FEATURE

A Brief History of Banning Ellen Hopkins

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Ellen Hopkins, the author of many verse novels for teens, did not shy away from writing about tough topics, like drug abuse, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and violence. Writing based on her own experiences—as a woman, and as a mother—Hopkins found herself, for a period in the early 21st century, the target of censors who thought her tales were too dark and gritty for teens. This chapter explores the author's own relationship to Hopkins' work and the history of attempts to censor Hopkins and her stories over the past nearly two decades. From disinvitations to permission slips, censorship takes many forms. It goes after many different people and types of books, and through the timeline of attempts to ban one specific author, we can illuminate ways in which censors attack people's lived experiences when they attempt to ban a book.

When banned books become the topic of conversation, modern audiences, those living today, think of books by queer authors, authors of color, and graphic novels that depict scenes some censors oppose. There exists, though, a generation of librarians in the profession who remember a time when banned books weren't necessarily always diverse books, or always classics like *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee) or *Beloved* (Toni Morrison), but were instead thick novels in verse flying off of teen shelves in libraries across the country.

As one of those librarians myself—a mid-20s early career professional raised on great young adult novels—recent censorship challenges and attempts at book bans immediately reminded me of my first awareness of banned books. It wasn't *Gender Queer* (Maia Kobabe) or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie). It was a book by one of my soon-to-be favorite authors, and the librarian checking me out clued me in to just how subversive my reading practice was when I brought it to the circulation desk.

"You know, this is technically a banned book now," she said with a little eyebrow wiggle. "I think you're going to love it."

I fell into the pages of one of Ellen Hopkins' earliest books—*Crank*—and by the time I came up for air, I knew that librarian was right. I loved the book—a gripping tale of a teenage drug addict told in blank verse—but I also realized that this was a different type of book banning than that of years past—or even years future. While many books were challenged and banned as an attempt to treat students and

young readers like they weren't ready to hear about historical events like slavery or apartheid, this book, and many of Hopkins' other books, were being banned because people didn't understand the power that books had as educational tools. Instead of reading *Crank* and seeing a lesson in why you should never do drugs—which is the lesson I got from the book—other parents, school teachers, principals, and politicians thought it was an advertisement for how to do drugs. They decided that Hopkins' lived experiences as a mother of a teenage drug addict were too subversive for the same young eyes that watched violent television shows, played shooting games, and experienced actual drug addiction and abuse in our own families.

There are people wiser and more experienced than myself who will write about the recent wave of censorship of queer and BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, people of color—authors—and how that is being influenced by many factors in society—but as a librarian who was reading banned books and loving them, I kept coming back to Ellen Hopkins. To me, her books are one of the best lessons you can give a young person on the dangers of drugs, and yet despite all of her books being stunningly rooted in reality, they are often challenged by those who think that kids aren't experiencing those things off the page as well.

"I wrote the book," Hopkins tells me when we talk in June 2022 about *Crank*, "as I write all of my books, in a straightforward fashion. I'm trying to talk to kids, and to talk to kids you have to come to where they live. You can't sit up here," she says, gesturing her arm up high, "in your little writers' room and write down to kids and expect them to give a shit about your books. And that's just it. I wanted a conversation."

Thinking about the history of censorship, and the way in which lived experiences are diminished by book banners and censors, I wanted to take a look specifically at Hopkins' own experience as a banned author. A white woman of a certain age, she's not the target people often think of when they consider recent book bans. Her ability to write her novels comes from a certain privilege, but they also come from her lived experiences. Many of her characters and plot arcs come from her own family—including her daughter, her own relationships, students she has spoken with, and ripped-from-the-headlines events impacting real readers around the world.

What anchored the attempts to ban Hopkins and her books from schools in the early twenty-first century? What does it teach us about anticipating and counteracting ongoing book bans and challenges that focus on the adjudication of lived experiences as right or wrong for young readers? As most scholars in the field acknowledge, only a miniscule portion of book bans, challenges, and censorship attempts receive media attention, and so this chapter is inherently limited in scope by the ability to look back through media coverage and see a complete picture of past challenges to Hopkins titles.

