

7 Reasons Your Favorite Books Were Banned

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Risqué-averse readers, cover your ears. Sunday marked the beginning of this year's National Banned Books Week, for which libraries and bookstores across the country will promote and celebrate commonly censored titles. The organization calls its cause a "celebration of the freedom to read."

According to BannedBooksWeek.com, 11,300 books have been challenged since 1982, when the event was launched. What constitutes a "banned" book, as opposed to a "challenged" book? The American Library Association explains:

A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others. Last year's most frequently challenged or banned titles included a mix of Young Adult books, literary classics and romance novels, such as "Gossip Girl," "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Fifty Shades of Grey."

This year's list includes a few stalwarts, such as Sherman Alexie's "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," and Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed," and a few titles that have recent or forthcoming film adaptations, such as Orson Scott Card's "Ender's Game" and Stephen Chbosky's "The Perks of Being a Wallflower."

So why are these stories, many of which are venerated award-winners, being scorned, and in some cases, pulled from shelves? Here are some of the reasons that have been cited:

Offensive language"The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" is one of the most frequently challenged books as of late, and the commonly aired complaint that Alexie uses profanity, including the "F-word" and "N-word." You know who else used those words? Henry Miller and Mark Twain, respectively. Yes, vulgar language popping up in an academic setting can be jarring. But when a writer is discussing weighty topics, like the troubling state of schools on Indian reservations, jarring is a suitable approach.

Sexually explicitAccording to the ALA, this is the No. 1 reason for banning books in the past decade. Margaret Atwood's "A Handmaid's Tale" was challenged by a North Carolina high school for being "sexually explicit," because clearly high school students are mature enough for sex ed, but not for feminist literature. Ironically, the book discusses the issues with censorship.

Homosexuality"And Tango Makes Three" is an illustrated children's book in which a zookeeper witnesses two male penguins performing mating rituals and gives the pair an egg to hatch. The result is Tango, a female chick. Sadly, this story has ranked among the top 10 most frequently challenged books for the last few years. Last year, it was marked for removal in a Davis, Utah, school district because

"parents might find it objectionable."

ViolenceBooks deemed "violent" are challenged about a third as often as books described as "sexually explicit," but so-called violent stories have been spotlighted recently. Nixing gratuitous fighting is understandable, but many of the flagged books use violence as an allegory for, well, nonviolence. Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game" features two big game hunters who grow tired of their animal targets, eventually turning their aggression toward each other, but a Colorado school claimed it "only serves to promote school violence."

Religious viewpointThe Harry Potter books and the Twilight series aren't the only ones targeted for their "ungodly" content, though they certainly are attacked often). Lauren Myracle's YA book, "t tyl; ttf n; l8r, g8r," and Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's "Dangerously Alice" are challenged for the same reason. Oddly enough, even Aldous Huxley's dystopian critique of modern society, "Brave New World," has been banned for its religious viewpoint.

DrugsBooks advocating the use of drugs are, of course, frequently censored titles; But even books that serve as warning signs against the dangers of drugs have been removed from school libraries. A prime example is "Go Ask Alice," by Anonymous. Written in the '70s, it's been banned in schools from Texas to Michigan. But the protagonist and her friends do not make drug use look fun. On the contrary, their partying ruins their grades, and their lives, in almost propagandistic, "Reefer Madness"-style prose.

NudityDescriptions of nudity is cited as a separate reason from sexually explicit content, because apparently teens can attend an art museum or read a biology book, but not experience fictional naked bodies. Last year, Dori Hillestad Butler's "My Mom's Having A Baby!: A Kid's Month-by-Month Guide" was one of the most banned books. Although the book is an instructional guide to what happens when a woman is pregnant, it has been challenged for including nudity.

If you're interested in doing your part to promote non-restrictive reading, head over to the ALA's site. The New York Times also has a nifty list of creative ways to celebrate.