



## Current Trends in Book Challenges and the Right to Read

Nine Academic and Public Librarians Share Their Candid Thoughts

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**W**hile the global pandemic has held the attention of many individuals worldwide, a different kind of pandemic seems to have taken hold in the United States. According to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), books were challenged three times more frequently during the last four months of 2021 than during a comparable period in the previous year. The office recorded 330 various attempts to censor reading materials during that time. Increasingly, educators and librarians especially are facing challenges, threats, and harassment as they navigate this changing landscape. In fact, in the opening months of 2023 several state legislatures are considering legislation targeting books, reading, and intellectual freedom.

ALA has become so concerned about these challenges that its executive board and the boards of directors for all of its eight divisions released a joint statement regarding attempts to remove materials that focus on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and ally+

(LGBTQIA+) issues and books by Black, Indigenous, or persons of color (BIPOC) authors or that document the Black experience; strongly condemning these acts of censorship and intimidation, the statement read in part:



In recent months, a few organizations have advanced the proposition that the voices of the marginalized have no place on library shelves. To this end, they have launched campaigns demanding the censorship of books and resources that mirror the lives of those who are gay, queer, or transgender or that tell the stories of persons who are Black, Indigenous, or persons of color. Falsely claiming that these works are subversive, immoral, or worse, these groups induce elected and non-elected officials to abandon constitutional principles, ignore the rule of law, and disregard individual rights to promote government censorship of library collections. Some of these groups even resort to intimidation and threats to achieve their ends, targeting the safety and livelihoods of library workers, educators, and board members who have dedicated themselves to public service, informing our communities, and educating our youth.

Through this statement, ALA's intention of protecting First Amendment rights, such as the freedom to speak, read, and publish, is crystalline, further expressing solidified opposition to any efforts for coercion and suppression of opinions and expressions. ALA has taken the stance that a democratic society guarantees all citizens an unfettered exchange of ideas and opinions without fear of retribution. Book challenges and censorship issues have been on the increase during the last US presidency and afterward; in fact, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of ALA's OIF, stated censorship issues are occurring so frequently that the organization can't keep up with the new occurrences and is unable to provide an update due to the unprecedented amount (CNN 2021). While the recent surge in complaints may be new, challenges against books for various reasons are not novel. Typically, in the past they have focused on concerns about profanity, sex, violence, or religion. But recent challenges often fit into the categories of race and gender identity, perhaps reflecting the political and cultural divide that seems to have swept through the nation. Thus, it is appropriate to provide a brief history of book challenges and censorship before addressing recent trends more thoroughly. This article highlights how these challenges often relate to race or LGBTQIA+ themed children's and young adult books, shares the thoughts of nine public, school, and academic librarians about censorship, and reflects on the importance of the First Amendment rights for young audiences. Survey questions sought their beliefs about children's Right to Read and what might make a book controversial. We also examined their reactions to book challenges and how prepared they feel to handle possible book challenges. Finally, through the data analysis process, we further discussed how their responses fit within the trend of increased book challenges.

## A Brief Review of First Amendment Rights and Book Challenges Against Children's and Young Adult Literature

Book challenges matter not only for the immediate communities they serve but also for the larger communities around them since so much information today is easily accessible and ubiquitous. Because of this abundance of sometimes conflicting information, individuals must be able to obtain, discern, and evaluate the information for themselves. Children and young adults are vulnerable because adults troubled by certain viewpoints or subject matter may attempt to hide or remove materials that they find offensive by challenging artwork, books, and films. Ultimately, these challenges mean that many readers lose the chance to read materials with conflicting viewpoints and decide for themselves what they believe to be true. A sound democracy is predicated on the assumption that citizens are informed and that intellectual freedom must be guaranteed so that readers can access relevant information without restriction.

The ALA's Intellectual Freedom Manual (2021) states that minors' First Amendment rights are not defined as broadly as those of adults in the school context; however, there are court cases that seem to protect their access to materials. For instance, in *Board of Education v. Pico* in 1982, the Supreme Court supported students' freedom of speech and expression after the Board removed 11 books from school libraries.

Contrary to recent entreaties to remove books from shelves to "protect" young adults, organizations such as ALA, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), PEN America, and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) stand guard against censorship, promoting intellectual freedom of literary materials rather than censorship. Although some parents and concerned parties attempt to challenge children's and young adult books with the intention of protecting them from sexually explicit language and age-inappropriate or mature content, the act of censorship often results in harmful consequences to children (Scales 2021). Limiting access to information, thereby imposing the prejudicial thoughts of some adults, can easily undermine readers' abilities to make good judgments about sensitive and controversial issues. In fact, this type of censorship may deprive them of opportunities for critical observations and reflective thoughts, ultimately putting them in danger of being uninformed or misinformed.

Even as the global pandemic seems to be receding in intensity, the opposite appears to be happening when it comes to book challenges. A look at the 2022 map maintained by the NCAC (<https://ncac.org/youth-censorship-database>) shows that there were 130 incidents of books



being challenged across the country, primarily by parents, for various reasons. It seems that almost every week, yet another book title comes under intense scrutiny, leaving authors, teachers, and librarians to deal with the fallout.

