

Washington Square Citizens League  
Discussion Forum  
7:00-8:30 pm, Monday, May 1, 2023 in the courtyard  
Barbara Gold, moderator

# Academic Freedom

**Indian Textbooks Are Purged of . . .**  
**Material Rejected by Modi's Party**  
**A Ban on a Film Is a Ban on American History**  
**Florida Re-edits  
A New Subject:  
Social Studies**  
**RECORD NUMBER OF BOOKS  
TARGETED BY BAN BACKERS**

**WEEK IN CARTOONS**

**Florence museum to Fla. parents:  
Come see 'David' for yourself**

## Introduction

From K through graduate school, from the community library to the most prestigious universities, academic freedom is under assault. Under attack are the right to teach and the right to learn. This is not the first time, not by a longshot, that censorship and banning have occurred. However, what we are witnessing seems to be increasingly wide in its sweep and organized on many fronts.

### Questions to think about as you read:

1. Is there any book that you would ban your child (or a young relative) from reading?
2. How do you define “sexualized content”? Supreme Court definition”. “I know it when I see it.”
3. Is there a difference in controlling content about sex and sexuality as opposed to content related to history?
4. How much exposure to “the real world” is too much—especially when elementary school kids are all participating in active shooter drills?
5. How does one determine if a political fact (e.g., the story of Rosa Parks is presented in a way that will make white kids “feel bad”)?
6. Should a professor like Amy Wax be allowed to teach in a university? In a required class? In graduate seminars only? In classes where students choose to be in her class and have the option of taking the same course with a different professor?
7. Should a professor be held accountable for comments made not in class but online or another forum?
8. Who gets to say what is taught in: pre-K, elementary school, middle school, high school, college? When are people “old enough” to decide for themselves? Who gets to challenge those decisions?
9. Should trigger warning be a part of education? At what level?
10. Should classics, such as Mark Twain, Agatha Christie, and Shakespeare, be altered to remove words that may be offensive in the current day? If yes, how?

The following articles, uncensored, of course, but edited for length, have been selected to provide food for thought. Enjoy!

# Is it antisemitism or political discourse? Professor plans to sue Cabrini University after he was fired for tweets about Israel

by [Susan Snyder](#)

Updated on Mar 19, 2023, Philadelphia Inquirer

Kareem Tannous said he was getting good reviews after he started his job in 2020 as an assistant business professor at Cabrini University.

But then Tannous was abruptly fired in August — not because of something that happened in the classroom but because of his 2022 tweets on his personal social media account, he said.

“#zionism is the disease #Free Palestine is the cure dismantle #ApartheidIsrael by any means necessary,” tweeted Tannous, 45, a Philadelphia-born Palestinian Christian.

In another tweet from May 2022, he likened Israel to the Nazis: “Today in Zionazi Ukraine, one upping zionazi Israel.” And among other tweets was this one from April 2022: “Israel and Ukraine are societal cancers and must be eradicated.”

The decision to terminate Tannous came after leaders of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia fired off a letter to Cabrini, asking that Tannous be censured for “spreading antisemitic and anti-Israel commentary and making posts in support of the destruction of the State of Israel.” ...

Tannous’ case is not an unfamiliar narrative. As antisemitism rises, more academics are being called to task for their public comments, especially on social media, about the Jewish state’s treatment of Palestinians. Colleges are then left fielding a debate that ranges from judging the nature of posts — are they antisemitic or merely political criticism — to dissecting whether accusations of antisemitism act to shield Israel of criticism. Also, when is any of it protected free speech?...

Jonathan Zimmerman, a University of Pennsylvania professor of the history of education, who has ardently defended free speech, disagreed with Cabrini’s decision to fire Tannous. While his rants appear “antisemitic and hateful ... what we don’t want is a university to be scrutinizing everybody’s digital footprint to see if they said something so bad that they should not be part of the community,” he said.

Instead, those who find his tweets offensive should speak out against his views, Zimmerman said.

“I believe in freedom to call out racist statements,” he said. “I would encourage everybody in Cabrini and outside who doesn’t like what this guy has to say to raise their voices about that.” ...

Tannous said he has since been working in real estate and mortgage brokering, struggling to pay his bills and loans.

“He’s permanently blacklisted at this point,” Mark Schwartz, his lawyer, said.

