

# From Mark Twain to J.K. Rowling: The Importance of Reading Banned Books

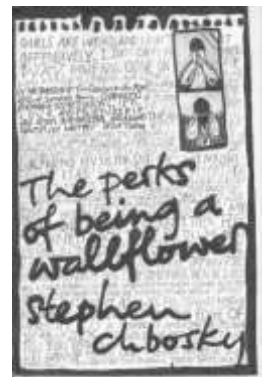
By Keri-Ann Jenkins, [ENGL 3130 Advanced Composition, ETSU](#), December 2013.

*Keri-Ann Jenkins is currently pursuing a degree in English with a minor in Teaching. After graduation in May of 2015, she plans to attend graduate school and pursue a degree in Educational Media and Educational Technology, M.Ed., with a concentration in School Library Media.*

\*\*\*

On May 7, 2013 the Board of Education for Glen Ellyn School District 41 in Illinois had a meeting on whether or not to keep the popular young adult novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky on the shelves at their junior high school. The book had been brought to the board's attention by two parents who thought that the novel was too mature and wanted it removed. At that meeting the board ultimately decided to have the book removed. Students, parents, teachers, and the surrounding community were outraged by this decision, claiming that it was censorship on its most basic level and wholly infringed upon the students' right to free speech. Over the coming month the story of the ban was reported in papers in the community, then the state, and later nationally on NBC News.

Petitions were passed around trying to get the book reinstated in school. Two students made a video speaking out about the school board's decision that went viral, in which they proclaimed, "They think we're too young, they think we don't have a voice." On June 10, 2013 the school board had another meeting at which hundreds from the community attended. Chbosky's novel was reinstated on a winning 6-1 vote (O'Connor).

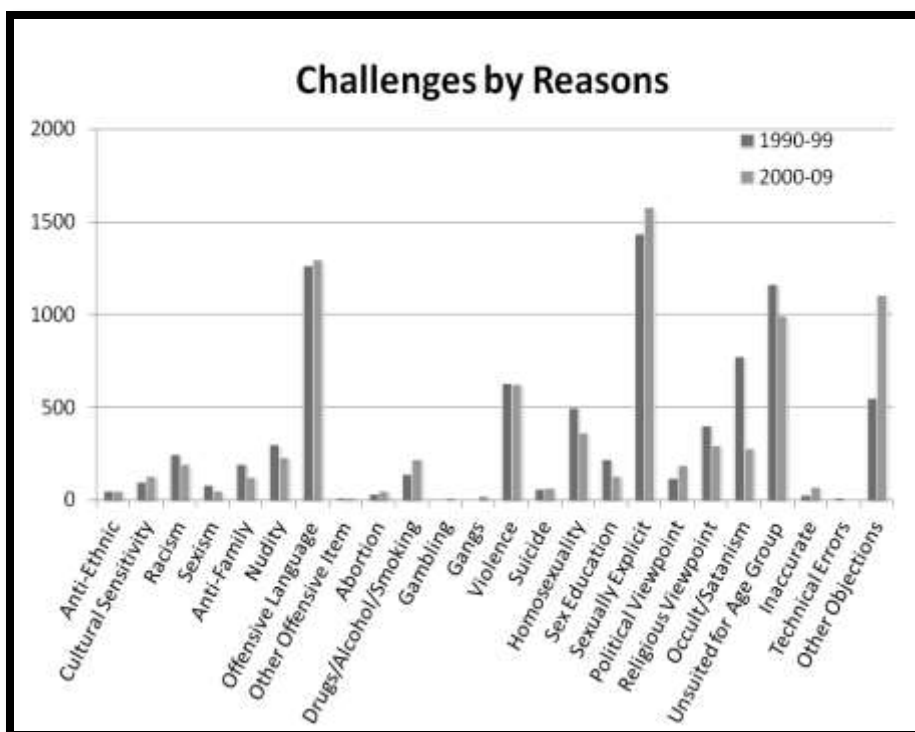


Glen Ellyn School District 41 is not the first case of book banning nor will it be the last. For a country that prides itself on the freedoms given to its citizens, the right to free speech is infringed upon

hundreds of times throughout the year through the challenging and banning of books in schools and libraries across the United States. This estimate from the ALA just includes the reported cases. The American Library Association estimates that between 70 to 80 percent of cases of book bans in the United States are never challenged or reported (O'Connor).

