



The book ban battleground

Young people need stories that reflect their lives, experts say. Using censorship to deny that representation can have dangerous consequences.

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Robin Chenoweth: 3,362 instances. That's the number of times just last year that individual books were banned across the United States, affecting 1,557 unique titles.

Mentor Board of Education parent: This filth is in our schools. And I'm sure many more that we are unaware of. What are you doing to vet these books?

Reuters: An email from the Central Bucks School District's library coordinator instructed staff to remove all copies of this and another book within 24 hours.

Student at school board meeting: I'm 17 years old, and I shouldn't have to stand up here pleading for books in schools against adults that are acting like children. This leads me to ask, exactly what is wrong with this book? Is it the fact that it sheds light on people of color and the struggles that they have faced living in America?

Jackie Goldberg: When you have two or three days of this kind of chaos of people screaming at the top of their lungs outside a school that read a book with one sentence in it that said, "Yeah, guess what? Families can include two moms and two dads." ... They made a decision based on agitators not from their community, but from outside their community who saw an opportunity to take advantage of the real fears of people.

Robin Chenoweth: The removal and restriction of books is not just occurring in k12 schools.

NBC Newscaster: In April, legislators in the Blue Grass State overrode the governor's veto, approving SB-167, which will transform public library boards by turning over power to local county judges.

Robin Chenoweth: This year, the number of banned book titles has increased by 33% over the 2021-2022 school year, including a book written by Ohio State's Ashley Hope Perez:

Ashley Hope Perez: The targeting of books is a strategy of intimidation. That's very consistent with what it was when the intellectual contributions of Jewish scholars and writers were being targeted by the Nazi party. So that's the kind of thing that should make every American concerned, and I find it really striking that folks who claim to be deeply patriotic choose not to connect those dots.

Cynthia Tyson: If we began to go down this pathway of banning knowledge, as it is presented in books and in reading materials, we have to ask ourselves, what part of our freedom related to our democracy are we also willing to give up? Because we will lose something in that process.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we dive headfirst into the banning of books in American libraries. An Ohio State professor tells how her book became one of the 10-most banned titles in United States. We talk to a chief diversity officer for Ohio State University Libraries, and to two children's literature professors about the negative impact book bans can have on kids and how bans ultimately can drive Americans further apart by limiting their capacity to empathize with others. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Banning books and restricting access to the written word is a very old practice. Ovid was banished from Rome for writing erotic poetry. Caligula banned the reading of Homer's *The Odyssey*, though it was written 300 years earlier, because he said it promoted dangerous ideas of freedom.

Cynthia Tyson: Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Shakespeare. Orwell's book, back in the day. These are some classic pieces of literature, and it has been a part of school curriculums forever.

Robin Chenoweth: Cynthia Tyson is a professor of literature for children and young adults and multicultural and equity studies in education in Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology.

Cynthia Tyson: But they're also authors that have been banned in classrooms for many, many years. It's about someone saying that the content is controversial, or obscene, or not developmentally appropriate. You probably remember Judy Blume and her best-selling *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. But those books have often been a part of controversies, especially as it relates to the ways in which people have values and beliefs rooted in morality. Even Anne Frank's book, *Diary of a Young Girl*, because people were concerned about the depiction of the family and the inappropriateness of some of the passages that were there. I mean, the Bible was banned.

Robin Chenoweth: Right. It still is, in some places, right?

Cynthia Tyson: In some places, the Bible is not even allowed to be included, and especially in school libraries. So, this whole idea of censorship is really, really as old as writing and the printing press. ... Of course, we know during slavery, and with those who are enslaved, and during the time of the Civil War, you know, there was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that came out, that was a treatise against enslavement. But there was a banning of sorts that happened there in terms of who could even learn how to read and who had access to printed materials, because we know enslaved Africans were not allowed to learn to read or have any printed materials at all. ... The history has emerged as a war, quote, unquote, against immorality. It's like if children and young adults don't read these books, and they're going to be able to be more moral and make better decisions around issues of morality. But we know that it's just the opposite. When you ban books and keep any information away from young people, from children, then it narrows their perspective of the world, and it narrows often the representation that they may see of

themselves. Judy Blume talks about how many letters that she got, thousands and thousands of those letters from young girls who said, "Somebody finally is talking about the real things that are happening to me as a young teenager."

