

About Banned & Challenged Books

What's the difference between a challenge and a banning?

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. Due to the commitment of librarians, teachers, parents, students and other concerned citizens, most challenges are unsuccessful and most materials are retained in the school curriculum or library collection.

Why are books challenged?

Books usually are challenged with the best intentions—to protect others, frequently children, from difficult ideas and information. See Notable First Amendment Cases.

Censorship can be subtle, almost imperceptible, as well as blatant and overt, but, nonetheless, harmful. As John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*:

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

— *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill

Often challenges are motivated by a desire to protect children from “inappropriate” sexual content or “offensive” language. The following were the top three reasons cited for challenging materials as reported to the Office of Intellectual Freedom:

1. the material was considered to be "sexually explicit"
2. the material contained "offensive language"
3. the materials was "unsuited to any age group"

Although this is a commendable motivation, Free Access to Libraries for Minors, an interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* (ALA's basic policy concerning access to information) states that, “Librarians and governing bodies should maintain that parents—and only parents—have the right and the responsibility to restrict the access of their children—and only their children—to library resources.” Censorship by librarians of constitutionally protected speech, whether for protection or for any other reason, violates the First Amendment.

As Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., in *Texas v. Johnson* , said most eloquently:

If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.

If we are to continue to protect our First Amendment, we would do well to keep in mind these words of Noam Chomsky:

If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all.

Or these words of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas (" The One Un-American Act." *Nieman Reports* , vol. 7, no. 1, Jan. 1953, p. 20):

Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us.

Who Challenges Books?

Throughout history, more and different kinds of people and groups of all persuasions than you might first suppose, who, for all sorts of reasons, have attempted—and continue to attempt—to suppress anything that conflicts with or anyone who disagrees with their own beliefs.

In his book *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other*, Nat Hentoff writes that “the lust to suppress can come from any direction.” He quotes Phil Kerby, a former editor of the Los Angeles Times, as saying, “Censorship is the strongest drive in human nature; sex is a weak second.”

According to the Challenges by Initiator, Institution, Type, and Year, parents challenge materials more often than any other group.