

American Censorship: How Book Banning Has Changed over the Decades

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Contents

Introduction	3
The Why	4
The Who	8
The Where	10
The What	12
The Classics	13
The Giants	18
What is next?	23
Conclusion	25
Works Cited	26

Introduction

This paper will provide an overview into which books have been challenged in America, why they have been challenged, where they have been challenged, and who they have been challenged by. The American Library Association defines a challenge as “a formal, written complaint filed with a library or school requesting that a book or other material be restricted or removed because of its contents or appropriateness” (Lee). To show this, I have chosen a four-pronged approach, looking at different aspects of book banning, and I will also provide context whenever needed. I would also like to emphasize that the American education system – high schools, in this case – operate very much locally, meaning what this paper will be talking about localized events, as there is no federal system in place for expunging a book out of the curriculum, because it is not the job of the federal government to interfere with such matters.

As for my examples, I have also chosen some specific books, such as Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) series to better illustrate my point. I chose this issue because of two reasons. Firstly, more and more books are targeted each year, with the trend set to continue (Jones). Because I find this to be an alarming trend, I wanted to detail its inner workings, show what has been going on in the past, what is going on right now, and what we can expect unless something changes. The other reason is that I believe this to be an incredibly important topic these days, because censorship seldom leads to the desired outcome, as proven throughout history. It is a dangerous tool which strips away intellectual freedom, limiting which books can be read and which cannot. Each of the four chapters will highlight a different aspect of (potential) censorship, shining a light on the process from different angles, and giving a comprehensive picture of the state of censorship in the United States.

While this paper will only cover a small section of the overall issue, I believe it will still show what is happening and more importantly, why. School curricula, school libraries, and even public libraries have become battlegrounds of censorship attempts, whether by parents or administrators, regardless of book content. I chose my examples carefully, each highlighting slightly different reasons for attempted censorship, such as racism, vulgar language, sexuality, anti-religious sentiments, or a combination of any of them. Books are rarely challenged for a single reason (“New State of America’s Libraries”), but even if they were, the end result remains the same. Adults wish to protect children from potentially harmful material, but they

do so without consulting them at all, taking away their agency altogether. Even though censorship of the books I will mention is counterproductive – as one of them is about the dangers of censorship, and another was censored for dangers of sexual experimentations while campaigning against meaningless, emotionless sex – it happens regardless, as certain parts or sections of books are taken out of context, becoming grounds of challenges for reasons which make no sense.

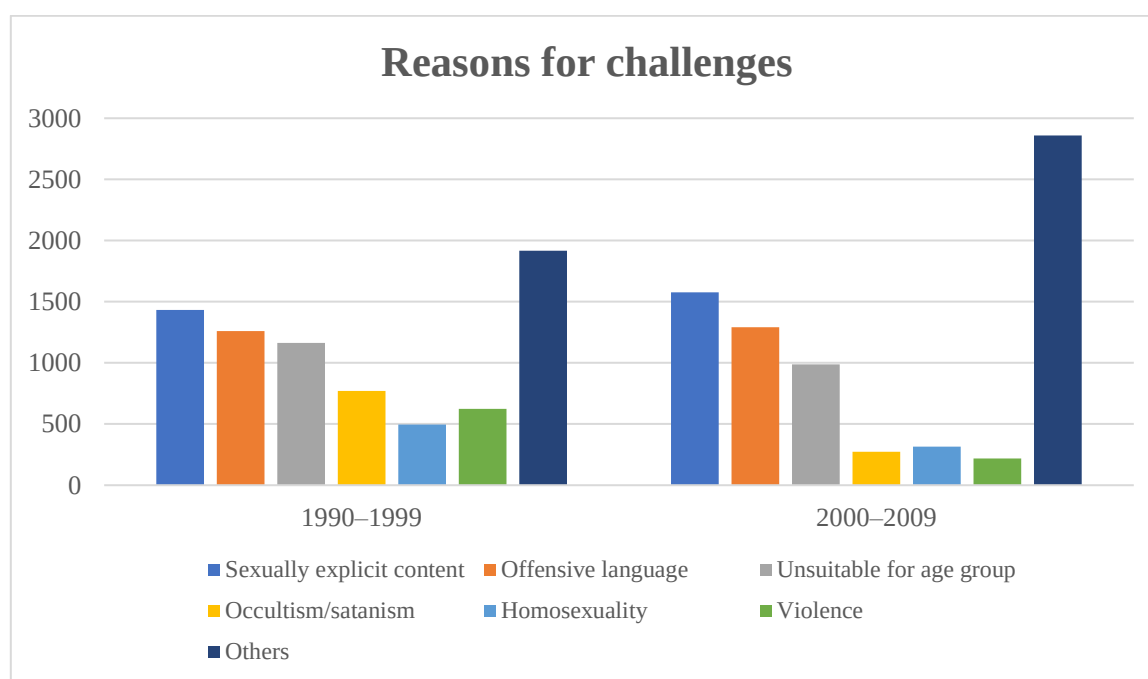
While there most certainly have been cases of books being linked to violent events, censorship is not the way, as echoed by several of the authors mentioned throughout the novel, such as Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). It must, however, also be said that, while challenges are frequent and can happen for almost any reason, they do not equal a ban. While many books have been able to resist attempts at censorship, there is still an alarmingly large number of them which will never see the inside of a classroom or even a school library in some cases, thanks to concerned parents and/or overzealous school administrators. With this paper I would like to highlight the state of attempted, as well as actual censorship today in America, showing in detail what is going on with regards to book banning and what the future holds for readers and authors alike. Something must also be done quickly, unless we wish for a future in which any book that does not conform to the “norm” is discarded, put aside, and made inaccessible.

The Why

For my most important angle I wanted to look at the reasons for attempted – and oftentimes successful – censorship. The reasons, collected and categorized by the ALA as well as PEN America, are almost endless, as almost anything can be grounds for censorship, regardless of what time period we are looking at. The recorded data of the ALA begins in 1990, although there are documented cases of book banning well before that too. Between 1990–2009, 15,187 reasons have been recorded as grounds for striking books. Challenges largely happen for one – or a combination – of these three main reasons: sexual explicitness, offensive language, and unsuitability for a particular age group. While there is a myriad of other reasons as well, these three made up 53% of censorship attempts between 1990–1999 (4123 out of 7661), and 51% (3857 out of 7526) between 2000–2009. By far the leading cause of challenge attempts was sexually explicit content, being singlehandedly responsible for 20% (3009 out of 15,187) of cases. A close second was offensive language, which took up 17% (2550 out of 15,187) of cases, and thirdly came unsuitable content for a particular age group with 14% (2151

out of 15,187) of cases. Occultism/satanism was responsible for 7%, 1044 cases, and homosexuality and violence were responsible for 5% of cases each, 844 and 811 respectively. The remaining 32% of reasons was split among racism, nudity, political/religious viewpoints, as well as topics like abortion, sexual education, and of course smoking/alcohol/drugs were reasons for attempted censorship as well (see fig. 1).

While the trends over the years are not obvious at first sight, there are indeed some. For example, even though the number of challenges due to sexually explicit materials or offensive language has remained almost exactly the same, changing only a couple of percentage points (18.6% to 20.9%; 16.4% to 17.1%) over the decades, the number of books banned for homosexual content has decreased from 6% to 4%, from 495 challenges between 1990–1999 to 316 challenges between 2000–2009, and challenges because of occultist or satanist references has also plummeted from 10% to merely 3%, a change from 770 cases to only 274 (“Infographics”). As the years go even further by, certain trends, while subtle, can be definitely seen.