## Recent Challenges and Critical Race Theory

Several recent book challenges relate to concerns or misinterpretations of critical race theory (CRT). Separating the ideology of democracy from politics is ideal when considering intellectual freedom; however, some state lawmakers choose to politicize it as part of their agenda. Their arbitrary attempts threaten to tamper with freedom of expression and even human rights, thereby causing more confusion for children and young adults. For example, most recently, Texas Governor Gregory Abbott sent a letter to the Texas State Association of School Boards calling for the removal of what he and others considered to be pornographic, obscene, or inappropriate literary materials from school libraries. In the letter, Governor Abbott stated, “rightfully angry parents’ should be able to shield their children from public schools that provide or promote pornographic or obscene materials to students” (Falcon 2021, x). Abbott subsequently pressured Texas school boards to develop guidelines to block numerous library materials and books for possessing sexually explicit content without having evaluated the nature and purposes of the books under consideration.

Afterward, Texas Republican State Representative Matt Krause created a 16-page list of concerning books (500 fiction titles and 349 nonfiction titles), sent the letter to the Texas Education Agency, and asked if the agency could investigate any schools that possess those books and if so, how much the schools spent on these books (Ellis 2021). According to Ellis, these books relate to House Bill 3979, the Anti-Critical Race Theory Bill. The disturbing part of this movement is that many of the selected books include award-winning books. Additionally, many of these books teach children about basic human rights, sex education and reproduction, race and ethnicity, and LGBTQIA+ individuals and issues. Of the “questionable” books, 605 (71.26%) of these books were written for young adult learners. Additionally, 509 books on the list relate to LGBTQIA+ people and issues, including gender-nonconforming and transgender characters. The Anti-Critical Race Theory law in Texas aims to prohibit local schools from using teaching materials that might cause any student to feel guilt or discomfort. Ellis expresses concern that students should be able to explore and examine questions rising from sensitive topics such as their human rights, sexuality, power relationships, and racial issues.

Martínez (2021) from WITF Pennsylvania Local TV and FM Station reports that 22 state legislatures have already passed bills banning teaching CRT in public schools in a misguided attempt to shield children from procuring information from literary materials. Officials in some school districts assume that teaching about differences can be harmful to many students because it might create a hostile learning environment. As Sawchuk (2021) points out in a poll from Parents Defending Education, an advocacy group for parents, some individuals worry that the takeaway from discussing race is that “white people are inherently privileged; while Black and other people of color are inherently oppressed and victimized; achieving racial justice and equality between racial groups requires discriminating against people based on their whiteness” (para. 25).

Explaining CRT is a daunting task as its concept is deeper and more extensive than the title of the theory itself, and providing a one-sentence definition is almost impossible. Although race itself is a social construct, the theory maintains that racism and discrimination are embedded in institutions as well as individuals (Sawchuk 2021). In education, CRT refers to acknowledging and opposing many types of inequalities and injustice that exist among students and in institutions. Educators typically discuss historical accounts through reading picture books or chapter books with students. Therefore, while it is true that many historical events related to CRT can be disturbing for some students because these sensitive topics address violence, racism, and discrimination against minorities, it is important to note that CRT itself is primarily a concept possibly included in teacher education programs or graduate-level programs. However, it is not typically emphasized when instructing K-12 students.

As Powell (2021) from the *New York Times* posits, Krause’s motive for prohibiting schools from teaching students about topics such as the Trail of Tears, slavery, racism, and the Civil Rights Movement is unclear. Educators cannot merely separate historical topics from the existing instructional curricula, which begs the question of whether banning a book on a certain topic also means banning the topic itself. Although many teachers and librarians requested responses to their concerns from the state, they have not received any feedback because these states have difficulty rationalizing their reasons. Many educators are now unsure what their state government expects them to do or how to teach history without some mention of race or slavery. In fact, imposing premature and contradictory policies and practices further adds unnecessary fears and burdens on students, teachers, librarians, and learning communities.



## Continued Pushback on LGBTQIA+ Themed Books

In addition to books related to race, another frequent target of parents and concerned groups is books about the LGBTQIA+ community. While some might argue that there is more acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, Steele (2020) maintains that LGBTQIA+ literary materials are still the subject of censorship. Some state legislatures attempt to limit funding for libraries that do not comply with restrictions on these literary materials (Barack 2005; Oder 2006; Steele 2020).

LGBTQIA+ literary materials have been subject to censorship throughout the twentieth century, and this tendency is likely to continue (Steele 2020). The OIF has published the top ten most challenged books annually since 2000. From 2000 to 2009, 5,099 children's books were challenged; out of that number, 361 books were challenged due to homosexual themes. Between 2000 and 2005, only four LGBTQIA+ titles were marked on the top ten list. After 2006, however, more LGBTQIA+ children's books began to appear on the list, such as *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005), which made the top ten Most Frequently Challenged list eight times since 2006, frequently being the most challenged book. Another example, *I Am Jazz*, by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings (2014), also made that list four times between 2015 and 2019. Finally, in a more recent example, a chapter book about a transgender fourth grader, *George* (now published under the title *Melissa*) by Alex Gino (2017), was marked on the top ten list five times from 2020.

Challenges to children's books are certainly not a new trend in education or libraries, but they seem to have become increasingly politicized in recent years, especially related to LGBTQIA+ topics. A brief history of some of these challenges is revelatory. As one of the examples, Scales (2021) reports that the school superintendent removed all copies of *Annie on My Mind*, written by Nancy Garden (1982), due to its depiction of homosexuality, from the junior high and high schools in Olathe, Kansas, in 1993; however, in the fall of 1995, the US district judge ruled that the removal of the title was unconstitutional because doing so violated the students' First Amendment rights (Stepanuik 2018).

