BOOKS CHALLENGED & BANNED IN 2008-2009

Speak·Read·Know

ROBERT P. DOYLE

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American Booksellers Association
American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression
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Banned Books Week 2009 is the twenty-eighth annual celebration of the freedom to read. This freedom, not only to choose what we read, but also to select from a full array of possibilities, is firmly rooted in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Although we enjoy an increasing quantity and availability of information and reading material, we must remain vigilant to ensure that access to this material is preserved; would-be censors who continue to threaten the freedom to read come from all quarters and all political persuasions. Even if well intentioned, censors try to limit the freedom of others to choose what they read, see, or hear.

Sex, profanity, and racism remain the primary categories of objections, and most occur in schools and school libraries. Frequently, challenges are motivated by the desire to protect children. While the intent is commendable, this method of protection contains hazards far greater than exposure to the “evil” against which it is leveled. U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, in Texas v. Johnson, said, “If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the Government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.” Individuals may restrict what they themselves or their children read, but they must not call on governmental or public agencies to prevent others from reading or seeing that material.

The challenges documented in this list are not brought by people merely expressing a point of view; rather, they represent requests to remove materials from schools or libraries, thus restricting access to them by others. Even when the eventual outcome allows the book to stay on the library shelves and even when the person is a lone protestor, the censorship attempt is real. Someone has tried to restrict another person’s ability to choose. Challenges are as important to document as actual bannings, in which a book is removed from the shelves of a library or bookstore or from the curriculum at a school. Attempts to censor can lead to voluntary restriction of expression by those who seek to avoid controversy; in these cases, material may not be published at all or may not be purchased by a bookstore, library, or school district.

We have reason to celebrate this year. Due to the commitment of parents, students, librarians, teachers, and other concerned citizens, more and more challenges are unsuccessful, and the material remains available.

It should be noted that this bibliography is incomplete because many prohibitions against free speech and expression remain undocumented. Surveys indicate approximately 85 percent of the challenges to library materials receive no media attention and remain unreported. Moreover, this list is limited to books and does not include challenges to magazines, newspapers, films, broadcasts, plays, performances, electronic publications, or exhibits. Banned Books Week 2009 is the twenty-eighth annual celebration of the freedom to read. This freedom, not only to choose what we read, but also to select from a full array of possibilities, is firmly rooted in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Although we enjoy an increasing quantity and availability of information and reading material, we must remain vigilant to ensure that access to this material is preserved; would-be censors who continue to threaten the freedom to read come from all quarters and all political persuasions. Even if well intentioned, censors try to limit the freedom of others to choose what they read, see, or hear.
This bibliography represents books challenged, restricted, removed, or banned in 2008 and 2009 as reported in the Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom from May 2008—May 2009. (A date prior to May 2008 indicates the controversy began earlier, but continues today.)

### A


**Anonymous.** *Go Ask Alice.* Avon; Prentice-Hall. Challenged as a reading assignment at Hanahan High School in Berkeley County, S.C. (2008) after being challenged as inappropriate for young children. “Some material may be inappropriate for young children.” The library board approved policy changes that restrict children’s access to any holdings that may fall under the state’s harmful to minors statute and barred the library from buying movies rated NC-17 or X. Source: May 2008, pp. 96-97; July 2008, pp. 140-41; Nov. 2008, pp. 253-54.

**Anonymous.** *The Fighting Ground.* Harper; Lippincott. Suspended from the Bay District school’s library shelves in Panama City, Fla. (2008) after a parent noted several profanities uttered by some soldiers. The award-winning book, intended for the fourth-grade reading level, is about a twenty-four-hour period in the life of a thirteen-year-old boy during the Revolutionary War. Source: July 2008, p. 140.

### B


**Barron, T. A.** *The Great Tree of Avalon: Child of the Dark Prophecy.* Philomel Bks. Restored by the Lackawanna, N.Y. School Board (2008) along with several other books following accusations of censorship by some parents and teachers. The books were pulled from the middle school library recommended list because of concerns that the books deal with the occult. Source: May 2008, pp. 115-16.

**Berendt, John.** *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story.* Modern Library. Banned for just four days from the Beulah, N.Dak. High School library (2008). Two school employees followed school policy to request removing the book after their son brought it home from an accelerated-reading program, in which students pick from a couple of hundred titles. The parents said the 1994 runaway nonfiction best seller was too pornographic and at odds with student behavior promoted in the school handbook. The board reversed its decision at the encouragement of the board president, who said the board moved too fast and unleashed a possible court case it would never win. He said there might be more palatable alternatives, like creating a list of restricted books that parents have to approve before their children can check them out. A decision to review school policies and investigate less-restrictive means to control library books was approved by the school board. Source: Mar. 2009, pp. 55-56.


### C


**Colfer, Eoin.** *The Supernaturalist.* Hyperion. Restored by the Lackawanna, N.Y. School Board (2008) along with several other books following accusations of censorship by some parents and teachers. The books were pulled from the middle school library recommended list because of concerns that the books deal with the occult. Source: May 2008, pp. 115-16.