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## **The Moral Center Is Fighting Back on Elite College Campuses**

April 16, 2023, NYT

By [David French](#), Opinion Columnist

William Butler Yeats’s “[The Second Coming](#)” has been called [the most plundered poem in the English language](#), and it’s easy to see why. The poem, written in the immediate aftermath of World War I and during the height of the Russian Civil War, vividly captures the feeling that events are sliding out of control. Three lines in particular resonate in troubled times. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold,” writes Yeats. “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

When I read these words, dramatic, violent events come first to mind. The Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6 is a prime example of the “passionate intensity” of one of the worst movements in American life. With each mass shooting, I think, “Things fall apart.”

But there are other ways in which the center finds itself under siege. The extremist attacks on free speech (from right and left) degrade American democracy, and those attacks are especially acute on college campuses, whether they come from angry left-wing students who shout down conservative speakers or from vengeful right-wing legislators who pass laws restricting free expression in the academy or from the online activism that often demands that universities discipline scholars for engaging in provocative (but constitutionally protected) speech....

Let’s take Stanford University, for example. In the days and weeks since law students shouted down and disrupted a speech by a federal judge, the center has taken a stand. The dean of Stanford Law School, Jenny Martinez, penned a [powerful, 10-page memorandum](#) that mandated a half-day of instruction on free speech and legal norms, reaffirmed the school’s dedication to the Stanford Statement on Academic Freedom and declared: “Unless we recognize that student members of the Federalist Society and other conservatives have the same right to express their views free of coercion, we cannot live up to this commitment nor can we claim that we are fostering an inclusive environment for all students.”

Then there’s Cornell University. In March, the school’s undergraduate student assembly unanimously approved a [resolution](#) calling for trigger warnings in syllabuses to warn students of “graphic traumatic content” in course content. Cornell’s president, Martha E. Pollack, [promptly vetoed it](#).

In a [joint letter](#) with Cornell's provost, Michael I. Kotlikoff, she explained that the trigger warning policy "would violate our faculty's fundamental right to determine what and how to teach, preventing them from adding, throughout the semester, any content that any student might find upsetting." Moreover, the letter said, the policy would "have a chilling effect on faculty, who would naturally fear censure lest they bring a discussion spontaneously into new and challenging territory, or fail to accurately anticipate students' reaction to a topic or idea."...

It's important to emphasize that the fight over free speech on campus is not left versus right. Attempts to suppress ideas and stifle speech come from both ends of the political spectrum. The faculty and administrators at Stanford, Cornell, Harvard and Chicago who are making their stands aren't a collection of conservatives taking on woke college students. Instead, they represent the moral and legal center of the American academy taking on the extremes.

Left and right tend to challenge free speech on campus in different ways. Left-leaning students have led [shout-downs](#) and [disrupted](#) events, while right-leaning legislators have [passed](#) or [considered](#) laws stifling the expression of controversial ideas about race and gender. [Both sides](#) have proved capable of mobilizing online outrage to punish professors who offend their constituencies.

The First Amendment cannot be tied to one side of our partisan divide. It's not a Republican value or a Democratic value but rather an American value, and it's a value that's particularly important in the academy.

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**The following letters were written in response:**

**To the Editor:**

Re "[There Are Promising Signs for Free Speech on Campuses](#)," by David French (column, April 17):

I hope Mr. French's column is correct. Freedom of speech, as provided for in the First Amendment, is a bedrock principle of our constitutional democracy.

It is based on the premise of neutral principles. It guarantees all of us the fundamental right to express ourselves regardless of our viewpoints. Its meaning and significance for a free society cannot be misunderstood or minimized.

Individuals who profess to believe in free speech demonstrate their commitment to the principle not merely when they support the right of a speaker with whom they agree but also when they show that support for a speaker whose viewpoint is antithetical to their own.

Norman Siegel  
New York

*The writer is a civil rights lawyer and a former executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union.*

**To the Editor:**

We should always be glad to hear of university administrators defending free speech. But I think it is wrong to equate student protests with lawmaker attempts to ban areas of academic discourse from curriculums.

Protests, while they may go too far in violating the rights and safety of speakers, are themselves, in principle, exercises in free speech. It is entirely appropriate, for example, for law students at Stanford to protest Federalist Society lectures.

Lawmakers' attempts to ban speech, on the other hand, are exercises in government tyranny. Big difference.

John Pederson  
Portland, Ore.

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## As Classic Novels Get Revised for Today's Readers, a Debate About Where to Draw the Line

Agatha Christie. Roald Dahl. Ian Fleming. Classics are being reworked to remove offensive language. But some readers wonder, when does posthumous editing go too far?