In a similar case brought to the federal court, *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas* (2000), Steele (2020) also reports that *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman (1989) and *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990) were ultimately returned to their original public libraries after a temporary injunction was filed in 1998 when Reverend Robert Jeffress, the pastor of the First Baptist Church, refused to

return copies of *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate* to the community libraries to keep them out of the hands of others. Supporters of these books, including the local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), protested the pastor's actions as a First Amendment violation. Scales (2021) also maintains that while challenges against children's books occur, it is rare that these books are completely removed from the library shelves; still, no library or classroom is immune to the act of censorship or challenges.

## How Librarians Have Faced Book Challenges and Censorship

Only a handful of academic articles illustrate how librarians have faced book challenges and censorship. After a review of articles and books (Nye 2020) about book banning and censorship on Google Scholar relating to research studies of book challenges and censorship, we found that the focus was not necessarily on librarians. We also explored various academic databases and journals, such as the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*. However, most published articles were personal accounts of librarians' experiences with book challenges. While many librarians work daily to preserve the freedom to read, it is also true that some administrators quietly remove books, avoiding potential controversy from conservative politicians and concerned parents (Natanson 2022).

Natanson (2022) further reports that interviews with librarians in eight states and a dozen school districts revealed similar incidents of school administrators' attempts to remove controversial library materials from their libraries. Sadly, despite their roles in protecting patrons' Right to Read, many librarians are compelled to self-censor, even refraining from recommending and reading aloud certain books to children visiting the library. For instance, Samantha Hull, a librarian in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, quoted in Natanson's article, mentioned that she feels the chill of disapproval from others even though she herself remains stalwart in her support of the Right to Read.

Harris and Alter (2022) also report this "chilling effect" of book bans in the *New York Times* through Caldwell-Stone's quote, "You live in a community where you've been for 28 years, and all of sudden you might be charged with the crime of pandering obscenity" (5). They report that she further states, "If you focus on five passages, you've got obscenity" (5). "If you broaden your view and read the work as a whole, you've got Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (5). Challenges about books often result from parents' focusing on one or two passages that they may misinterpret or complain about without reading the entire book.



When working at the ALA's OIF, Doyle (2017) revealed that many librarians would contact him because they feared losing their positions if they disagreed with the school administrators and principals, the library board, and local politicians. The levels of support varied depending on the situation, such as listening to the type of problem a library is handling, providing more specific strategies, or offering some guidance for legal counsel (Doyle 2017). However, pressure from other parties also reinforced many librarians to practice self-censorship (Oltmann 2016).

Oltmann (2016) examined public librarians' perspectives on censorship and collection development with 251 library directors and certified librarians in Ohio. She heard from 108 eligible respondents and examined their responses regarding pressure, intellectual freedom statements for collection development, non-selection factors such as duplication of the resources, falsehood, inaccuracy of information, biased, age, local community culture, and personal beliefs. Regarding pressure, the author reported a number of librarians said some pressure from a conservative colleague and board of trustees or people not associated with the library had an impact when they acquired, withdrew, labeled, or relocated materials. For example, one of the respondents said, "Our director would not allow us to circulate the book *Go the F... to Sleep* because she said it looked too much like a picture book, and a child might accidentally pick it up" (29).

We are likely to believe that conducting such a study in a particular state makes the findings specific to the research context. However, in the conclusion Oltmann (2016) elaborated that "only 3.7 % reported that they had not selected something out of fear of negative community response" (42–43). Most participants thus supported intellectual freedom; local community characteristics did not directly reflect how these librarians would handle freedom of choice in the study. In future research studies, she recommended further exploring non-physical collections such as online collections, including music, video, and other genres. In addition, it would be beneficial because internet filtering makes self-censorship among librarians more complex, but few researchers have explored this area yet.

Watson (2020) also scrutinized how anti-sexuality groups and religious morality groups attempt to pressure librarians and oppress library freedom via the home pages. By labeling material as pornographic, the groups tend to attack LGBTQIA+ materials in the database providers, such as EBSCO, and online intellectual freedom information related to homosexuality and trans people, prostitution, birth control, and sex trafficking. In addition, the researcher reported that many anti-sexuality groups focus

on the national level when attempting to attack controversial issues, which makes it essential that librarians collaborate with local community members to muster local support against book challenges. Although many libraries and school districts have policies for handling book challenges, some boards tend to ignore those policies, perhaps out of fear of angering constituents.

Another problematic element of self-censorship is *identity censorship*, according to Becnel and Moeller (2021). The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDE) defines identity censorship as not criticizing content of a pornographic nature but LGBTQIA+ characters that are part of the story. The authors argue that identity censorship is especially problematic because school curricula and communities often cancel, reject, or even ban literary works because of disturbing features they believe are merely present in the literacy materials. Thus, Becnel and Moeller agree that all librarians should be familiar with book challenges and censorship policies. Additionally, they advocate that universities' library information science graduate programs should more explicitly teach students about identity censorship or librarians' self-censorship issues and address ways to prepare for book challenges.

There is no perfect approach or solution for book challenges and censorship. However, establishing policies helps librarians understand readers' First Amendment rights. The ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* from the OIF (2021) suggests that librarians follow the essential principles of maintaining intellectual freedom in a library, thereby striving to protect the First Amendment rights of readers:

1. Create a culture that supports and nurtures intellectual freedom.
2. Develop written policies that sustain the intellectual freedom of library materials and information.
3. Formally adopt ALA statements as a policy for their libraries.
4. Consult this manual.
5. Ask for help when facing a challenge or concern about censorship and any complaints about library materials and resources.

*(A modified version rewritten by the article authors.)*

The NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center's *The Intellectual Freedom Guidelines for the Student's Right to Read* and the guidelines from the ALA's OIF are additional valuable resources for librarians. Concerned individuals may also benefit from asking for help, reporting incidents to these organizations, and presenting about book challenges at professional conferences.