The Early Rumblings of Censorship

It would be nice and pat to say, "It all began in 2004, when *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins was published," but it's not that simple. While *Crank* was published in 2004—a novel of a girl who gets involved with drugs and quickly loses control of her life, slipping into dangerous behaviors and being victimized by those around her—the book banning did not immediately begin.

Hopkins instead spent years hearing praise from teens and teachers about the power of her books and the bravery of telling the story of her own daughter fictionalized in such a way that it would grip readers but also educate them.

Early reviews of the book praised it as a "quick, thought-provoking read" and listed it amongst best of lists for summer reading for teens (Snyder 2005).

In the summer of 2005, *Crank* was put on a ninth grade summer reading list for Leominster Public Schools (Massachusetts). Talking to a local outlet about the choice, a teen related her own reading experience to the kind of books her parents read that similarly dealt with tough issues.

"Our parents read '*Go Ask Alice*' growing up and it talks about drugs. I just read it too," Christina Longo, 16, of Leominster, said. "As long as you're mature enough, you can read it and not have to go out and do the same thing. These books all have learning messages." (Bozek 2005).

In 2006, a "Good Kid" interviewed for a segment on the Dallas Morning News said that *Crank* was the best book she had ever read. Another news piece focusing on an Illinois teen pageant winner cited her interests in church and babysitting, and the last good book she read: *Burned*, by Ellen Hopkins, which was published that year (Good Kid 2006).

Covering topics of religion (Church of the Latter Day Saints) and sexual abuse, *Burned* was devoured by teens not afraid of hard topics. However, the Mormon community of Utah took offense at the novel's depiction of the church. While there were no documented removals of the book at the time, the fervor which with some letters to the editor wrote indicate there may have been unreported acts of censorship surrounding the book in religious communities.

In one such op-ed published in a Utah newspaper, the self-identifying Jewish author wrote, "What Hopkins writes of in *Burned* might be indicative of one or more of these offshoots but not the modern-day LDS Church as I understand it. . . . More importantly, when writing for teens and kids,

it is incumbent upon authors to understand that our young audience often lacks the background to evaluate and contextualize what they're reading, especially in books about race, religion and ethnicity" (Gottsefeld 2006).

The author of that op-ed was an author himself at the time, having published a novel centered around a Confederate flag scandal in a small town that read like a soap opera (Publishers Weekly 2004) and was geared toward teens.

Others took more extreme measures with that particular Hopkins title—a Wisconsin police department reported in 2007 that "At 8:53 a.m. Monday, a Hartland Public Library official reported a copy of the book '*Burned*' by Ellen Hopkins was damaged by fire before it was returned to the library, 110 E. Park Ave. The book is estimated at $50" (Waukesha Freeman Staff 2007). No motive for the burning was indicated in the report, but police involvement implies a level of suspicion on the part of the library staff.

Hopkins continued to publish her books—all of which dealt with difficult topics and sensitive issues and were well received by teens. When the author of this chapter spoke to Hopkins in the summer of 2022, Hopkins indicated that despite pushback—which would only intensify at the end of the first decade of the century—her publisher never wavered in publishing her hard-hitting and well-read novels.

In 2007, Hopkins published *Impulse*, which dealt with suicidal ideation, and the sequel to *Crank, Glass*. In 2008, she published *Identical*, and in 2009, *Tricks* was published, dealing with sex trafficking and prostitution. It was a time of snark on the internet, and when Disney phenom Miley Cyrus tweeted that she was reading *Identical*, and loving it, Page Six wrote it up with the lede, "MILEY Cyrus has been captivated by sex and drugs" (Miley's Filthy Favorite 2008).

In March 2009, an Illinois high school held a fundraiser at their local Barnes and Noble bookstore to raise money to bring Hopkins to Hampshire High School for a writing workshop. The school's library director at the time told a local outlet that Hopkins' books were "immensely popular" among the students (Wiant 2009).

The next month, Hopkins spoke at the Southern Kentucky Book Fest. Other speakers included future administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes Dana Canedy and Kevin Clash, the puppeteer behind the Sesame Street character Elmo (Messenger-Inquirer 2009).

Something shifted though, in the coming year. Only then, with multiple best-sellers and an audience, including one of the most influential young adults in the media, who loved her work, behind her, did Hopkins begin to see the tide turn in school and library reactions to her work.