By [Alexandra Alter](#) and [Elizabeth A. Harris](#), Published April 3, 2023, NYT

The estates of several revered literary figures are altering portions of well-known works to conform to current sensibilities, stirring a heated debate among readers and the literary world over whether, and how, classics should be updated.

In Agatha Christie's novels, terms like "Oriental," "Gypsy" and "native" have been taken out, and revised versions of Ian Fleming's "James Bond" books will be scrubbed of racist and sexist phrases. Classics by Roald Dahl have been stripped of adjectives like "fat" and "ugly" along with references to characters' gender and skin color.

While some changes have been made to books published in decades past, often with little fanfare, many of the current attempts to remove offensive language are systematic and have drawn intense public scrutiny. The effort has left publishers and literary

estates grappling with how to preserve an author's original intent while ensuring that their work continues to resonate — and sell.

Finding the right balance is a delicate act: part business decision, part artful conjuring of the worldview of an author from another era in order to adapt it to the present....

Altering a text carries its own risks. Critics say editing books posthumously is an affront to authors' creative autonomy and can amount to censorship, and that even a well intentioned effort to weed out bigotry can open the door to more pervasive changes.

“You want to think about the precedent that you're setting, and what would happen if someone of a different predisposition or ideology were to pick up the pen and start crossing things out,” said Suzanne Nossel, the chief executive of PEN America.

Changes could also remake the literary and historical record by deleting evidence of an author's racial and cultural prejudices, and eroding literature's ability to reflect the place and time in which it was created. “Sometimes the historical value is intimately intertwined with why something is offensive,” Nossel said.

Then there's the chance that readers who cherish the original works will revolt....

More recently, [Dr. Seuss's estate announced](#) that six of his books would no longer be published because they contained egregious racial and ethnic stereotypes. Among those titles was his first children's book, originally published in 1937, “And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street,” which included a crude caricature of an Asian man.

While older texts regularly get updated when they are reprinted, publishers and estates have in recent years begun to search literary classics more systematically to find and alter passages that might offend readers. In many cases, publishers say, the interventions involve a handful of words, and don't impact the overall story....

But when an author is no longer alive, the posthumous revision process can be more fraught.

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**To the Editor:**

Re “[Readers Torn by Push to Revise Classics for Modern Sensibilities](#)” (front page, April 6):

One of the purposes of art is to offer a window on the values of its time. Offensive passages in the works of Agatha Christie, Roald Dahl and others are a reflection not only of those writers' sensibilities, but also of what the commercial and cultural powers of the day — and the public — found acceptable. They are part of the historical record of our problematic journey toward enlightenment.

While there may be an argument for expurgated versions of some books for young children, adult readers should face squarely our literature as it is — flaws and all.

Al McKee  
San Francisco

**To the Editor:**

Efforts by literary executors, editors and school systems to sanitize the writing of past generations is nothing new. Notoriously, the 19th-century [Bowdler editions of Shakespeare](#) scrubbed away all unsettling sexual content. They have been viewed with scorn ever since.

Unfortunately, the cost of “bowdlerizing” texts is not just literary or aesthetic. This retroactive censorship has dangerous political implications. Victorian translations of classical texts scrubbed away all references to homosexuality, creating an illusion of heteronormativity where it never existed. Late 20th-century library shelves were purged of books that expressed racist, antisemitic and eugenic beliefs, creating a comfortable delusion that such opinions were rare.

In the end, our current wave of neo-bowdlerization is likely to have effects that contradict its proponents’ well-intentioned aims. Censorship cannot fix history. Rather, it erases and conceals our history, making it harder to reckon with.

Sean McEnroe  
Ashland, Ore.  
*The writer is a professor of history at Southern Oregon University.*

**To the Editor:**

Attempting to revise classic literature for a modern world sounds great at first. But it has serious ramifications.

We cannot rewrite history for our own contentment. Because if we do, we’re refusing to acknowledge the anguish caused by the prejudice and bigotry they delineate.

We cannot pretend that racial slurs have not been violently thrown off the tips of tongues, and that they didn’t wound those they were intended for. We cannot pretend that women have not been suppressed for millennia, and that chauvinism wasn’t prevalent in many facets of life. We cannot pretend that people weren’t disparaged and dehumanized. Because they were. And they still are.

If we change these words, if we change these stories, we aren’t merely effacing the discrimination within them. We are effacing the years of pain and suffering they represent.



Keya Mehta  
New York  
*The writer is a high school freshman.*

## **Another author visits Central Bucks to speak out against potential book bans**

Jean Kwok, whose book *Girl in Translation* is facing a challenge, said she traveled from the Netherlands to address the board at its meeting.

by <a href="#">Maddie Hanna</a> , Philadelphia Inquirer Published Apr 12, 2023
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The debate over library books in Central Bucks continued Tuesday, as another author made the case to the district’s school board for why her book shouldn’t be banned.

