING BOOKS?

Reading the titles that have been challenged and removed from public-school libraries across the country.

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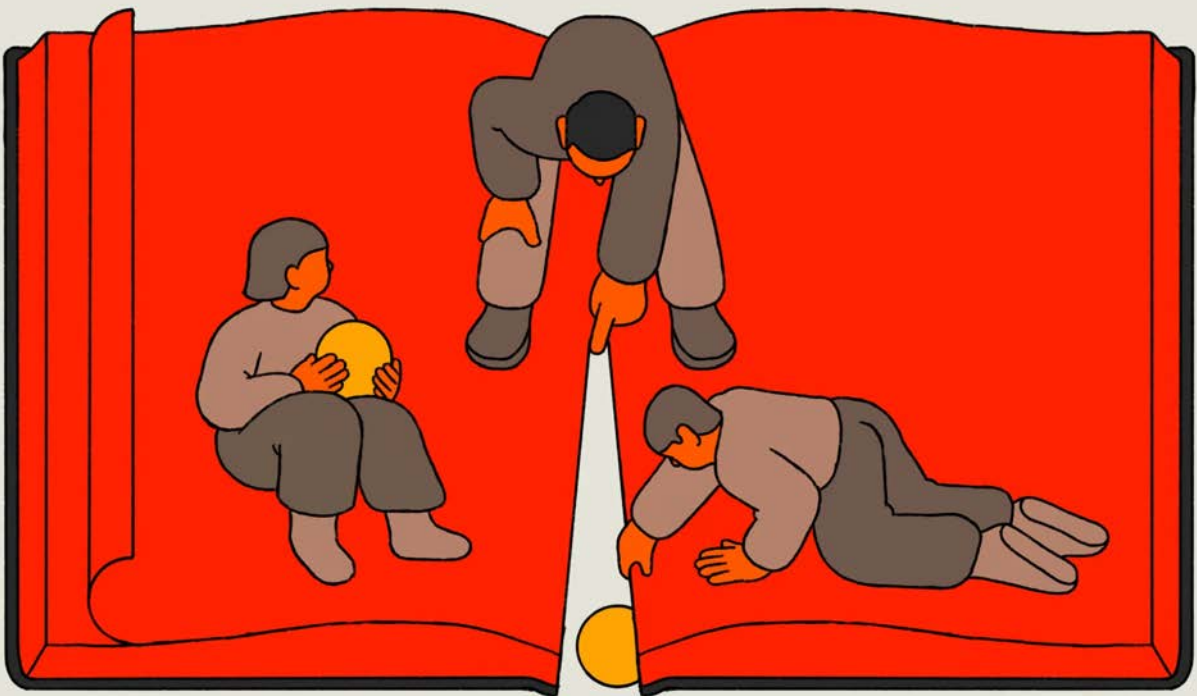



Illustration by Pavel Popov

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You can find, on the Web site for Duval County public schools, in Florida, a list of books nominated for removal from the district's libraries between 1978 and 2009. It's a revealing artifact: a map of cultural anxieties and a portrait of books as enduring flash points. The challenges range from endearing and silly to sinister. Some preoccupations remain with us: race and history, profanity, sex. Roald Dahl ("vulgar, unethical") was a frequent offender. "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," by Judy Blume, got challenged once, in the eighties, for irreligiosity and again, in the two-thousands, for "introduction to pornography." Other nominations are more idiosyncratic: in 1983, "Little Red Riding Hood" was side-eyed for "violence, wine"; a goofy poetry collection, "The Robots Are Coming," drew criticism, in 2004 and 2005, for "voodoo, the Devil, etc." A prerogative of parenting is to not have to explain yourself—"Even Cowgirls Get the Blues" was tersely declared "not suitable"—and there is, permeating the list, not so much a driving vision as a surpassing irritability. ("101 Ways to Bug Your Parents" is "rude, disrespectful"; a mischievous romp called "Four Good Friends" has a "negative, nonproductive tone.")

