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**JORDYN
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IS IN HER OWN ERA

**THE FAR RIGHT
IS *OBSESSED* WITH
BANNING BOOKS**
HERE'S HOW TO FIGHT BACK (PAGE 030)

features



First They Came for the Books

Over the past few years, there's been a dangerous, growing trend: an assault on books and a threat to make accessing or providing certain ones a crime. We've seen bans go down in 30+ of the 50 states, from Florida, Texas, and Virginia to Pennsylvania, New York, Georgia, and others in between. But who's behind all this, and what can you do to stop it? Read on to find out.

By Rachelle Legrand

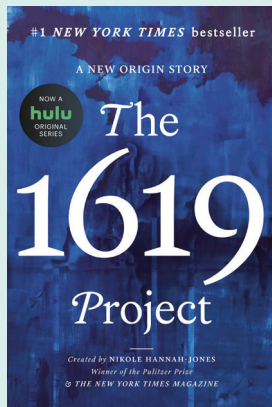


When you walk into Socialight Society, a Black woman-owned bookstore in Lansing, Michigan, you're immediately greeted by black-and-white canvas prints and colorful, graphic-style illustrations of African-American women authors smiling back at you. And if you don't recognize them at first sight, at the bottom of each portrait is their name written in bold. Maya. Zora. Toni. Alice. Just slightly underneath those images are shelves lined with books by these same authors — and then some — who have penned their stories for the sisters of the past, present, and yet to come.

Situated inside Lansing Mall, this indie bookshop is also outfitted with dark blue, velvety-looking sofas adorned with tan throw pillows featuring quotes from Angela Davis and Audre Lorde and modern bookshelves that house Black girl-themed berets, travel mugs, notebooks, tees, and stickers. It's a haven for children's, YA, and adult Black lit, continuously stocking reads that elsewhere in Michigan and across the country are being pulled off shelves.

Book banning is about as new as institutionalized racism in America; it runs centuries deep. But in recent years, there's been a disconcerting rise. "Over the 2021–22 school year, what started as modest school-level activity to challenge and remove books in schools grew into a full-fledged social and political movement, powered by local, state, and national groups," reports Pen America, a nonprofit that advocates for self-expression through literature. Led by the GOP and right-wing "activists," the targets of these book bans are largely, as you'd suspect, stories featuring Black, POC, and LGBTQ+ characters as well as stories examining racism and race in America.

Censoring titles does more than just threaten literature. These acts, in essence, tell Black girls and other diverse groups that their lives, their experiences, and their stories are not worthy. Of the more than 2,000 affected titles, some include *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones, *This is My America* by Kim Johnson, *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong'o, *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson, *I Am Enough* by Grace Byers, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas.



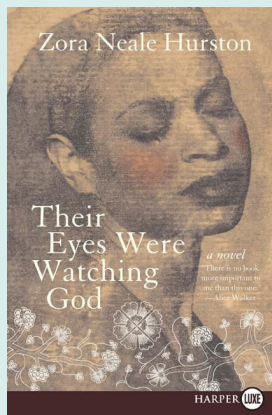
The 1619 Project
Nicole Hannah-Jones



The Hate U Give
Angie Thomas



You Should See Me in a Crown
Leah Johnson



Their Eyes Were Watching God
Zora Neale Hurston

For 16-year-old Amaya Conde, reading *The Hate You Give* was like watching her own life play out before her, and it showed her she, too, could find love. She bookmarked the pages depicting the love story between protagonist Starr Carter and Chris (“I love reading romance books, but it’s hard to read about white girls when they say, “He runs his fingers through her hair.” She holds up her 4b coils, joking, “Oh yeah that’s definitely happening over here.”) and could relate to being called “whitewashed” because of the school she attended (“We went to a predominantly white elementary school, so when I came to middle school, it was predominantly Black [and I was mainly called ‘whitewashed’] because of what music I listened to or how I talked.”).

Her twin sister Anisa cosigns the relatability and was inspired by the protests against police brutality. “[*The Hate You Give*] was the first book ... I ever [read] about Black protesting and stuff like that — the first one that really just resonated with me,” she says. “Seeing the protests [made me feel like] I should probably start protesting [because] this is a serious issue.”

Sixteen-year-old Jaida Williams and her 15-year-old sister Jordain say *The Hate You Give* made them feel seen. “Reading [Starr’s] story made me realize ... I can be my true, authentic self,” Jaida says. “I was thankful,” added Jordain. “Now everyone who reads this book will see what we go through on a daily basis.” She continues, “Honestly, I feel like this book should be allowed everywhere ... [We’re] speaking the truth, and [they] can’t take away our voices anymore.”