Jean Kwok, whose book *Girl in Translation* is facing a challenge, said she traveled from the Netherlands to address the board at its meeting.

“Do I seem like a person who writes pornography?” Kwok asked.

The district [received 61 book challenges](#) in February after enacting rules accompanying its policy targeting “sexualized content” in school libraries.

The complaints, and the policy’s language, have spurred fears of book removal. Last month, author Laurie Halse Anderson, who lives in Upper Dublin, [told the board it would be “educational malpractice”](#) to ban her memoir, *Shout*, and other books dealing with sexual abuse....

At Tuesday’s meeting, school board member Jim Pepper asked Superintendent Abram Lucabaugh whether any books had gone through the challenge process. Lucabaugh answered yes, but didn’t specify how many....

## **A Florida School Banned a Disney Movie About Ruby Bridges. Here’s What That Really Means.**

March 29, 2023, NYT

By [Charles M. Blow](#), Opinion Columnist

This month, an elementary school in St. Petersburg, Fla., stopped showing a 1998 Disney movie about Ruby Bridges, the 6-year-old Black girl who integrated a public elementary school in New Orleans in 1960, [because of a complaint](#) lodged by a single parent who said she feared the film might teach children that white people hate Black people.

The school banned the film until it could be reviewed. So I decided to review the film myself.

First, here's a refresher on Ruby: When she integrated that school, she had to be escorted by federal marshals. She was met by throngs of white racists — adults! — jeering, hurling epithets, spitting at her and threatening her life. Parents withdrew their children.

Only one teacher would teach her, so every day that 6-year-old girl had to be in class by herself, save for the teacher, and eat lunch alone.

Ruby became afraid to eat because one of the protesters threatened to poison her. Her father lost his job, and the local grocery asked that her family not come back to the store.

All of this was endured by a Black first grader, but now a Florida parent worries that it's too much for second graders to hear, see and learn about.

Furthermore, of all the ways Ruby's story could have been portrayed, the Disney version is the most generous, including developed story lines for Ruby's white teacher and the white psychiatrist who treated her. And in the end, another white teacher and a white student come around to some form of acceptance.

The movie is what you'd expect: a lamentable story about a deplorable chapter in our history, earnestly told, with some of the sharpest edges blunted, making it easier for children to absorb.

But in Florida, the point isn't the protection of children but the deceiving of them. It's to fight so-called woke indoctrination with a historical whitewash....

Also this month, a principal in Florida [was pressured to resign](#) after students were shown Michelangelo's statue of David, a biblical figure no less, and three parents complained.

Giving so few parents so much power to take educational options away from other parents and children runs counter to the spirit of democracy and free inquiry, and enshrines a form of parental tyranny of the hypersensitive, the inexplicably aggrieved and the maliciously oppressive.

It portends an era of bedlam in Florida's schools, all courtesy of extremist state legislators' and Gov. Ron DeSantis's quixotic war on wokeness....

History is full of horribleness. We do ourselves and our children no favors pretending otherwise.

Learning about human cruelty is necessarily uncomfortable. It is in that discomfort that our empathy is revealed and our righteousness awakened.

These debates continue to center on the discomfort of white children, but seem to ignore the feelings of Black children, discomfort or otherwise.

As I watched the film, I was incredibly uncomfortable, sometimes angry, sometimes near tears as I revisited Ruby's story.

How did that happen? How do we honor that moment, condemning the cruelty of the racists and exalting her bravery? And how do we address the effect of racial discrimination on the American experience?

If an accurate depiction of white racism and cruelty is a metric by which educational instruction and materials can be banned, how is a true and full teaching of American history possible?

The wave of censorship we're seeing also invokes, for me, [the "slave" Bible](#), an abridged text used in the 1800s in the West Indies to try to pacify the enslaved. Passages that evoked liberation were cut and passages that supported slavery were kept. It was a tool of psychological warfare masquerading as sacred text.

DeSantis's Florida is engaged in similar psychological warfare. Its battlegrounds are race, gender and sexuality, and it is napalming inclusive narratives.

The state's crusading censors are choosing the comfort of ignorance over the inconvenience of truth.

## **The Bryn Mawr grad who took Judy Blume to her graduation**

by <a href="#">Bedatri D.Choudhury</a> , Philadelphia Inquirer Updated on Apr 13, 2023, 3:49 p.m. ET
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"The current wave of book banning is bizarre and disgusting," author Lorrie Kim says to The Inquirer over the phone.

