

Counterpoint: Book Censorship can be Justified in Some Cases.

Thesis: Censorship of books in US public schools and libraries is acceptable because parents have a right to restrict access to books they feel are unfit for their children.

Summary: Censorship is defined as the act of suppressing information that is objectionable, whether for moral, political, ethical, or other reasons. The suppression of books in the United States is generally not mandated by the federal government on a large scale, unless a work contains child pornography or other illegal content. Most censorship of books takes place on a much smaller scale; within school or public libraries, for example. Additionally, most book censorship revolves around the moral issue of what is appropriate for minors to read and how much power parents should have in determining which books are good or bad for their children. Fueling the issue is the fact that what some parents consider acceptable for their children is not considered appropriate by others. The situation is made even more complex by arguments that the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech, makes any kind of censorship unconstitutional.

[The Reasons Behind Book Banning](#)

Book banning in schools or public libraries generally begins when a concerned parent or group of parents takes issue with a literary text on (usually) moral grounds, although some textbooks have been condemned for their perspectives on civic values and history. Throughout the twentieth century, a number of classic books consistently appeared on banned book lists. Among these are Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The books were banned for various reasons: profane language, racial slurs, and, in the case of Frank's diary, because it was considered too depressing for children to read. These books still undergo scrutiny in various communities today; the use of racial slurs in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, has been criticized by members of the African American community.

Some critics have noted a change in young adult (YA) and children's literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Sexuality, sexual violence, gang violence, homosexuality, profanity, and violent crimes against children are increasingly and graphically represented in many of these books. However, in some cases, concerned parents and community members react without taking the time to closely investigate the books they want banned. A book depicting rape, for example, may be offensive to some, but it may also be a useful starting point to engage students in conversations about rape.

It might help young people better understand the world they live in, the human condition, and issues they face in their culture.

The finer points of criticism involve judging whether a book has depicted something objectionable tastefully and appropriately. Librarians and parents should learn as much as they can about the book in question, and try to determine if it in fact may have redeeming educational value, rather than just gratuitous sex or violence. Some parents may seek a less-offensive alternative that does equally well in dealing with the same topic. Censorship is not, therefore, about repressing information that children and teenagers should have; instead, it insists that parents have the right to educate their children on controversial topics in ways they deem appropriate, and to monitor the materials their children are exposed to in school or at the library.

The key is that parents must become active and engaged in what their children are reading. Just as parents monitor the music, video games and movies to which their children are exposed, parents should be aware of what books their children are reading. Censorship of books should not be about silencing voices on important topics, but about steering young people toward the best possible literature on the topics they are interested in. This, after all, is what education and public tax dollars should be doing in the first place. The conversations around this issue will raise important questions: What is "good literature," exactly? Does reading literature really affect people that profoundly? Should one person or group dictate the moral standards of the entire community? Is compromise the best solution? These are difficult questions that should be part of ongoing discussions in communities where censorship has become an issue.

[The Power of Books](#)

Books are powerful instruments. They can be used to educate, to inculcate values and transmit ideology, and to stimulate the imagination. They can instruct in civic virtues or contain instructions to build a bomb. Can reading a book directly harm a young person? Certainly pornography and other such materials objectify women and may encourage violence against women and children. Some would argue that simply reading a novel is not going to morally compromise a child, while others claim that the content of certain books undermines the values they are trying to instill in their children.

Sometimes, clashes over whether a book should be banned are reflections of disputes over larger social issues. Two examples of this dilemma are the well-known books *Heather Has Two Mommies*, by Leslea Newman and illustrated by Diane Souza, and *Daddy's Roommate*, by Michael Willhoite. When these books were published by Alyson Publications in the early 1990s, they were intended for families headed by gay parents. However, by 1992, a number of communities became concerned about how the books taught children about homosexuality. Some parents and lawmakers, particularly those from conservative or Christian areas of the United States, argued that by making the

books available in public schools and libraries, their rights to educate their children on homosexuality were being trampled. They claimed that the books' content was not only objectionable but obscene, and that federal funds should not be used to purchase them. In spite of the controversy, the books continue to be popular today.

The clash over these two children's books became a debate over moral values in the early 1990s. Even in this case, though, censorship did not mean complete repression of the books, only that federal money was not to be spent on them. In many book-banning scenarios, there is much less fanfare; in some cases, library patrons petition that questionable books be moved to the adult section of the library. In this type of case, children may still read the books, but only if a parent approves and checks the book out for the child. This may be the best solution to the quarrels over certain books deemed objectionable by some and necessary by others, especially for very young children.

In the case of teenage readers of young adult fiction, there are slightly different issues. One is that many books targeted at or assigned to the teen audience have increasingly graphic violence, sexual content, drug and alcohol use, and obscene language. For example, the book *33 Snowfish*, by Adam Rapp, is a dark story of three teenage runaways who are victims of various forms of abuse, including child prostitution and pornography. There are graphic depictions of the characters committing murder and engaging in acts of prostitution on the streets. While this book could bring up important discussions among students on issues like crime against children and the plight of child runaways, it is also a book that many parents find too intensely violent for their teens to read.

One possible solution for parents is to find their children an alternative story about these issues. Additionally, schools and libraries can provide parents with information about books by using a rating system, similar to the system used to rate movies. However, it is important that parents be given information about the books that are being made available to their children. Parents who believe that a book like *33 Snowfish* is not the best way to teach their children about social problems have the right to choose their own methods, and to restrict their children's reading lists to those books they deem appropriate.

[Public Schools and Libraries](#)

Perhaps the censorship issue is even more sensitive today than it was during the furor over *Heather Has Two Mommies* in the early 1990s. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US government passed the Patriot Act, which many believe restricts American civil liberties. Librarians have become particularly vocal opponents of the act, because it gave the government access to previously private records, such as which books a particular patron has checked out, or which websites they have visited using library computers. Many librarians believe that the US government has no right to information about what readers choose to read at public libraries.

According to critics, this atmosphere has restrained intellectual freedom in the United States. While it is important for parents to know and restrict the books their children are exposed to at school and the public library, it is also important that censorship of books for young people be a careful process. There is no place for mass censorship in American public institutions. Rather, the needs of the individual child must be considered, parental rights must be honored, and there must be open, intellectual debates over the merits of challenged books in the community.

What Should Happen Next

Books are challenged for various reasons. It is true that certain books are challenged by would-be censors time and again, but each case must be examined and debated carefully. Parents must make sure that they carefully read the books they are challenging and have full knowledge of the works they want censored. Librarians and educators should work to create a kind of rating system that will make it easier to judge whether a work is appropriate for younger children or a teen audience.

Conclusion

Parents are the primary and most important educators of their children, and have the right to restrict what their children are exposed to in public schools and libraries. However, it is important that censorship is treated as a process through which parents can determine which books their children should be exposed to, rather than a tool to eliminate the open exchange of ideas. Open debate within communities addressing censorship can help by exposing cases motivated by bigotry and ignorance. Such debates will provide a healthier environment for diversity and education than an unchallenged system that is entirely permissive. The topic of censorship itself should continue to be discussed in public forums, particularly in light of recent restrictions on civil liberties.

Ponder This

1. What is the primary argument this author makes in favor of book censorship? What aspects of the author's argument could an opponent of banning books make in response?
 - 2. Do you believe parents reserve the exclusive right to teach their children about topics like homosexuality, sexual behavior, or alcohol and drug use? Why or why not?
 - 3. Do you agree with the author's assertion that parents should examine the books they intend to bar their children from reading? What if the parent is extremely opposed to the subject in question?
 - 4. In your opinion, can limited censorship coexist with intellectual freedom? Why or why not?