Still, as a document of the culture war, Duval County's list reflects a fragile sort of détente. Parents objected to particular books, and a committee reviewed their objections. Some titles were banned or restricted; many were marked "open access" and returned to the shelves. As libraries have become the latest targets of an anti-"woke" backlash stoked by Republican politicians, that system, however flawed, has gone the way of the papyrus scroll. In early 2023, parents in Duval County, which includes Jacksonville, discovered that thousands of library books had been removed pending mass review—a response to House Bill 1467, which Governor Ron DeSantis signed in March, 2022, and which mandates that all books (in libraries, on curriculums, on reading lists) undergo vetting by a "certified media specialist." (A spokeswoman for Duval County public schools wrote in an e-mail that about 1.5 million titles were being evaluated.) The texts must contain no pornography and be "suited to student needs." A widely circulated training video borrows language from Florida's controversial Stop woke Act: media specialists should avoid material that provokes feelings of "guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress" related to race or gender. As my colleague Charles Bethea reports, public education in the state has since taken a dystopian turn; by one estimate a third of school districts preemptively put restrictions on their libraries. Classroom shelves, Bethea writes, have become spectacles of dour absurdism, covered in signs announcing "Books Are NOT for Student Use!!"

Book bans, spearheaded by politicians and advocacy groups such as Moms for Liberty, have been proliferating over the past few years. A PEN America paper, published last September, records 2,532 instances of book banning in thirty-two states between July, 2021, and June, 2022. The challenges are spread throughout the country but cluster in Texas and Florida. Their targets are diverse, running the gamut from earnestly dorky teen love stories and picture books about penguins to Pulitzer-winning works of fiction. Some are adult potboilers that have found their way onto school-library shelves: three out of twenty-one books reportedly recently whacked in Madison County, Virginia, were written by Stephen King, and two were written by Anne Rice. Other bannes—including "Strega Nona," a charming folktale about a pot that won't stop cooking noodles—are presumably vectors of witchcraft. Still others, if you squint, could fall under the category of "pornography," which is outlawed by DeSantis's H.B. 1467. ("Tricks," by Ellen Hopkins, is an introduction to grimy realism, replete with drug use and blow jobs.) Yet a whiff of pretext surrounds more than a few of the cries of obscenity.

“Lawn Boy,” a semi-autobiographical work by the writer Jonathan Evison, was flagged for pedophilia yet portrays a twentysomething recalling a sexual experience he had as a fourth grader with another fourth grader.

The most frequently banned class of books are those intended for “young adult” readers—between the ages of twelve and eighteen. It makes a certain amount of sense that Y.A.—an awkward, gawky genre, as hard to delineate as adolescence itself—is the target of the majority of bans. Some Y.A. novels are essentially adult novels with the ages changed; some seem intended for much younger children; a lot of them fall somewhere in the middle. PEN’s list includes pitch-black and intense books that take up mental illness, addiction, cruelty, or social ostracization. (“The Truth About Alice,” by Jennifer Mathieu, considers slut shaming; “Speak,” by Laurie Halse Anderson, posits mutism as a trauma response to rape.) And a number of the banned titles—“13 Reasons Why,” “The Perks of Being a Wallflower,” “We Are the Ants”—address suicide. But many more of the prohibitions seem to cohere around a specific political vision. According to the PEN report, forty-one per cent of the banned books featured L.G.B.T.Q.+ themes, protagonists, or prominent secondary characters; the next-largest category of non grata texts has “protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color.” Other problem subjects include “race and racism,” “rights,” and “religious minorities.”

The two most banned books in the country—“Gender Queer,” by Maia Kobabe, and “All Boys Aren’t Blue,” by George M. Johnson—meld didacticism with profound gentleness. The first, which recounts Kobabe’s experience of having a nonconforming gender identity, briefly shows oral sex and masturbation, but foregrounds the process of learning to accept oneself and others. (Its verboten status may also have to do with its being a graphic memoir, with images easy to lift out of context and fewer words for censorious parents to slog through.) Johnson’s book has darker shades. Growing up, the queer main character is attacked by bullies and molested by a family member. Yet the work’s message of self-fashioning may be its most provocative gesture. Johnson addresses readers directly, reassuring them of their beauty and agency. “Let yourself unlearn everything you thought you knew about yourself,” he says, in a sweetly serious oracular diction, sourced equally from Walt Whitman and “Sesame Street.” And: “Should you not like your name, change it. It is yours.”

