

## **What is a banned or challenged book?**

When someone tries to get a book permanently removed from a library, school, or bookstore because they object to the content, it's called a book challenge. At most libraries, including Air Force libraries, there is a formal process called a "request for reconsideration" where the challenger submits a form requesting that the book be removed. If a book is removed from a library, school, or bookstore, then the book is considered "banned." A book is also considered banned if an authority removes a book from a library, school, or bookstore without going through the official process because they (or someone else) object to the book's content or they are afraid that someone *might* object to it and wish to avoid controversy.

## **Why do libraries have objectionable books?**

One person's objectionable book is the book that saves another person's life. Libraries are for everyone, so they need to have books for everyone, books that offer multiple viewpoints and ideas. Consider children's picture books for a moment. Some parents object to picture books that portray any non-white or non-straight characters. Others object to picture books that contain only white or straight characters. Some people object to books containing talking animals. If the Library contained only non-objectionable books, the picture book section would contain only a tiny collection of books about animals that don't talk or that feature shapes, colors, letters, numbers, and other inanimate objects. Now what if someone objects to talking inanimate objects? Now we're down to only a handful of non-talking animal books.

We're not really exaggerating when we say that a book that someone finds objectionable could save someone's life. Researchers have known since the 1950's that it is psychologically very damaging when children can't find positive representations in books and other media of characters that are like them, characters they can identify with. It makes them feel that something is inherently wrong with them. A banned and challenged novel written for adults that explores just how psychologically damaging this can be is *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Most of the non-animal children's books portray positive representations of white, straight, cis-gendered people, but children who are not white, not straight, or not cis-gendered, or have family members or friends who are not, need positive representations too. As another example, the writings of and interviews with LGBTQIA+ people who grew up before the 1990's when positive portrayals of LGBTQIA+ people were practically nonexistent often mention how this made them feel hopeless, helpless, and contributed to contemplations of suicide. LGBTQIA+ teens are three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Transgender teens are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their cis-gender peers.

Libraries have to have books that represent and appeal to everyone in their communities. We have LGBTQIA+ people and people of color in our community, so we have to have books that appeal to them, that depict positive narratives about them, and that deal with topics of interest to them. Again, we have thousands of books containing positive narratives about white, heterosexual people, but we can't only have books about, by, and for white, heterosexual people. Libraries also have to stay politically neutral by having books that appeal to both sides of the political divide. The only way for libraries to be neutral is by having books for everyone as, again, removing all the books that anyone objects to would result in pretty empty shelves and would not be serving our community.

In the case of Air Force Libraries, we are mandated by AFI 34-101, para 16.14.4 to "follow the current American Library Association Bill of Rights to ensure that the [book and other material] selection process is free from censorship. Apply the principles of intellectual freedom, not only in selection, but also in all aspects of service, by implementing the Interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights, the Privacy Act, and the procedures for handling complaints set forth in the current addition of the American Library Association's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*."

### **Are all banned and challenged books about race and sexual orientation?**

No, there is a lot of variety in banned and challenged books, and book challenges come from people on all sides of the political spectrum, but in the last year or so, most of the books that are being challenged and banned in America are about race or sexual orientation, and the number of books being challenged and/or banned has skyrocketed. Previously, the American Library Association only logged about two to three hundred incidents per year. Between September 2021 and March 2022, there were about 1,500 known book banning incidents. The new challengers are also more organized. Many belong to political organizations that work with the intent of forcing through bans of books by or about certain segments of the population. They're also using slightly different methods than before including death threats, cyber-harassment, and trying to pass laws to put librarians in jail and/or defund libraries that contain one or more books that they find objectionable.

### **If so many people want to ban books, shouldn't we ban them because the majority rules in a democracy?**

According to a poll in March, 2022, only about 30% of Americans are in favor of banning books, so they are not in a majority. Those 30% don't agree on which books they want to ban, either, as they represent a minority of all political parties. According to the poll, 70% of Americans don't agree with book banning.

### **Doesn't everyone agree that kids, at least, shouldn't be exposed to certain books or content, though?**

Almost everyone wants to protect and care for children, but there is a lot of disagreement about how best to protect them and even what to protect them from. Some parents think the best way to protect their kids is to try to prevent them from knowing anything about certain topics. Others think the best way to protect their kids is to forearm them with knowledge in order to prepare them to make good decisions when those topics come up in their lives. This is the essential disagreement on a wide range of topics including sex, drugs, violence, death, racism, bullying, abuse, etc. Books on all these topics are frequently challenged.

