

Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us.

Banned Books Week (September 26-October 2, 2021) is an annual event celebrating the freedom to read. Typically held during the last week of September, it spotlights current and historical attempts to censor books in libraries and schools. It brings together the entire book community — librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types — in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those some consider unorthodox or unpopular.

This year's theme is "Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us." Sharing stories important to us means sharing a part of ourselves. Books reach across boundaries and build connections between readers. Censorship, on the other hand, creates barriers.

Carolyn Blatchley, executive director of the Cumberland County Library System, comments, "During this annual effort to spotlight the risk and dangers of censorship, the importance of free access to information, and our fundamental freedom to read, we reaffirm the commitment of the System and all of our member library locations to continue providing our patrons with uncensored access to library materials."

The books featured during Banned Books Week have all been targeted for removal or restriction in libraries and schools. By focusing on efforts across the country to remove or restrict access to books, Banned Books Week draws national attention to the harms of censorship.

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 156 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services in 2020. Of the 273 books that were targeted, here are the most challenged, along with the reasons cited for censoring the books:

George by Alex Gino

Reasons: Challenged, banned, and restricted for LGBTQIA+ content, conflicting with a religious viewpoint, and not reflecting "the values of our community"

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds

Reasons: Banned and challenged because of author's public statements, and because of claims that the book contains "selective storytelling incidents" and does not encompass racism against all people

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

Reasons: Banned and challenged for profanity, drug use, and alcoholism, and because it was thought to promote anti-police views, contain divisive topics, and be "too much of a sensitive matter right now"

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Reasons: Banned, challenged, and restricted because it was thought to contain a political viewpoint and it was claimed to be biased against male students, and for the novel's inclusion of rape and profanity

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie

Reasons: Banned and challenged for profanity, sexual references, and allegations of sexual misconduct by the author

Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard, illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin

Reasons: Challenged for "divisive language" and because it was thought to promote anti-police views

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Reasons: Banned and challenged for racial slurs and their negative effect on students, featuring a "white savior" character, and its perception of the Black experience

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Reasons: Banned and challenged for racial slurs and racist stereotypes, and their negative effect on students

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Reasons: Banned and challenged because it was considered sexually explicit and depicts child sexual abuse

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

Reasons: Challenged for profanity, and it was thought to promote an anti-police message

Find all your reading materials at the Cumberland County Library System, which consists of seven federated local libraries, one branch facility, a system headquarters office, and an associated non-profit Foundation. The Library System provides support to its member libraries through information technology, securing library materials, older adult services, training opportunities, and administrative and financial services. More information on the Cumberland County Library System can be found at www.cumberlandcountylibraries.org.