Back in 1984, when Kim was 16, her pen pal, author Judy Blume, wrote to her about the National Coalition Against Censorship in a letter and mentioned "being really busy with work with that organization." By that time, it had been seven years since Kim first wrote to Blume.

Growing up in central New Jersey, and in the fourth grade, Kim admittedly "had no idea what menstruation or sex or anything like that was." Which was when some of her classmates "shook their heads" and "kindly led" Kim over to the section of the school library where Judy Blume's books were stacked. Kim picked up Blume's 1970 novel, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

“I remember feeling really angry,” Kim said, “that I hadn’t been told all these important things [about myself] ... that there was this adult conspiracy to keep me ignorant even though everyone else already knew.”

That’s when she decided to write Blume a letter.

“I just wrote down everything that I wanted to ask her. No one had taught me that you couldn’t write to an author ... so I was sending a letter out into the void,” she said. Blume wrote back, and the two haven’t stopped writing to one another ever since. It has been 45 years since that first letter from Blume, that came with a brochure Blume had written for a sanitary napkin company. It was called *Growing Up and Liking It...*

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## **On the Ongoing Fight Against the Censorship of Ideas**

By [Amy Brady](#), September 22, 2016, NYT

Like small pox and vinyl records, book banning is something many Americans like to think of as history. But according to the American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE), the practice persists. ABFE, which from its headquarters in White Plains fights book banning across the country, keeps a list of books challenged each year by American public libraries and schools. In 2016, that list includes Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Emily M. Danworth’s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Most of the titles are by LGBTQ authors and authors of color who write about life beyond white, straight, middle-class America.

One way ABFE fights book banning is to partner with other organizations in the publishing industry (including their parent organization, the American Booksellers Association) to host Banned Books Week, a seven-day celebration that takes place in bookstores and libraries all over the United States. This year, the event runs from September 25th to October 1st with a focus on “diversity,” a factor behind many book challenges. “There were over 300 book challenges in 2015,” said Chris Finan, Director of ABFE, in an interview. “And themes of race, ethnicity, and sexual preference have been a large part of why those books got challenged.”

On its website, ABFE acknowledges that diversity is difficult to define. One definition that has informed their thinking comes from the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom:

Diversity includes “non-white main and/or secondary characters; LGBT main and/or secondary characters; disabled main and/or secondary characters; issues about race or racism; LGBT

issues; issues about religion, which encompass in this situation the Holocaust and terrorism; issues about disability and/or mental illness; non-Western settings, in which the West is North America and Europe.”

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## **Bannings and Burnings in History**

Source: *Freedom to Read*

<https://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/bannings-and-burnings-in-history/>

This article could not be included because of space limitations. However, you may wish to follow the link to read about the history of bannings and burnings going back to 200 BCE in China. Some of the titles and authors are: *Harry Potter* (2019), ancient manuscripts in Mali (2013), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2012), *The Book of Negroes* (2011), *Satanic Verses* (1998), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (NC, 1987), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Alabama, 1983), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (ND, 1973), Mickey Mouse (East Berlin, 1954), Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner (Ireland, 1953), massive book burnings in Germany (1933), *Alice in Wonderland* (China, 1931), *Huckleberry Finn* (Concord, MA, 1885), *King Lear* (England, 1788), *Robinson Crusoe* (Spain, 1720), Galileo’s documents (1616), *Richard II* (England, 1597), books and paintings (Florence, IT, 1497), 200,000 volumes in the library at Alexandria (640), Ovid is banned from Rome for *Ars Amatoria* (8), all books in China except one copy in the royal library (China, 259 BC).

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## **WHERE THE WILD THINGS AREN’T: ON THE BANNING OF SENDAK**

By: [Rob Spillman](#), September 26, 2013, Pen America

*“That very night in Max’s room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through the night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are.”*

—*Where the Wild Things Are*

It took Maurice Sendak four years to get Harper & Row to publish *Where the Wild Things Are*. One of the most beloved—and bestselling—children’s books of all time almost didn’t

make it past his editors, who were scared that the unvarnished story of rebellion, fear, punishment, and escape were too much for little children. Silly editors, that's exactly why it was an immediate hit. In 1964 *Where the Wild Things Are* won the Caldecott Medal for best picture book, and since its publication has sold nearly twenty million copies worldwide. The editors weren't off base, though, as the book did frighten people—they just happened to be adults, particularly those living in the South who immediately began pulling it from libraries and schools. Adding his voice to the outcry was prominent child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote in *Ladies' Home Journal* "What [Sendak] failed to understand is the incredible fear it evokes in the child to be sent to bed without supper, and this by the first and foremost giver of food and security—his mother." Luckily for history, there were a lot more reasoned opinions, like this early review from a Cleveland newspaper : "Boys and girls may have to shield their parents from this book. Parents are very easily scared."