### D

**De Haan, Linda, and Stern Nijland.** *King & King.* Putnam. Parent of a Lexington, Mass. (2008) second-grader protested that their son’s teacher read the fairy tale about gay marriage to the class without warning parents first. The book was used as part of a lesson about different types of weddings. “By presenting this kind of issue at
such a young age, they’re trying to indoctrinate our children,” stated the parent. The incident renewed the efforts of Waltham-based Parents’ Rights Coalition to rid the state’s schools of books and lessons that advance the “homosexual agenda” in public schools. U.S. District Court Judge Mark Wolf ruled February 23, 2007, that public schools are “entitled to teach anything that is reasonably related to the goals of preparing students to become engaged and productive citizens in our democracy.” Wolf said the courts had decided in other cases that parents’ rights to exercise their religious beliefs were not violated when their children were exposed to contrary ideas in school. The parents appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, which dismissed the case on January 31, 2008. The courts said, “There is no evidence of systemic indoctrination. There is no allegation that the student was asked to affirm gay marriage. Requiring a student to read a particular book is generally not coercive of free exercise rights. Public schools are not obligated to shield individual students from ideas which potentially are religiously offensive, particularly when the school imposes no requirement that the student agree with or affirm those ideas, or even participate in discussions about them.” The parents plan to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court claiming the curriculum violated their right to religious freedom. Withdrawn from two Bristol, England, U.K., primary schools (2008) following objections from parents who claimed the book was unsuitable for children and that they had not been consulted on their opinions. Sept. 2006, pp. 186-87; May 2007, pp. 105-6; July 2008, pp. 146, 186; Sept. 2008, pp. 194-95.


Greene, John. Looking for Alaska. Dutton. Challenged, but retained for the eleventh-grade Regents English classes in Depew, N.Y. (2008) despite concerns about graphic language and sexual content. The school sent parents a letter requesting permission to use the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature novel and only three students were denied permission to read the book. Source: May 2008, p. 117.


Heinlein, Robert A. The Day After Tomorrow. Signet. Removed from the Beardsport, Ill. High School (2008), a public library (2009). A committee determined the novel “rather very adult in nature” and, because the library already had a large selection of other valuable science fiction and spy literature, the committee elected to remove the book from the high school’s circulation and donated it to the public library. Source: Nov. 2008, pp. 229-30.


Jackson, Jon A. Dead Folks. Atlantic Monthly Pr. Challenged in the Big Sky High School in Missoula, Mont. (2009) because the local author’s work was viewed as too graphic in its discussion of sex. Source: May 2009.


Kaysen, Susanna. Girl, Interrupted. Vintage. The New Rochelle, N.Y. Board of Education (2008) announced that it would replace all fifty copies of Susanna Kaysen’s memoir after school officials tore pages from the book deemed “inappropriate” due to sexual content and strong language. Removed was a scene where the rebellious Lisa encourages Susanna to circumvent hospital rules against sexual intercourse by engaging in oral sex instead. The incident was a hot topic across the blogosphere, transcending political ideology. It was featured on the left-leaning Boing Boing, the most widely read blog in the world, as well as the top conservative site, Hot Air, which is owned by Michelle Malkin of Fox News. The New Yorker magazine and The Atlantic Monthly also picked up the story as well as dozens of blog sites focused on literary and free speech issues. Source: Mar. 2009, pp. 56-57.


Meyer, Stephenie H. Twilight Series. Little. Removed from and later reinstated in the middle school libraries of the Capistrano, Calif. Unified School District (2008). The books were initially ordered removed by the district’s instructional materials specialist, who ordered that the books be moved from middle school to high school collections. That order was rescinded and the books remain in the middle school libraries. Challenged at the Brockbank Junior High in Magna, Utah (2009) by a parent over sexual content in the Mormon author’s fourth novel, Breaking Dawn. Source: Nov. 2008, p. 253; Jan. 2009, p. 5; May 2009.


Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. Alice on Her Way. Atheneum. Restricted to students who have parental consent at the Icicle River Middle School library in Leavenworth, Wash. (2008) due to its depiction of sexuality. One other book, Gary Paulsen’s Harris and Me, has been similarly restricted at the school for almost a decade. Parents challenged the book’s use during classroom reading because of “two cuss words.” Source: May 2008, p. 97.

Nixon, Joan Lowery. Whispers from the Dead. Laurel-Leaf Bks. Restored by the Lackawanna, N.Y. School Board (2008) along with several other books following accusations of censorship by some parents and teachers. The books were pulled from the middle school library recommended list because of concerns that the books deal with the occult. Source: May 2008, p. 116.

Oh, Minya. Bling Bling: Hip Hop’s Crown Jewels. Wenner Bks. Retained with limited access at the Maplewood Middle School Library in Menasha, Wis. (2008). The book for reluctant readers contains photographs and interviews with rap artists and focuses on how hip-hop taste for flashy jewelry typifies their musical and cultural evolution of the last twenty-five years. In addition to retaining the book, board members voted unanimously to adopt procedures intended to secure and record parental consent before limited access books are released to students. Source: July 2008, p. 164.

