

Banning Books, or Banning Change?

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The most banned book in the 2021-2022 school year was *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, the title of which provides an apt enough description about the contents of the book. The first runner-up is *All Boys Aren't Blue*, about a queer Black man struggling with racism and homophobia and the trials he faced growing up; and third comes *Out of Darkness*, the forbidden love story of a Mexican-American girl and a Black boy in the 1930s. Oddly enough, they were banned because of “sexually explicit content and violence”, which is a common enough phrase that I’ll take it for what it really means: that it makes people uncomfortable to face the trauma of the “others”, the marginalized, the lower rungs of the ladder. But even when taken at face value—well, there certainly are sexually explicit parts in each of the three books—it’s funny to consider banning books in the context of, well, America. America, land of the brave and the free; and America, the land of education, where parents like mine immigrate to, just to put their kids through the top schools in the world. America, the land of—banning books. Odd, isn’t it? But maybe not so much, when we look not just at these books, but at literature in general.

Centuries after its creation, the American Constitution continues to be one of the most influential pieces of writing created at the time of America’s foundation. Many of the rights given to us—as Americans, by Americans—are considered constitutional rights: written down and preserved forever in the faded pages of the Constitution. They are inarguable, mainly because they are the papers in which the spirit of America was first declared. Don’t we all, as Americans, deserve the right of freedom, the right to practice whatever religion we so choose, the right to petition our government? Don’t we all know these rights are bound to us forever, irrefutably, indisputably, as members of a democratic society?

But the Constitution's power is two-fold: one, in the words written down on the pages; and two, in the fact that they are *pages*. An orally told Constitution would have little to no power: after all, what government would believe in a law which exists only in our mouths? While this may seem obvious—stupidly so—it’s crucial to point this out only because there are those that will deny the power of literature as a tool for change, whether that change be positive or negative. Paper may be easily destructible, but perhaps there is some odd, altering characteristic to it, where once words are inscribed upon them, they become engraved in our minds, as easily as if they had always existed there. This pattern is not fabricated, though it may be easier to give a personal example of it than leave it up for you to believe me:

In the third grade, for instance, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At the time I could not conceive of it as anything more than a coming-of-age story: little baby Scout, at that time just about my age, fighting with her brother, running away in fear from the ghostly Boo Radley, loving Atticus with a warmth hotter than fire. This book made me acutely aware of my race; my history, as the daughter of immigrants, as a girl who was neither Black nor white. I had no place in the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: there are no people like me. Yet somehow I was between its pages, folded into the story like a flower, or a ghost, floating in the thick Alabama air behind Scout, behind Jem, behind Atticus, behind Tom Robinson as he was arrested, as he tried to climb the prison wall; as he was shot and killed; as his wife mourned. I was there, hand-in-hand with the ghost of racial trauma and the heaviness of youth, surrounded by the smell of gunfire and smoke.

This is not to say that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is somehow the epitome of literature, but that what I *felt* for it—a fragile understanding of how the world Scout lived in came to be—was real, sometimes realer than what I learned in school. It meant very little of me to hear of segregation, which is not to say that I was cruel or uncaring, but that we are taught history like it is all facts: this is when Black people were freed; this is when they were allowed to vote; this is when immigrants began to flood into Ellis Island; this is where the battles of World War I were fought. It was books that brought all of this to life, and humanized the past.

But more than that, at the time when it was written, *To Kill a Mockingbird* had humanized the *future*. Literature as a form of rebellion and social change is not an unheard-of concept; any historian or literature major worth their salt knows that books have been used both as chains and as the keys to unlock them. Again with *To Kill a Mockingbird*: to me, it was history; at the time it was written, it was a tool. How can white people help Black people? How do we learn to stop judging people by what we are told of them? Certainly it was not and will never be *the* singular tool used to free Black people—I would not discount the centuries of fighting they did themselves to reach where they are today, writing books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Color Purple*, *The Hate U Give*—but *To Kill a Mockingbird* prodded at the backs of white people. *Here: This is how you treat them. Here: This is how you change.* And this is not a singular, Black-only concept, the idea behind books having caused change. Ancient religious books and texts—the Christian Bible, the Muslim Quran, the Hindu Vedas, the Jewish Torah—are *books* for a reason: not pictures, not oral, but books. There is no doubt these texts have ushered forward great social change, some positive and others negative, and have influenced people *to this day*. (After all, 63% of the US population is Christian; people typically swear into office on the Bible.) When we examine the earliest years of most religious, social, and cultural phenomena, chances are there will be, in some way, a book.