## Perceptions and Reactions from the Field

The issue of book challenges is not limited to a specific area such as the conservative South. The authors of this article, all literacy or literature teacher educators, live in different regions in the United States, including the Midwest, Northwest, and Northeast. Noting the trends in book challenges reported in the media and some of the trends in our communities, we were curious about the thoughts of librarians since they are the ones who are most likely to have insight and knowledge about these critical issues, and in a sense, are the gatekeepers when it comes to book selection, display, and recommendation. Mindful of Flick's (2017) assertion that "qualitative researchers are interested in people who are 'really' concerned and experienced with the issue under study" (39), we presumed that many librarians have strong feelings about this topic. Furthermore, even though not all librarians have experienced book challenges, many have professional peers who have, which might raise their awareness and prompt strong feelings about the topic.

## Participants and Questions

Since not all librarians are familiar with censorship or challenged books and some might not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with us, we initially approached librarians with whom we were already familiar through our own work in academic settings. As they work in academic or higher educational settings, most shared their experiences and thoughts with no hesitation. Some referred us to other librarians. We ultimately involved public and school librarians through referrals from other librarians as well as social media outreach. It was much harder to obtain responses or even participation from public and school librarians due to anxiousness about expressing their thoughts or being recognized by community members. Some volunteered eagerly at first but then withdrew from the project as more book challenges were described in the media even though their privacy was protected and the data was completely confidential, possibly hinting at fear of reprisal or judgment from others.

After choosing the librarians to be interviewed, we focused on the guiding questions we wanted to answer in our research project: What is the current state of censorship? What do individuals find controversial these days? What part do librarians, either privately or publicly, play in the censorship process? We have served on thirteen book award committees, attended national conferences focusing on censorship-related topics, provided hours' long lectures in literature classes on the topic each semester, and written journal articles about the topics; therefore, we drew from our previous experiences when developing the interview questions. To try to answer these guiding questions, we brainstormed

questions that would be appropriate to gauge how participants felt about the current state of censorship.

After Zoom discussions and email exchanges, we narrowed our focus to five to seven questions from a longer list, focusing on those that were particularly appropriate for librarians and keeping in mind that "questions may be site-specific because of the uniqueness of their profession as librarians (Marshall and Rossman 2016, 82). It is important to note that after reading the responses and when we needed clarification, we sought a follow-up response.

When it came to selecting possible librarians, we first made sure our participants had some experience and knowledge about the topic. Then, we decided that purposive and convenience sampling techniques were the most appropriate methods which would be "likely to generate useful data for the project" (Patton and Cochran 2002, 9). We also considered "easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate" (2). We asked each librarian interviewee if they would prefer to respond by phone, in person, or by email with most choosing email due to convenience; in addition, participants signed a consent form which included information about risks and confidentiality. Finally, as part of the Institutional Review Board approval, we agreed to provide pseudonyms for our participants so they could freely speak about the topic.

For data analysis, we took the thematic and descriptive approach described by various authors in the field; more specifically, we followed Patton and Cochran's (2002) *overall* strategy of reading the responses, identifying themes, developing a coding scheme, and finally coding the data. We read through the responses as they arrived in order to be "well versed in the topic or discipline addressed in the study" (Saldaña 2021, 53). Then, we continued to follow Saldaña's strategy before our Zoom meetings by taking the raw data, making preliminary jottings as the data arrived, and then assigning a final code collaboratively during meetings. During our last meeting, we agreed on the themes, which are detailed in the following paragraphs.

## Librarians Tell Their Stories

Of the nine librarians, three (Penny, Sydney, and Theresa) work at public libraries serving their local communities in the Northeast, three (Lindsey, Julia, and Peter) serve as academic librarians in the Northeast and Midwest, and three (Karen, Avery, and Becca) work in the K-12 setting as school librarians in the Midwest and Northeast. The size of libraries varies depending on each city's population each city. Penny is the director of one of the local public libraries; she is the only certified librarian in her small municipal library. Sydney works as a head youth librarian, and Theresa works as



a librarian for youth in another local library. The three academic librarians work in two settings: small, private universities as well as large, regional state schools. The K-12 school librarians work in various settings assisting students with research projects, guiding them in their reading choices, and collaborating with teachers. One apparent difference from their responses is that academic librarians appear to possess more freedom to approach a book challenge than public and school librarians as they work in a higher education context. It seems that this gives them more flexibility for handling any book complaint, and they rarely receive many book challenges. However, it appears that public and K-12 school librarians who serve a more general population face more complaints and book challenges.

### **Reading Provides Critical Thinking Skills, Informs Society, and Builds Empathy**

As might be expected, all nine librarians were able to articulate why the Right to Read is so fundamental in our society, and some posited that it is essential that citizens in a democracy are informed and that libraries serve the entire community. Specifically, Penny stated that “critical thinking skills as well as empathy” are essential to the Right to Read movement while Sydney considered that “with a better understanding of things and people we don’t know, there is less opportunity to misjudge or criticize.”

Julia agreed, seeing literacy as fostering empathy since “children need to read books by and about people that are not like themselves to gain other perspectives.” Peter also addressed the fact that some individuals challenge books from fear, ignorance, and lack of empathy.

When commenting about the Right to Read, Avery and Becca also used the word “empathy” in their responses. Specifically, Avery stated that it is “crucial for everyone but is particularly important for young readers as they start to form their own view of the world,” and that “being able to read about someone’s experience allows a reader to develop a sense of empathy for that character, and eventually transfer that empathy to the real world.” Reading provides a safe space in which to experience conflict and hardship, allowing readers to be better informed citizens, she said.