Richardson, Justin, and Peter Parnell. And Tango Makes Three. Simon. Returned to the general circulation shelves in the sixteen elementary school libraries in Loudoun County, Va. (2008) despite a complaint about its subject matter. Withdrawn from two Bristol, England, U.K., primary schools (2008) following objections from parents who claimed the book was unsuitable for children and that they had not been consulted on their opinions. Challenged, but retained at the Eli Pinney Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio (2008) despite a parent’s concerns that the book “is based on one of those subjects that is best left to be discovered by students at another time or in another place.” Challenged in the elementary school library in Ankeny, Iowa (2008) by parents who do not want their children to read the story of two male penguin parents in the Central Park Zoo due to concerns that it promotes homosexuality. On Dec. 15, 2008, the Ankeny school board members voted six to one to keep the book. Retained in the Chico, Calif. Unified School District (2008), over complaints that the book is inappropriate for elementary school students. The district review committee determined that the book meets library selection standards and district policy. Retained by the Calvert County Library in Prince Frederick, Md. (2008) after requests that the book be removed from the children’s section and shelved in a labeled alternative section. Retained in the Meadowview Elementary School in Farmington, Minn. (2009) despite a parent’s concern that “a topic such as sexual preference does not belong in a library where it can be obtained by young elementary students.” Source: May 2008, pp. 116-17; July 2008, pp. 146, 164, 166; Jan. 2009, pp. 6, 21-22; Mar. 2009, p. 551; May 2009.


Schreier, Alta. *Vamos a Cuba* (A Visit to Cuba). Heinemann. Removed from all Miami-Dade County, Fla. school libraries (2008) because of a parent’s complaint that the book does not depict an accurate life in Cuba. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Florida filed a lawsuit challenging the decision to remove this book and the twenty-three other titles in the same series from the district school libraries. In granting a preliminary injunction in July 2006 against the removal, Judge Alan S. Gold of U.S. District Court in Miami characterized the matter as a “First Amendment issue” and ruled in favor of the ACLU of Florida, which argued that the books were generally factual and that the board should add to its collection, rather than remove books it disagreed with. When the district court entered a preliminary injunction ordering the school district immediately to replace the entire series on library shelves, the Miami-Dade School Board appealed the decision to the Eleventh Circuit Court in Atlanta. In a February 5, 2009, two to one decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit said the board did not breach the First Amendment, and ordered a Miami federal judge to lift a preliminary injunction that had allowed *Vamos a Cuba* to be checked out from school libraries. But the three-judge panel’s opinion—not unlike the School Board’s initial vote—was so fraught with political rhetoric such as “book banning” that further appeals seem inevitable. Source: July 2006, p. 207; Sept. 2006, pp. 230-31; Nov. 2006, p. 288; Jan. 2007, p. 8; May 2007, pp. 91-92; Mar. 2009, pp. 43-45.


Silverstein, Charles, and Felice Picano. *The Joy of Gay Sex*. Crown, Simon & Schuster/Fireside. Challenged at the Nampa, Idaho Public Library (2005) along with seven other books because “they are very pornographic in nature and they have very explicit and detailed illustrations and photographs which we feel don’t belong in a library.” The library board approved policy changes that restrict children’s access to any holdings that may fall under the state’s harmful to minors statute and barred the library from buying movies rated NC-17 or X. The book was relocated to the director’s office (2006) and it was eventually restored to the collection (2008). Challenged in the Lewis and Clark Library in Helena, Mont. (2008) due to objections over its content. The book has been in the library’s collection since 1993. The library director accepted the recommendation of the library’s collection review committee that the book be retained in the collection. Restricted minors’ access in the Topeka and Shawnee County, Kans. Public Library (2009) because a group contended that the material is “harmful to minors under state law.” Source: July 2006, p. 183; May 2008, pp. 96-97; July 2008, pp. 140-41; Nov. 2008, pp. 231-32, 254-55; May 2009.


Stroud, Jonathan. *Prolongy’s Gate*. Hyperion. Restored by the Lackawanna, N.Y. School Board (2008) along with several other books following accusations of censorship by some parents and teachers. The book was pulled from the middle school library recommended list because of concerns that the book deals with the occult. Source: May 2008, p. 116.


Tucker, Todd. *Note Dame vs. the Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan*. Loyola Pr. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) administrators found (2008) that a student-employee was guilty of racial harassment merely for reading in a public area an historical account of Notre Dame students’ fight with members of the Ku Klux Klan. The student-employee contacted the American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana and six months later received a letter stating that IUPUI “regret[s] this situation took place,” is committed to upholding freedom of expression on its campus, and no documents regarding this incident exist in the employee’s file. Source: July 2008, pp. 159-60.


Celebrate
Banned Books Week
September 26–October 3, 2009

Banned Books Week celebrates the freedom to choose and the freedom to express one’s opinion, even if that opinion might be considered unpopular or unorthodox. The campaign stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of those viewpoints to all who wish to read them.

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