Book Banning in the USA

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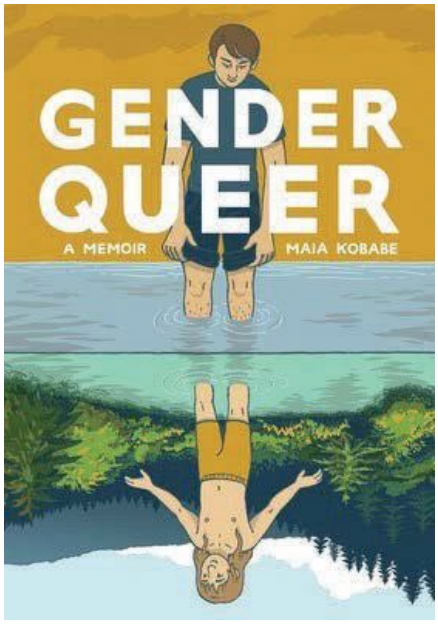
"Librarians grapple with conservative efforts to ban books." "Librarians are resisting censorship of children's books by LGBTQ+ and Black authors." "Librarians face coordinated efforts to remove books." These are just some of the headlines covered in the media in the last few months. Books focusing on the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ people and the experiences and perspectives of people in communities of color are being singled out in record numbers for removal from school libraries. Why is this, especially in light of the 1982 Supreme Court case, *Island Trees v. Pico*, which argued that removing books from school libraries violated students' First Amendment rights? One book, *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, by Maia Kobabe (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/01/books/maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban.html), has the dubious accolade of being the most banned book of 2021 according to the American Library Association. *Gender Queer* is about one person's experience of being non-binary and asexual and was published three years ago, in 2019. However, it is only now being condemned as a book that young people should not be reading, despite winning accolades from the American Library Association. (It was both a Stonewall Book Award (https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/gender-queer-memoir) winner and an Alex Book Award (https://www.ala.org/yalsa/2020-alex-awards) winner in 2020). This book was not only challenged around the country (https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-life-and-style/author-gender-queer-one-banned-books-us-addresses-controversy-rcna8991), but was also challenged in New York City, in the relatively politically liberal district where I work. I work as a Coordinator of Library Services for the New York City School Library System with the New York City Department of Education under the supervision of Melissa Jacobs, Director. A parent challenged this book, which is owned by a handful of school libraries within our city. The system policy is that individual school librarians are permitted full discretion about what they order for their school libraries, unlike other communities where school librarians can be held criminally liable for what they purchase if it offends a parent or lawmaker, as in Tennessee (http://tnedreport.com/2022/08/lock-them-up/). New York City public schools also have a Citywide Digital Library



with over 27,000 titles, brought to fruition during the pandemic, to make ebooks available to our students. *Gender Queer* was not in our ebook collection at the time of the challenge, but it was available in print format in several New York City school libraries. The parent wanted the book removed along with one other title. Fortunately, we had a collection development and materials review policy in place and used this materials review policy to convene a committee to review the books in question. The parent had also challenged *The Pants Project* by Cat Clarke, an innocuous book written for a junior high school audience about a transgender boy who challenges his school's school uniform policy. The committee consisted of myself, coordinator of library services, Jacobs, director of library services, Jacob's supervisor, two parents, a school principal, and a school librarian. We discussed the contents of each book, and determined by a vote that both titles should be allowed to remain in both our Citywide Digital Library and in our schools' library collections. Unfortunately, the parent was not satisfied with the findings of our review committee and went to the press. The result was this headline: "New York City Education Department Promotes Gay pornography in Public Schools" (https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-life-and-style/author-gender-queer-one-banned-books-us-addresses-controversy-rcna8991). And there were more similar headlines in the media (quoted above) during the next few months.

Books focusing on the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ people and the experiences and perspectives of people in communities of color are being singled out in record numbers for removal from school libraries. We are not deterred however because, as stated in the written conclusion of our review committee, New York City public schools affirm all students. The book is not pornographic, does not depict child rape or pedophilia, nor aims to desensitize its readers to pedophiles, as this parent claimed, but rather it is a memoir of one person's experience of being non-binary and asexual. It includes visual depictions of dildos, masturbation, and oral sex, yet it is the author's authentic experiences of discovering eir sexuality and gender identity, and how could anyone object to another person's life experiences? (The author uses e, em, eir pronouns). The book's purpose is not to "groom" its readers, but rather provides a window into the lived experiences of one person's life journey. It is a groundbreaking work providing both a window into the lived experiences of non-binary people and a mirror for those who can relate to that experience. *Gender Queer* was well-reviewed and if read in its entirety, its readers will gain a glimpse into the life and experiences of a non-binary and asexual person and their discoveries as such.