Becca was of the opinion that “reading makes you smarter.” She suggested that some of the parents or organized parent groups who are so vocal against certain books “are suffering from tunnel vision and a lack of empathy.” But, critical thinking and empathy are nurtured through literature. Since much of popular culture mirrors their own life experiences, it’s difficult for them to acknowledge them. Many see books with LGBTQIA+ characters as a threat to their way of life, she said, “as though if their kids read about

these things, they’ll somehow influence them to not believe in the things they’re trying to instill as parents.” Becca went on to say that “to be honest, they’re not totally wrong there, because reading grows empathy and broadens your worldview. Essential for a functioning democracy, both are best instilled in the young.”

Karen also explained that reading is one way for students to learn the latest information and enrich their lives. For her, the Right to Read results in a successful and productive society. “If someone does not like the content of a book, they don’t have to read it,” she said, because reading is a choice. Based on her experience as a high school librarian, she perceived that younger generations are likely to embrace more liberal thoughts and accept diverse or varying points of view from others than older people. When she encounters negative reactions from others, Karen considers that they are rather hesitant to accept different views because they are unaware of differing thoughts, experiences, and way of thinking.

### **Different Attitudes About Challenged Books**

While public and school librarians may find themselves balancing academic freedom and trying to skirt controversy, the academic librarians said they specifically purchased and defended books that have been challenged or banned. In fact, Julia said that her library tends to purchase books on the challenged and banned lists since they should be able to include various cultures in their materials.

Lindsay embraced the idea of including a book deemed controversial, stating that “If I hear about controversy surrounding a book I’m not familiar with, I’d become very interested in it! I’ve always found this to be a rather humorous paradox, that challenging or banning a book often tends to draw more attention to it.”

The public librarians were quite emotional about challenged books. For instance, Penny stated that she experiences a “host of emotions” when a book is challenged, ranging from disappointment to anger to disbelief. It can be hard to address someone who misinterprets a book that discusses racism or gender identity.

Public librarian Sydney wasn’t as bothered by book challenges as some of the others, seeing it as “a right of the people to question materials and go through the process if they feel strongly about it.” This experience may create an opportunity for everyone to explore why a particular book may be important and useful.

All three public librarians have positions of responsibility in book selection at their libraries. For instance, Penny is a director, Sydney a head of the youth services department, and Theresa a youth services librarian. If someone challenges



a children's book, they are the first points of contact in the formal complaint process.

Penny explained, "I'm the first line and the last line. As (the) director, people bring their complaints to me, or sometimes to me via a staff member. I've never had it go further than that." As the local library director, she is the person who handles any types of complaints filed to that library. Penny said she typically explains that the "library serves everyone, and we feel there should be books here for everyone."

As the head of the youth services department, Sydney said she is "often at the desk and receives the initial complaint." She further noted, "It may be surprising to know, many times they haven't even read the challenge[d] books completely." Although Sydney did not mention any influence from politics in her responses, she echoed possible reasons for book challenges described by the other respondents.

Of course, all libraries, whether they are public, academic, or K-12, should provide an avenue for formal complaints from their library patrons. For instance, Karen does not directly handle book challenges. However, as her school district explicitly publicizes informal and formal guidelines for book challenges, she feels more prepared and confident whenever the incident occurs.

Usually, the initial concern about a book doesn't go further than a conversation since, according to Theresa, "Often, they just want to be heard and acknowledged."

Sydney expressed a similar awareness of what library visitors want: "Patrons just want their opinions to be heard by staff and then do not pursue it further." All three public librarians shared similar points of view and tactics when a library patron challenges children's books.

On the other hand, as is typical for librarians in higher-education settings, Lindsay has yet to deal with any book challenges. Accordingly, she acknowledged the likelihood that her job placement is probably the reason why. "In higher education, it's understood that we might carry controversial materials as part of the overall learning process."

Peter, another academic librarian, also appreciated this relative freedom since academic librarians rarely have book challenges or are involved in any book censorship process. "Thankfully, working in academic libraries, we much more rarely encounter book challenges," he said. In fact, he has never had to be involved in the challenge/censorship process in his five+ years in academic libraries. "One of the reasons is that in higher educational settings, students are adults. This fact differentiates academic librarians for their stance and responsibilities regarding a book challenge."

That said, Julia and Peter were not certain what the process for handling formal complaints was. Peter admitted that he has never encountered a complaint, and he further

claimed, "I believe it is the leadership of the library who should defend and respond to a book challenge."

However, Lindsay articulated a different perspective from the other two academic librarians by saying, "If a challenge did come up, I feel that I would still be well prepared to handle it. We're trained and equipped to deal with book challenges, too, and know of resources to turn to." She also provided an example of her way of handling challenges by turning to professional organizations. "The American Library Association has material to help deal with censorship issues, so I would ultimately turn to that resource for formal procedural guidance."

When explaining how they feel when a book is challenged, the K-12 school librarians used emotional words such as angry, fear, and uneasy. Avery shared that "my initial reaction is often anger when a book is challenged, followed by a short period of fear. I tend to imagine the worst-case scenario, that the challenger is ultimately looking to have someone fired when they are challenging a book."

Becca predicted that "we're heading for some dark days ahead. The conditions that made World War II possible didn't happen overnight—it took 10 or 15 years of worsening conditions to make that possible." Given the recent surge in book challenges, she describes herself as feeling "uneasy and a little hopeless."