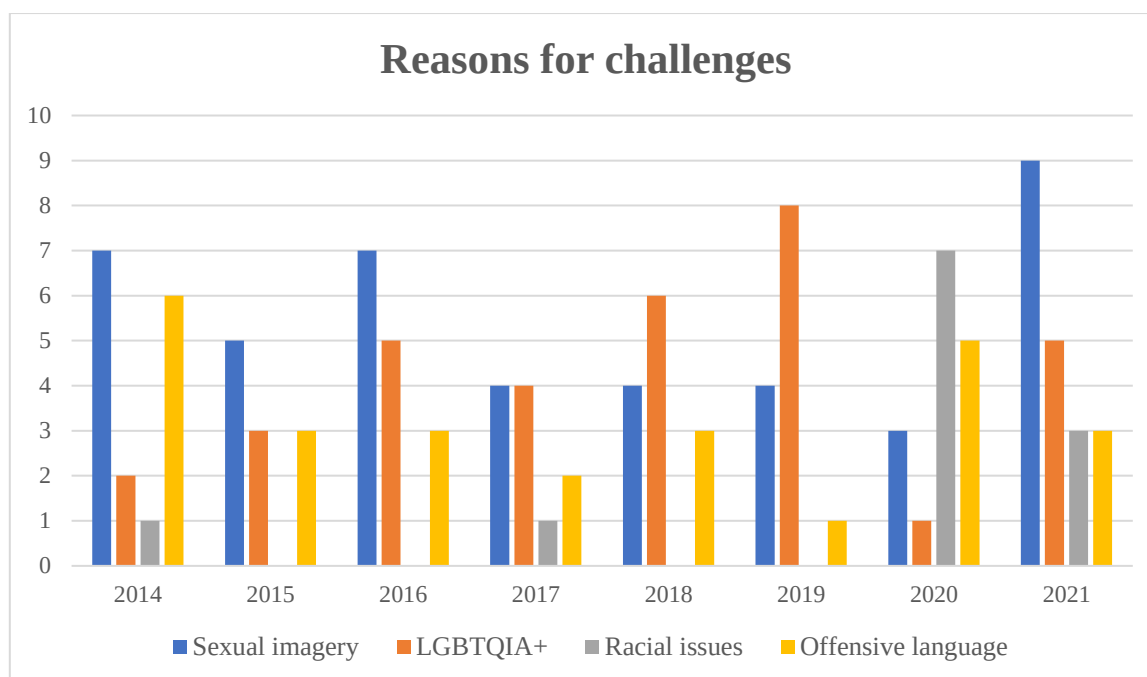


Reasons for challenges between 1990–2009. Fig. 1.

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

Regrettably, such detailed statistics from the ALA are unavailable for recent years, but by taking a look at the ten most challenged books of recent years, it is quite clear what kind of books have become the target for would-be censors. Five of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books

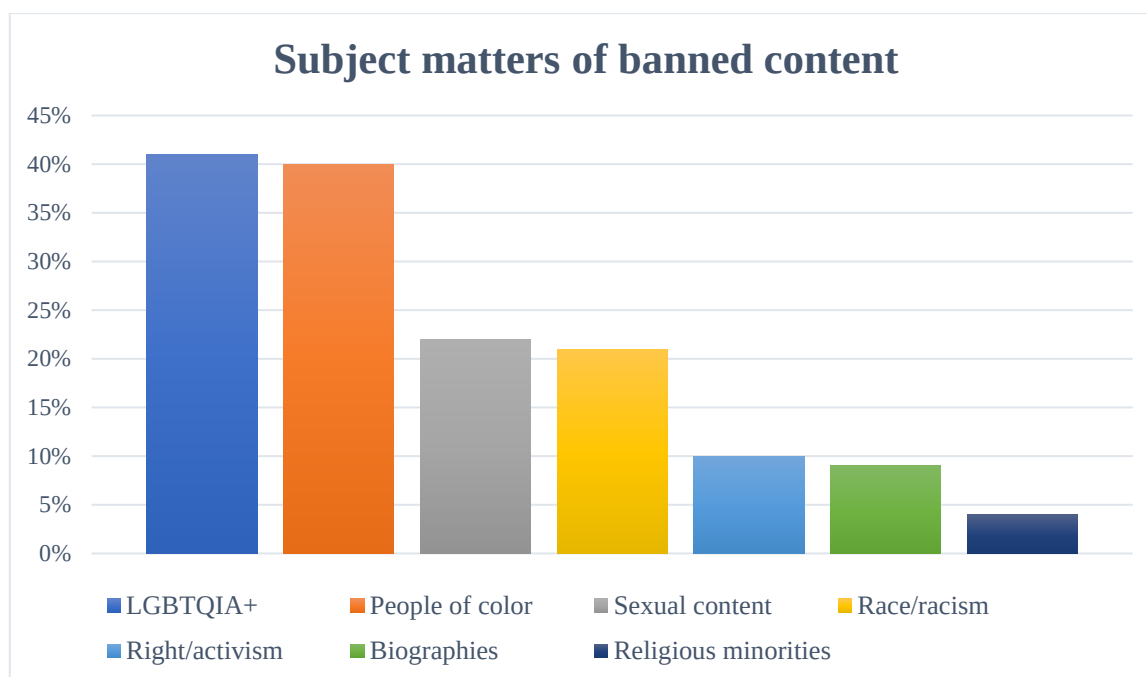
of 2021 feature LGBTQIA+ content, and nine of those ten contained sexually explicit content. In 2020, during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, three books were challenged because of anti-police views, seven altogether because of racial issues, and two because of sexual imagery. Going a back a year further to 2019, four of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books made the list because of sexual imagery, and a staggering eight books were challenged because of LGTBQIA+ topics. 2018 paints a similar picture, as four books were challenged because of LGBTQIA+ topics, and another four because of sexual imagery (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”). While the books themselves may have changed over the years, the reasons for banning them have merely transformed, not disappeared. It is obvious at first glance that sexuality is still the overwhelming reason for challenges, but in recent years books featuring racial issues and LGBTQIA+ topics have also risen to the top of these lists. As a reaction to the civil rights protests of 2020, books dealing with racism, perspectives of people of color, and in general stories not featuring “regular” white protagonists have started rising on the censorship lists. Similarly, stories dealing with gender issues, questions of sexuality, and with any non-straight, “abnormal” subject matters have also been occupying an alarming number of spots on these lists (see fig. 2), as their subject matters have become more and more relevant in today’s society. I think the trends shown by these graphs are very much indicative of the future, but this data is far from complete, and only takes into consideration reported cases, which, according to the ALA, is far from all cases (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”), so conclusions must only be drawn carefully, since these numbers are only a fraction of the overall whole. As the data shows, books containing LGBTQIA+ themes or racial issues are most contested, dethroning vulgar language, which used to be one of the biggest reasons for attempted censorship. Homosexuality, which also used to be a major issue amid concerned parties, has been incorporated into LGBTQIA+ issues, thus the decline in challenges that happened over the first decade of the 21st century has essentially been turned on its head.