All of this to say: literature, in its purest form, is *change*. Even books that seem to have no particular message behind them represent a shift in how we view humor, or love, or joy. Dystopian books represent what is wrong with the world; fantasies are representative of how we might change the world, or what we can change it into. Romances emerged as a way to represent women breaking free of social norms and becoming, eventually, happy despite this, and has now shifted to include characters of various races, sexualities, and gender identities. (Even books that are purely about sex—and, yes, there are many—push our culture farther and farther from the oppressive idea of all women having to be chaste and virginal and closer to a future where sexuality is embraced in its rawest, lustiest forms.) All books represent some sort of advancement in society, a growth we cannot quantify but can see and feel.

So, again, to bring up the American constitution: don't we have the right to free speech? To change? What does it mean when we ban books?

It always means something. Books are uncomfortable. I never did like the parts of *To Kill a Mockingbird* where the n-word was spoken aloud: but then, who does? I've had white friends say shamefully that the book humiliated them; but then, that wasn't the point of the book, so if you felt humiliated, then isn't that your responsibility to face it? Banning books will never stop marginalized groups from the discomfort of being killed and maimed, but it will stop the privileged folks from knowing their people did it.

This discomfort around books—and their subsequent bans—does not lead to, despite common opinion, less difference of opinion; once again, these are only just stifled. The system we have is built on a few papers: the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, all of which were written during a time where those in power were all of the same creed; now, though, we exist in a world where these men are no longer simply heralded for their creation of a new country, but scorned for their creation of a country that is directly hypocritical to the values they stood for. (*All men are created equal*—so easy to quote, and so hard to uphold.) In theory, stopping people—including kids—from reading books that critique their mindsets will protect them, but in truth, we are all impacted by the world around us. Books can foster a healthy exploration of what it means to live in a democratic, free, fair society; the lack of them gives no place for these thoughts to grow.

And, more simply, it is simply not fair. Perhaps this is an oversimplification. There are private reasons to ban certain books: kids should not consume material that is too old for them; certain books may promote mindsets that are unhealthy. After all, books have been used to enslave: used to promote the idea that Black people were inferior, that Asians were weak, that Hispanics were dull, that Indigenous people were brutes. And yet—yet—it never seems to be *these* reasons as to why books are constantly put through the wringer. Nobody ever suggests banning, say, *The Bell Jar* for its blatant antisemitism; now, wouldn't that at least mean protecting an already marginalized group? Instead it was named controversial

for profanity, crudeness. *The Great Gatsby* was banned in Alaska for sexual language, but nobody ever considered the odd racial stereotypes within. Of course, these stereotypes are products of their time: that is why the painful bits are overlooked. But where they weren't products of their time—where they were products of a higher intellect and a brighter future—led to them being banned. And yet, isn't the general viewpoint that we should understand that we don't necessarily have to agree with a book to like it? Why isn't that the case for books that challenge the status quo?

This tells us only that literature is getting banned for *what it is meant to do*—for attempting to integrate some sort of change into society. All of this information can be accessed through the internet, but perhaps it feels different when it's in a book: maybe people want fiction to cater to themselves, to their own mindsets. It's especially odd when we consider banning books does nothing but draw attention to them. And, certainly, they hardly work to keep these books from the limelight—*The Catcher in the Rye*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A Handmaid's Tale*; all three overwhelmingly popular classics that have been banned or have been threatened to be—or, most acutely, the topics they discuss from the limelight. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned in 1929 for its graphic sexual content—though most people preferred to complain about the healthily-portrayed romance between a man and woman of two drastically different social classes—but now we have come to regard it and its recent movie adaptation as important works of art. Obviously, not only is banning books unfair, but useless too. What lies under the surface will always emerge. It is only a matter of time.