### What Makes a Book Controversial?

While the controversial nature of a book is determined by its readers or the community in which those readers reside, all the librarians agreed that being able to predict what may prompt a book challenge can be difficult. For instance, Penny asserted that a book's controversiality is determined by its readers, often resulting from a reaction to anything that challenges the reader's world view. "None of us want to be uncomfortable. None of us want to be challenged to let go of long-held beliefs," she said. "None of us want to have to be exposed to our own privilege and to have our eyes opened to a world beyond our safe neighborhoods. Books that force us to think and see are always controversial." Still, she admits to struggling with some books. That said, do I want *Mein Kampf* on my shelves—probably not."

Theresa's comments on controversial books were similar, stating that "depending on the viewpoint of the person, anything can make a book controversial." She pointed out that the typical reasons books have been challenged were because the material was considered to be "sexually explicit," contained "offensive language," or was considered "unsuited to any age group."

Sydney echoed these two responses, asserting that "any book, in theory, could be controversial. Oftentimes, patrons





find a book controversial because they don't feel like it's age-appropriate or the book's premise is in conflict with their values or beliefs." And it isn't just conservative-minded individuals who might be troubled by books. She pointed out that there are religious challenges as well as challenges as to how certain communities are represented. "For example," she said, "I once had a patron challenge a book (although not formally) because the book displayed LGBTQIA+ characters as promiscuous and not because it included that community."

Peter's comments went to the heart of the matter while providing a slightly different slant on controversial books. "What truly makes a book controversial is when its information is not well-founded or factually backed up. Some of the titles I have seen which I find controversial (yet do not believe should be censored) are self-published and tout disinformation or misleading information," he said. "I still believe in them being available for patrons to encounter and decide for themselves."

Julia concurred with her fellow librarians, saying that "Many different aspects make a book controversial, but mostly it seems that when people think their lifestyle or opinion is the only 'right' way to live, they are offended and deem something controversial. Controversy generally involves politics, religion, sex, gender, etc."

According to Lindsay, the very idea of something being "controversial" is "a very subjective concept: a topic that is controversial to one person may be perfectly acceptable to someone else. It frequently depends on the individual's perspective. Much of the banning/challenging controversy arises from parents attempting to shield their kids against topics which they deem inappropriate for various reasons."

Books that have been considered "controversial" in the past, she said, are books that contain descriptions of sex, violence, drug use, profanity, obviously not age appropriate for a very young child. Still, it's an individual parent's responsibility to "discern when a child is able to handle mature content, not to pull it off the shelves completely for everyone else!" She compared this to the use of film ratings. Most likely parents wouldn't want to ban a movie from theaters just because it was rated R for sex and swearing. Instead, she said they would use that information to determine whether it's appropriate for their own child.

As of 2020, similar to Penny, she pointed out, the top three reasons books were challenged as reported to the OIF were because the material was considered "sexually explicit," contained "offensive language," and were described as being "unsuited to any age group."

Theresa considered the wide array of opinions held by parents and citizens in this country and saw that as

responsible for possible book challenges, noting that challenges are usually motivated by the desire to protect children from "inappropriate" sexual content or offensive language.

Lindsay concurred, stating that the very term "controversial" can be polarizing. What is controversial is often "a very subjective concept: a topic that is controversial to one person may be perfectly acceptable to someone else. It frequently depends on the individual's perspective. Controversy often arises from parents attempting to shield their kids against topics which they deem inappropriate for various reasons."

It's worth acknowledging, according to Lindsay, that additional books that come under fire might be "socially controversial, dealing with topics such as race, politics, sexual identity, religion, etc. All challenges are disappointing, but restricting books by these social topics strikes me as especially damaging, since it gives a message that certain themes are somehow "wrong." For instance, many books are challenged "because" they include witchcraft or gay and lesbian relationships or they take a strong political stance and so on."

From Lindsay's perspective, "Books can also be socially controversial if they depict certain terrible but authentic situations: for instance, it's common for books to be challenged because they use racist language or show violent forms of racism." Often, these depictions are taken out of context. "A racist situation might appear in a book as a way to provoke the reader and raise their awareness. Or it might be an older book containing stereotypes from the time period, in which case it's still important to examine that historical perspective, not to deny that it ever happened." At times the controversial book highlights "something painful about society, something that is difficult but necessary to confront," she said.

Sydney was in complete agreement with Lindsay, even stressing that any book "in theory, could be controversial. Patrons find a book controversial because they feel it's not age-appropriate or the book's premise is in conflict with their values or beliefs. "Books can be controversial to both conservative leaning people as well as liberal leaning people."

The K-12 school librarians repeated many comments already stated by the other librarians when explaining what makes a book controversial. They all shared that controversy stems from being shocked and confused by hearing about books that do not fit what they feel are traditional American values. Becca in particular expressed that "it's very naive to think this isn't a one-sided issue. The recent challenges are coming from a certain group of extreme thinkers on one side of the political aisle."

### Current Trends in Book Challenges

Noting the presence of only one LGBTQIA+ book and primarily race-related books on the 2021 Frequently Challenged



List, the librarians had mixed reactions as to whether that might be a new trend or an anomaly. Lindsay admitted to finding that unexpected. “That’s surprising! It’s hard to predict how that might change next year, but it does seem to be moving in a good direction,” she said, considering that perhaps society is becoming more accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals. “Compared to even just a couple of decades ago, we’ve come a long way. These days, an adolescent exploring their gender identity would be able to easily see that they’re not alone. It makes sense that this increased acceptance and visibility extends to books, film, shows, and other media, too.”