What is at stake when parents and some lawmakers are calling for bans of books on race, social justice, and LGBTQ issues? After all, 'those that make challenges against reading materials in school libraries often do so with the best intentions in mind. Challenges to remove books from schools are meant to protect the student, frequently young children, from uncomfortable or difficult ideas and information' (Waggoner 2019).

However, these censors do not realize that students' first amendment rights and their right to free expression are being violated. Students have a constitutional right to access information. They have a constitutional right to read, and to read what they wish. They have a constitutional right to receive information. If a parent wants to curb what their child reads, that is one thing, but they should not be enabled by politicians and lawmakers to regulate the reading lives of other people's children. Books are not just being banned from school libraries. They are being removed from classroom collections, and from school curricula, and challenged in public libraries as well. In fact, some towns in the United States are even defunding their public libraries over their inclusion of LGBTQ books when the librarians refuse to remove those books.

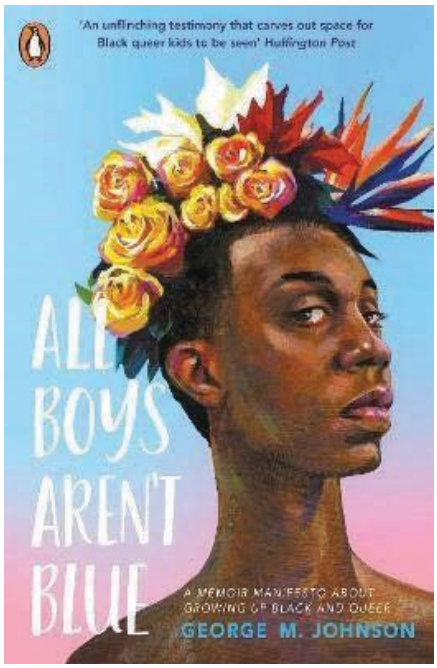
This is the case with the Patmos Library (https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/upset-over-lgbtq-books-michigan-town-defunds-its-library-tax-vote) in Jamestown Township, Michigan, and elsewhere. What is happening here? In one nine-month period, PEN America (https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/) recorded 1,586 instances of books being banned in a total of 26 states and 86 school districts in the United States. Why is this happening now, especially considering the Island Trees v. Pico Supreme Court case? In 1982, a case was brought before the Supreme Court of the United States called *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=11432514393725128521&hl=en&as_sdt=5,33&sciodt=3,33). This court case was initiated by a high school senior, Steven Pico and four other students, who filed a lawsuit against the school board about the removal of nine books from the high school library claiming that their First Amendment rights were being violated. The books were removed based on their perceived anti-Christian and anti-Semitic viewpoints and being deemed immoral overall and in "bad taste." The Supreme Court concluded that students' First Amendment rights would be transgressed if the school board was permitted to remove the books from the school library. In essence, Pico et al. won their court case. The Supreme Court ruled that "Local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books." Justice William Brennan concluded that "local school boards have broad discretion

in the management of school affairs, but such discretion must be exercised in a manner that comports with the transcendent imperatives of the First Amendment."

Hence, it was determined that the removal of books from school libraries by school boards is unconstitutional and that students and school libraries have constitutional protections. In *Pico*, it was written: A school library, no less than any other public library, is "a place dedicated to quiet, to knowledge, and to beauty" (*Brown v. Louisiana*, 383 U. S. 131, 142 (1966), opinion of Fortas, J.) *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U. S. 589 (1967), observed that "students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." The school library is the principal locus of such freedom.

So, this begs the question about why all the book banning now? After all, wasn't Pico settled law? Nine justices weighed arguments for and against the removal of books from public school libraries and determined that it was unjust. Just as *Roe v. Wade* was considered settled law on the topic of abortion, it was recently overturned by a predominantly conservative Supreme Court in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf) case. Whereas women in the United States, for nearly 50 years, had the constitutional right to an abortion, that 1973 ruling has now been overturned. "Students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding." Will the same happen to the *Pico* case? Will school boards and politicians be allowed to violate students' first amendment rights to read what they like in the school library? Will certain books be challenged and banned because their content is deemed inappropriate? For 40 years, the *Pico* case has stood as settled law. Will it, like *Roe v. Wade*, be challenged now?