Censorship takes many forms, including on the grounds of religious principles, and, not surprisingly, *Wild Things* has been "challenged" in schools and libraries because of "witchcraft/supernatural elements." Don't laugh—so has *Harry Potter*, the most challenged book of the last decade according to the American Library Association. Another particularly pernicious flavor of censorship is the "We're banning this for your own sensitive good" brand, officially labeled as "Unsuited to Age Group." Yet how many children who are plagued by dark thoughts, including my own moody pre-teen self, have been thrown a lifeline by Sendak? Millions of kids who have seen a fictional kid going a rampage through the house, lashing out at his mother when caught ("I'm going to eat you up!") and then escaping on a raft of the imagination. Sendak himself was a brooder—a gay, Jewish Brooklynite, who as a young child was traumatized by the Limburgh baby kidnapping, fearing that if horror could happen to the most rich and powerful, there was nothing to protect him from the evils of the world. With his work Sendak acknowledges darkness and fear, and provides an introduction to complicated thinking, the basis for reason and, fundamentally, humanism. The very things that protective censors wish to shield sensitive children from. And for this reason *Where the Wild Things* is still, after thirty years, being pulled from schools and libraries and worse, shunned by overprotective guardians.

I'm sure there were some who winced when President Obama read the book at the White House Easter Egg Roll and called it one of his favorite books. Sendak himself said that his work is "about human emotion and life." He didn't consider himself a kids' writer: "They're pigeonholed as children's books but the best ones aren't — they're just books." Maybe we should trust the kids, not to mention the National Education Association, which lists *Where the Wild Things Are* as one of the teacher's top 100 books for children. But it is up to us to protect the wild things and thoughts from those who want to deny them to future generations.

## Finally two optimistic articles to relieve the gloom:

### The day the book banners lost in Pennsylvania's culture wars

A right-wing move to keep a young-adult climate change novel out of a Kutztown middle school backfired in spectacular fashion.

by <a href="#">Will Bunch</a>   Columnist Published Apr 16, 2023, Philadelphia Inquirer
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KUTZTOWN, Pa. — If you ban it, they will come.

For the better part of an hour Saturday, dozens of teenagers and their parents snaked around the towering stacks of tomes inside Kutztown's Firefly Bookstore and sometimes spilled onto the sidewalks of this quaint Berks County college town — most of them clutching the book that conservatives on the local school board didn't want them to read.

Calliope Price, 14 and in the eighth grade, came out to meet Alan Gratz — author of the “banned” young-adult novel about climate change, [Two Degrees](#) — after hearing about the controversy and realizing that Gratz had also written her favorite book, which is called, ironically, [Ban This Book](#). Holding her now-signed copy, she weighed in on Kutztown Area Middle School [canceling](#) a planned “One School, One Book” program amid conservative complaints a climate book would somehow scare or indoctrinate adolescents.

“I think it's really stupid,” she said.

Price has a good point. Right-wingers who thought they'd scored a victory by canceling the middle school program only ensured that more young folks in Berks County would actually read [Two Degrees](#) — a tale of teens dramatically fighting catastrophes brought on by climate change. They were helped by the progressive grassroots organization [Red Wine & Blue](#), which raised money [to buy 200 copies](#) to give away to Kutztown youth. Gratz, who'd long planned to come to Kutztown University for its annual [conference on children's literature](#), arranged to hold both afternoon and evening book signings to meet as many young fans as possible.

Saturday was the day that the book banners lost in Kutztown, a somewhat liberal-leaning borough surrounded by a political red sea of Trump voters where the left and the right are currently duking it out for control of the Kutztown Area school board. And it couldn't have come at a better time, when it seems that the culture warriors of the extreme right are waging war against not just books but [freedom of thought](#), from coast to coast.

In Missouri, state House members [took the radical step](#) of cutting all state dollars for its 160 public libraries in a fit of pique over a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, which is challenging a state law forcing libraries in the Show-Me State to yank some 300

books over allegations they are sexually explicit. In Texas, Llano County officials backed down from [their threat](#) to shut down its library system after a judge ordered that 17 books be returned to the shelves, but battles around titles dealing with race, sexuality, and other topics are still raging in many jurisdictions. Especially in politically riven communities like Kutztown.

