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The Book I Never Got to Read: A Tale of Book Censorship

by Courtney Everett

As time continues, society progresses, and the world evolves, the present day will be etched in history through literature and records. The telling of history, stories, and lessons has been around for centuries, and so has the opposition to it. Literary censorship is still present today and affects the lives of students across the United States. Book censorship has been the topic of many debates, raising questions about the First Amendment, such as in the event of the court case *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District* (6th Circuit) in 1976. This federal court case ruled that “school board officials do not have unfettered discretion to remove books from library shelves simply because they find the books objectionable” after school board members in Strongsville, Ohio, went to have books removed from the school library and curriculum (Hudson). However, this does not stop individuals from challenging and having books removed and censored from students across the country yearly. Book banning and censorship is harmful to students and should be put to an end, as it causes students to be less informed of today’s society, disables the most prominent connection humans have with the history of the world, and blindly erases the stories and lessons authors write to share with their audiences.

Literature reflects the ideas, perspectives, and actions of people within the world. There have been many challenged books that have educational value for this generation of students and those to come after, yet they are removed from schools and libraries due to the challenge from people with opposing views. For example, the novel *1984* by George Orwell is one that has a spot on the list of the top one hundred most banned and challenged books of the past decade

(“Banned and Challenged Classics”). This book demonstrates the dangers of a government with complete and total control and how a society can be negatively impacted by it. This novel is taught and analyzed in many schools, however not all, because of the protests of parents and school board members for the novel’s “political and social themes and sexual content” (Poling). This has resulted in students losing access to the novel, as well as the lessons it teaches about governments, censorship, and freedom.

This is not the only book removed from the hands of students that takes away the educational views they provide. When books are challenged, the main purpose of the literature is overlooked and forgotten, and students are deprived of themes that have been studied throughout time. “Banning core novels from school would undoubtedly lower the quality of education for many years to come,” Vincent Wang explains in his article regarding book censorship. As more literature with educational and informational purposes become censored, knowledge begins to dwindle, and the students are no longer receiving the best quality of education that schools could provide them with.

Written works provide a glimpse into history, a time that remains unknown without the tales and artifacts that have been left behind. Novels take historical events and shape them into content that can be read and understood by people today, yet many of these books that do so are challenged, which can lead to the removal of the book, changes in school curriculum, and less access to history for students. A classic novel constantly under fire for being taught in schools is *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. This book has remained one of the most challenged, removed, and banned books in the United States for its racial themes and use of racial slurs (Downs). This book, however, highlights many important aspects of the period it was set in, and the content present in it is appropriate for that time in history. Teaching the differences between

societal norms and acceptance throughout history requires the acknowledgement of parts of history that people view as wrong, uncomfortable, and inappropriate, but that does not change the fact that it existed once upon a time. In an interview done by digital reporter and producer for PBS NewsHour, Kenya Downs, Chris Sergel, the Dramatic Publishing vice president at the time, touches on this view. “Being uncomfortable with history is not means to change it. People need to figure out how to confront issues,” Sergel states (Downs). Teaching history to students allows for past lessons to be understood, lessens the chance of repeating mistakes in history, and creates an opening for students to form their own opinions on history, the current present, and the future.

Not only is literature meant to teach, but it is also used to inspire and create atmospheres for students outside of reality. Reading can be seen as a mental escape route in which people look for familiarity, comfort, and safety in the words on a page. This can be created through tales shared by authors that readers connect to or relate to. Many novels for young readers with such purposes have been challenged, and students have lost access to these books that inspire them and possibly teach them more about themselves. Books that deal with self-discovery and identity remain some of the most challenged books, especially those dealing with embracing cultures and LGBTQ+ themes (“Infographics”). According to the American Library Association, out of the top ten most challenged books of 2019, eight of those books were challenged for including themes that relate to the LGBTQ+ community (“Infographics”). The number one challenged book of 2019 was *George* by Alex Gino. It was challenged, banned, restricted, and hidden due to its LGBTQ+ central theme, conflicting with religious viewpoints, and for having a transgender protagonist (“Infographics”). People argued that “schools and libraries should not ‘put books in a child’s hand that require discussion’” (“Infographics”). The censorship of identities that exist is not only hurtful to children who are growing up being sheltered away from people because of

adults' opposing views, but this is harmful to people who have these identities that many individuals try to keep hidden in media and literature. The censorship of human identities causes future generations to grow up associating such identities with negativity and meant to be hidden when that should not be the case. In an article on book censorship, Meg Metcalf, a collections specialist and women, LGBTQ+, and gender studies librarian, says "It's an emotional, psychological feeling when you can't see yourself in history. And people come to the library to see themselves in history" (Good). The constant censorship of the way of life for different people takes away their right to be noted in history. Opposing views should not dictate the erasure of identities.

Many people behind the constant challenges of books are parents. Behind patrons and organizations, parents are the second most group that initiates the challenging of a book ("About Banned and Challenged Books"). As the adults in charge of their children's well-being, it is understood that parents are the ones that take initiative in protecting their children from content they believe they should not be exposed to in books. Parents censoring books with certain content from their children is a given right, as they are the one with full authority over their children after all. However, the protection of their child does not hinge on the protection of everyone else. Censoring books does not only get them removed from the hands of one student, but the hands of a community of students. Challenging books and novels put them at risk from being removed, hidden, and banned in school libraries, curriculums, and public libraires. This affects more than just one student or one family. The opinion of one parent on a particular issue can cause the restriction of access other students have to literature that could possibly alter their perspectives and change their lives. This is unfair to communities across the United States and should no longer be allowed. Challenges from specific individuals should be handled

individually and not cause every other student to face the consequences of someone else's opposing viewpoints. "Libraries and their governing bodies shall ensure that only parents and guardians have the right and the responsibility to determine their children's—and only their children's—access to library resources," the American Library Association states ("Access to Library Resources.") Parents protecting their own children is a family matter, and there is no need to involve the rest of the community in it.

The censorship in literature has been around for longer than society can imagine; however, as time changes, people need to change as well. Humans will constantly have to adapt to the changes being made around the world and in people. As the present continues to grow into the past, lessons and tales will continue to be etched into pages and shared, and not everyone will agree with it all. There will always be opinions and different perspectives, but it is time to acknowledge them instead of casting them away. Embrace history, support identities, and acknowledge that knowledge is power. Students have a right to education, whether it be about different time periods or different cultures and communities. Challenging, banning, and hiding books from students must come to an end. Through reading, students get a glimpse of what the world beyond their daily life holds, and nothing should take that away from them. Help stop the ban on books today by spreading awareness and visiting <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/public-awareness> to bring a change. Every story deserves to be told.

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