## Challenged and/or Banned Books

You may now be wondering, what is the difference between a challenged and a banned book? Well the answer is quite simple. A challenged book has had a formal complaint about it, whether it be oral or written, with the intent that the book be removed or placed on restricted access. A banned book has already gone through the challenged process and has been removed from the library or school (American Library Association). The Office for Intellectual Freedom has stated that there are three main reasons behind the challenges/bans on books, including: sexually explicit, offensive language, and unsuited for age group. These three are by all means not the only reasons behind challenges, just the most frequent (American Library Association).



This chart (left) is provided by the American Library Association. It displays the frequency with which each reason for challenging a book is used by decade. As displayed "offensive language," "sexually explicit," and "unsuited for age group" have remained among the top reasons behind book challenges for both decades. However, "other objections" has doubled in frequency, with it only being used for a little over 500 cases in the 1990s to over 1000 cases in the 2000s (American Library Association).

## Organizations/Projects

There are several organizations that have numerous projects designed to help aid communities facing book bans and further spread the word of their cause. A big organization associated with stopping book bans is the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA was founded on October 6, 1876 in



Philadelphia, with the purpose of protecting libraries and the intellectual freedoms for individuals across the United States. The ALA is now based in Chicago, Illinois. It created the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) that keeps track of cases around the nation involving infringement on those intellectual freedoms given to citizens of the United States. The ALA also organized Banned Books Week which was created with the purpose of celebrating banned books and getting the issues surrounding banned books out there. It usually occurs every year in the last week of September. The organization plans numerous events and activities aimed at honoring those who chose to speak out against book bans (American Library Association).



Another organization that is involved with preventing book bans is the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) based out of New York, New York. The NCAC's main goals are to keep records of incidents of censorship, expand public awareness, and provide advocacy support to those who have been affected by censorship and plan to fight back against it. The NCAC has also founded the Kid's Right to Read Project in 2007. Since it was established

National  
Coalition  
Against  
Censorship

the KRRP has aided in over 200 cases of book bans across the nation (National Coalition Against Censorship).

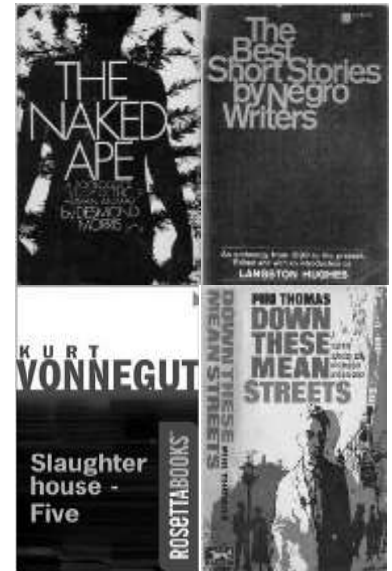
One last organization that is involved with book bans is the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) founded in 1969 and, also, based out of Chicago, Illinois. This is a somewhat smaller organization than the aforementioned, however it strives to promote and defend citizen's First Amendment rights especially the rights to read or listen to any topic without any interference from the government. The FTRF is similar to the KRRP, because this organization is available to help advocate individuals or groups who want to take measures against book bans in their areas across the nation (Freedom to Read Foundation).



## Milestone Court Case

There are many court cases that have been taken all the way to the Supreme Court, which involve book bans and their infringement on the students' Freedom of Speech. The first case involving book bans was Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico (1982). In 1975, the Island Trees School Board in Long Island, NY, received a list of books that were considered "objectionable" from a group of parents. The book list included:

- *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
- *The Naked Ape* (1967) by Desmond Morris
- *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) by Piri Thomas
- *Best Short Stories of Negro Writers* (1967) edited by Langston Hughes
- *Go Ask Alice* (1971) by anonymous
- *Laughing Boy* (1929) by Oliver LaFarge
- *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright
- *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich* (1973) by Alice Childress
- *Soul On Ice* (1967) by Eldridge Cleaver
- *The Fixer* (1966) by Bernard Malamud
- *A Reader for Writers* (1962) edited by Jerome Archer



Instead of following the proper procedures the school board decided to go ahead and remove the books from the shelves. When the news of the bans broke, a lot of the public was upset and demanded that they put the books back on the shelves, however, the school board refused.