An Author in Oklahoma (and Not Texas)

The year was 2009. Barack Obama had become the nation's first Black president that January, and the economic climate was dire. Ellen Hopkins prepared to head to Oklahoma. As part of a charity auction, she provided a school visit writing workshop and author talk, and the winning school was in Norman, Oklahoma (Griswold 2009).

Hopkins would eventually speak in Oklahoma, but it would not be within the walls of the school that won her visit or only to the eighth grade class that was expecting her.

Despite having numerous books in publication at the time, and being invited to talk primarily about the writing process and not one of her books in particular, a "concerned parent" at the middle school focused in on the book *Glass,* Hopkins' sequel to *Crank* that continues the fictionalized story drawn from Hopkins' own experiences. Hopkins' daughter, Cristal, struggled with drug addiction, specifically crystal meth, in a cycle that directly impacted Hopkins household and led to her raising Cristal's child as her own son. Hopkins herself was an adoptee, and a victim of domestic abuse—a recurring theme in many of her books.

Despite that relationship to her work, one Norman parent complained about the content of *Glass,* and therefore of Hopkins' upcoming visit. It would be a common strain that Hopkins would hear in years to come—her stories were too "gritty" for young ears, despite the fact that young people experienced these issues—and more—on a daily basis all over the world, and despite the fact that it was drawn from Hopkins' own experience and told more as a cautionary tale than as a promotion of methamphetamines.

The school district responded swiftly to the parent's complaint—the only one listed publicly as a response to Hopkins' scheduled appearance.

"An internal committee made up of administrators, teachers and librarians will review *Glass* and possibly Hopkins' other books to see if they should be in middle school libraries," a representative told a local outlet. "The district's policy is to leave the books on the shelves until a decision is made."

A local news anchor even chimed in on the censorship attempt. Per an op-ed written at the time, local newscaster Kelly Ogle, "accused Hopkins of painting 'an ugly and graphic picture' of meth addiction" (Schultz 2009).

This was not the first time that censorship had come to Oklahoma, and the Norman decision to disinvite Hopkins and call into question whether her books belonged in certain school libraries reminded many of a previous attempt at banning Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, some years prior. Less well-known than the Pulitzer Prize winning title, Hopkins' book nonetheless struck a nerve.

One local op-ed in September 2009 noted, "Siano's [the school's superintendent] decision made a small ripple in the state media, but in 2001, when an administrator at Muskogee High School took 'To Kill a Mockingbird' off the freshman required reading list because of a few complaints, it was reported by The Associated Press and picked up by Reuters, CNN, the British Broadcasting Corp. and National Public Radio. Muskogee became a household word for censorship and closed-mindedness" (Gerard 2009).

Ultimately, though, one parent and a school district did not keep Ellen Hopkins out of Oklahoma entirely. The author made her way to Oklahoma—and spoke not at a school, or in a library, but at a religiously affiliated college (Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College in Moore, Oklahoma), which felt particularly ironic, said the author, due to the fact that her visit was protested due to her books being too gritty (Parker Jones 2009).

Hopkins (2009), ever the author, wrote about this experience on a LiveJournal blog: "Some 150 kids, parents, teachers and librarians showed up," she wrote in the September 2009 post, "but not one member of the book review committee, or the superintendent, or the worried parent bothered to come listen to my message, which is basically, 'the choices you make as young adults will affect you for the rest of your life.'"

Any authors, librarians, parents, or teachers who have seen attempts at book bans in recent years have likely seen a continuance of this tradition: banning from afar, or from snippets and assumptions, and then not showing up to hear the actual message.

In that 2009 blog post, Hopkins also reiterated a point that many of her advocates highlight when discussing attempts to ban or censor her books. While the books contain topics like drug use, sexual abuse, gun violence, and prostitution, they are hardly ringing endorsements of the life that comes from these behaviors.

Schools, including middle schools, often bring DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs into the schools, and high schools in certain parts of the country are known for staging fake car crash skits to discourage drinking on prom night. Many DARE programs involved bringing in former addicts to speak to students (Magan 2012).

