

# Dispelling the Fiction of “Book Bans”

“What we’re seeing here is a resurgence of widespread censorship in America,” [Nadine Farid Johnson recently told The Wall Street Journal](#). Johnson is the Washington director of PEN America and co-author of its report claiming to identify 2,532 books banned in public schools during the 2021-2022 school year.

PEN America advocates on behalf of poets, essayists, and novelists, and it shows: Its report is almost as fictional as the work of the writers it represents.

It is simply false that 2,532 books were removed from schools during the 2021-2022 school year. We know this is false because we examined online card catalogues and found that 74% of the [books PEN America identified as banned](#) from school libraries are actually listed as available in the catalogues of those school districts. In many cases we could see that copies of those books are currently checked out and in use by students.

Among the books that PEN America alleges were banned are classic works, such as “Anne Frank’s Diary,” “Brave New World,” “Lord of the Flies,” “Of Mice and Men,” “The Color Purple,” and “To Kill a Mockingbird.” In every school district in which PEN America alleges those books were banned, we found copies listed as available in the online card catalogue.

For example, PEN America claims that “To Kill a Mockingbird” was “Banned in Libraries and Classrooms” in the Edmond public [school district in Oklahoma](#). Edmond’s card catalogue indicates that the library has 10 copies of the book, two of which were checked out at the time we looked.

[PEN America suggests](#) that racism is a major factor driving

censorship. The organization reports that “659 banned book titles (40 percent) contain protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color” and “338 banned book titles (21 percent) directly address issues of race and racism.”

The book “The Hate U Give,” which was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and primarily features black characters, is listed as one of the most frequently banned books, reportedly removed from more than a dozen public school libraries during 2021-2022.

But when we examine the online card catalogues in those school districts, we find copies of “The Hate U Give” available in every one of them.

For example, PEN America says that “The Hate U Give” was banned in Goddard [Public Schools in Kansas](#), yet that district’s card catalogue lists nine copies of the book; three were checked out at the time we examined it. Similarly, the book was supposedly banned from the Indian River School District in Florida, but the card catalogue in that district shows 20 copies available, with several checked out.

We were unable to find 26% of the books that PEN America claimed were banned in school district card catalogues, but that doesn’t necessarily mean those books were banned. Given how sloppy and error-prone the PEN America report is, it’s unclear whether the books we were unable to find in school district card catalogues had ever been listed and then removed.

In addition, many of the books we were unable to find in card catalogues were works that would strike most reasonable people as unlikely to be age-appropriate for school libraries. Works like “Gender Queer,” “Flamer,” “Lawn Boy,” “Fun Home,” and “It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health” either contain images of [people engaged in sex acts](#) or graphic descriptions of those acts.

People who don't want these books available to children in school libraries aren't book banners. And people unwilling to defer to the unilateral authority of teachers and librarians to decide what children should have access to without democratic oversight or parental input are not fascists.

Determining what books are age-appropriate and [educationally valuable enough](#) to be purchased and kept in school libraries is inherently contentious even among well-intentioned people. But having a productive process for adjudicating these disputes is rendered impossible by false and hysterical claims from organizations like PEN America that there is "widespread censorship in America." The vast majority of books allegedly banned from school libraries haven't been banned at all.

A more realistic description of the situation is that classic works of literature continue to be available in the libraries of virtually every school district while we have some disagreements over a limited number of graphic works. Manufacturing a [book-banning crisis](#) where none exists only serves to undermine public discourse and fails to protect democratic freedom.

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