Reasons for challenges among the Top 10 Most Challenged Books. Fig. 2

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

PEN America, another organization concerned with the issue of book banning, has also been collecting data. According to their figures, between July 1, 2021, and June 30, 2022, 1648 unique books were banned. PEN America defines a ban “as any action taken (against a book) based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, [...], that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished (Friedman, “Rising School Book Bans”). According to their statistics, 41% of these books (674 out of 1648) explicitly address LGBTQIA+ themes, 40% (659 out of 1648) contain protagonists or prominent characters of color, 22% of them (357) contain some kind of explicit sexual content, and 21% of them (338) address race or racial issues. Among these, around 10% contain themes related to activism, and around 4% of them contain characters whose stories are in the religious minority, such as people of Jewish or Muslim faith (Friedman, “The Growing Movement to Censor”). It is not hard to see that sexual and vulgar grounds for challenges have taken a backseat to so-called “diverse” books, which deal with the issues of non-straight and/or non-white people (see fig. 3). While sexuality is a common topic in those books too, “diversity” has been the leading cause of censorship in recent years, along with sexual explicitness, which has been a chart-topper for as long as recorded data exists.

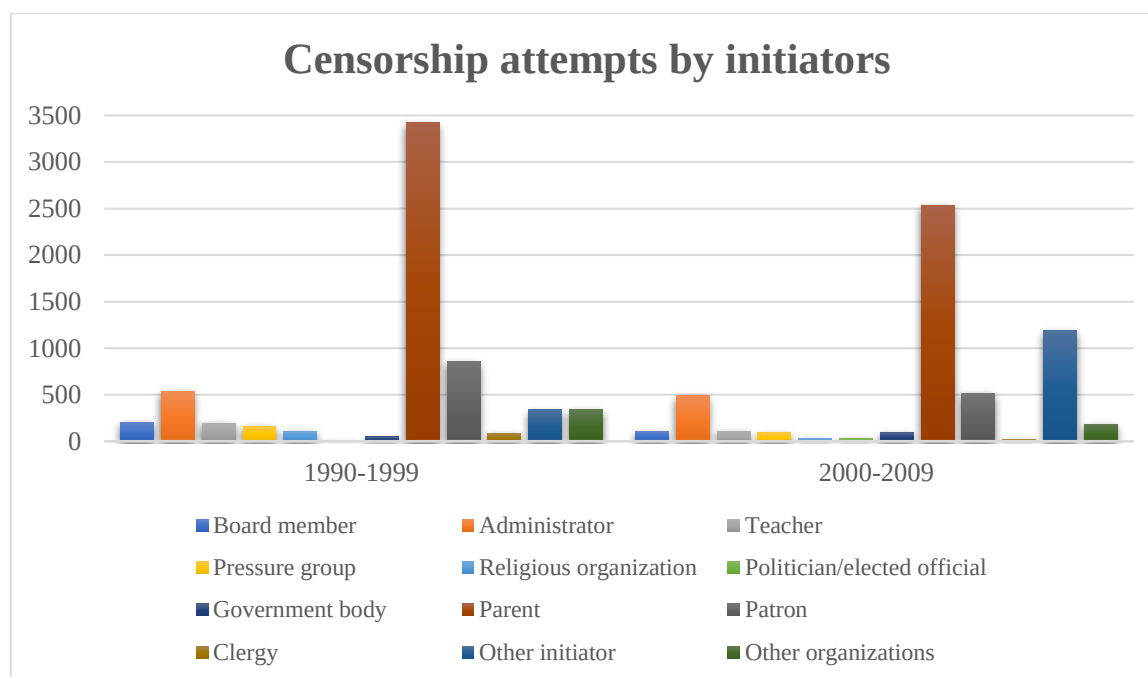


Subject matters of banned content between 2021–2022. Fig. 3

source: <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

The Who

For my second angle, I wanted to take a look at who initiates the challenges. Thanks to statistics from the ALA, the main actors are obvious. They have recorded 11,691 attempts at censorship between 1990–2009, of which 6288 attempts took place between 1990–1999 and the remaining 5403 took place between 2000–2009. Thanks to their data collection efforts, we can see that every second attempt, 5956 out of 11,691 (51%), has come from parents, with the remaining being split mostly between administrators and patrons (9% each). The rest (31%) is split among the parties as indicated on figure 4 below. For other initiators and other organizations, no further or more specific data of any kind exists. The numbers clearly show the stark contrasts between parents and everyone else as even teachers and administrators who run the very schools in which a large number of these challenges occur, only make up 11% of reported cases, so 1303 out of 11,691 challenges (“Infographics”). While it should be no surprise that parents are the most concerned party out of all of them, I still think it is striking just how involved they are in attempted censorship, trying to take away the very books their children might one day wish to read. I think it also worth repeating that even a single, concerned parent is enough for a book to be stricken from not only an entire classroom’s reading list, but from that of an entire school.

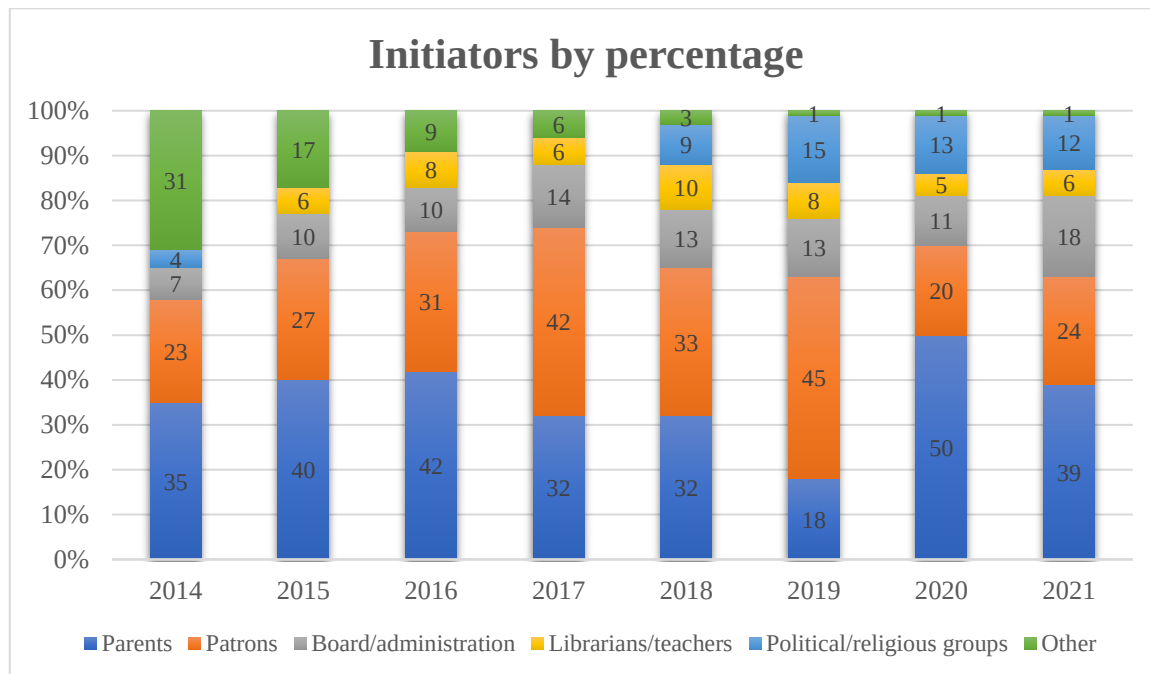


Censorship attempts by initiators between 1990–2009. Fig. 4

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

The figures change as the years go on, as other notable actors emerge in censorship attempts. The ALA has recorded around 3000 attempts at censorship between 2014 and 2021, with parents and patrons being the primary culprits, but school boards/administrations as well as political and religious groups, and teachers/librarians also make up a not insignificant percentage of book banning attempts. Parents on average have made up 36% of censorship attempts in the last eight years, patrons have represented 30%, school boards and administrations have made up 12%, and teachers and librarians were responsible for 6% of all attempts. The other 16% is split between religious and political parties, but also at times between students and government bodies (“Infographics”). Patrons, of whom no strict definition exists, are largely outside parties who provide financial support to schools, but otherwise have nothing to do them, though in recent years that has not stopped them from trying to interfere with curricular matters, as evidenced by the numbers. While this starkly contrasts to the decade prior, and especially to the one prior to that, parents still remain the main actors responsible for trying to strike books from library shelves as well as reading lists, but patrons have also taken up a large role in the matter. While far from exhaustive, this data does provide a fairly exhaustive look at who has been initiating the challenges, and how the importance of these actors has changed over time, with certain groups emerging over the decades, challenging more and more books over the years (see fig. 5). While the number of attempts has also been

