

BOOKS

The Year We Banned Books

Making sense of the politics behind the unprecedented attacks on Texas school library volumes that deal with issues of race and gender.

By Michael Agresta

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Texas K-12 public schools typically come out fair to middling in state-by-state rankings of student performance, so it's an occasion worth noting any time we come first in something. This year, we led the nation in book bans,

and the contest wasn't even close. Our school libraries were, in sportscasters' terms, absolutely *on fire*. Between July 2021 and June 2022, according to PEN America, Texas school districts banned 801 books in 22 school districts, often focusing on titles that deal with racial history and sexual identity.

Our achievement may yet turn out to be ephemeral. Hard-line book-banning candidates lost seats in some school board elections this month, including in Round Rock, while winning in other locations, such as Granbury. We'll learn soon enough whether such mixed results temper the energies of book-banning activists. But this post-election moment is a good time to unpack the book-ban movement.

How did we get here? Why have contentious book-ban fights been so especially prevalent in Texas? And what are the prospects for making some kind of peace across the aisle that will allow librarians to do their jobs without constant activist outcry? Can we ever, to coin a slogan, Make Libraries Quiet Again?

Through the years, both liberal and conservative parents have occasionally objected to individual books, but librarians currently face what they describe as a novel and overwhelming tide of organized intervention in the management of their collections—not to mention harassment and threats. “We’ve never seen anything like this, from either side, in the past,” says Texas Library Association president Mary Woodard, who spent 35 years as a school librarian in Mesquite. “It’s totally unprecedented.”

It’s hard to put an exact date on the beginning of the present book-banning movement, because it’s entwined with ongoing struggles over curricula and other culture-war battles that touch on schools. Vociferous complaints about books bubbled up throughout 2021, often with bigoted overtones. Viral videos emerged from Texas school board meetings, such as one of an aggrieved parent using a dildo as a prop to protest Maria Carmen Machado’s lesbian-relationship memoir, *In the Dream House*, and one of another loudly and repeatedly decrying a euphemistic reference to anal sex in Ashley Hope Pérez’s historical novel of interracial love, *Out of Darkness*.





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Around this time last year, state-level Republican politicians began to add their weight behind the push for book bans. First, in October, state representative Matt Krause wrote a letter to school superintendents that included a list of 850 books to investigate, demanding they report back to him on which listed books were in library inventories and how much money had been spent on them. Krause's list included prominent titles widely praised for their literary merit, including Ta-Nehisi Coates's National Book Award-winning *Between the World and Me*; Andrew Solomon's National Book Critics Circle Award-winning *Far From the Tree*; and John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*, the film adaptation of which won Irving a screenwriting Oscar. To ban them is to remove vital organs from the body of American literature. But these books also grapple with race, sexuality, and abortion in ways that are unwelcome to some conservative readers.

The month after Krause sent his letter, Governor Greg Abbott threatened criminal consequences for any school library that harbored "pornographic" content, which Abbott did not define, leaving librarians to wonder how broadly he or certain parents in their districts would. Critics saw this move as an attempt to suppress LGBTQ-friendly books, and at least some allies of Abbott did too. Though legal experts doubt First Amendment precedent would allow successful enforcement of Abbott's order through the court system, the threat alone gave districts further impetus to review their

holdings. In Frisco ISD, for instance, criteria **for banning books based on obscenity** were revised to be more censorious.

Some districts, including San Antonio's North East ISD, have published **detailed records** of their reviews and removals of library holdings. Others are less candid. For Granbury ISD, which temporarily removed **131 books** from library shelves, the most telling information came from a leaked recording of a meeting between superintendent Jeremy Glenn and a group of school librarians. "Specifically, what we're getting at . . . it's the transgender, LGBTQ, and the sex—sexuality—in books," Glenn told his librarians in private. "That's what the governor has said that he will prosecute people for, and that's what we're pulling out."

Traditionally, decisions about the contents of school libraries in Texas are made outside the public eye by librarians with relevant professional training. Because they can't read every book in the building, librarians rely on peer-written reviews in publications such as *School Library Journal* and *Booklist* to help vet for quality and age-appropriateness. Librarians acquire books that complement the curriculum, reflect the interests and experiences of the kids in their school, and, by their judgment, have the potential to encourage extracurricular reading.

At the same time, library holdings are reviewed on an ongoing basis, and books are quietly removed by librarians if they become damaged or when they no longer fit the library's priorities or appeal to students. If parents have a problem with a book their child brings home, there are protocols for reviewing it, which vary by locality but typically terminate with a "reconsideration committee" that includes parents and administrators.