Now a top author like Tennessee-based Gratz — who has steadily climbed toward the top of the young-adult bestseller lists [with his 19 books](#) on hot-button subjects such as refugees, the Holocaust, and terrorism, an approach that he calls “social thrillers” — is finding himself on the front lines of a war that no one expected to see in America.

“The reason I’m writing these books is because kids are asking me to write about these topics,” Gratz told me. “We always want to say we’re trying to protect children by keeping these kind of things from them, but honestly the world is coming at kids faster than before. The kids have been going through active shooter drills since kindergarten” and have also been exposed to debates over tough issues like racism at a young age. The world is coming at them, he said, “and I hope that books like mine can give them a way of seeing what’s happening in the world without having to experience it just yet.”

That was certainly the thinking behind his latest, *Two Degrees*, in which [everyday teens cope](#) with events such as floods and wildfires in a near future when the world’s temperature has risen 2 degrees due to greenhouse gas pollution. The implied message of a call to action around climate change, and Gratz’s long-planned appearance at the local university, had inspired Kutztown Area Middle School to pick *Two Degrees* for its annual “One Book, One School” schoolwide reading program.

The books had already arrived when several conservative board members and parents leaned on the school to cancel the program. [According to the Reading Eagle](#), one adult complained at a board meeting that a book about climate change might make kids feel guilty — and turn them against their parents.

The backlash was hardly unique, either nationally or in Pennsylvania — where several suburban districts have seen bitter clashes over what’s [in school libraries](#) — or even in Kutztown, where school officials did retain the controversial book *Gender Queer*, but with a [parental consent form](#), after a lengthy public debate. But the controversies in this college town about 65 miles northwest of Philadelphia have brought pushback in favor of free expression.

The 2022 fight over *Gender Queer* inspired local teen Joslyn Diffenbaugh, now a ninth grader, to [launch the Kutztown Teen Banned Book Club](#), which garnered her a national free speech award. Diffenbaugh and a couple of her girlfriends were among the first in line Saturday, and club members returned in the evening for a discussion panel with Gratz.

“I think it’s amazing that we have such a well-known author in our tiny town, and I think it’s amazing that we were able to get these books out to all the people who are here because that opportunity was unjustly taken away from kids in the middle school,”



Diffenbaugh told me. She said the students weren't just supposed to get a free book "but to have a conversation, and having conversations about books are so influential and helpful in education."

But right-wingers who thought they had "banned" a climate change book in Kutztown only made it more popular. Middle schoolers not only were allowed access to *Two Degrees* from the boxes that school officials had already opened before the "One Book, One School" cancellation, but many enjoyed the 200 free copies doled out by Red Wine & Blue.

What's more, academic free speech is now the number one issue in a heated May 16 election that will determine the future direction of the Kutztown Area school board. Four of the five candidates from a group called [KOFEE](#) (Kutztown Organized for Educational Excellence) running on an "Open Books, Open Minds" platform were at the bookstore Saturday to show their support for Gratz and his teen readers.

"It's just outrageous," one of those KOFEE candidates, Charles Brown, told me of the district's backdown on *Two Degrees*, one of the reasons he decided to run. "It's not like a book, 'How To Make a Bomb' or anything. ... To think that it's propaganda — to me, the issue is that kids have to learn the difference between fact and fiction and how to judge something they read. Not ban books!"

Not surprisingly, Brown's slate is facing spirited opposition from a Republican ticket, the [Concerned Citizens of KASD](#), whose platform calls for banning what it called "critical race theory" as well as diversity programs in the Kutztown schools, and which has been showing up at board meetings [with signs like](#), "We Do Not Co-Parent With the Government."

The battle is now joined. What happened this weekend in Kutztown shines a bright light on one of the most encouraging political trends of 2023, in which a radical minority of extremist book banners has [awakened a sleeping giant](#): the vast no-longer-silent majority who still believes that absurd restrictions on exposing our young people to ideas are un-American.

In that Llano County, Texas, flap, officials ultimately backed down from their threat to close the library because of public pressure and national publicity. Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, over 150 kids at Perkiomen Valley High School, carrying signs like "Teach Children the Truth," [walked out of school](#) to protest proposed book restrictions that are on hold.

The bad news might be this "it can't happen here" reality that America is even debating these restrictions on free speech in the 2020s, but the great news is that the book banners are often failing. And more voters need to know that your child's freedom to read a book, and to learn, is on the ballot in 2023 and especially in 2024.