Steven Pico, a 17-year-old student, gathered a group of students and together they sued the Island Trees School Board. At the U.S. District

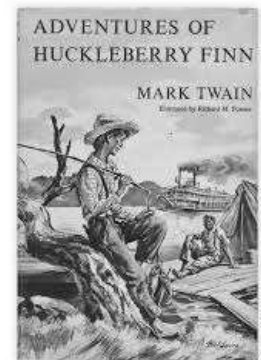
Court the students lost to the school board, however, they appealed to the second U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and won which sent the case back to the U.S. District Court for a retrial. The Island Trees School Board was not happy with this decision, and decided to make an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. At the Supreme Court the decision was split, but the students won with a narrow 5 to 4 vote (Mullally). The Supreme Court stated, "Local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to 'prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion'" (Board of Education v. Pico). Even though this was a narrow victory for the students, it has still set a precedent for many of the

cases of book bans that followed both good and bad. For example, one of the Supreme Court Justices claimed his decision to side with the students was actually very narrow. He believe that if the school board would have removed the books based on “educational suitability” or claimed that the books were “pervasively vulgar,” he more than likely would have chose to side with the school board. In a lot of the cases after this one, the main reason that a book was banned was that it was considered to be “vulgar.” There have even been some cases of book bans won based on that reason (Mullally).

## Frequently Banned Books

There are numerous books, including classical and current fiction, alike, that are banned more often than not.

- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain
  - According to the ALA, Twain’s novel is actually one of the most frequently challenged books of all time.
  - Even though his novel is historically accurate, it is constantly being challenged based on undertones of racism and offensive language.
- *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne
  - *The Scarlet Letter* was first published in 1850 and it is amazing to realize that this book has faced challenges and bans for over 150 years.
  - The objections to this book are commonly due to complaints that “it is sinful and conflicts community values.” Believe it or not that is still a common reason for this book to be banned even in the U.S. today (Banned Books Week).
- *The Captain Underpants* (1997-present)(Series) by Dav Pilkey



- This series of novels topped the 2012 Frequently Challenged Books list by the ALA.
- It was challenged because it promoted disobedience and offensive language.
- *Harry Potter* (1997-2007)(Series) by J.K. Rowling
  - All of the novels in Rowling's series have been banned at one point or another all around the world.
  - It is often complained by individuals or groups that this series is satanic and occult.
  - There have even been book burning of Rowling's series on several occasions.

## **Why Read Banned Books?**

As you can probably tell by the list above, many banned books are those that are truly great stories made by great authors. So that in itself, should be reason enough to go out and read these novels. It is important for everyone to realize, that if one individual or one group decides to remove a book from a school or library, it is taking away your right to be able to choose what you want to read. Spreading the word out about banned books is extremely important because many individuals do not realize that censorship is still very much alive in this country and we all should try to protect our right to free speech.

## Works Cited

- "American Library Association." *American Library Association*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.  
<<http://www.ala.org/>>.
- "Banned Books Week." *Banned Books Week*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.  
<<http://bannedbooksweek.org/>>.
- "Board of Educ. v. Pico." *Board of Educ. v. Pico*. Cornell University Law School, 02 Mar. 1982. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <[http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0457\\_0853\\_ZO.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0457_0853_ZO.html)>.
- "Freedom to Read Foundation." *Freedom to Read Foundation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Oct. 2013.  
<<http://www.ftrf.org/>>.
- Mullally, Claire. "First Amendment Center." *First Amendment Center*. N.p., 13 Sept. 2002. Web. 03 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/banned-books>>.
- "National Coalition Against Censorship -- NCAC." *NCAC News*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Oct. 2013.  
<<http://www.ncac.org/>>.
- O'Connor, Acacia. "The Perks of Being a Reader: Kids Fight and Win Book Battle in Glen Ellyn." Illinois Library Association. p. 4-11, August 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.  
<[http://www.ila.org/Reporter/August\\_2013/Reporter\\_0813.pdf](http://www.ila.org/Reporter/August_2013/Reporter_0813.pdf)>.