Robin Chenoweth: Why do you think it's happening more now than it even did in the past?

Cynthia Tyson: These nationwide bans, it isn't enough for me to say that I don't want my child to read a particular book. I also feel that as part of my mission, part of my value system, that I must protect other people's children, for an example, from this as well. And this is why school libraries have sort of become the battleground for this. ... We've seen it emboldened even more so as we've watched the political landscape of this nation shift and change over the last, what, eight years?

Robin Chenoweth: I've heard that it's not necessarily just parents acting on their own now, that there are groups or organizations that are behind the book bannings.

Cynthia Tyson: Absolutely. Yeah, there's several groups who hold trainings and are preparing those who will speak out. ... Texas and Florida, as we know, are really high on the list of the numbers of bannings that are happening and challenges. And they know that there are groups like the Moms for Liberty, who say, "These are the things that you say." So, they're not only saying that we're wanting to fight, and ban a book, you know, and engage in that level of censorship, but here are the talking points. So that there's sort of a messaging that is happening across the nation. ... And I don't know if in my history of working with children's and young adult literature that I've ever seen with book banning this level of national organization around the fighting of particular books.

Robin Chenoweth: And that's how Ashley Hope Perez, assistant professor of comparative studies at Ohio State, found that her young adult novel, *Out of Darkness*, came to be banned in 2021. Perez talked about the banning at Ohio State during Banned Books week. She wrote *Out of Darkness* and other books as a way of giving Latine students — like the ones she once taught in Texas — characters they can relate to and stories of their history.

Ashley Hope Perez: Each of my books, engages with aspects of Latinx experience, and tells a story that I feel like, I wanted my students to know. ... *Out of Darkness*, for me, one of the really important things that it does is to acknowledge and engage with the particular character of segregation in Texas schools. ... Few of my students knew that their great grandparents would have been forced out of education by sixth grade.

Robin Chenoweth: *Out of Darkness* is a historical novel, but also a love story about a teenage Mexican-American girl and a teenage Black boy. It chronicles the tragic explosion that killed 300 students at New London School in 1937.

Ashley Hope Perez: *Out of Darkness* is, at its core, a story about love and its ability to create possibility where there seems like there's nothing but pain.

Robin Chenoweth: After it was published in 2016, the book won multiple awards for young adult fiction before it was challenged in 2021.

Ashley Hope Perez: By August of 2021 the book was banned in one district in central Texas. And that's the same time that that viral video came out and circulated everywhere.

Kara Bell at Austin School Board meeting: I want you to start focusing on education and not public health!

Ashley Hope Perez: So, once that happened, *Out of Darkness* was on the list for the book banners. And most of the places where they're banning books, *Out of Darkness* has already been banned. But that kind of ramping up was really shocking because it seems bad enough to have it banned in one community. And then to see it ... at this point, it's been banned in over 40 school districts. And it still just makes me confused and sad.

Robin Chenoweth: The scene read by a parent at a Texas school district board meeting was meant to shine a light on aggressive language used in the 1930s against girls and women, Perez said. And the abuse of the Mexican-American protagonist can give voice to other survivors.

Ashley Hope Perez: One of the more frustrating claims that has been made about *Out of Darkness* is that, because it depicts sexual abuse and sexual violence, it will harm survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence. And as a survivor myself, I find that really infuriating. What we know for trauma survivors is that it is incredibly important to have spaces to engage with what we've experienced, and for young people to see represented, as harm, harms that they or someone they know may have experienced, can be really helpful in identifying it. My experience with my students was that, a lot of times, those who had experienced abuse of different kinds didn't have the language to talk about it. And so when we encounter that harm in literature, it creates an opening for beginning to speak about in our own lives if we haven't been able to before.

Robin Chenoweth: You talked about during your talk about the fact that you could stack up the books where those themes were showing up with white characters, and in the stack is really high....