on the rise, especially in recent years, it must also be stated that not every challenge results in a ban, nor does a ban from school curriculum mean that the book is entirely removed from the school library, or that students are prohibited from seeking the book out elsewhere, only that their chances of coming across or reading the book decrease substantially.



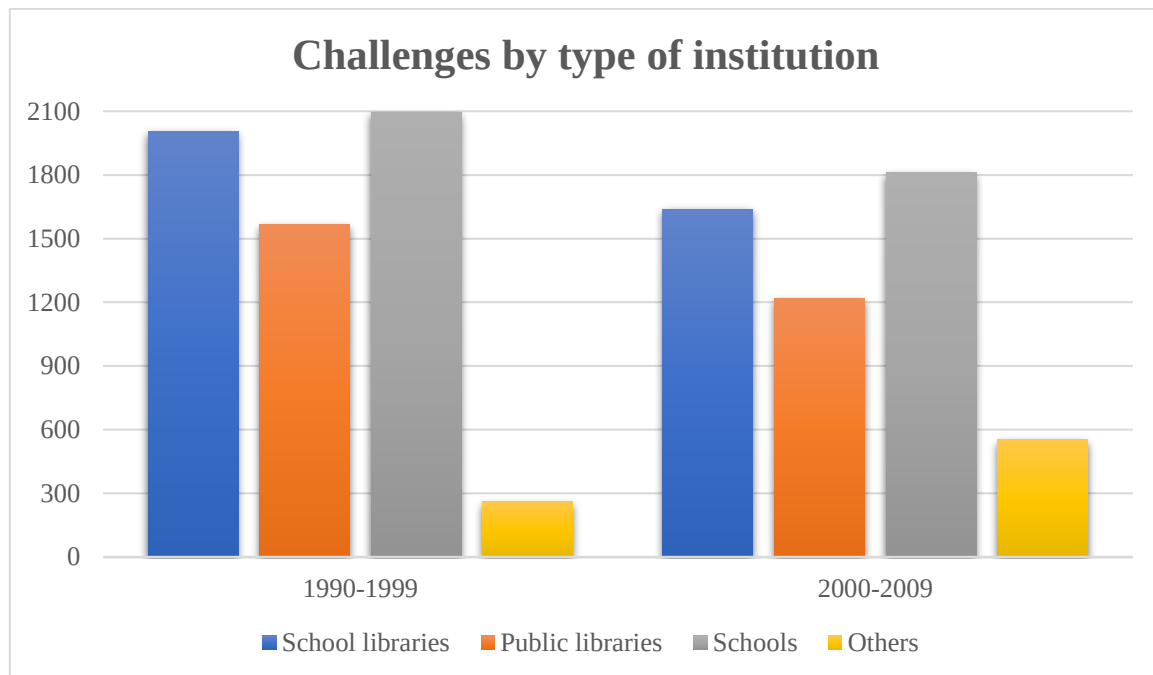
Initiators by percentage between 2014–2021. Fig. 5

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

The Where

For my third angle, I wanted to look at where challenges are taking place, be it a school, a library of a school, a public library, or in some cases other institutions entirely. The ALA's data reveal that most attempts take place inside the three aforementioned places, but that does not mean that other institutions are safe, only that they are less targeted or that there are fewer mechanisms in place for material to be challenged in there. The ALA has recorded altogether 11,146 attempts of censorship across over a dozen institutions between 1990–2009, of which 35% has taken place in schools (3906 out of 11,146), 33% in school libraries (3644 out of 11,146), 29% in public libraries (3204 out of 11,146), and the remaining 3% has taken place across a wide variety of institutions, such as academic libraries, colleges or universities, and prison libraries, to name a few ("Infographics"). While it is logical that most censorship attempts would take place where children are educated, it is still shocking that around two out

of three (68%) challenged books were attempted to be censored in schools or in their respective libraries (see fig. 6).

