

Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: 'Ban' my book!

Allen Mendenhall | 03.31.24



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Early this year, the Alabama Public Library Service disaffiliated from the American Library Association. Critics say the dispute was over book "banning." Is that true?

To *ban*, according to the "Oxford English Dictionary," means "to interdict, proscribe, prohibit." Is that what's happening in Alabama's public libraries?

No.

Moving books from one section of the library to another isn't a ban. It's a relocation. Nor is it "banning" to remove certain books from the library altogether. They remain available for purchase online or in bookstores. Children can read them at home or bring them to school.

"You can choose not to read a book," a librarian posts on Meta (formerly Facebook). "You can choose not to let your kid read a book. You *don't* get to decide that no one else gets to read that book."

There are two problems with this reasoning. First, a book's relocation within or removal from the public library doesn't prohibit people from accessing that book elsewhere. It's easier to acquire books online than to drive to the library for them. Second, taxpayer money subsidizes libraries, in large part, and taxpayers have a say in what they fund.

To investigate accusations of book banning, James Fishback surveyed public library catalogs in Florida and Texas. "What I discovered," [he writes](#) in The Free Press, "isn't so much a problem of banned books. It's that kids are often exposed to only one side of the story." Books Fishback found in public libraries, such as Ibram X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist," or Kacen Callender's "Felix Ever After," leaned left, with minimal conservative representation to offer contrasting perspectives.

PEN American Center recently [sued](#) a school district, alleging, among other claims, that restricting access to books based on their ideological content violates the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The organization asserts that suppressing unpopular ideas amounts to unwarranted censorship.

The opposition takes a similar position, namely that libraries use public funds to stifle disfavored beliefs. They argue that removing specified books from library shelves creates space for other titles to ensure a more diverse array of subjects.

In other words, both sides of this debate purport to value viewpoint diversity.

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"Children in a democracy," [proclaims](#) Suzanne Nossell, PEN America's CEO, "must not be taught that books are dangerous."

I agree! That's why I afford my children wide latitude in their reading choices – and why I roll my eyes when I hear that "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "Ulysses," or "The Catcher in the Rye" are prohibited in high school curricula.

Yet I also understand why the "Fifty Shades" trilogy and Anaïs Nin's erotica are unsuitable for preteens. And some books removed from the children's section of public libraries are downright pornographic, having no literary or aesthetic merit.

Careful curation of library books for age-appropriate content doesn't teach that books are "dangerous." It teaches responsibility, common sense, discernment, prudence, and judgment. As children mature, they can appreciate the care and caution with which they were initiated into adult subjects.

Cognitive development differs among adolescents. The Statue of David, the story of Onan and Judah and Tamar, Leda and the Swan, the love affairs of Aphrodite, the marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta – these esteemed and classic subjects are more salutary than obscenity or pornography at introducing pubescent students to provocative sexual themes and content.

Prepubescent kids, however, may not be ready for such material.

How can one argue that children shouldn't discover the ontology of Santa Claus, yet should encounter graphic depictions of adult phalluses or vaginas? Aren't realistic portrayals of fellatio and cunnilingus – whether heterosexual or homosexual – unsuitable for elementary schoolers?

I say yes.

And I'm no prude. My novel, "A Gloomier Peace This Morning," features sexual content, profanity, violence, nudity, and underage drinking. It should be "banned" – at least under that term's going usage.

Why don't we hear denunciations of banning or censorship when the Motion Picture Association rates a film R or X rather than G or PG?

Coming from the partisans of cancel culture, de-platforming, and trigger warnings, cries of "book banning" ring hollow.

Those who approach this issue in good faith must strike a balance: How to reaffirm the risks of censorship without denigrating legitimate concerns about age-appropriate content? Most books in public libraries aren't controversial. To avert censorship, those advocating book removal must bear the burden of proving the necessity for removal.

This week's "Word to the Wise" comes from Proverbs 15: "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

Stocking books in public libraries with limited shelf space understandably involves difficult decisions about sensitive topics. Charges of "banning" in this context are grievous words that stir up anger. Amid such controversies, we should employ vocabulary that pacifies rather than inflames emotions.

This article is adapted from Allen Mendenhall's regular segment "Word to the Wise" on Troy Public Radio.

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