Lindsay wondered about the impact of current events on books being challenged. “In looking at the top 10 list,” she said, “I see a few books are challenged for racial reasons, and three for ‘anti-police’ views (wow!). It could also be that given many current events, the race topic in particular is stirring up the most controversy, so the focus is landing more heavily on these themes.” Still, she remained hopeful, saying that “overall, though, with so many more LGBTQIA+ books being published these days, it’s encouraging to see that they’re not all suddenly being challenged! I definitely remember *And Tango Makes Three* making quite a stir and being frequently reported on when it was published, solely because it featured a gay theme. I can’t recall any LGBTQIA+ books in recent years causing the same level of widespread controversy.”

Peter also expressed hope that this demonstrates a shift away from targeting LGBTQIA+ as the primary target for challenges. But he also said he was dismayed to see many challenges for so-called “anti-police” rhetoric. He followed up by stating, “If they read the books they will see a call for reform, change, and accountability for police actions.” Finally, “As for the many bans for sexually-explicit material, I would harken back to religion being the impetus in the challenge which I deny as a legitimate reasoning. I believe parents have the right to deem what is appropriate for their child, and in many societies around the world sex is not seen through such a rigid mindset.”

Theresa pointed out that Caldwell-Stone’s article in *School Library Journal* stressed that there has been a shift on the list to books “that discuss racism and America’s history with racism.” She continued,

It isn’t exactly that LGBTQIA+ books are not being challenged, it is just that the conversations and increasing awareness of racial injustice and its history are in the forefront in people’s minds at this time. More books about race, racial equity and racism are being challenged. However, Alex Gino’s *George*, cited for its LGBTQIA+ content, still tops the most challenged book on ALA’s Top 10 Most Challenged

books’ for the third year. ALA also states that ‘its latest list only represents a fraction of the books challenged over the last year as about 82 to 97 percent of challenges remain unreported.

Julia found the recent list disturbing since as more anti-racism books are being published, more books by POC are being challenged for “trivial reasons—such as profanity.” There is almost a systematic challenge to specific POC books or authors. It seems clear that certain groups such as Moms for Liberty are leading the charge in this respect. She noted that academic librarians have different roles than public or school librarians, perhaps making book challenges far less likely.

Peter acknowledged that this is typical. “We are privileged to work with a variety of patrons from different cultures and backgrounds,” he said. According to Peter, he continued,

When selecting materials for purchase, display, etc. the idea of offending is less in mind than the quality and truthfulness of the book. In our purchasing and displays we make a conscious effort to include POC voices, LGBTQ+ representation, and Own Voices, and generally do not worry if they will offend our population. Inclusion is SO important, and if someone is offended by inclusivity, it seems that they are the one with the problem.

While Sydney found some positives in the lack of LGBTQIA+ books on the list, Penny was unable to do so. Sydney acknowledged that “It’s a bit difficult to say, because I live in the ‘bubble’ of academia, but I do believe these books are becoming more accepted.” She explained that even a decade ago, it was difficult to find quality LGBTQIA+ titles, “whereas now there are many wonderful titles of all kinds and for all ages.” She also conjectured that it might be possible that “public libraries in communities where these books would be more controversial to the community are not buying these titles and therefore, they are not able to be challenged.” But she said she hopes this is rarely the case.

Penny didn’t feel encouraged by this possible trend in LGBTQIA+ books being more widely accepted. She said,

Honestly, I’m a pessimist and so I’m not sure that LGBTQIA+ materials are becoming more widely accepted. I feel more like the Black Lives movement and the #MeToo movement are causing a backlash among white supremacists and misogynists, and so we are seeing anti-racist literature and feminist literature and books about sexual abuse being more challenged. And although the reasons challengers give



are often divisiveness and “inappropriate content,” the reality is that books that challenge white and male privilege, or point it out, are just currently making people uncomfortable and therefore are being challenged.

### Effects of Book Challenges

There tends to be a chilling effect when a book has been attacked or challenged, possibly prompting librarians and others to second guess what books to include in the library collection. But Peter, for one, has not felt the pressure to do so. As he explained, “I have the privilege in my area of librarianship that I do not have to often question my collection development decisions.” He said his library administration has taken extra steps to make their collection “represent diverse political beliefs, even in a time when I may personally believe spreading some ideals causes harm in our society.” Perhaps academic librarians are the last bastion of freedom of selection and the Right to Read as some state legislatures continue to work to limit the types of books that would be available to patrons.

### Moving Along the Conversation

It was abundantly clear from the passion and depth with which our respondents answered our questions that they care deeply about the Right to Read and intellectual freedom. Not only were they willing to share their thoughts on censorship and book challenges, but they were eager to respond. All of them are fully aware of the perils of censorship and make sure they are informed as to current trends regarding book challenges. But it is also clear that many of them exist in ivory towers of sorts, protected, at least for now, by their job assignments from dealing with the general public. But as book challenges across the nation continue to grow, the so-called culture wars play out, and the nation becomes even more polarized and divided, not only are those challenges likely to increase in public libraries, but they may also intrude into college and university libraries. After all, there are movements afoot among some state legislature that question what is taught in university classrooms or the contents of Advanced Placement courses, classes for which high school students can receive college credit.

It is also possible that some librarians and library administrators will simply remove material that might be objectionable before a patron raises an objection, thus avoiding controversy but also limiting access and the free exchange of ideas. It’s impossible to know how frequently this type of censorship occurs. As the number of book challenges rise, it would not be surprising to find librarians and educators leaving their jobs out of fear of retaliation or to protect their own mental health and well-being. This trend could also

spill over to college students considering librarianship as a career. What once might have been considered a domain of academic freedom—the university library and college classrooms—may also come under fire from those who insist that shielding students, even adult learners, from the truth is more important than teaching the truth about our nation’s history or acknowledging gender identity and sexuality.