And what of the LGBTQ content and the material written by people of color? The American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom (https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10) tracked 729 challenges to library materials in 2021 with 1,597 books challenged. Of the ten most challenged books of 2021, five of them have LGBTQ content and two of them were written by people of color, with one of them being written by someone both Black and queer. George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue*, is a coming-of-age memoir of growing up both Black and queer in New Jersey and of the author's coming to discover their sexuality in college. *All Boys Aren't Blue* has now also been optioned for television in the United States, demonstrating that beyond its literary merit, it also deserves a wider audience. In a recent Phi Delta Kappan article, Robert Kim asks the same question: "Pico appears unequivocally to serve as a legal deterrent to book censorship. So why do so many school districts still feel legally entitled to ban books?" (Kim 2022).



I would argue that most of the parents and even some of our lawmakers are not familiar with this case. That's because we have a problem in this country. We don't have the most educated citizenry. Twenty-one percent of U.S. adults are illiterate in the United States (https://www.thinkimpact.com/literacy-statistics/). We don't want this for our citizens, and we certainly don't want this for our students. At this rate it would mean that one in five of our current student population will end up illiterate. This is frightening. However, students are fighting back against these book bans, and they deserve to be heard. In one Georgia community, students have been attending school board meetings and denouncing the book bans going on in their schools. They have solid points. As one student said in a recent article (https://www.cnet.com/news/politics/features/book-bans-are-on-the-rise-but-students-are-fighting-back/), "I'm openly queer, openly transgender, and so it really hits close to home when people are like, let's not have diversity. I am, in my own way, diverse, so if we don't have diversity, where do I go?" As Linda Jacobson writes in *School Library Journal*, school librarians are "the creator(s) of the known world. If it cannot be found in your collection, it simply does not exist. Would you have your LGBTQ students believe that they do not exist? Would you allow victims of sexual abuse to believe that they are the only people to ever have that experience?" (Jacobson 2016).

Yet these are the very books that are being banned. And this is why books are so important. We know already that books can provide comfort to their readers, teaching them that they are not alone in their thoughts and experiences, something so crucial during one's growing up years. As James Baldwin, a noted Black and gay American author wrote in

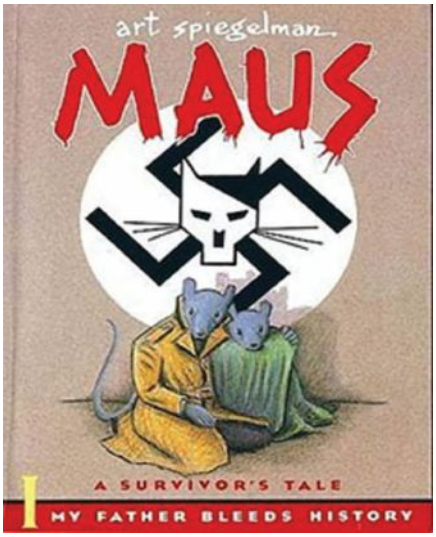
Life Magazine in 1963, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive."

Would we deny this vital experience to today's readers, especially to our young readers? Reading is about learning; it is why we send our children to school. "Since students are compelled to attend school, it can be argued that they should be exposed to more ideas, not fewer" (Kemerer and Hirsh 1982). It is about being exposed to ideas, experiences, and information beyond our own experienced senses. It is how we become open to new ideas and things we have not thought of before or experienced before. And it is how we connect with others who do have the same thoughts we have and experiences we have had. Books are a lifeline in this regard. I would argue that it would be criminal to deny a child or an adult, but especially a child, access to this lifeline. Reading is a vehicle to understand the world around us and it is also a path to intellectualism if one chooses that path. However, there are anti-intellectuals in this country who would deny young people access to this lifeline because "intellectualism [can be] dangerous and books are instrumental for the creation of intellectuals" (Knox 2020).

This is the essence of what is at stake here. School librarians are obligated to provide materials in a variety of formats on a variety of subjects and from a variety of perspectives because doing so helps to support a well-rounded intellect. "It could also be stated that efforts to diversify collections and include books people might ban will contribute to a development of mass consciousness toward greater respect for all humanity and awareness of lived realities beyond those centered by the media and traditional school systems" (Torres 2022). How can this be a bad thing?

