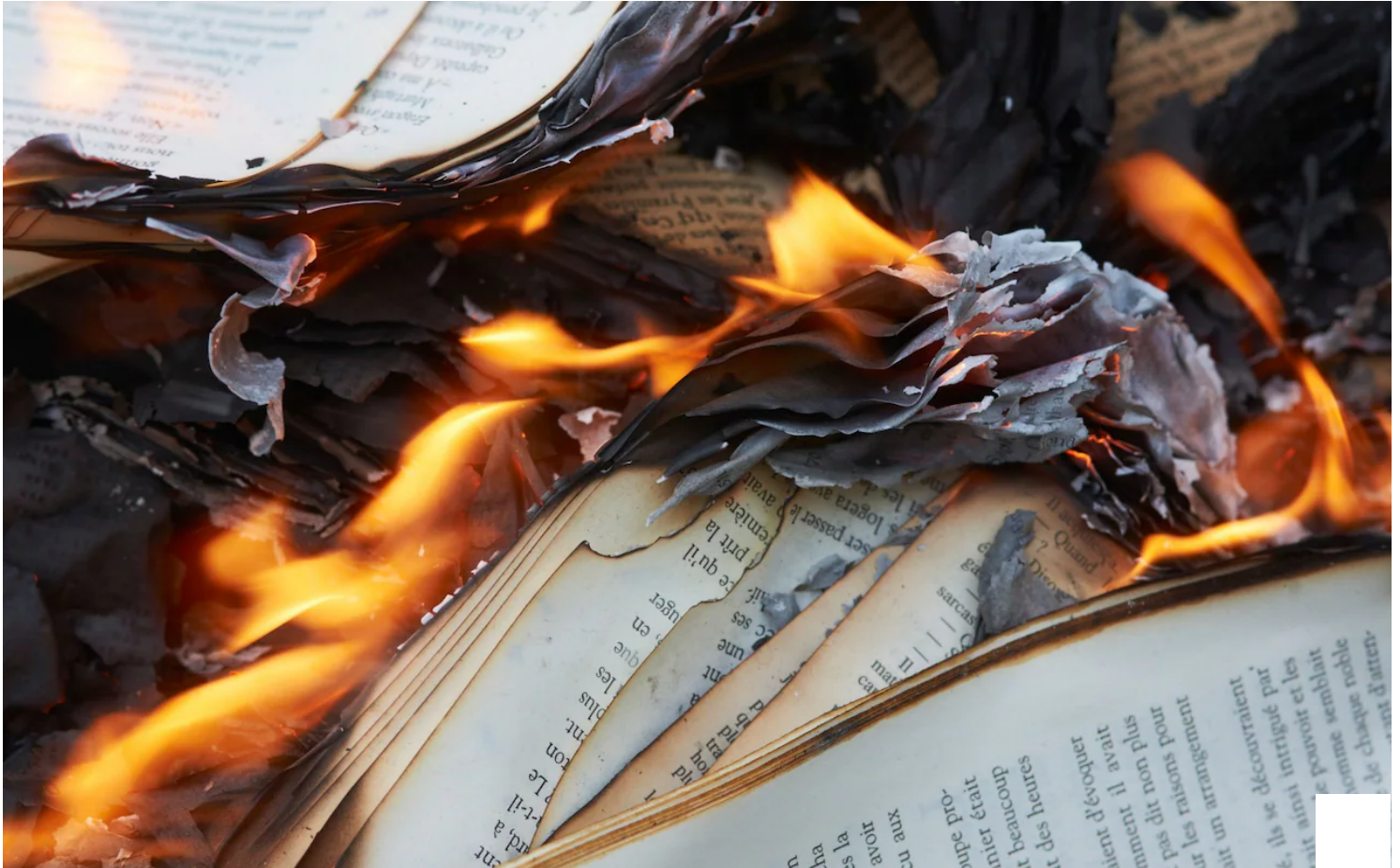


[See all Culture](#)



Inside Texas’s book ban wars: ‘Librarians have been vilified – called paedophiles and groomers’

Death threats, intimidation, smear campaigns... How the state's war on ‘vulgar’ tomes has made life hell for the humble librarian

By Charlotte Lytton

18 May 2023 • 7:08pm



When Shirley Robinson became head of the Texas Library Association (TLA), dealing with death threats didn't make the job description. Yet they have become a prominent feature in America's second-largest state, where battles over what children should read has now reached the legislative floor.