"Absolutely it's a victory because it's the people in the community who stood up and said we're not going to let a few people speak for them," Gratz told me after signing dozens of books Saturday. "I think that what's happening around the country is that a few loud people

are making a stink and getting school boards and superintendents to back down because they don't want the trouble. And I think a lot of people are standing up and making good trouble."

## ***Texas County Keeps Public Libraries Open Amid Book Ban Controversy***

Officials in Llano County considered closing the entire library system in lieu of returning challenged titles to its shelves.

By [David Montgomery](#) and [Alexandra Alter](#)

Reporting from Llano, Texas, April 13, 2023, NYT

A small Texas county decided to keep its public libraries open amid a monthslong fight over keeping challenged material available to residents. During a heated public meeting on Thursday, county commissioners weighed whether to close the library system after a judge had ordered the county to restore 17 banned books to its shelves.

The decision was seen as a victory for a group of residents who had sued the county and library officials, arguing that the book removals were unconstitutional and violated citizens' First Amendment rights.

The judge, Robert Pitman, of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas, ordered Llano County to return the books to their place while a lawsuit over the banned books, brought on by a group of county residents, proceeds. After the judge's order was issued, county commissioners called a special meeting to decide whether to "continue or cease operations" at the library.

The [ongoing fight](#) has divided the community and made Llano, a rural county in central Texas about 80 miles northwest of Austin, a new testing ground for citizens invoking First Amendment protections in the face of [rising book bans](#).

After impassioned statements from residents on both sides of the issue, including those who support removing books, Llano County commissioners voted unanimously to keep the library system open as the confrontation plays out in the courts.

"The library will remain open," said County Judge Ron Cunningham after he and the four county commissioners emerged from a closed executive session. "We will try this in the courts, not through social media or through the news media."

They then adjourned without further comment...

The defendants have argued that there was no First Amendment violation because libraries have discretion over the content in their collections, and that residents could still access the removed books through other channels. They have filed an appeal in the

Fifth Circuit, contesting the judge's order to restock the books. A trial is scheduled for this fall.

“Judge Pitman's order was very fair, and it was a victory for everybody that believes in the rule of law and is against censorship,” said Leila Green Little, one of seven residents who sued county officials over book removals.

The fight in Llano County is a more extreme example of the conflicts brewing in school districts and communities across the country as libraries face a growing wave of [increasingly coordinated and politicized](#) book banning efforts.

While the majority of book ban efforts are aimed at school libraries, public libraries like those in Llano County have been impacted as well: In 2022, around 40 percent of the challenges that the American Library Association tracked targeted material in public libraries.

Some Llano residents were shocked by the possibility of losing access to the county's public libraries and the services they provide, including free internet.

Gretchen Hinkle, a Llano resident, went to the meeting on Thursday to make a case for keeping the library open.

“I don't think libraries are meant to be a curated collection of government-approved ideology,” she said. “What happens here may provide a foothold for similar actions in other communities, and it's the citizens who will pay the price.”

After she learned that commissioners decided to preserve the library, she said she felt encouraged that people on opposite sides of the issue had found a point of agreement.

“Some common ground was found for keeping the library system open,” she said. “Some people have said, ‘Look, I don't agree with the content of the books, but don't close the libraries.’”

Hours before the commissioners' meeting on Thursday, dozens of residents waited outside to enter the venue.

The crowd included people who are in favor of keeping the books out of libraries and closing the libraries if necessary.

Lisa Bellamy, the president of the Llano Tea Party and mother of two sons in high school, said she supported the idea of closing the library if the commissioners found it necessary.

“The books talk about many topics that are adult topics,” she said. “Parents believe they can leave their children in the library and they will not be harmed, but examination proves otherwise.”

More than a half-dozen spectators sang several choruses of “Amazing Grace” during a break, while the commissioners were in executive session. Jason Herron, a 6-foot-7 sales representative who described himself as “a citizen of God’s kingdom,” led a group in prayer.

Among those who supported keeping the library open was Katie Burrescia, who lives in Llano County and takes her three young children to the library two or three days a week, and said the library was a vital resource for her family and other residents.

“The library is a pillar of our community,” she said.

Other residents who attended the meeting spoke about the value of libraries as a hub for free information, and of the importance of fighting censorship efforts.

Suzette Baker, a former librarian at the Kingsland branch in Llano County who was fired after she refused to remove books, said before the meeting that she worried about the erosion of civil liberties.

“This is obviously a violation of people’s rights,” Baker said.

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