Yet, instead of viewing Hopkins and her novels as an extension of this work—a way to tell of the dangers of drugs through Hopkins' own lived experiences and entice readers towards increased literacy—schools like the one in Norman, OK, looked only at the surface—at book blurbs and tag lines and poems pulled out of context—and considered disallowing students from reading books that only years before were gracing bestseller lists and being lauded as excellent books by high-functioning and successful teens. While recent censors and book banners focus on obscenity and sexuality as the objects of contention, it is not a far cry from previous ban attempts that zoomed in on the less-than-admirable qualities and actions of fictional characters out of context to call them unfit for readers.

Hopkins told the Kids Right to Read Fund (NCAC 2009) as much, saying "I don't back-pedal and I don't sugar-coat things for my readers. *Crank* and *Glass* were both based on true stories- fictionalized of course to give space to my daughter and those that the stories are based upon. I don't feel as an author I need to tip toe around addiction, sex or anything else. In my books my characters experience things as they are."

Hopkins' tour of the South would not continue in 2010, though. Her planned visit to the Humble Lit Festival, a literary festival geared towards teens, in Texas, was disrupted before it could begin when a local middle school teacher—seemingly unaffiliated with the organizers—protested Hopkins' appearance due to the content of her books. When Hopkins was disinvited by the Humble Lit organizers, many expected the festivities to continue. Several other authors were still slated to attend—including another frequently banned author, Laurie Halse Anderson, who's novel *Speak* has often found itself challenged for depicting sexual assault. However, several of those authors decided to boycott the event in protest, and it was ultimately cancelled (Flood 2010). Anderson openly stated that she did not want to boycott (Anderson 2010), and many others hoped that the authors would appear and use the space as a time to talk about the dangers of censorship, but instead the 2010 Humble Lit Festival was cancelled.

Other Sensitive Issues as Defined

There can be no doubt that the semi-successful disinvitation of Hopkins from Norman, Oklahoma, influenced the Texas disinvitation, though the two events show a juxtaposed way of responding to authorial disinvitations, whether they involve a book ban explicitly or not. In Oklahoma, efforts were made by supportive parties to still bring Hopkins to speak so that opposition was not met solely with silence. In Texas, instead of a quieter space, or a space with a new topic at hand, the Humble Lit Festival was cancelled due to a preponderance of the invited authors pulling out of the event. Opposition was met not necessarily with silence—as the authors and other free speech advocates did publicize their boycott and the issue at hand—but the teens of Humble were denied the joy of hearing from the award-winning authors they had looked forward to seeing.

Both events—in Norman and in Humble—seem, on the surface, to have ended with the opposition party finding

success. They successfully challenged Hopkins' right to speak and share her stories and kept her from her planned venue. Neither opposition party—in Oklahoma or in Texas—spoke with Hopkins, and it is possible that neither party had read a Hopkins' book cover to cover despite being concerned about the contents within. Both events involved middle school teachers protesting Hopkins and her stories being available to their students—students up to 13 and 14 years old who have lived experiences of their own. Unfortunately, as statistics show us, many of these students will see themselves, their families, and their own experiences represented on the pages of Hopkins' gripping verse novels (Administration for Children and Families 2022).

Hopkins' published books were not done with criticism, and Hopkins was not done writing more books that would challenge conventions of what many think teens are ready to read. Over the next decade, after the Oklahoma and Texas challenges, Hopkins would publish many more books—including a third book In the *Crank* trilogy, adult novels, a sequel to *Burned*, a book told from the perspective of violence, and middle grade novels exploring the foster care system and opioid addiction. The attempts at banning her books directly waned, but her titles still appear frequently on round-ups of banned and censored books, despite librarians reporting their continued appeal to teens.

While the drug use and cursing were frequent targets of complaint for Hopkins' books, the depiction of a familial sexual abuse in books also drew frequent ire. Some complaints called it pornographic, a charge that particularly angered Hopkins, who writes in blank verse that often sparsely dots the page.

The scenes of abuse—like the scenes of drug use and violence—in Hopkins' books feel visceral, Hopkins admits, because of her chosen style. Writing in blank verse is very interior, and it brings the reader inside the character in a way that few prose novels can. Yet, the words are simply fewer, and chosen carefully, and so while a scene of sexual violence may feel more palpable in verse, it is not laid out on the page in the same way it is in prose. Nor, Hopkins notes in our 2022 interview, is the depiction of sexual violence pornographic in any way—instead, it is a depiction of a real-world trauma that many teens and young adults experience.