It seems essential that all citizens of this nation be informed about what democracy entails and the importance of the free exchange of ideas. Perhaps all schools need to examine their curriculum to determine how much, if any, focus is placed on intellectual freedom and its importance. This speaks to the current debate about the purpose of education. For some individuals, it means telling only the favorable parts of our nation’s history and avoiding any controversy, while for others, its purpose is to admit the whole truth of our history, even though some of it is unpleasant, and encourage students to ask questions, think critically, and perhaps work for change, acknowledging that mistakes have been made and that our nation and we as individuals can do better.

There’s a deep divide rippling across the nation’s landscape as debates swirl around who decides what books can be read, taught, and discussed and what topics are deemed appropriate reading material and discussion fodder. It isn’t all that far-fetched to see these trends seeping into academic libraries as well. In fact, most of the respondents stated that it’s difficult to tell when a book might be challenged, so the door is open for patrons to challenge reading material for any reason. Much like what the interviewees stated, future challenges will come from both sides of the political aisle.

Even though the responses of these librarians left us feeling cautiously hopeful and encouraged, we must acknowledge that the results would have been quite different, more hesitant, and even perhaps more fearful and world-weary if we had included more school and public librarians. Many schools no longer fund librarian positions, so those who take care of the library may not have library certification or understand the Right to Read or aren’t willing to risk their livelihood in defense of a book. Whose fight is this anyway? The authors, the book publishers, bookstores, teachers, librarians, students? It is noteworthy that, in his book, *You Can’t Say That! Writers for Young People Talk about Censorship, Free Expression, and the Stories They Have to Tell*, Leonard Marcus (2021) shares interviews with authors whose books have faced challenges in the past, and the authors’ responses to those challenges vary widely. Including school and public librarians who have faced recent book challenges would have undoubtedly resulted in a more pessimistic accounting of the current state of affairs.



As we considered our findings, we asked ourselves additional questions:

- How frequently do librarians think twice before ordering or placing on library shelves books on certain topics that they anticipate might stir up a complaint?
- Once someone has had a book challenged, how carefully do they consider the next book that might be deemed controversial or cause problems?
- How frequently do libraries have a policy for how to handle complaints from parents, and how often do they adhere to that policy?
- What outside pressures do library boards experience when dealing with complaints about books covering certain topics?
- How often do they bend to those pressures and why?
- When will this trend to challenge or question such large numbers of books abate?
- How closely related is it to various political movements or the difference in “red” and “blue” states and political parties or campaigns for elected office?
- What do these trends mean for the Right to Read and for the future of our democracy?

## Conclusion

Censorship challenges continue with several states, including Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, and Missouri having bills in consideration that allow librarians to be sued if they make “age-inappropriate material” available to children, while *The Atlantic* (Sarappo 2022) lists books facing challenges and encourages subscribers to read the books and decide for themselves. In a recent *Education Week* article, Montgomery (2022) noted that some librarians and anti-censorship groups are fighting back. Four librarians from Texas have started social media pages such as #FReadom tweets as well as the website (<https://www.freadom.us/>) which displays various ways to support the Right to Read. Other supportive actions include letters to editors, Freedom Fridays, and contacting local school board members. The *Salt Lake City Tribune* (2022) reported that local groups, Utah Citizens for Positive Change, Murray Equity Alliance, and Utah Project, among others joined forces and sent Valentine’s Day messages in support “of our professional and stalwart librarians.” In addition, PEN America, a diverse group of poets, essayists, and novelists in seven regions across the US, has also answered the call to fight censorship by establishing a \$500,000 defense fund in support against the “politically motivated efforts to censor bookshelves” (Trimel 2022). Although there are many groups who want to control what

others read, many Americans are feeling the urge to assist and support librarians in being the gatekeepers of public information.

Book challenges seem to be trending in 2022 as First Amendment rights are under attack, a trend that is likely to continue as the nation remains divided politically or until more schools teach about what this right entails. With fewer schools focusing on social studies and history classes, favoring narrowed curriculum and high-stakes testing preparation, many students graduate from high school without understanding these fundamental rights and the dangers to democracy when only one point of view is allowed, whether that be a liberal, conservative or perspective somewhere along the continuum. Thus, the next generation is likely to be the victims of this ignorance and nearsightedness. It is likely that educators and librarians will increasingly face threats to academic freedom and their jobs as more politicians get involved. One state actually considered a bill to criminalize librarians, according to an article by Bryan Clark in Yahoo! News (2022). The legislation would incarcerate librarians for up to one year or impose a \$1,000 fine if they distribute any minor literary materials judged and evaluated to be obscene. Not only would bills such as this silence certain voices, but as Sydney, one of the public librarians, previously addressed, in truth, many of the challenges are based on hearsay since many of those who would remove material from library shelves haven’t even read the books they are so riled up about.

Although the librarians we interviewed supported the Right to Read and their responsibility to protect readers’ rights to choose, and, for the most part, say they know how to handle book challenges, all libraries need to have and follow guidelines for responding to book challenges. The OIF also suggests that all libraries develop specific material selection policies based on the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights (Scales 2021).

Clearly, danger lurks in hiding the truth about history and disseminating misinformation. Moreover, obfuscating or misinterpreting the true purpose of CRT only confuses the general public and endangers vulnerable populations. “Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people” (Freire 1970, 62). We must speak with more robust voices to advocate for children that omission and censorship have no place in a democracy and are intellectually damaging since they will never produce a positive outcome in encouraging future generations to think for themselves.



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