As Mona Kerby writes in *American Libraries* magazine, "An item's inclusion in a collection does not mean the librarian endorses or promotes it. They are simply helping the library fulfill its mission to provide information from all points of view" (Kerby 2019). Would we deny this vital experience to today's readers, especially to our young readers? Reading is about learning . . . Reading is a vehicle to understand the world around us . . . Yet school librarians are under attack in the United States right now, under attack for providing a lifeline for young people in the form of books—books that teach, reveal, expose, transform, connect, and comfort. "Teachers [and librarians] should give students many books to read because each book reveals something that gets one closer to the truth, not because one particular book contains all truths. . . . Each book is but one perspective out of many. . . . This process of changing an individual through education is exactly what censors are trying to control when they target books" (Knox 2020). School librarians and English teachers are already well aware of Rudine Sims Bishop's seminal article in the journal, *Perspectives*, in which she outlines the need for literature which constitutes "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" (Bishop 1990). "Together, literacy educators and librarians can work to sustain this important work—that of safeguarding intellectual freedom and student access to worlds beyond their own found within the pages of books they choose to read" (Torres 2022). These conceptual metaphors, mirrors, and windows offer teachers and librarians a new way to look at literature as well as to look at its critical importance to the reading lives and developing intellect of young people when it comes to books. Mirror books reflect back to us who we are. They validate our own lived experiences and legitimize and authenticate who we are as the people we are developing into. Mirror books are important because representation matters. When you don't see yourself in a mirror book, because there are none available in your library, or because they have been banned, students may have trouble relating to the written word because it does not reflect their reality. This cannot stand, as we need our young citizens to read, and to want to read. Window books offer readers a glimpse into the lived experiences of others. They authenticate others' lives and offer perspective on what it is like to live as someone else. And finally, sliding glass doors offer a way to walk through a window book "to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" (McNair and Edwards 2021).

This is why, when *Maus* was banned unanimously by the McMinn County school board in Tennessee back in January, it was covered in so many reputable news outlets from the *New York Times* (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/maus-banned-holocaust-tennessee.html) to the *Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/02/10/maus-holocaust-striped-pajamas/) to National Public Radio (https://www.npr.org/2022/01/31/1076970866/maus-banned-tennessee-school-board). In fact, the news even made it overseas as a friend in France even heard about it and sent me the articles. *Maus* is the Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel memoir of the author's, Art Spiegelman's, relationship with his Holocaust survivor father. It is an important mirror book for other Holocaust survivors and their children and most certainly an extraordinarily significant window book for those wanting to learn about the Jewish Holocaust during World War II. On top of being a riveting read, it happens to also be a graphic novel making it especially accessible for reluctant readers. When it was announced in the major presses that it had been banned,



there was a wave of a 'you've got to be kidding me' reaction. How can anyone ban Maus? Such an important work! It was indicative of the absurdity of what was going on in the country.

Unfortunately, there is a surge of conservative propaganda sweeping our country. For example, when the New York City public school parent made a complaint about *Gender Queer* being in New York City school libraries, she had not read the book. Instead, her written complaint included articles from other conservative newspapers which depicted the book in a poor light, including copies of provocative images from the book, which happens to be a graphic novel. She did not provide her own reasoning behind her objections, but rather relied on others' reasoning for her objections. To boot, and most importantly, she had not read the book herself! How can you challenge a book you have not yourself read in its entirety? "Books are objected to for a variety of reasons. Typically, objections arise from parents or other members of the community taking certain passages contained in the book out of context from the message of the book. . . . Overall literacy and educational value is ignored" (Waggoner 2019).

This is what happened here in New York City. And in Texas, Matt Krause, a lawmaker, created a list of 850 titles (https://bookriot.com/texas-book-ban-list/) that he demanded be removed from libraries. There is no question in my mind that he had not read a single one of those 850 titles he wanted to ban. And neither did this parent. This parent admitted as such when she filled out our book challenge form asking her if she had read the book in its entirety. In addition to this, the book was not in our Citywide Digital Library, nor was the book in her child's school library. This is what's called a "nuisance complaint," when a book is challenged just to be challenged. It was the book's very existence she wanted to challenge, not that her own child had been exposed to it at all, yet she wanted it removed from all the school libraries in our city. Still, we entertained her challenge and convened a committee to review the challenge. Although queries about what is in our New York City school library collections are coming in on a rather regular basis since this conservative wave has swept over the country, we in New York City remain steadfast to provide literature that is culturally relevant to all our nearly one million student readers. Unlike some towns around the country who would rather defund their libraries than permit access to LGBTQ materials, we will continue to fund our collection development efforts of LGBTQ materials (https://www.newsweek.com/town-defunds-library-after-fight-over-lgbtq-novel-1730934), as well as materials about race and social justice and materials written by people from communities of color.

As Karl Rove, former deputy chief of staff during the George W. Bush administration, said at one point, "As people do better, they start voting like Republicans—unless they have too much education and vote Democratic, which proves there can be too much of a good thing." Most of the complaints about certain books are coming from the conservatives who are objecting to the ideas contained in the books they are challenging. It is unfortunate that they do not understand what books are really all about. Books expand our knowledge. Books are about ideas and information. Books uplift and educate. It is a sad state of affairs that we are going through this right now in the United States, but thankfully, as a school librarian, I work for a school system that recognizes, supports, and upholds the rights of its students to read and read what they wish. ■

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