Kobabe’s and Johnson’s works are packed with nutritious morals, helpful lessons, and affirmations as ringing as they are intimate. Grownups might find this mode exhausting—it’s not just conservative culture warriors who deride Y.A. as preachy and excessive; literary critics also get their hits in—but one of its upsides is a commitment to engaging with kids on their own terms. (Adolescents on journeys of self-making can be very preachy and excessive!) Even the banned books that contend with contemporary politics weave their themes into stories of young people finding an independent identity, or discovering ways in which the world is not as it seems. “The Hate U Give,” by Angie Thomas, studies the reverberations of police violence, but it’s a novel of tender introspection, not an indoctrination manual. The protagonist, Starr, begins the story changing her voice when she’s “around ‘other’ people.” “I don’t talk like me or sound like me,” she confides. “I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well.” Her triumphantly corny journey entails learning to move through different spaces proudly as herself.

Other banned books maintain an even more oblique relationship to politics. There are few soapboxes in “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,” by Sherman Alexie; there is the Spokane Reservation—close-knit, dilapidated, blasphemous, and holy. The book is part comedy: its protagonist, Junior, travesties

romanticized notions of boyhood with his nerdy glasses and scrawny body. (Alexie himself performed standup.) But the humor gets tangled with critique. Junior scoffs at the silver linings and neat moralism that so often streak through sanitized—and therefore child-friendly—narratives. “Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance,” he thinks. “Poverty only teaches you how to be poor.”

If there’s a neon-flashing message here, it is that heterogeneous experiences produce useful insights. And the novel’s dedication to treating kids like adults makes it potentially alluring for actual adults as well. Alexie speaks to the alienated teen-ager eating Cheetos in all of our mental basements—or, maybe, to the one discovering the eroticism of libraries. “Every book is a mystery,” Junior realizes. “And if you read all of the books ever written, it’s like you’ve read one giant mystery. And no matter how much you learn, you just keep on learning so much more you need to learn.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes,” his friend Gordy replies. “Now doesn’t that give you a boner?”

“I am rock hard,” Junior says.

As this scene suggests, libraries always exude at least a little transgressiveness. The anxiety about what kids are reading inevitably bleeds into fear about what else they’re doing—the trope of the sexy librarian, ever about to loosen her hair and initiate you into forbidden knowledge, exists for a reason. But books are obscene in another way. Their plots are irrevocable; they conjure up worlds in their opening pages that they will go on to transform or destroy by the end; they are harbingers of mortality, telling us that we are going to die. (The eerie images of the denuded bookcases in Florida feel ticklishly apt.) Turning the page of a text, “we feel instantly youthful,” the unnamed narrator of “Checkout 19,” a novel by Claire-Louise Bennett, thinks. But, “by the time we get to the bottom of the right page, we have aged approximately twenty years. . . . The book has dropped. Our face has dropped. We have jowls.”

Knowledge is power, but it can also age you, make you vulnerable and afraid. Wishing to protect children from the realities of adult life—grubby, earthbound, disappointing—for at least a little while is deeply human. Kids mature at different rates, and it’s not unreasonable for the parents of twelve-year-olds to want to keep their own children from reading the same books as eighteen-year-olds.

But a glance at the list of most frequently banned books makes clear that “mature content” is a fig leaf: what parents and advocacy groups are challenging in these books is difference itself. In their vision of childhood—a green, sweet-smelling land invented by Victorians and untouched by violence, or discrimination, or death—white, straight, and cisgender characters are G-rated. All other characters, meanwhile, come with warning labels. When childhood is racialized, cisgendered, and de-queered, insisting on “age-appropriate material” becomes a way to instill doctrine and foreclose options for some readers, and to evict other readers from childhood entirely.

The recent wave of bans comes as many Republicans, in their opposition to gun control, climate science, food stamps, public education, and other social services, work assiduously to render the lives of American children as unchildlike as possible. A number of grownups apparently feel emboldened to spend their lives playing peekaboo with reality. Their kids may not have that luxury. ♦