Robin Chenoweth: Here's a snippet of the presentation at Ohio State's Thompson Library:

Ashley Hope Perez' presentation: If you go into any library space, high school library, public library, and you start stacking up books that have sexual content... let me tell you... If you're going to do some racial categorization and some gender identity or you know, sexual orientation stuff. You will see the largest stacks, there will be so many stacks of books about straight, white characters. Those are not the books that are targeted. So, when folks are targeting classic literature, it's almost always Toni Morrison. Interestingly, Faulkner, Hemingway, all those guys also writing about incest, rape, racism. When Toni Morrison does it, somehow it needs to be banned.

Ashley Hope Perez: Books that are targeted, get targeted again. And I think there's a kind of a feedback loop. But again, there is a racial and kind of identity-based emphasis that drives which books they're looking at. And I think that the idea that, "Oh, it's classic when Faulkner writes about rape and incest, but when Toni Morrison does it's pornographic." The contrast speaks for itself.

Thomas Dickens: I'm never surprised with the lengths that we will go to ban something that certain viewpoints in society view as inappropriate for people to see or to learn more about.

Robin Chenoweth: Thomas Dickens is assistant dean for equity, diversity and inclusion, and chief diversity officer for Ohio State University Libraries. I talked to him about Pen America's list of the top 100 censored books. Banned books remain available at Ohio State and in other research libraries, he said.

Thomas Dickens: But there's also a bias that comes with it. As you will see, a lot of the things that are being restricted from K through 12, and starting to get restricted from public libraries, is the things that highlight the experience of historically marginalized identities. So, we're looking at LGBTQ-plus communities. We're looking at people of color, or BIPOC, communities. ... What's interesting is I try to read a wide range of books. And there are a lot of books that are pretty popular that I am surprised aren't banned.

Robin Chenoweth: You care to name any?

Thomas Dickens: I would say I'm a huge Stephen King fan. ... The main book that has been banned in his collection of works is called *Rage*. I understood why; it has the viewpoint of a school shooter. ... But it has been banned for decades. And not a lot of people know that work because of it being banned. But he has a lot of books that I'm surprised don't make it on, like the top 10 list of being banned.

Robin Chenoweth: How much of that is because he's a white man?

Thomas Dickens: I don't have the statistics to really back this up. But I would venture to guess you don't see white, cisgender, heterosexual men on this list, as much as you will see other people who have, again, historically marginalized identities as their salient identity. So, things like *The Hate U Give* being on this list or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Parttime Indian* being on this list. I very much don't think they should be there. And I think that the perspective that the authors hold, as well as, you know, a part of the context of the book, absolutely played a role in those books being banned.

Robin Chenoweth: Dickens got me to thinking. So, I looked up all the authors on Pen America's Top 100 Banned Books list for Fall 2022. Only six of them were white, cisgender males. Let's consider one of the biggest concerns of those seeking book bans: Age appropriateness. Listening to parents read certain book passages in school board meetings can be uncomfortable. I asked each of the faculty members we interviewed, and Thomas Dickens, about considerations for knowing which books are appropriate for which kids.

Thomas Dickens: Essentially, you're relying on the expertise of librarians. They go to school, and they understand the age appropriateness of books and are put in a position to appropriately facilitate that information. And so, absolutely, librarians in a DEI space take into account the age appropriateness and the type of information that people should have access to. I think what the problem comes to be is that there is a fundamental difference in opinion of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. If you go on to ALA's top 10 banned books, you know, those books usually have the reasons why those things were banned. Some things will say sexually explicit, but sometimes that's not really the case. It's just a person existing. ... I don't think banning books or completely restricting access to information is the answer. I think appropriately providing a context around a particular topic is the answer.

Robin Chenoweth: Ashley Hope Perez points back to access and representation.

Ashley Hope Perez: One of the really important things to emphasize is that the vast majority of the books that are being banned are not classroom texts. They're not for whole-class instruction. They're books that are available for kids who want to seek them out. And I think that's a really important distinction. ... A book in the library does not need to meet the needs of every kid who walks into the library. It just

needs to meet the needs of one of those kids. And librarians are best positioned to make those decisions and what we're seeing undermines their ability to serve the learners that they're charged with serving.