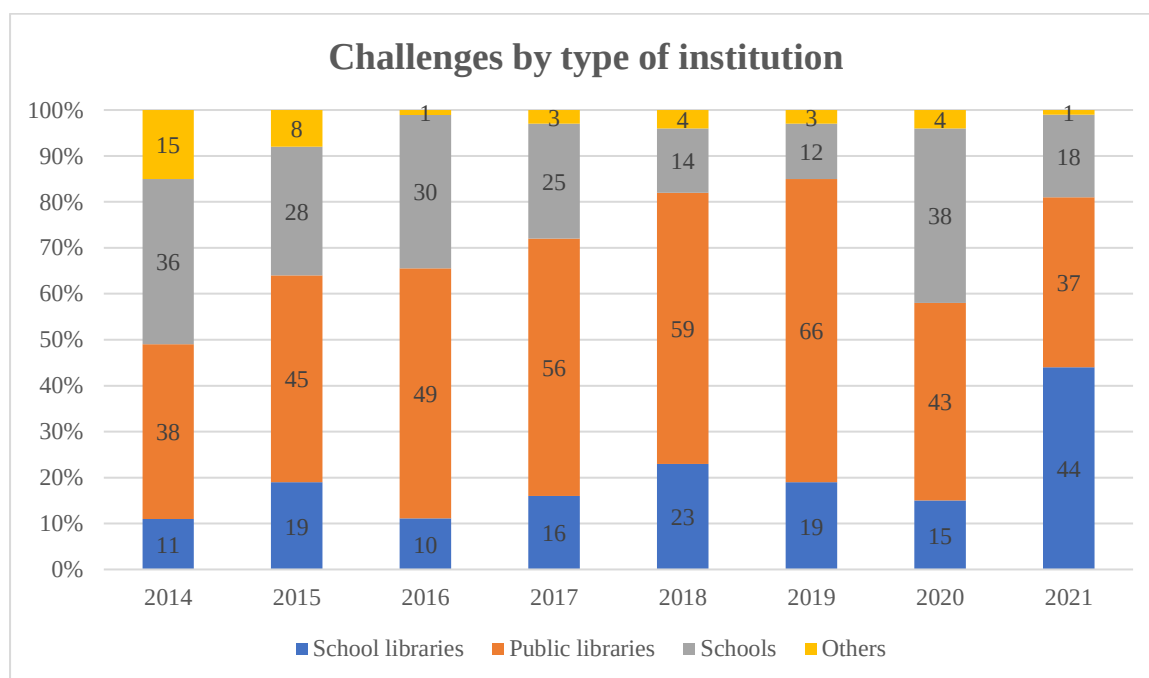


Challenges by type of institution between 1990–2009. Fig. 6

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

The data changes, albeit not much, if we focus our attention on the years between 2014 and 2021, between which years the ALA has recorded well over 2000 attempts across institutions, split similarly to the statistics mentioned prior. During the last eight years, public libraries bore the brunt of censorship attempts, one out of every two (50%) challenged book came under fire there. Schools – meaning curriculum and programs – were responsible for one out of every four (25%) challenged book and school libraries for one out of every five (20%) challenged, while other institutions made up the remaining 5% (see fig. 7). While it would be an overstatement to say much has changed, it is obvious that over time public libraries have become the battle ground of would-be censors and anti-censorship activists alike, while censorship in schools has dropped slightly, especially in the last decade or so, although but last year did see a sharp increase. I also wanted to highlight that while school cases are overall only around 20-25% of challenged books, these are the most crucial, as books which are banned here are taken off mandatory – and sometimes even optional – reading lists (“Infographics”). While far from the only place for students to read, their role is still significant in students learning about a plethora of topics, such as historical events, deep-rooted social issues, questions of identity and self, and so on. Even though we are now living in the Information

Age, when the Internet has become the norm for the dissemination of information (Kemp), schools, especially at such early ages, are still responsible for introducing children to books and literature. While most, if not every single censored book is still available some place on the internet, perhaps even for free, the role of schools, after hundreds of years, still remains to educate, which is growing ever harder as more and more educational material is taken out of curricula.



Challenges by type of institution between 2014–2021. Fig. 7

source: <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

The What

I would like to finish my analysis with specific, high-profile cases of actual censorship. While so far I have been mostly talking about challenges, these cases will be about books which were successfully removed from schools or libraries. I chose well-known books on purpose, to further illustrate that any book can be the target, and more importantly the victim of censorship. While these eight examples will cover a diverse range of topics, such as institutionalized racism, social issues, vulgar language, sexuality, as well as teenage rebellion including alcohol and drugs, these books are just eight of out of thousands of censored books. I split them into two groups, one for classics from around the 20th century, and popular books mainly from the 21st century. My aim was to highlight books which were core pillars of school curricula, whether on mandatory reading lists or in school libraries, as well as popular books, which were

not traditionally taught at schools, but were otherwise read by a very large chunk of schoolchildren and teenagers.

The Classics

I chose four titans of classical literature which should be familiar to most if not all readers of American literature. They are Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and lastly Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). I will be going over each of them in order of release, detailing their cases one-by-one.

I wanted to start off with Mark Twain's legendary tale of Huckleberry Finn because it is probably one of the most often censored books on the list, for several reasons. The book was fifth between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), fourteenth between 2000–2009 (Top 100 2000–2009), and thirty-third between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019) on the American Library Association's list of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books. This puts it on average as the seventeenth most challenged (and banned) book of the last three decades, well over a whole century after its release. Having been published at the end of the 19th century, in 1884, it still attracts controversies to this day (Banned Books 2022 – The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn), making the issue at hand still relevant today. The story is as the title describes, the adventures of a teenager named Huckleberry Finn around two or three decades before The Civil War in then slave states, Missouri and Arkansas. Huck, a young white boy, runs away from his abusive father and runs into an escaped slave, Jim, with whom their adventures across the Mississippi River then unfold. The story is told from Huck's perspective, who narrates the happenings of the story all throughout.

Even though the book was written in a very different time, some school-districts in America still refuse to teach the original version, and some refuse to teach it altogether (Pitts). Twain wrote the book in an authentic style, using the words and phrases of the era (1830s/40s), many of which were – and still are – derogatory towards black people, which is the main reason censors still to this day have not made their peace with this novel. The book is also an interesting case of censorship, as there are two distinct eras during which it was censored. Initially, naysayers took issue with its coarse language, not because of its racism, but because of its style, which mimicked the language of the era (“Banned: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”). While racial slurs might have been acceptable during that time, they are the reason the book is as widely contested in schools as it is today. Nowadays, Twain's tale has become

infamous for containing the n-word over two hundred times (“The Hunger Games Reaches Another Milestone: Top 10 Censored Books”) and in general containing language still considered offensive today (“Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”), focusing mainly on institutionalized racism and slavery, as well as themes of civilization and prejudice, which most censors and adults are uncomfortable letting schoolchildren read. Regardless of the book’s message, which is universally agreed on as being positive (Fishkin), this is still not enough for many schoolboards to keep the novel in their curricula, even though the book could be many pupils’ first experience with slavery in America (“Huckleberry Finn” and the N-word). While regarded as one of the greatest writings in American literary history, one has to look neither far nor hard to find examples of the book being stricken from libraries and/or school reading lists, such as a recent cases in California or Michigan just to name a few, although it must also be said that not everywhere the book is challenged does it end up getting banned, such as cases in Virginia or Illinois, for example (“Banned Books 2022 – The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”). While certainly not a comfortable, easy-to-read book, it still has its place in the classroom as the issues it writes about were very much part of America, regardless of how awful they were. Lastly, I would also like to re-emphasize the point that, if one of the greatest works in literary history can fall prey to censorship - regardless of its contents – is any book really safe?

Of Mice and Men, while a mainstay in several schools nationwide (Newman), has been the target of a ludicrously high number of censors, making it one of the most challenged books in American history. Steinbeck’s novel was sixth between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), fifth between 2000–2009 (Top 100 2000–2009), and twenty-eighth between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019) on the ALA’s list of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books. This puts it on average as the thirteenth most challenged (and banned) book of the last three decades, almost a century after its publication. Originally published right before World War II, the book tells the story of two displaced migrant ranch workers who search for job opportunities during the Great Depression. Since its publication in 1937, its divisive reputation has not changed much, even as the years have gone by.

Steinbeck’s tale contains several touchy subject matters, such as vulgarity, racism and racial slurs, rape, and it even promotes euthanasia. Educators in schools often choose to teach this book because of its accessibility and simplicity, while also being able to offer more to keener readers (Mauder). Yet, the book is constantly under fire by (would-be) censors, ever since the mid-1970s, when the book was first banned in Syracuse, Indiana. Since then, almost

no year has passed in which someone or another has not attempted to remove it from young audiences, citing similar reasons. These reasons include “profanity and using God’s name in vain”, being “filthy”, “indecent”, and “blasphemous language and sexual overtones”, just to name a few out of literal dozens (“Banned and/or Challenged Books”). In a 2015 case in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, parents complained about the book’s coarse language, as well as its bleak ending, as reasons for removing the book from course materials. “I thought it was too dark for ninth graders,” said Eugene Marano, a retired magistrate judge, in favor of removing the book (qtd. in Maben). Another controversial aspect of the book is the shooting of Lennie by George. George decides to shoot his friend as an act of mercy, because Lennie’s unintentional actions earlier in the story have caused a lynch-mob to come after him. George, knowing full-well that by shooting Lennie he can at least grant him a merciful and quick death, kills his friend before the mob can lynch him. This, among the aforementioned issues, contributed greatly to the novel’s status as a now-infamous, widely banned book across American high-schools.