So far this school year, some 438 [books have been banned](#) in Texas – more than anywhere else in the country – with almost 40 bills put forward to exert control over what gets placed on library shelves; ban requests have been filed for Anne Frank's diary and the Bible (both of which were ultimately overturned), while titles by authors including Toni Morrison and [Margaret Atwood](#) have been removed for good.

“The profession as a whole has been denigrated,” Robinson says. “Librarians have been vilified; they've been called paedophiles and groomers... it's created a climate of fear and intimidation, and it's had some really ugly consequences for those individuals in the profession who are just trying to serve the public.”

PEN America, a nonprofit centred around freedom of expression, says that "across the country, book bans are driven by individuals, politicians, and new laws that seek to censor specific identities, mainly LGBTQ+ characters and characters of colour, or concepts, such as books on race and racism. Efforts in Texas are emblematic of a larger and coordinated movement to ban books, ideas, and knowledge for students in schools."

There is now a major shortage of librarians in Texas, Robinson adds – the result of attacks from parents, local government and social media being directed their way. One of the biggest battlegrounds has been in Llano, 72 miles northwest of Austin, where complaints led to 17 books being pulled from the county library without public input.

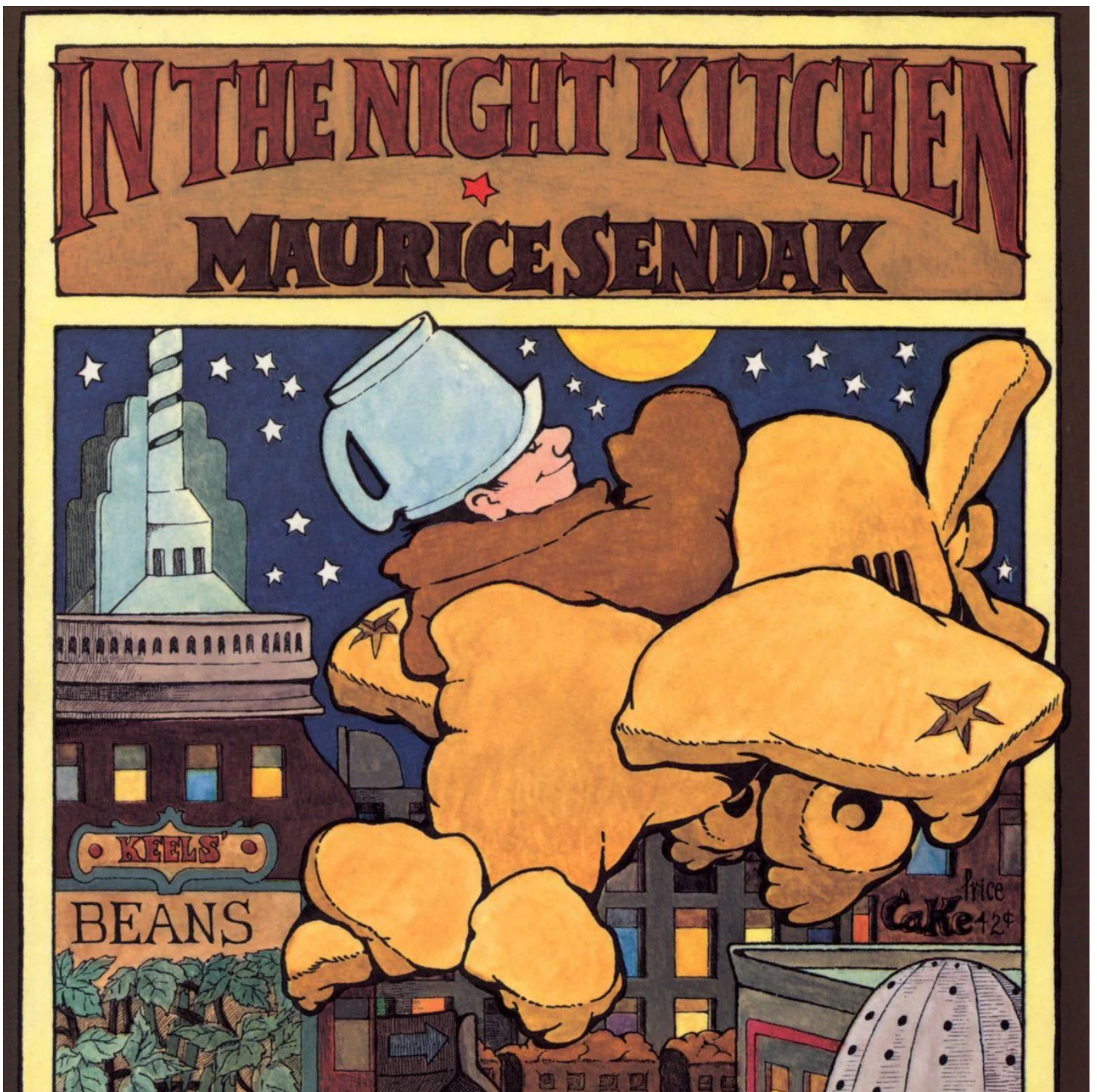


The Texas Freedom Network holding a 'read-in' as a protest against book bans | CREDIT: Mikala Compton/Austin American-Statesman via AP

Seven parents then sued the state following the removal of titles including *In the Night Kitchen*, a picture book by Maurice Sendak, and several with the word “fart” in the title – yet when a federal judge ruled that they be returned, local commissioners touted closing the library and dismissing its staff altogether, rather than complying. During a final hearing last month, concerned residents lined the block outside the courthouse, breathing a sigh of relief as the county judge declared the library would remain open.

Still, the process was “terrifying for the individuals who were serving as the plaintiffs,” Robinson says – and believes that the pendulum only swung in their favour this time due to the level of public outcry. She hopes the case, which made international headlines, will serve as a “wake-up call” about the restrictions uber-conservative communities in rural areas are seeking to impose.

But Robinson remains concerned that people still have a “very fuzzy awareness of the issue, which is really, really, scary, because there's this whole culture war happening between these small minority groups and librarians, and not enough of the public are really aware of what's happening and how bad it is, especially in the state of Texas.”