"There were people who got very offended by one scene in *Identical*," Hopkins told me, describing a scene in which the main character of *Identical* is in her room, listening to the sound of her sexually abusive father come down the hall. The door opens, and he comes in. "I wrote it as mildly as I could, but you can't . . . the best email I ever got on this book was from a girl who said 'I have to thank you for not shutting the door. Because when you shut the door, people assume nothing happens on the other side of the door.'"

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) named *Identical* the fifth most popular book for teens in 2009, after polling over 11,000 teen readers (Howard 2009).

Recent Attempts at Censorship

While the outrage around *Crank* seemed to die down as the years went on, Hopkins did not suddenly find her books widely accepted by those worried about the delicate minds of teen readers.

In 2015, a school district in Delaware planned to require permission slips for students to check out books on sensitive issues (Hart 2015). Hopkins' book *Identical* was listed as one of the objectionable books that would require such a slip—a proposition that arose from parent objection to library materials. Through the work of free speech advocates, this plan was reversed.

The idea of permission slips continues to come up in book banning conversations, as if all parents are going to be willing to sign them, or as if students might not be interested in a book about something they do not want their parent to know they are reading. These concerns are especially raised by LGBTQ advocates, who know that not every queer teen comes from a welcoming home and that requiring a permission slip could put the reader in danger. Similar concerns have been raised when it comes to privacy discussions about library checkout procedures. Libraries around the country can attest that when teens worry that their checkout history will be revealed, or they will be denied a book due to not having a parent's permission, the book instead disappears off the shelf and often is not returned (Hawkins 2022).

In other acts of quiet censorship, books are being pulled pre-emptively from library shelves by administrators, teachers, and possibly even librarians to prevent future bans or challenges (Natanson 2022).

In 2021, a spate of book bans and attempts at censorship made the news. As previously stated, it is understood that many book bans, book removals, and other acts of censorship go unreported, but the vast majority of challenges to intellectual freedom through reading reported in 2021 and early 2022 focused on books featuring BIPOC or LGBTQ–lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer characters. Authors like Alex Gino, Tyler Johnson, Angie Thomas and Maia Kobabe became well-known figures in the book banning world, and their books appeared on "most banned" lists across the country.

While Hopkins, a white woman who writes characters of different sexualities and ethnicities, was not a primary focus of these bans, her books still often ended up on increasingly

long lists of "objectionable books" found on school libraries and in public library teen sections.

In February 2022, a Polk County, Florida, school removed many books, including *Tricks* by Ellen Hopkins, from their shelves due to objection. The books, including Hopkins' title that looks at sex work and sex trafficking, were returned to shelves by the end of the school year (NCAC 2022). Another Florida group, Moms for Liberty, also listed several titles of Hopkins among more commonly challenged books of recent years on their list of books they wanted removed from school libraries (Gallion 2022).

"You Can't Ban a Person's Story"

Crank, as a book, is 18 years old now. It could vote, or join the military, or buy cigarettes. The readers who were initially drawn to *Crank* upon its publication have their own children now, and teens are still drawn to the story of Christina, based upon Cristal and so many other teens who found themselves lost in the grip of addiction.

"You can't ban a person's story," Hopkins told me when we talk about her own experience with book bans, and about recent bans on books such as *Gender Queer*. As news proliferates about censorship battles, book bans, and everything in between, it is imperative to remember this. You cannot ban a person's story, and when we talk about banning books, we must also think about the core truths at the center of that book and what it says to children experiencing addiction, questioning their sexuality, or surviving abuse when we deem their stories unworthy of space on our shelves.

Books were banned long before Ellen Hopkins became an author, and unfortunately, will continue to be afterwards. Instead of seeing her work as an end of the conversation, I hope you'll see it as a way to look at the banning of "gritty" books not as an attempt to protect children from the harsh realities of the world, but as a silencing of lived, personal experiences—one that continues to haunt librarians, teachers, and free speech advocates today. What will you do to speak up? How will you advocate for books that will resonate with readers who have lived these tough experiences and ensure that their needs are being met with engaging books and not just bans and attempts at censorship?

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