While Steinbeck’s purpose was merely to faithfully recreate the land and its people of the age, not unlike Twain’s, censors still believe it would be ill-advised for pupils to come across this book. Most critics complained about the vulgarity, but several have also cited the depiction of rape, as well as its bleak, albeit realistic, ending as grounds for removal. Even though almost a century has passed since it was published, not much has changed in the eyes of the censors. While some teachers might think the book holds important lessons or relevant themes for children, many parents consider the language of the book to outweigh the potential benefits, such as being short, easy to understand, and relevant, even as of today. It is quite the juxtaposition for a book to be considered one of the greatest literary works in all of American history and at the same time being banned in school districts in almost two dozen states nationwide (“US English – Of Mice and Men”).

Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is another infamous book in American schools. Published a couple of years after the end of World War II, the novel quickly attracted hostility. Placing tenth between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), nineteenth between 2000–2009 (Top 100 2000–2009), and forty-ninth between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019) on the ALA’s list of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books, the novel was on average the twenty-sixth most challenged (and banned) book of the last three decades, even seven decades after its publication. The story is about alienation and teenage angst, told from the perspective of Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old boy, struggling with school, relationships, and life in

general. He recounts his days of chasing girls, dropping out from schools, and trying to connect in a society which does not accept him.

This story has all the hallmarks of teenagerhood: several sexual references as well as promiscuity, encouragement of rebellion, promotion of drinking and smoking, among mentions of blasphemy and the undermining of moral codes as well as family values (“Banned & Challenged Classics”). It is safe to say this book has everything – and more – censors usually find unbecoming of a book meant for younger audiences, and it shows in the reception which this book has received. Even though it is a story about a teenager, meaning who else should read it if not another teenager, this never stopped concerned parents or school boards from challenging and banning the book. In spite of that, it is still one of the most taught books in all of America, as well as one of the most challenged books of all time. Some real-life examples for proposed (and at time successful) censorship include being “anti-white” and “obscene”, being “unacceptable” and “obscene”, “blasphemous and amoral”, as well as “filthy”, just to name a few from all over America (“Banned & Challenged Classics”). Certain parties have cited the scene in which the protagonist, Holden, refuses to defend himself and gets beaten up by his roommate, because he feels like he deserves the punishment, as a wrong example being set by the book, as it might encourage self-harm in readers. Also, Holden uses alcohol to “drink away” his problems, potentially teaching young readers that alcohol is a means to be free of problems, which is yet again another potential reason concerned parties have voiced their displeasure with the book among young audiences (Aldrich).

A big difference, however, between this book and the other seven is that there is actual evidence of the harm this story has (in)advertently caused, which most certainly contributed greatly to its perception and reputation as a “harmful book”. The murder of John Lennon is arguably the most famous case linked to the novel, along with the attempted assassination of Ronald Regan (Augustyn). Mark David Chapman, who shot and killed Lennon, was found with the book into which he wrote the following: “This is my statement”, signing Holden (Caulfield)’s name (Doyle). He even read a passage from the book during his sentencing, with which he addressed the court (“Mark David Chapman on Trial”). While this is an isolated incident and is overall not reflective of books – violent or otherwise – or the people who read them, it still raises the question whether censors were right wanting to keep this book out of schools and libraries. While obviously one isolated case of a man suffering from severe psychosis (“Mark David Chapman”) is not a reason to suddenly ban every questionable book outright, cases like this do contribute to the cause of censors.

To Kill a Mockingbird, published about a decade after *The Catcher in the Rye*, is another book on this list which has attracted the watchful eye of censors. Lee's book placed fortieth between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), twenty-first between 2000 - 2009 (Top 100 2000–2009), and fifteenth between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019) on the ALA's list of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books. This puts it as the twenty-fifth most challenged (and banned) book of the last three decades, even half a century after its publication. Lee's book tells the story of six-year-old Jean Louise Finch during the Great Depression. The story features several grown-up topics such as rape and racial inequality, told through the lenses of a lawyer and his daughter, Jean.

While both of those subjects have caused many a controversy among school boards and parents alike, the book is widely taught and read in American high schools, at least in ones which have not yet banned it (Randall). The book, despite many critics' arguments for its ban, has been heavily linked to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s ("To Kill a Mockingbird"). While the author herself was never personally involved, many prominent figures have cited her work regarding the movement, calling it a force for good, even despite its ugly and graphic subject matters. The character of the lawyer father, Atticus Fitch, has gone on to serve as an inspiration for lawyers, mostly because of his moral compass. While the appropriateness of these topics among teenagers is heavily debated, renowned figures largely agree that its message makes it worth keeping on reading lists, no matter how touchy or uncomfortable reading the book might be (Will).

Nevertheless, several attempts, successful and unsuccessful alike, at censorship have taken place. Reasons include "certain swear words", "doing psychological damage to the positive integration process" and "representing institutionalized racism under the guise of good literature", as well as "containing adult themes, such as rape, sexual intercourse, and incest, among racial slurs" ("Banned & Challenged Classics"). As I already mentioned, sexually explicit content has been the leading cause of censorship, and this is one such example, where such a subject matter has caused concerned parents to go after it, succeeding in many places, such as a school in Lindale, Texas, or a school library in Southwood High School Library in Caddo Parish, Louisiana ("Banned and/or Challenged Books"). Also, similarly to *Huck Finn*, this has been criticized from two different angles throughout history. Initially, rape as a plot device was one of the two main reasons for challenging the book, alongside its racial undertones. Then, after the 1970s, as societal trends underwent a major change in racial attitudes, some parties became convinced that the book's portrayal of black characters, as well

as its slurs, no longer fit inside a classroom, being too degrading for students to read (“To Kill a Mockingbird”).

These four were “just some examples” of book banning. I use the quotation marks because the books in question are some of the most important and prominent pieces of writings in American literary history, yet they were nonetheless mentioned in a paper talking about book censorship. Even though these books were published several decades, if not a century, ago, their contents are still giving reasons for censors to keep them out of the hands of students in certain parts of America, for one reason or another. Aside from classics, I also wanted to explore the other side of literature, popular literature, to see if there are any differences. Suffice it to say, the landscape is not much different, if at all.

The Giants

Moving onto other kinds of examples, I also wanted to highlight books which are much more popular among students, as the books I have talked about so far, while certainly part of mandatory reading lists (Wiginton), were not particularly known for their popularity among adolescents. I have chosen *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling, *Looking for Alaska* (2005) by John Green, and *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins as my corpus for looking at book-banning among popular, highly successful books. While Atwood’s book is certainly more high literature than the other three on the list, as it is a more recent book, and one which has enjoyed recent popularity due to its TV series adaptation, I thought it would fit better in this category than the one prior. While at first glance one might not find an immediate connection between these novels apart from their popularity, the main similarity which connects them is that they were written about teenagers for teenagers – save for Atwood’s book – yet all four of these books have been heavily scrutinized and often banned (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”).

The Handmaid’s Tale is the earliest of these novels, published over three decades after *The Catcher in the Rye*, in 1985. It placed thirty-seventh between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), eighty-eighth between 2000–2009 (Top 100 2000–2009), and twenty-ninth between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019) on the ALA’s list of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books. This puts it on average as the fifty-first most challenged book of the last three decades, which, to be fair, is a much “smaller” number than any of the classics above. Atwood’s story tells the tale of a nameless handmaid, called Offred, in a dystopian society where America has become Gilead, a theocracy in which almost every woman is infertile, and those (women) who

are fertile are traded as commodities between high-ranking, powerful men, to be used as concubines. The women have lost control over their reproductive organs, their money and properties, as well their ability – or rather, their right – to read or write, and so-called commanders and religious extremists have taken over control.