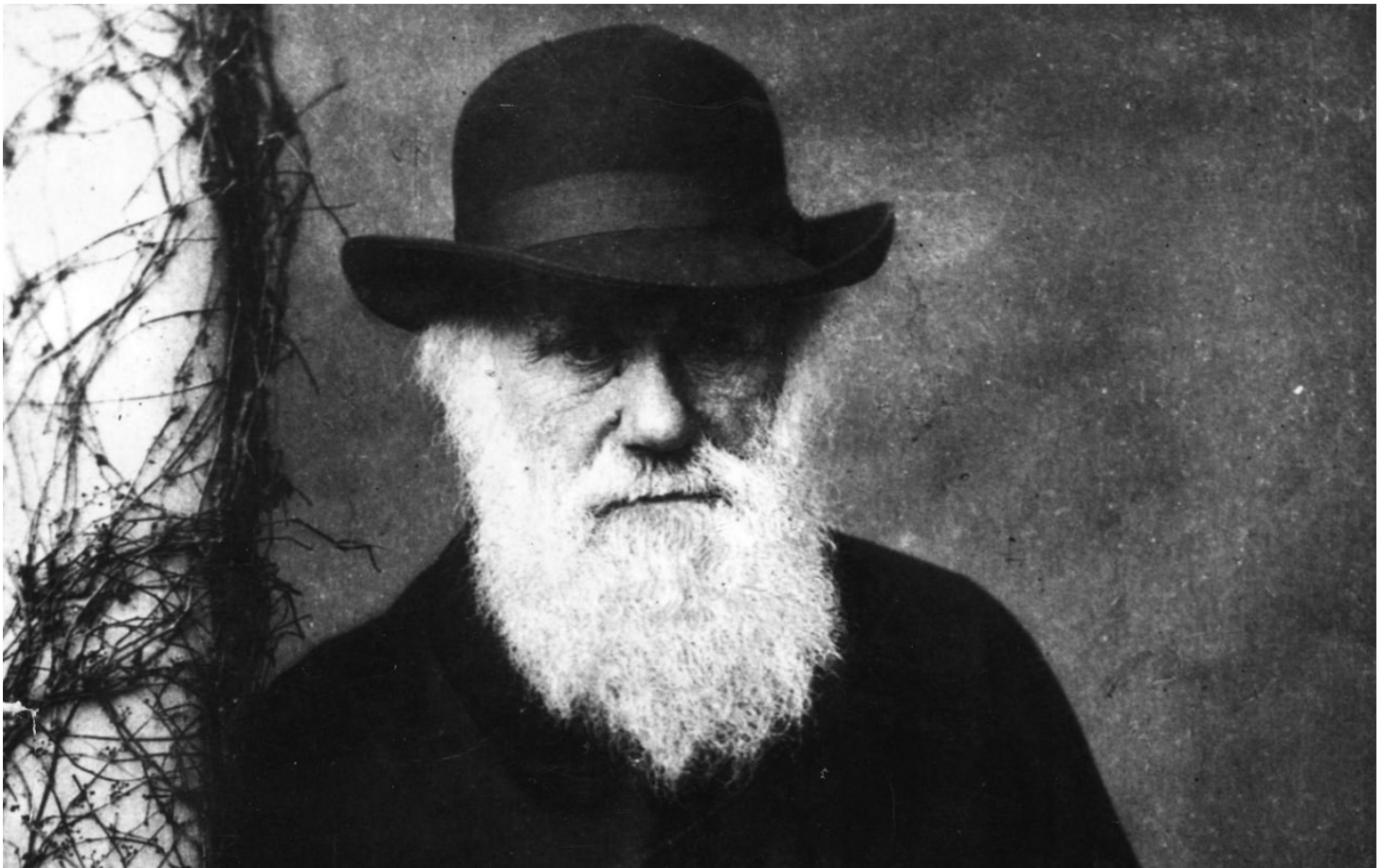


Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen*, one of many books in the crosshairs

There remain bills that have not yet been overturned which would “remove the affirmative defence to prosecution for the alleged distribution of harmful materials within libraries” – effectively meaning that librarians could be criminally prosecuted for their collections. Other legislation, if passed, would enable parents to decide which books libraries can have (rather than trained librarians), which “will absolutely impact education and learning for our students in the state of Texas. No doubt about it,” Robinson believes.

It marks the unwelcome return of mass book bans in America, which most had hoped were consigned to the McCarthy era. Having first begun in the mid-17th century as a fate doled out to tomes that went against the religious orthodoxy of the time, by the 19th and 20th centuries, works by the likes of Walt Whitman, Charles Darwin and Mark Twain were censored (Adventures of Huckleberry Finn remains among the most-complained about titles in the US), helped by the introduction of the Comstock Act – which made it illegal to possess “immoral” or “obscene” writings – in 1873.

It remained in effect for 63 years - during which time citywide bans on certain books were introduced (such as in Boston in 1929), with Ernest Hemingway and [DH Lawrence's](#) literary contributions verboten. Some 30,000 books were banned during the “red scare”, yet the thousands currently being reported means America's restrictive past feels closer than ever.



Charles Darwin, whose books have banned in the past | CREDIT: Getty

More concerning still is that the effect is catching. While recent years have seen ‘trigger warnings’ attached to historic works in the UK, and classic texts revised by [sensitivity readers](#) (typically to appease those on the Left rather than the Right), a US-style problem is mushrooming in the UK too. According to research from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (Cilip) last month, a third of librarians have now been asked to censor or remove books by members of the public – a rise that 82 per cent of those surveyed

admitted to being concerned by. Empire, race and LGBTQ+ themes were found to be in the most frequently targeted titles, while some librarians reported being threatened with violence for introducing collections on decolonisation.

In the US, book bans are again a political act: local officials are now working book bans into their campaign strategies, with Republican state representative Jared Patterson both challenging titles in his district and publicising this on his website (Patterson did not respond to repeated requests for comment).

Last year, 58 books were pulled for review from another Texas school district following a list of ‘vulgar’ tomes circulated by Republican rep. Matt Krause. Banning bills have also come into effect in the likes of Florida (where naysayers have the support of [Ron DeSantis](#), the state governor believed to soon be announcing his Republican presidential candidacy), South Carolina, Utah and Missouri.



