

Why Our Bookstores Never Participated in Banned Books Week

Banned Books Week, October 1–7, is here again.

Bookstores and libraries across the country will feature displays of what they call banned books. Some mainstream news outlets will offer editorials and articles denouncing censorship in places like school and public libraries. We'll doubtless hear this year's theme and slogan, "[Let Freedom Read](#)," repeated from these same sources. It's a noble tagline and one in keeping with the First Amendment and our country's deepest aspirations. What American, one might ask, could possibly favor banning books?

The first Banned Books Week took place in [1982](#). From 1984 until her death in 2004, my wife and I owned and operated three book businesses, including a mail order outfit aimed at homeschoolers. During that score of years, we never once participated in Banned Books Week.

Here's why:

When I think of books being banned, my first thoughts are of dictatorships, of writers thrown into gulags and literature into bonfires, where totalitarians control the presses, the libraries, and what an author may publish, however innocent of politics the material. In Nazi Germany, for instance, the state [condemned and removed](#) from public consumption the works of authors like [Marx and Engels](#), [Freud](#), and [Jack London and Ernest Hemingway](#). Even Felix Salten's 1922 [Bambi](#)—the story is a [parable](#) of anti-Semitism in Europe following World War I—was [given the ax](#).

The Soviet Union likewise [regulated](#) libraries and bookshops

and banned, censored, and bowdlerized the works of writers past and present. Nobel Prize-winner [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#) was the most famous of these, and that reputation may have brought him banishment and exile rather than another stint in a gulag. Yet many of his contemporaries were imprisoned, killed, or prohibited from publishing their work.

By early 2023, the government of Ukraine had [withdrawn 19 million books](#) in Russian from its libraries, with plans to continue this culling, despite nearly one-third of Ukrainians speaking Russian. Once again, it is the state that is banning books.

Here in the United States, however, it is a different story altogether. Banned Books, "[a coalition of organizations dedicated to free expression](#)," isn't at war with the state. This year, its opponents are parents and other concerned citizens who are objecting to certain books, most of them aimed at adolescents and young children, found in our school and public libraries. The "book banners" are angry moms and dads who contend that these books are both political in intent and pornographic in content and should be removed from library shelves or restricted in their availability.

So, what are these books?

The Banned Books website [lists](#) the top 13 controversial books of 2023. Number 1 on this list is Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*. Besides citing the title and author, Banned Books provides this scant information about its banning: "Reasons: LGBTQIA+ content, claimed to be sexually explicit." Six other books on this list bear this same LGBTQIA+ label. Accompanying all 13 books is that strange, murky notation, "claimed to be sexually explicit." And as far as I can tell, with a couple of exceptions, these books are aimed at adolescents.

For sample passages from two of the books from this list, read Dave Seminara's *City Journal* article, "[The Left Twists the](#)

[Meaning of 'Book Ban.'](#)” Moreover, it is only fair to note here that some in the Banned Books camp use the term [challenged](#) rather than *banned* books, which strikes me as much more apt. Because is it really about *banning* books? All of the titles on the Banned Books list are readily available for purchase or order from bookstores across the nation or from online outlets. Parents who want their child to read *Gender Queer*, *Lawn Boy*, or *Flamer* therefore have access to the books. In addition, most of this fighting occurs over materials in school libraries, where, unlike in public libraries, parents cannot supervise their children browsing the shelves.

At any rate, the battle lines are drawn. On one side are some publishers, liberal organizations, and the American Library Association, whose [recently elected president](#), Emily Drabinski, publicly and proudly said in a now-deleted tweet: “I just cannot believe that a Marxist lesbian who believes that collective power is possible to build and can be wielded for a better world is the president-elect of @ALALibrary.” On the other side are parents who don’t want their children exposed to pornography. The Banned Books forces are well organized and well financed. Their opponents, mostly parents, are the Davids in this fight, individuals and grassroots organizations standing against a Goliath.

So, if you want to talk to me of the writers who fled to America after the Nazis or Soviets condemned their books and threatened their lives, I’ll listen; or bring up the brutal suppression of literature, history, and art in other countries around the world, and I’ll be all ears.

But talk to me about books being banned in America, and you will have lost me.

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