Try as they might.

But why are Republicans and self-described conservative groups so obsessed with controlling what people read? The simple answer: Power. And power in the hands of people whose stories and experiences they seek to erase from the culture poses a threat to their increasingly anti-democratic views. As our society continues to become more polarized, certain politicians are looking for new ways to disguise their need for control over marginalized groups.

“For centuries, [Black people] couldn’t read because we were enslaved. Now, today, we do have that opportunity to read, and they’re

telling us that there's certain stuff that we can't read," says Jazmyne Baylor, a research and instruction librarian at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. "If you're banning books that discuss issues with the LGBT community or that bring up issues with Black and brown folks ... you're challenging these books because of racism."

Of course, the GOP won't come all the way out and say that, claiming to remove books under the pretense of "protecting parental rights and the innocence of children" and "fighting indoctrination of kids." They claim some topics are "too mature" for the recommended grade levels or they're rife with "pornographic material," which is just code for "it covers LGBTQ+ themes."

"There's no agenda that [libraries] are trying to push. We want to make sure that everybody is represented," says Baylor. "When you're coming into the library, it should not be that you're seeing books based off of only a certain type of person; you should be able to find different perspectives, different realities, different cultures within the library."

"For [people] to even see [themselves] in a book is powerful in itself," she continues. "[Book bans are] infuriating because it does seem like a silencing of people's experiences, silencing their identities and telling people that they don't matter."

A clear violation of our First Amendment rights to receive information as reaffirmed by the Supreme Court when it stated — back in 1982 during a book ban challenge in the case *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* — that "the right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom," suppressing books is also an attack on learning as a whole. And it's up to all of us to fight back.

In her corner of the library world, Baylor holds community read-ins for all people, regardless of race. They serve as a safe space for people to chop it up about certain book topics like inclusivity, police brutality, race, and microaggressions, to name a few. She shows there is still hope to keep our stories alive, and is comin' through with recs on how you, too, can combat the gatekeepers.

1. Attend school board meetings.

These spaces have been the hot spot where our narratives are being extinguished. As so-called parental advocacy groups scream that diverse books are a part of the critical race theory agenda and claim they're divisive and racist, you scream louder. Your voice and your experiences deserve to be heard. No one can tell your story better than you can, so don't let anyone invalidate the life you live.

2. Start your own banned books club.

Gather your squad and select 12 banned books to read over the year. Each month, your crew can meet up to discuss what went down in each one. Taking control over what you read can help you feel empowered and free on your quest for knowledge.

3. Call on your reps.

Make it clear that you support access to books of all kinds and condemn book bans. This moment in history is a dangerous time for librarians across the country who are speaking out on behalf of our stories, with some being threatened with prosecution. And while none have been prosecuted yet, there have been instances in which police officers have been called to schools over books on shelves. Check The American Library Association's resources and templates for help at ala.org.

4. Support Black-owned bookstores.

Even if you don't have a brick-and-mortar store near you, you can still show love by purchasing banned books (and others) from Black-owned stores via bookshop.org.

5. Combat misinformation.

A lot of the conversation that surrounds book banning is inaccurate. For example, queer books are often banned for being "obscene" when all their doing is telling stories reflecting experiences of the LGBTQ+ community, and books featuring Black people and other people of color? They're frequently deemed "divisive" simply because they speak truths about white supremacy, racism, and the like. Take to TikTok, IG, or in-person events to share facts correcting those who spread false narratives.

6. Vote.

It's the job of the people we elect to represent our voices and our stories, so make sure you elect politicians on the right side of democracy. Know who is on the ballot and understand what they're advocating for. Not voting puts your power in someone else's hands and allows them to hold the fate of our stories.

Banned Books Reading Challenge

In addition to the suggestions previously mentioned, another way to resist book bans is to read the very books being banned. Get started by checking out banned books that match some (or all) of the prompts on this reading challenge!

Connect 4!

A book that was recently banned in your local public or school library

A book about a religion that's different from yours

A book featuring Black characters

A book that was made into a movie

A book that reflects your own experiences

A book featuring LGBTQ+ characters

A book from a Black woman-owned shop

A book that deals with race or racism in any way

A memoir

A book covering themes of police brutality

A book of poetry

A debut novel written by a POC author

A book that covers themes of activism and fighting for rights

A book with a same-sex couple on the cover

A book with magical elements

A book that deals with themes of mental health