Republican rep. Matt Krause is attempting to ban 'vulgar' books | CREDIT: Shutterstock

Until autumn 2021, a book had never been challenged in Keller, central Texas. But once Krause’s list circulated, urging parents to root the listed titles out in their districts and file petitions for their removal, 41 became subject to review. It is about more than just books, many fear.

“Unbeknownst to many of us regular parents in the school district, a political action committee had already decided they were going to pump hundreds of thousands of dollars into our community to elect a school board that would push their agenda into public [non fee-paying] schools – and they were going to use this book banning madness to do it,” says Laney Hawes, a mother-of-four. “The plan was to scare the community into believing that pornography was being forced on our kids through books and then elect a school board that would promise to protect kids and ban all these books. Unfortunately, the plan and the money worked.”

Public information requests sent to the school district revealed that “more than 90 per cent of the books being challenged are coming from three women,” according to Hawes, who adds that “these women don’t read the books... they simply challenge them and include links to book review websites.”



A display of 'banned' books in a New York Barnes & Noble store | CREDIT: AP

Hawes, whose children are aged six to 15, describes the current situation as “infuriating, devastating, and frustrating,” with the worst part being that “this isn't actually what most people want” - not least the children. Her 14-year-old daughter borrowed *The Hate U Give*, a book that addresses racial inequality (and was made into a film in 2018), from her school library just before it was excised.

“She explained to me that kids are talking about, participating in, and experiencing in real life the very issues that are getting these books banned,” Hawes says, adding that “books are some of the best places to read about tough topics, because they are safe and can help kids learn how to navigate the really hard parts of life.” There is also the fact that Hawes and her husband “have no idea what it's like to grow up a black girl in a very white community, but there are stories she can read to learn that life isn't the same for everyone. Books to help her grow and be a better person.”

Infuriating too for parents is that books have become a battleground in schools – yet phones and laptops with poorly restricted access to the internet remain. The only pornography Hawes’s 15-year-old son has been exposed to in school was not in a library book, but on another student’s phone. (Hawes has herself been called a “library porn apologist” by opposing parents.) “This rhetoric is making people believe small children are being exposed to sex... they aren't. And whether or not a 15-year-old should be able to check out a sex ed book is a great conversation we can all have as adults, but it's not happening at the primary schools [in Texas].”



Moms for Liberty 

@Moms4Liberty · [Follow](#)



Don't tell us these books aren't in our children's public schools.

Libs of TikTok  @libsoftiktok

 graphic content warning 

A parent reads from the book "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" which was found in a middle school library in @onwardpioneers.

The book is still showing as available in the library as of today. This is what 13-year-olds have access to at school.

6:58 PM · Apr 23, 2023



382



Reply



Share

[Read 46 replies](#)

Tiffany Justice, co-founder of campaign group Moms For Liberty (who answers my questions via a representative from a crisis management firm) disagrees, saying that “many books have been found to contain pornography and have nothing to do with education curriculum.” (Justice did not cite which titles fell under this bracket.) Concerned by “taxpayer funds” being used to put these tomes on school shelves, Justice says “our effort is to empower parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government. We have made some

progress in protecting our parental rights in government schools by reclaiming school board seats and now the work to reform the education in those school districts begins.”

Others, however, see the issue as already part-way down a slippery slope. Librarians aren’t the only ones feeling the weight of this current pressure: “educator morale and retention” is being badly hit too, according to Hawes, as her children’s “librarians and teachers live in constant fear of being labelled as paedophiles and targeted by parents in the community. So educators are leaving the profession in droves, and they can't even teach. They're changing lesson plans out of fear; they're pulling anything from their classrooms that might make a parent upset.”

One teacher told Hawes that while she had previously shown students *Remember the Titans*, a film that explores the history of slavery and the civil rights movement, she has since stopped for fear of the backlash. “We're being held hostage as a community by absolute extremists,” says Hawes, “and it’s maddening.”

Culture Newsletter

The latest art, film, theatre, book and music reviews



Sign up

Related Topics

Texas, Fiction books, Children, Libraries



The Telegraph values your comments but kindly requests all posts are on topic, constructive and respectful. Please review our [commenting policy](#).

Show comments

More stories



After 114 years, the Girl Guides have finally lost their way