Before this past year, librarians managed most parents' concerns simply by talking with them, and few complaints reached the level of a formal request for review. "In my thirty-five years, we'd maybe have one or two every few years," Woodard says. "Now it's just astronomical. There are some districts dealing with eighty requests in one year, which is unheard of."

Woodard paints a picture of a benign institution run by career professionals, with meaningful but seldom-exercised opportunities for public input. That was then; this is now. Like employees of comparable institutions handling everything from elections administration to public health, school librarians now find themselves cast as enemies of a populist movement that distrusts credentialed expertise and aims to advance right-wing social and political priorities in spheres of public life in which partisan aggression was, until recently, rare.

Abbott did not respond to requests for comment for this article, but Krause, who chose not to run for reelection and holds the chair of the Texas House General Investigating Committee until January, was happy to take the time to defend his book-banning rationale.

Krause's vision, as he puts it, is to encourage communities to get more involved in shaping school library collections to better reflect local values. "These discussions need to be had at the local level," he says of proposed book bans. "Maybe what's appropriate for Granbury ISD is not the same as it would be in Houston ISD. It's important for the community to be engaged in each and every one of these and to make sure that you have the books in there that you want."

Krause appeals to voters, as opposed to librarians, as the ultimate deciders of school library contents. "They have a chance to decide, either through book review committees, or the election of the school board, or the appointment of the superintendent by those school board members," he says. "There's accountability at each step."

Where there is less accountability is in Krause's list itself. So far, whatever data he's collected on the listed books from superintendents has not been put to any public use by the committee he heads. He says he is bound by committee traditions of confidentiality not to discuss it. But absent any other obvious purpose for the letter, it has the feeling of a blacklist, and a hastily compiled one at that. "It's just a compilation of catalog searches," opines Pérez, whose book is on Krause's list.

Pérez says the list will affect the livelihoods of some of the authors listed—not big names such as Coates and Isabel Wilkerson, perhaps, but less-famous writers. “I have not been asked to do a school visit since this started, and that has never happened in my career,” Pérez says. “I think that’s common for authors who have been banned or even targeted on the Krause list. That list made authors toxic to librarians in Texas. They won’t be invited. For me, I have a day job, I’m a professor, and I’m going to be able to feed my kids no matter what, but there are certainly writers for whom that will be career-damaging.”

Many librarians, along with many authors of works deemed too controversial for school libraries, have no problem, in principle, with Krause’s argument that parents should become more involved in decisions about which works are appropriate for children of various ages. But Krause’s critics contend that school districts do their students a disservice when they shield them from works that grapple with the complexities of gender and sexuality, the brutalities of racial history, the hard choices and emotions surrounding abortion, the trauma of sexual abuse and assault, and other troubling realities. For one thing, plenty of kids, even in conservative towns, are dealing with such realities in their own lives. Second, schools are failing kids if they are not preparing them to live in a diverse country and world. Third, schoolkids today have easy access, via the internet, to a wide variety of articles and videos about sex, gender, and other sensitive subjects. Having carefully selected books available on those subjects, and teachers and librarians to guide them, can help them make sense of the flood of information they’re encountering online.

“Kids aren’t just living in their local areas,” says Emily Knox, an associate professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the author of *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*. “They need to be global citizens. They will encounter people who have different values than their parents. It’s important to have an educational system that allows you to flourish in a global economy.”

Knox's research gives her a broader view of the history of book bans, and she mentions two twentieth-century historical precedents for the present moment. One is the Red Scare after the end of World War II, when politicians and the public became concerned about library materials that might support communism. Another is the "satanic panic" of the eighties, when conspiracy theory-addled parents challenged some books for supposedly promoting the cause of the Prince of Darkness himself. One could perhaps look at today's movement as a combination of these two past examples, a moral panic folded into an ideological and patriotic cold war.

Knox sees suburban culture and the desire for homogeneity as feeding into book-ban movements both during the eighties and now. This is perhaps a factor in Texas's precedence in the PEN report, as we boast a large suburban population, much of which is conservative, that is now experiencing tumultuous demographic changes. "There's something about how the suburbs work and what people expect from their communities," Knox says. "What I see in my research is that people in the suburbs expect their neighbors to agree with their values."