Robin Chenoweth: Context matters, says Cynthia Tyson. Sadly, in this age of politicization, many working to ban books haven't read beyond the passages that they contest. So, they miss the context.

Cynthia Tyson: To have that person stand there and say, "Well, no, I've never read the book." It makes me sad, not only just for the children, but also for that person. Because it's like, hey, at least have read the book. At least know the content and, and also the full context of what is being mentioned. You know, there's a lot of cherry-picking that happens in some of these books. They'll pull one phrase out and say, "This is why it should not be on the shelves and available to young readers," without reading the full context of the chapter, the full context of the book, to understand why that is even there, realizing that it may not be as harmful as they think.

Robin Chenoweth: Patricia Enciso, a professor of literature for children and young adults, read drafts of Perez's work and has written with her about Latine identities in children's and young adult literature.

Robin Chenoweth: What are some books that you are surprised that are banned?

Pat Enciso: I'm surprised that *Out of Darkness* is banned. Just reading the opening, it's really a free verse poem about the explosion of the school in 1937.

Benita Robledo reading *Out of Darkness*: Men and dust and tents. Thousands of spectators gather, necks craned. But it is not a circus. Not a rodeo. Within the great circle of light, men crawl over the crumpled form of a collapsed school. They cart away rubble and search for survivors. For their children. Mostly, though, they find bodies.

Pat Enciso: It's heartbreaking, the description of a community coming together to pick up the, literally the pieces of their children, as they mourn and grieve and are in shock over what has happened.

Benita Robledo reading *Out of Darkness*: Just after midnight it starts to rain, but no one runs for the tents. Some men take off their hats. Water runs down their faces. The perfect cover for tears.

Pat Enciso: And then the turning of the phrase at the very end of those opening two pages, where they need to place blame. ... That opening, would engage anyone into wanting to know more of that story. And it is a beautiful, heartbreaking story. And it's deeply ethical. It challenges the reader to examine their own ethical stance and their own ways, especially a young person who's 16, 17 years old, who's heard all of this sexist language, and this misogynistic language.

Robin Chenoweth: She's talking about the passage that is often read in defense of the banning of *Out of Darkness*. Teenagers see beyond it, she says.

Pat Enciso: They recognize it. And Ashley's book asks readers to examine that. Not to accept it. Not to endorse it. But to really examine their own complicity, or their own sense of despair over being at the center of that kind of talk.

Robin Chenoweth: What's your understanding of why it was banned?

Pat Enciso: The book is a sophisticated representation of tripartite racism and sexism and misogyny. The kind of material that I think would shock a 15-year-old if they just trying to come to terms with the world for the first time. So, I wouldn't recommend the book for all 15-year-olds. I wouldn't even recommend it necessarily, unless you're a skilled teacher, to make it the class set or a class read-aloud. But it is certainly a powerful book and an unforgettable story for 15-, 16-, 17-, 18-year-olds and adults. So how did it get banned? They found one word that was offensive and within the social media sphere was provocative. ... Life is provocative. But what we don't get with everyday life is a chance to evaluate those moments and those fears and those losses. Literature helps us slow down and evaluate what is happening and ask ourselves, what do we want to do and who do we want to be in those spaces?

Robin Chenoweth: Can we talk about LGBTQ students?

Pat Enciso: Yes.

Robin Chenoweth: It seems to be where a lot of the controversy is. Is that something you address in your classes?

Pat Enciso: I absolutely address that in my classes. Our eldest is trans. And this is an unfolding journey for us. And one that I can see is both a beautiful journey and dangerous because of the current political climate. ... Instead of being told, you don't get any stories, because you're so wrong, they need stories that are sympathetic to the dilemmas that they face, to the institutional norms and barriers that they're facing. And those books are now available. So, *Gender Queer* is a beautiful memoir of the exploration of their sexuality and gender identity, from childhood to young adulthood. It's a very undetermined understanding of themselves. And that is not a story that was ever available even five years ago. So, making visible the realities of people who are questioning gender and sexuality norms, threatens people who are very protective of the gender binary. ... People are not all the same. And these book bans are targeting those stories that are most honest, I would say. I will add that the book *Lawn Boy* was never intended for young people. And that got picked up as if it were a young adult novel and is still grouped with all of the other books as though it's a young adult novel and it's not. The author never intended it for young people. So that becomes a kind of flashpoint when it really is not within the scope of any of this. But it then called attention to other books.

