



Celebrating the Freedom to Read: September 24 - September 30, 2017

Main menu

[Home](#) » [Censorship](#)

Banned Books That Shaped America

The Library of Congress created an exhibit, "[Books that Shaped America](#)," that explores books that "have had a profound effect on American life." Below is a list of books from that exhibit that have been banned/challenged.

(To learn more about challenges to books since the inception of Banned Books Week, check out the [timeline](#) created by ALA.)

***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, 1884**

The first ban of Mark Twain's American classic in Concord, MA in 1885 called it "trash and suitable only for the slums." Objections to the book have evolved, but only marginally. Twain's book is one of the most-challenged of all time and is frequently challenged even today because of its frequent use of the word "nigger." Otherwise it is alleged the book is "racially insensitive," "oppressive," and "perpetuates racism."

***The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 1965 (Grove Press)**

Objectors have called this seminal work a "how-to-manual" for crime and decried because of "anti-white statements" present in the book. The book presents the life story of Malcolm Little, also known as Malcolm X, who was a human rights activist and who has been called one of the most influential Americans in recent history.

***Beloved*, Toni Morrison, 1987**

Again and again, this Pulitzer-prize winning novel by perhaps the most influential African-American writer of all time is assigned to high school English students. And again and again, parental complaints are lodged against the book because of its violence, sexual content and discussion of bestiality.

***Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Dee Brown, 1970**

Subtitled "An Indian History of the American West," this book tells the history of United States growth and expansion into the West from the point of view of Native Americans. This book was banned by a school district official in Wisconsin in 1974 because the book might be polemical and they wanted to avoid controversy at all costs. "If there's a possibility that something might be controversial, then why not eliminate it," the official stated.

***The Call of the Wild*, Jack London, 1903**

Generally hailed as Jack London's best work, *The Call of the Wild* is commonly challenged for its dark tone and bloody violence. Because it is seen as a man-and-his-dog story, it is sometimes read by adolescents and subsequently challenged for age-inappropriateness. Not only have objections been raised here, the book was banned in Italy, Yugoslavia and burned in bonfires in Nazi Germany in the late 1920s and early 30s because it was considered "too radical."

***Catch-22*, Joseph Heller, 1961**

A school board in Strongsville, OH refused to allow the book to be taught in high school English classrooms in 1972. It also refused to consider *Cat's Cradle* as a substitute text and removed both books from the school library. The issue eventually led to a 1976 District Court ruling overturning the ban in *Minarcini v. Strongsville*.

***The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger, 1951**

Young Holden, favorite child of the censor. Frequently removed from classrooms and school libraries because it is "unacceptable," "obscene," "blasphemous," "negative," "foul," "filthy," and "undermines morality." And to think Holden always thought "people never notice anything."

***Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury, 1953**

Rather than ban the book about book-banning outright, Venado Middle school in Irvine, CA utilized an expurgated version of the text in which all the "hells" and "damns" were blacked out. Other complaints have said the book went against objectors religious beliefs. The book's author, Ray Bradbury, died this year.

***For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ernest Hemingway, 1940**

Shortly after its publication the U.S. Post Office, which purpose was in part to monitor and censor distribution of media and texts, declared the book nonmailable. In the 1970s, eight Turkish booksellers were tried for "spreading propaganda unfavorable to the state" because they had published and distributed the text. This wasn't Hemingway's only banned book - *A Farewell to Arms* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* were also censored domestically and abroad in Ireland, South Africa, Germany and Italy.

***Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell, 1936**

The Pulitzer-prize winning novel (which three years after its publication became an Academy-Award Winning film) follows the life of the spoiled daughter of a southern plantation owner just before and then after the fall of the Confederacy and decline of the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Critically praised for its thought-

provoking and realistic depiction of ante- and postbellum life in the South, it has also been banned for more or less the same reasons. Its realism has come under fire, specifically its realistic portrayal – though at times perhaps tending toward optimistic -- of slavery and use of the words “nigger” and “darkies.”