Even the premise of the book already implies that it is heavily anti-religious (and according to some, anti-Christian, even though the word itself does not appear in the text), and contains several mentions of rape and violence, all of which have been grounds for challenges. Some examples of challenge include “vulgarity and sexual overtones” (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”), being “detrimental to Christian values”, as well as its anti-biblical attitudes towards sex and its negative view on religion. As the book depicts several instances of ritualistic rape, for example when the commanders impregnate their handmaids – without consent, obviously – several parents voiced that such subject matters do not belong in schools, least of all curriculum. The story also features brutal descriptions of the retaliations that are carried out against critics of Gilead, such as public executions, among others, which also gave reasons for parents to challenge the book. While these have given enough reasons to opponents of the book to challenge it, the author’s obvious anti-censorship messages have obviously fallen on deaf ears, as one of the key tenets of the regime of Gilead is censorship and the restriction of intellectual freedom of women (Howard).

While this book is often used on the Advanced Placement English exam (“The Handmaid’s Tale”), and even part of the optional curriculum at some schools (Schaub), most school boards and parents have not taken to it well. Atwood, the author, herself is a strong anti-censorship activist, and has voiced her concerns regarding this issue many times, even creating an unburnable version of her book as a symbol against censorship (Cain). One only has to look a couple years into the past to find cases of parents complaining about its contents, demanding that the book be removed from reading lists or be banned altogether (“The Handmaid’s Tale”). I have chosen this book because I think it shows best the effects of censorship, as the book itself is about censorship, among other topics. The novel discusses the politics of Gilead in detail, highlighting how oppressed women have become by men after they were banned from writing and reading, making the banning of this book rather ironic. While this tale might not contain hard lessons about racism in 19th century America, nor bring up social taboos about classes, it has been a highly censored book in several parts of America, even with its anti-censorship message and rhetoric, showing the consequences of a nation where censorship has become the norm.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is arguably the most well-known of my examples, most probably requiring no introduction. Published as a seven-part anthology, Rowling's fantasy novels span a decade, with the first book *The Philosopher's Stone* coming out in 1997 and the last book, *The Deathly Hollows*, finishing the series in 2007. Those familiar with Potter's adventures might find it a surprise appearance on this list, but contrary to what one might think, these are some of the most contested books of recent history. While only the forty-eight most challenged book between 1990–1999 (Top 100 1990–1999), the series was the most challenged book (series) between 2000–2009 (Top 100 2000–2009) on the ALA's list of Top 100 Most and Banned Challenged Books. The young wizard's story was the most challenged book in 2001 and 2002, the second in 2003, and the ninth in 2019 ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists").

While the books I talked about prior contained themes of racism, vulgar and offensive language, or at times explicit sexual references, *Harry Potter* is rather different from them. While Potter's stories do contain violent scenes, the main problem of censors was occultism/satanism and religious issues, as well witchcraft and curses, among other things ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists"). In 2007, witchcraft was directly cited as a reason for the book to be kept out of classrooms, but ultimately the schoolboard in Lawrenceville, Georgia, remained unconvinced of the book's harm, so it remained in the classroom because they thought it could spark the students' creativity and imagination, as well as their love for reading ("Book Censorship in the United States"). While I think most kids, teenagers, and even young adults who have read the book have fond memories of Potter's stories in and around Hogwarts, not every adult agrees that such stories have their place in schools or elsewhere, as evidenced by the constant challenges against the series (Peters). While reasons of occultism/satanism, as well as religious grounds are common reasons behind challenges, they are a relatively small pretext for challenging books, far behind reasons mentioned earlier. *Harry Potter* is probably the most high-profile example of this, as several other notable works contain similar elements, such as *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) from J.R.R. Tolkien, or *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 – present) from George R. R. Martin, neither of which are featured on censorship lists at all, making this a rather isolated case in the grand scheme of things. While there certainly have been other works challenged for similar reasons in the past twenty years, their number is insignificant compared to books containing sexual references, LGBTQIA+ themes, or racial undertones.

These books have gone on to be successful beyond measure, spawning an entire generation of actors who owe their careers to the movie adaptation, as well as branded merchandize and book sales which are incomparable to any other novel on this list. While most children and adults agree that Rowling's story is exactly the kind school-aged children should be reading, there are some who would forbid the mere appearance of these books on shelves or reading lists, largely for occultist themes, as well as themes of witchcraft and curses.

John Green's *Looking for Alaska* is a textbook young-adult novel. Published in 2005, the novel earned the fourth place on the ALA's list of Top 100 Most and Banned Challenged Books between 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019). It placed seventh in 2012 and 2013, first in 2015, and sixth in 2016 on the ALA's list ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists"), so needless to say this has been one of the most controversial books of recent years, even more than a decade after its publication. The book tells the story of two teenagers, Miles Halter and Alaska Young. Miles, the story's protagonist, attends a boarding school, where he spends his days chasing love, being the victim and the perpetrator of pranks, causing mischief, and experimenting – sexually or otherwise – like any ordinary teenager. This story has all the elements of young adulthood, such as smoking, sex, alcohol, trouble, etc., since teenagers are the main characters in the story.

In the eyes of the censors, John Green's sin was depicting the life of a teenager authentically, the same way Twain depicted his country – and subsequently, society – in *Huckleberry Finn*. Since the book's release, several states have attempted banning it outright, but that did not stop it from becoming a hit among younger readers. Reasons for censorship include a sexually explicit scene which might lead a student to "sexual experimentation", being unsuitable for the age group, offensive language and being sexually explicit, as well as mention of drugs, alcohol, and smoking ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists"). While this book has been part of school curriculum (Flood), I think the role it occupies is much larger than that. This book was specially written about the hardships of adolescence, so it being kept out of the hands of those very same teenagers seems rather counterproductive, because who else would (and should) read and truly understand this coming-of-age story, if not them? While it is understandable that parents are careful and prudent on what subjects their kids should and should not read about at such an age, John Green does not glorify alcohol or meaningless sex in the story, but if children are forbidden from reading the book, how would they even know? This is exactly the age teenagers are discovering themselves, and by preventing them from reading young-adult fiction, censors are restricting them from finding answers to the very

questions they would most like the answers to, such as questions of identity, self, sexuality, etc.

The *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins is the most recently released example that I have chosen. To call these books a success would be an understatement, as not only have they sold well, but they have also been turned into widely successful movies. Published as a trilogy yearly from 2008 to 2010, these books have also attracted a lot of attention because of their premise. The first book earned the 12th place on the ALA's most banned and challenged books list of 2010–2019 (Top 100 2010–2019), and since its release has been the target and centerpiece of many controversies. The books placed fifth in 2010, third in 2011, and fifth again 2013 on the ALA's list for all kinds of reasons not dissimilar from the previously mentioned books ("Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists"). Collins portrays a society in which teenagers are forced to participate in a violent battle to the death, in yearly "competitions", for the lack of a better word, told from the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, the sixteen-year-old protagonist who volunteers for the competition. As this is a battle to the death, I think the reasons for controversy are self-explanatory.