Progressive responses to book bans, on the other hand, can suffer from delusions of equanimity. "Anti-censorship" is often a rallying cry, but as a practical matter, everything that is presented to schoolchildren of various ages is curated or "censored" to some degree. The question is how to curate books and lessons and who should call the shots. Quiet censorship is an inevitable mainstay of the school library, broadly if tacitly supported by both sides of the political spectrum in myriad cases. Obvious consensus examples include *Hustler* magazine and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The idea of censorship by age-appropriateness is also hard to argue with, though it's easy to disagree on where to draw the lines. According to a poll of school librarians at all grade levels, 66 percent have passed on purchasing books because of sexual content, 43 percent because of profanity or vulgar language, and 21 to 29 percent each because of LGBTQ issues, violence, drug and/or alcohol use, self-harm or suicide, and racial or ethnic stereotypes. These concerns can cut across politics. Progressives who object to racial

slurs in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have succeeded in **banning it from school curricula** in some districts, and one can easily imagine thousands of similar keep-or-pulp decisions about less-famous, newly "problematic" older books that don't fit emergent hegemonic values. This year in Keller ISD, **the Bible** was temporarily pulled from bookshelves because of a parent's complaint. The specifics of the challenge against the Bible were not made public, but one gets a hint of the challenger's politics and religiosity from what they listed as the "author name" for the Word of God: "**men who lived a long time ago.**"

In a worst-case scenario, the progressive backlash to conservative book bans might lead to an escalating censorship war between parental political factions, with each side banning what it disagrees with or agitating to acquire more books that champion its pet causes. Such conflict could also be arbitrated through voting—and indeed, recent elections might have settled the issue, for now, in some jurisdictions—or through exhausting expenditures of energy at school board meetings. But in a happier scenario, these conflicts would be resolved by mediators who know books, care about kids, and are willing (and paid) to put in the work that's required to earn the trust of parents. In other words: school librarians.

Unfortunately, after the past year's emotional roller coaster, Woodard says, some excellent librarians are departing Texas public schools to work in less-hostile environments. "It is very disheartening when your elected officials come in and start accusing you of trying to do harm to the students, when that is the furthest thing from your mind," she says. "Librarians feel very demoralized. Their professional judgment is under question. All they want to do is provide what they can for their kids. They didn't get into this business to harm kids, and to be accused of being pedophiles and groomers."

With "pedophiles and groomers," Woodard is referring to a noxious implication by some right-wing activists, especially on the internet, that anyone providing young people with educational resources on gender, sex, and sexuality is somehow trying to seduce them or lure them away from a

normative heterosexual identity—accusations often freighted with homophobia.

This brings up the crucial question of bad faith. Pérez and Woodard both imply that an ulterior motive of the book-banning movement—which, like the aligned **“critical race theory” backlash**, has its origin in **a mix of grassroots and top-down conservative organizing**—is to damage the standing of public schools in general, perhaps to promote the cause of school privatization and vouchers, or even of Christian nationalism. “Conservatives are thrilled to have another issue that puts public education in the cross hairs,” says Pérez, who taught high school English in Houston ISD early in her career.

Woodard urges differentiating between actual concerned parents and disruptive groups. “You want parents to be able to start that process if they feel it’s necessary,” she says of book challenges. “We want to work with parents. The problem is when you have these organized groups coming in. For them, it’s not really about the books. It’s about trying to develop some kind of culture war and wedge issue, playing on every parent’s fear of not being able to protect their kids. Our process is designed for people who are concerned about their own child, and these people are trying to throw a wrench in the works. The goal is not really about the books. It’s about trying to create problems for schools.”

Conservatives surely have their own arguments for not trusting the good faith of progressives and institutionalists, perhaps having witnessed certain educators and administrators who’ve lacked the discretion or courage to resist the worst fringe ideas and would-be progressive orthodoxies of recent years, from teaching that white people are inherently racist to advocating gender-affirmation surgery before the age of consent. (To be fair, both of these ideas are on the wane in liberal circles.) For librarians to keep the faith of parents, they must exercise sensitive and thoughtful judgment, avoiding groupthink and perceived peer pressure.

Even so, the battlefield is uneven. Those who would prefer to see a future education system split along ideological lines, in which religious

conservatives can keep their tax dollars to send their kids to schools that reflect their values and progressives can perhaps do likewise, may have little issue with seeing public school libraries permanently damaged in the cross fire of the culture war. It's left up to those who believe deeply in public education to put in the work at school board meetings, on review panels, and with disgruntled parents to uphold school libraries as broad-based institutions meant to serve a Texas public that is diverse across many measures, including ideology.

That work can be exhausting and thankless, and no one knows how long it will have to go on this way. "Authors and educators are repeatedly put in a position of defending the merits of works to people who will not even open books," Pérez says. The sweetest victory, one imagines, will come when, maybe someday, their kids will.