***The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck, 1939**

Kern County, California has the great honor both of being the setting of Steinbeck’s novel and being the first place where it was banned (1939). Objections to profanity—especially goddamn and the like—and sexual references continued from then into the 1990s. It is a work with international banning appeal: the book was barred in Ireland in the 50s and a group of booksellers in Turkey were taken to court for “spreading propaganda” in 1973.

***The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925**

Perhaps the first great American novel that comes to the mind of the average person, this book chronicles the booze-infused and decadent lives of East Hampton socialites. It was challenged at the Baptist College in South Carolina because of the book’s language and mere references to sex.

***Howl*, Allen Ginsberg, 1956**

Following in the footsteps of other “Shaping America” book *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg’s boundary-pushing poetic works were challenged because of descriptions of homosexual acts.

***In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote, 1966**

The subject of controversy in an AP English class in Savannah, GA after a parent complained about sex, violence and profanity. Banned but brought back.

***Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison, 1952**

Ellison’s book won the 1953 National Book Award for Fiction because it expertly dealt with issues of black nationalism, Marxism and identity in the twentieth century. Considered to be too expert in its ruminations for some high schools, the book was banned from high school reading lists and schools in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Washington state.

***The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair, 1906**

For decades, American students have studied muckraking and yellow journalism in social studies lessons about the industrial revolution, with *The Jungle* headlining the unit. And yet, the dangerous and purportedly socialist views expressed in the book and Sinclair’s *Oil* led to its being banned in Yugoslavia, East Germany, South Korea and Boston.

***Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, 1855**

If they don’t understand you, sometimes they ban you. This was the case when the great American poem *Leaves of Grass* was first published and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice found the sensuality of the text disturbing. Caving to pressure, booksellers in New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania conceded to advising their patrons not to buy the “filthy” book.

***Moby-Dick; or The Whale*, Herman Melville, 1851**

In a real head-scratcher of a case, a Texas school district banned the book from its Advanced English class lists because it “conflicted with their community values” in 1996. Community values are frequently cited in discussions over challenged books by those who wish to censor them.

***Native Son*, Richard Wright, 1940**

Richard Wright’s landmark work of literary naturalism follows the life of young Bigger Thomas, a poor Black man living on the South Side of Chicago. Bigger is faced with numerous awkward and frustrating situations when he begins working for a rich white family as their chauffeur. After he unintentionally kills a member of the family, he flees but is eventually caught, tried and sentenced to death. The book has been challenged or removed in at least eight different states because of objections to “violent and sexually graphic” content.

***Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1971**

Challenges of this book about the female anatomy and sexuality ran from the book’s publication into the mid-1980s. One Public Library lodged it “promotes homosexuality and perversion.” Not surprising in a country where some legislators want to keep others from saying the word “vagina.”

***The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane, 1895**

Restricting access and refusing to allow teachers to teach books is still a form of censorship in many cases. Crane’s book was among many on a list compiled by the Bay District School board in 1986 after parents began lodging informal complaints about books in an English classroom library.

***The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850**

According to many critics, Hawthorne should have been less friendly toward his main character, Hester Prynne (in fairness, so should have minister Arthur Dimmesdale). One isn’t surprised by the moralist outrage the book caused in 1852. But when, one hundred and forty years later, the book is still being banned because it is sinful and conflicts with community values, you have to raise your eyebrows. Parents in one school district called the book “pornographic and obscene” in 1977. Clearly this was before the days of the World Wide Web.

***Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Alfred C. Kinsey, 1948**

How dare Alfred Kinsey ask men and women questions about their sex lives! The groundbreaking study, truly the first of its scope and kind, was banned from publication abroad and highly criticized at home.

***Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert A. Heinlein, 1961**

The book was actually retained after a 2003 challenge in Mercedes, TX to the book’s adult themes. However, parents were subsequently given more control over what their child was assigned to read in class, a common school board response to a challenge.