Robin Chenoweth: Many teenagers themselves are weighing in on LGBTQ book themes, says Cynthia Tyson.

Cynthia Tyson: When I talk to young people, especially, teenage young people, they're like, this is not an issue for us. This is an issue for older people. They don't even understand why some of these books are even on the list. Because, they're like, we're beyond this. This isn't a thing. Everybody should be allowed to live and breathe and love how they want to in the world. So, the fact that we have young people feeling that and ready to shift and change and challenge the world, I think that folks who are sitting around thinking we need to ban these books are also working to disempower what that might look like as we see a shift and a change in the world.

Robin Chenoweth: So how can a book, the simple written word, change a child? Can a story help people see beyond themselves? Is there a chance that it can bring us — the dissenters, the proponents, the Black, brown and white, the gay and straight — together?

Robin Chenoweth: A book — I think you may have answered this already but let's maybe dive a little deeper...

Pat Enciso: Okay.

Robin Chenoweth: ... how a book can help shape a kid's mind. And I feel like maybe some people on the side of banning these books have a fear of that. But it can also be used to create empathy, to create advocacy. ... What are the possibilities for what a book can do to help shape a person? And then why, why do we have this fear surrounding it?

Pat Enciso: Words matter. Stories matter. Stories are part of who we are. They shape how we view the world. Book banning is about excluding those stories that a small group of people have decided would create a misshapen world. But to say that is to also say who you are, as a real person represented in that story, is also undeserving of being represented. ... The storytelling that we're doing with diverse literature disrupts these very problematic views of those people we do not know well, or do not engage with on a daily basis. It disrupts those narratives. But it also at its best, teaches us how to see people as human and fully human and interesting, and doing everything humans do. We grieve, we laugh, we love, we lose, we want, we need. Too often when otherness is the subject of the book, all you get is otherness, and us and them, and that, that narrative is very hard to disrupt in schooling. ... If you connect with a character, if you, in some cases actually merge with the character, if you're standing alongside them watching through their eyes, what is happening in the world, you're taken into another space of another human experience. That is incomparable. You can only do this through reading. Well, and drama and other art forms, but especially through reading. And when kids experience that kind of close alignment with the world of the story, their comprehension, it excels. So, to take that representation opportunity away from kids, so that they never know what that experience is, to me... it is a form of denying a human right.

Robin Chenoweth: Repression even.

Pat Enciso: It is a repression of their right to learn. They need to be able to learn with stories that they can enter into fully. They may disconnect at certain points in that story. But overall, their experience is, I know what is going on there.

Robin Chenoweth: Here's Cynthia Tyson about where literature can lead us.

Cynthia Tyson: You get to see an experience through the eyes of a protagonist, the ways in which another group of people may live and view and see the world. It will then increase your empathy. It can increase your compassion. It can increase your way to not walk in their shoes, but to see the pathways that their shoes take in life. ... And understanding that there's multiple ways of being in the world, I do believe really helps us understand that we can coexist. We can agree to disagree. We can have different views. We can want to have the same goal but work at it from different ways. ... The world does open up through reading. And I would suggest that the fact that the banning of books has become such an increased agenda item, is because people know how powerful books are. They know the power of a book. They know that to put these books in the hands of especially the folks who are going to be the leaders in our world, as we move forward...they know how important it is. Beyond just the educational piece. Beyond just a therapeutic value of isn't it wonderful to sit down and feel good and read a good book? It's beyond even the empathy and the understanding. It's about inspiration. It's about

empowerment, it's about moving and shaking the world as we will soon watch these young people do and helping them really challenge some of the things that are in these books.

Robin Chenoweth: To read the National Council of Teachers of English article on Continuing the Fight for Intellectual Freedom, see the link in our episode notes.

Read a National Council of Teachers of English article about continuing efforts to preserve [intellectual freedom](#).

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