Of course, it is true—always true—that restrictions can and should be placed on content. How much easier would it be for Black students to suffer through *To Kill a Mockingbird* if, well, they weren't forced to suffer through it at all? Who would make a Jewish student read through It's fair to say the book is an unequivocal classic, the only one of its creed, but it heavily features racism through the view of a white man and his family—not, as it should have been, the unfairly incarcerated Black man's POV. It does what it is meant to do: discuss acceptance as it should be developed between those of different races, between strangers and friends and enemies. But what it does *not* do is take away the trauma Black people have faced. In this case, yes, it would be fair to say a warning should be placed on the book. (Of course, there are very few people who do not know what the book stands for; the point stands.) But a warning—something restricting children from accessing inappropriate content, something providing a barrier between marginalized groups and victims of trauma from something that may trigger them—does not equal banning books at *all*. Access to knowledge is a human right; protection from trauma is one as well. Banning books does the latter, albeit abysmally, but simple warnings—trigger warnings, content labels, etc.—would do the job for both.

It is 2023. When we look back at the last ten years, it's easy to track a pattern, especially surrounding children. Many book banners cite inappropriate content as reasons why books should be

banned. We will protect our kids from abuse, as we always have. With this in mind, it's easy to see why, say, *The Bluest Eye*—the story of a Black girl struggling with self-image issues, as well as elements of sexual assault, racism, alcohol abuse, incest, etc., and therefore the fourth most banned book in America from 2021-2022—wouldn't be the best book for a child to read. After all, what six year old can comprehend racism, or molestation, or alcohol abuse? The answer, of course, is the 42.2% of children in America who are people of color; the 25% of young girls and 7.7% of young boys who experience child sexual abuse; and the 28.6% of children ages 0-17 who face familial alcohol abuse. Again, these topics are not *unrelatable*: they are brewing under the surface, ready to burst, like a geyser. Now, there are suitable alternatives to letting children read *The Bluest Eye* at 6, to be fair—many picture books and middle grade books now venture into the murky waters of many harrowing topics—but jumping straight to banning the book seems like both a leap of faith and extremely inappropriate. For one, any reasonable psychologist will tell you that children want exactly what they can't have; for another, banning the book would only lead to information being snatched away. To make up for *restricting access to* or *warning kids off* of certain books, similar, more age-appropriate books can and should be provided. This not only secures their freedom as Americans but helps them develop an understanding of the topics they are reading about, both of which are crucial. This, of course, is the easiest and most reasonable solution to anybody who thinks for more than two seconds about this topic—so perhaps the reasoning behind banning books isn't that they're too inappropriate, but rather that everything seems inappropriate when it challenges a previously-held worldview.

It becomes obvious as we head towards a fairer future that there are some that would prefer to keep us in the past. Funny, considering these systems of power heralded none but the elite few, and brought the rest down into the pits of hell. It was books that provided some form of resistance to the marginalized, brought them peace and power. There were books before America even existed: I would say they have more of a right to exist than the country. But I digress. The point remains: we will not get anywhere by banning books. They achieve nothing, and resist everything. There are many concessions that can be taken, from notes of acknowledgements of difficult themes to trigger warnings—oh, how shameful—to swapping out books for easier alternatives. These concessions can only be made, however, when we are willing to open our eyes to the truth of our new and fairer world. We could always continue to live in the past: a world where *To Kill a Mockingbird* was seen as the embodiment of anti-racist literature, rather than a once-defiant, now-outdated example of what white people considered anti-racist. This world might have been easier to some, including—in certain circles—myself. But when we actively try to promote accepting the past for what it was and opening our hands to a better future, one full of literature for and by us all—*that* is when we will know what a healthier, happier future looks like.