***A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams, 1947**

The sexual content of this play, which later became a popular and critically acclaimed film, raised eyebrows and led to self-censorship when the film was being made. The director left a number of scenes on the cutting room floor to get an adequate rating and protect against complaints of the play’s immorality.

***Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston, 1937**

Parents of students in Advanced English classes in a Virginia high school objected to language and sexual content in this book, which made *TIME* magazine's list of top 100 Best English-Language Novels from 1923 to 2005.

***To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, 1960**

Harper Lee's great American tome stands as proof positive that the censorious impulse is alive and well in our country, even today. For some educators, the Pulitzer-prize winning book is one of the greatest texts teens can study in an American literature class. Others have called it a degrading, profane and racist work that "promotes white supremacy."

***Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852**

Like *Huck Finn*, *Of Mice and Men* and *Gone With the Wind*, the contextual, historically and culturally accurate depiction of the treatment of Black slaves in the United States has rankled would-be censors.

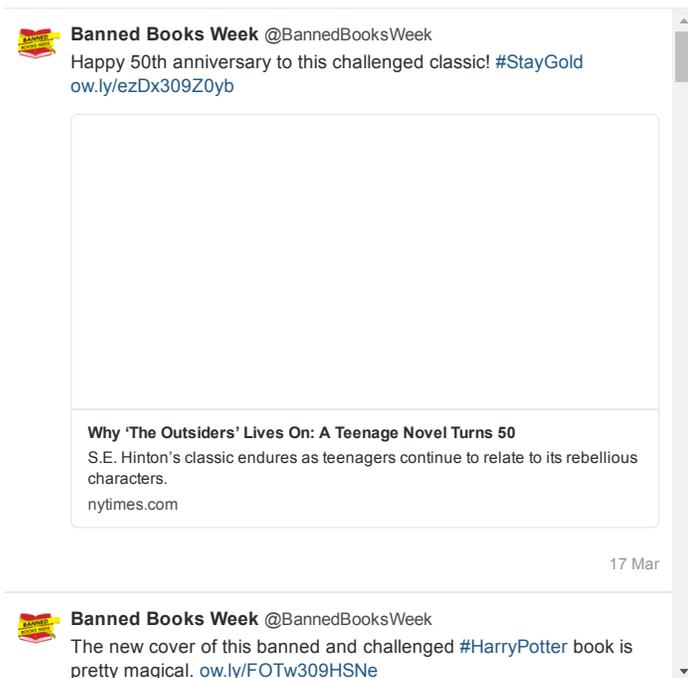
***Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak, 1963**

Sendak's work is beloved by children in the generations since its publication and has captured the collective imagination. Many parents and librarians, however, did much hand-wringing over the dark and disturbing nature of the story. They also wrung their hands over the baby's penis drawn in *In the Night Kitchen*.

***The Words of Cesar Chavez*, Cesar Chavez, 2002**

The works of Chavez were among the many books banned in the dissolution of the Mexican-American Studies Program in Tucson, Arizona. The Tucson Unified School District disbanded the program so as to accord with a piece of legislation which outlawed Ethnic Studies classes in the state. To read more about this egregious case of censorship, [click here](#).

Tweets by @BannedBooksWeek



Banned Books Week @BannedBooksWeek
Happy 50th anniversary to this challenged classic! #StayGold
ow.ly/ezDx309Z0yb

Why 'The Outsiders' Lives On: A Teenage Novel Turns 50
S.E. Hinton's classic endures as teenagers continue to relate to its rebellious characters.
nytimes.com

17 Mar

Banned Books Week @BannedBooksWeek
The new cover of this banned and challenged #HarryPotter book is pretty magical. ow.ly/FOTw309HSNe

[Embed](#)[View on Twitter](#)**Banned Books Week sponsors:**



Banned Books Week contributors:



National
Coalition
Against
Censorship

**PEN
AMERICA**
free expression.
literature.



The News That Didn't Make The News

Banned Books Week is endorsed by:

[Center for the Book at the Library of Congress.](http://www.bannedbooksweek.org/censorship/bannedbooksthatshapedamerica)