

**Kate Koenig**

**23 April 2018**

### **Banned Books**

Books were my escape growing up. My household was heavily censored in content and in most media. When I was in high school, my parents grounded me for wanting and beginning to watch an Ellen DeGeneres stand-up routine that was playing on TV. Not for the content of her routine, which was definitely age appropriate, but simply for her identity as a lesbian.

I struggled in high school when at fifteen I started questioning my own sexuality. Movies and television shows about and featuring gay people were not common and even if they were, I would be banned from watching them. I grew up being told that LGBT people are deviant and morally corrupt. When you are in a minority, positive representation and support is vital to well-being and even survival. I know the struggle personally.

For the most part, my parents never screened my books and it was how I was able to be exposed to different ideas and ways of life. I read all kinds of books but unfortunately did not read any with LGBT characters as my school's library no doubt limited them. Still, these books were my escape as I read about worlds and cultures different from my own and the love and acceptance that the characters found. Imagine how I would have felt to be able to read a book with a character *like me*. It would have brightened up so many sad days. It would have empowered me.

As a response to books deemed offensive or inappropriate in content, many schools and public libraries ban books. While there is not a universal list of banned books, the American Library Association, the oldest and largest library in the world, keeps track of and documents why books appear on lists across the country and even the world. With the lists they compile,

patterns emerge, an apparent attempt at censoring surfaces. Banning books in school districts and libraries is an act of censorship not protection.

My parents and many like them would support banned book lists, to remove and keep books about LGBT, Muslim, or a myriad of other characters and themes off the shelves. The banned book list represents a silencing of minority voices under the guise of protection for children and teenagers. It is an attempt at erasing the voices of the non-white, non-straight, non-cis, and non-Christian books that deserve to sit on library shelves.

As a culture, we are obsessed with the idea of protecting children's innocence. To keep the bad of the world off of their mind, away from their vantage point. Children and teenagers interact with books on a daily basis while in the school system. They will read classics from *Romeo and Juliet* to modern works like *1984*. Sometimes even more modern books enter the curriculum like *The Kite Runner* or *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, featuring non-white and non-Christian characters, something my parents and many others would rally against.

The banned book list is well-known across the country, with school districts and libraries banning books for differing reasons. It's a common practice for books of all age groups to be put on a school no-fly list if deemed offensive. Parents, educators, and school officials band together in the hope of preserving innocence or shielding children and teenagers from ideas or themes judged too mature, explicit, or distressing for them.

On the surface, the idea of banning books from reading lists for minors may appear smart. We certainly wouldn't want a third grader to be reading books with topics or language above their maturity level, but that's not the true intention of the banned book list anyway. No one is stocking *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *The Lovely Bones* on a third grader's book shelf. We don't have to wonder why books make the list either. The reasons given for the books

often cited are stated quite clearly. They are almost always problematic. The lists frequently cite reasoning such as suggestive/sexually explicit content, language (not always cursing, but other ‘language’), violence, and most LGBT books, as in books that feature LGBT characters.

When I was in high school, I couldn’t tell you where or even if there was a YA book with a gay protagonist or any story with prominent gay characters for that matter. Knowing my district, there probably wasn’t. Yet, in the autobiography section, in a large frame of a book with a worn title, sat *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler’s autobiography. This book, infamous for the writer and for the content sat happily on the shelf, no call to take it down, no petitions to protect the children.

Censoring of books often takes a certain slant where minority communities are affected most. Angie Thomas’, *The Hate U Give*, a YA book about a black teenager who witnesses a police brutality shooting against her friend found itself on a banned list in a Texas school district. The decision was made by the superintendent, who bypassed normal review procedures and banned it for language.

The book is a heartbreaking and gripping portrayal of the effect of police violence on communities of color seen through the eyes of the teenage protagonist, who must struggle with feelings of guilt, fear, and sadness in the aftermath. Some may speak up and say that curse words do not belong in books and those that have such explicit content should be banned. Banning books for language is an easy excuse for banning it because of perspectives in the book.

*The Hate U Give* was banned because of the topic of police brutality, perhaps for even having a young, vocal black protagonist carrying that message. The foul language smokescreen is just that. And the twenty-five libraries in that school system lose out on an important story, an important perspective that can educate, empower, and enlighten the students that district serves.

Some may push back and argue that the ban has nothing to do with the topic or the color of the protagonist's skin, that it's just the language. Except the evidence of banned books strongly indicates bias and not true concern. You need not look much further than the picture book, *I Am Jazz*.

Jazz Jennings is a transgender teenager who wrote about her experiences as a young child. The book is colorful, playful in content, as picture book Jazz alerts the reader that she is a girl who was born in a boy body. The book is fun and delicate around the issue, a great introduction to what being transgender means that is approachable for parents and their children. Nothing other than the topic is unusual about the book as transgender narratives are only just beginning to be written about.

In 2016, *I am Jazz*, was number four on the list. The reason? According to the American Library Association, it was "challenged and removed because it portrays a transgender child and because of language, sex education, and offensive viewpoints". The book contains no curse words, no nudity, and no suggestive content. The only word that was deemed offensive was "transgender". Simply being about a real life transgender child, the book was banned.

The banned book list acts as a tool for actual dangerous viewpoints. The aim is to keep libraries and children and teenage reading lists lacking diversity. Books with non-white, non-straight, and non-cis characters overwhelmingly make it on the list. It's not about protecting the innocence of children or age-appropriate content, it's about maintaining a white, straight, and cis superiority.

When a school district bans a book with LGBT characters simply for seeing LGBT persons and themes as offensive, what does that say to that districts LGBT students, parents, and

faculty? Vulnerable LGBT students see that their stories, their experiences, their love doesn't matter. It's an othering. It's discrimination. *This* is what is harming children and teenagers.

These books that end up on the list like *The Hate U Give*, *I am Jazz*, and books like *Two Boys Kissing*, are not usually books assigned for classroom reads anyway. These books often are stored in the library for personal reading. In my school district, Teachers weren't educating on issues like police brutality or what it means to be transgender in the classroom. Many districts, steer clear of such topics for fear of backlash from parents. Those lists approved for classroom education are largely white, straight, and cis. Shakespeare over Thomas, Orwell over Levithan. The banned book list is just a further attempt to keep the status quo.

I think about my high school days. I would have benefited from reading books that featured someone like me, but I know those books would have an upward battle to appear on the shelves. And I wonder, how do we—how can we explain to the students today that their representation does not matter, that their stories are not permissible on the shelves of their libraries, because we have to make room for *Mein Kampf*?