The book deals with several adult themes in addition to violence, such as insensitivity, and reasons for censorship include anti-family and anti-ethnic themes, as well as satanism, among the previously mentioned aspects. While far from the only book dealing with these topics, I thought it would be a great showpiece of even gigantic franchises being "too small" to withstand censorship (Oeverman). While also not exactly part of school curricula, I still think these books, which many school-age children wish to read, serve an important role as educators as well as entertainers. Once again, these books are not really used as teaching devices in classrooms, but that does not mean they cannot have an important role in children's lives. Therefore, I think they should be accessible in school libraries, which is where students are most likely to come in contact with books early on. Since classics are everything but popular among child readers, I think these books serve an even more important role than appears at first glance. Violent or questionable content aside, restricting young readers from every book that irks or rubs an adult the wrong way should not be the way forward, otherwise there will be no literature for future generations to read, if every overzealous censor gets their way. Librarians largely agree with this notion as well, many of whom are trying to push back against censorship efforts (Burrow).

What is next?

Unlike the previous chapters which dealt with the past and present, this chapter will focus on the future. Even though the year had not even been over yet, as of August 31, 2022, the ALA has already documented 681 attempts at restricting materials, of 1651 unique targets. Last year was already a record year in the ALA's history at 729 attempts concerning 1597 books, and this year has already almost surpassed it merely eight months in, with would-be censors having no intention of stopping. Another alarming change compared to last year is that while in 2021 the vast majority of challenges were targeting only a single book, this year more than 70% of challenges attempted to challenge more than one title ("ALA Releases Preliminary Data"). In November of 2022, the state of Missouri, thanks to a recently passed law, banned several graphic novels, books about the Holocaust, George Orwell's *1984* (1949), and even an illustrated version of the *Bible* from libraries, and placed several other materials under investigation (Bernhard). In 2021, Texas passed House Bill 3979, which severely restricted the manner in which students may learn about race, racism, sex, sexism, or the role of these concepts in American culture or history ("Texas House Bill 3979"). In Florida, House Bill 1557, also known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, has been making headlines for putting vague restrictions on books discussing "sexual orientation or gender identity". Purposefully vague, so as to cherry-pick undesirable materials, this piece of legislation is essentially an educational gag-order, to use PEN America's terminology. It describes legislation targeting a specific set of "divisive" concepts such as race/racism, gender, and American history, meant – on paper – to protect children, but in reality, these laws merely chip away at Floridians's freedom to read and learn, as well as teachers' ability to educate (Sachs et al.). Georgia's Senate Bill 226 is another similar piece of legislation, aimed at taking away the book veto power of professionals, and instead entrusting the task to school boards. The bill's requirements would mean that trained and qualified professionals within schools would no longer have a say in censorship matters, and principals, who now would only have seven days to investigate complaints, would be under immense time pressure to make these decisions. This is another change where politicians are taking away the power of educators and by extensions the freedoms of those who would wish to read and learn (Jensen, "Georgia Governor").

These are merely four concrete examples of what is going on today, and there are several more examples of upcoming legislation which aims to restrict materials one way or another. While obviously no one can predict the future, just by looking at these trends it is painfully obvious that several states and school districts are hell-bent on dictating what is

acceptable in a classroom or a school and what is not. While someone obviously must make that choice, it is alarming that states are working on taking away this power from the hands of qualified educators and placing it into the hands of politicians and school administrators. Each year the number of banned books grows ever larger, along with the reasons for their removal and the ways in which they ultimately become restricted. While these trends do tend to follow those of society itself, certain issues such as sexual content or vulgar language are timeless causes for censorship. In addition to those two, certain reasons, such as occultism/satanism and violence might be on the decline, stories featuring LGBTQIA+ themes, as well as themes of race or racism are on the rise instead, as more and more books featuring “diverse” characters or “divisive” topics are being challenged.

To be fair, the previous system already had its faults because a single concerned parent could have a book removed from an entire school, but with what is going on today, several school districts and even whole states are headed in a direction of total control, where it is no longer up to educators to decide which books a child may come across and which ones they may not. While this initiative is far from nationwide, Texas, Missouri, Georgia, and Florida are setting alarming examples for students of all interests, as well as their educators. Censorship spares no book, no topic, no theme, and politicians all over the country are campaigning and demanding that certain books be banned, for one reason or another (Friedman, “Rising School Book Bans”). PEN America’s survey, which ranges from July 2021 to June 2022, lists 2532 instances of books being banned, affecting 1648 unique books. Similarly to the ALA’s data, these numbers only encompass bans which have been reported. Put into numbers, that means thirty-two states in one hundred and thirty-eight school districts. This, in turn, represents a little over 5000 schools, where around 4 million students are currently enrolled (Friedman, “The Growing Movement to Censor”). Considering this is only for one year, it begs the question what the state of literature and intellectual freedom will look like in five- or ten-years’ time if everything proceeds in its current pace. While not every state is in the process of introducing such legislation, the number grows larger day by day (Jensen, “States that have enacted Book Ban Laws”).

It must also be said that while book bans of the 21st century, also known as the Information Age thanks to the widespread availability of the Internet, are not at all like the book bans of the 19th century, they still pose a very real threat to intellectual freedom. Regardless of a book’s presence on the Internet, which is quintessentially unbannable, unlike the book bans of the past, where a book could completely disappear from the hands of children,

libraries and schools are still the main source of education of children, which should be protected at all costs, lest we embark on the road to totalitarianism, the core tenets of which is censorship.

Conclusion

I think the numbers speak for themselves, especially when put into context. Books of all subject matters, written by authors of all backgrounds, intended for audiences of all ages have become the target of book banning across all of America. In the last thirty years alone, which is when proper, recorded data by the American Library Association begins, well over 20,000 attempted cases of book censorship have taken place, a large number of which occurred in schools and school libraries, initiated largely by concerned parents, mostly about books with sexual or vulgar contents. While it is hard, if not impossible to generalize, books which contain sexual imagery, violence, racial themes, or LGBTQIA+ themes are almost certain to rub someone the wrong way somewhere, which, evidenced by recent data, usually leads to a challenge. Hundreds, and soon well over thousands, of books are being challenged each year, because someone believes them unfit for consumption by students or just people in general. These censorship attempts have no end in sight, and their number is only increasing, with 2022 well on track to set a new record, after 2021 was already a record-breaking year for book censorship. While there is hope, as there certainly are cases of communities coming together and protecting books, with politicians becoming involved, the way books are challenged might forever change as legislation is introduced prohibiting and criminalizing certain materials.

Current trends are also obvious and alarming at the same time. While thirty years ago classics which dealt with tough historical events or issues might have taken up large portions of the challenged books lists, in recent years those books have given way for very different kinds of literature. Books which discuss sexual identity, adolescence, or the current societal issues have emerged as the chart toppers. Parents, as well as politicians, the latter of whom used to barely participate in book challenges thirty – or even twenty – years ago, are taking issue with more and more books which present challenging or dividing topics. As several of the authors I have mentioned have also echoed, intellectual freedom must be protected at all costs, as censorship is a step towards totalitarianism, not the supposed protection of children from “harmful materials”.

Regardless of political changes, or the topics which have become the centerpiece of censorship, communities must come together and take a stand against the restriction of intellectual freedom, especially in schools and school libraries, as these are children's first contact with books, the very first time they meet literature of any kind. Whether we are talking about books of historical significance, books of science fiction or time travel, or books which discuss the issues and hardships of being a teenager, literature must be protected at all costs, unless we wish for a future where any book daring to discuss sensitive and relevant issues might only be accessed through cumbersome means, if at all. And most importantly, if we allow politicians, instead of educators to make the decision of which books can be read and which cannot, Orwell's *Ingsoc* truly might become more reality than fiction.

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