The problem isn't that some parents don't want their kids exposed to certain books or content. That is their choice. The problem is when they take that decision away from all of the other parents in the community under the assumption that everyone agrees with them when this is not the case.

Many parents turn to books to help kids understand situations they encounter or might encounter. We've had parents ask for LGBTQIA+ picture books to help explain to their kid why their classmate has two mommies. We've had parents ask for books to use to have "the talk" with their kids about sex and puberty. We've had parents ask for fiction books about suicide to help their kids deal with a classmate attempting or committing suicide. We've had parents ask for books on teen pregnancy to help their child that is in that situation. We've had parents ask for books to help their children to understand racism or to help answer questions their kids have been asking about race. The list goes on. Again, because the Library is for everyone, it is our duty to have books for these parents and their children.

Parents also disagree about what age kids should be when exposed to different topics. Different kids have different maturity levels, so any kind of strict age limit system is not going to work for everyone. It's a problem if kids can't read about issues they are actually dealing with in their own lives because they aren't considered old enough, and some kids just grasp concepts at a higher level earlier than their peers.

## **I read/heard that a book is sexually explicit or obscene. Surely we can agree that the library shouldn't have it?**

People don't agree on the definition of "sexually explicit." Some people define sexually explicit as containing a detailed description of a sexual act. For other people, any book where it is implied or stated that a character is or might be LGBTQIA+ or might have a characteristic they associate with LGBTQIA+ people is sexually explicit. For example, a picture book that is frequently challenged for being sexually explicit features two male penguins who raise a chick together. Sex is not mentioned, described, or hinted at, but this book, *And Tango Makes Three*, has appeared on the American Library Association's most frequently challenged book list numerous times since it was published. There are many personal definitions of "sexually explicit" that fall in between.

When we read or hear something that makes us feel strong emotions like anger or outrage, the emotion can override the analytical part of our brains that normally makes us stop and think critically about what we read or hear, so even if you know how the person you heard about the book from defines "sexually explicit," you don't know if they read the book themselves or are just passing on what they heard or read. It is especially common on social media for people to share or re-post things that outrage them without investigating to find out the truth about them. If you work back to find the source of the rumor, you might find it originated from a source you don't know or trust at all or someone who is basing their opinion on what they imagine the book contains when they haven't actually read the book themselves.

Obscene actually carries a legal definition. As defined by the Supreme Court, for a book to be considered obscene, it must be considered by the average person to, as a whole and applying community standards, appeal to prurient interest. It has to describe, in an offensive manner, sexual content as defined by the applicable state law. Finally, it also has to, taken as a whole, lack "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." So, for example, sex education books containing illustrations are not legally obscene because they are not intended to appeal to prurient interest and have scientific value, and award winning literary works that contain a few sex scenes are not legally obscene because they have serious literary value.

## **With all the new laws against CRT (Critical Race Theory), isn't it illegal for our library to have books about race?**

First, while Executive Order 13950 forbade training on CRT concepts, it did not mention books or libraries. It was rescinded in January 2021, so no federal agencies are required to abide by it anymore. North Dakota's Critical Race Theory law prohibits teaching CRT in public schools to K-12 students which does not apply to us. Secondly, providing access to educational materials is not the same as teaching in part because it the reader decides what they would and would not like to learn when they choose which books to borrow whereas students in class are a "captive audience." Thirdly, Critical Race Theory is a specific framework dealing with racism in law and institutional policy; it is a very small, specialist study within the larger study of race relations. The library's books on the experiences of individuals of color and those that discuss racism as a social issue do not fall under the specific and specialist umbrella of CRT.

## **Why does the library have books containing swear words?**

Some children's and young adult books are written to appeal to youth by using the language they are likely to be hearing or using in real life. This is especially the case with urban realistic fiction, and, among the youth these books are trying to appeal to, it seems to work. Some youth particularly resent what they perceive as

having something dumbed down or cleaned up for them but will read a book that feels “real” to them because it uses the language they hear in their everyday lives.

Also there is again a case of different parenting styles. Some parents believe that using proper terms for body parts is “dirty,” while others believe that using any words other than the proper ones is “dirty,” so there is no agreed on standard for what language is acceptable to everyone.

### **Have any books been banned from the Minot AFB Library?**

As of July 2022, not to our knowledge. We did have an incident where some LGBTQIA+ books for children disappeared under suspicious circumstances several years ago. We replaced what books we could, and, when word got out, several upset parents donated additional ones.

### **What happens if someone challenges a book?**

Air Force libraries are mandated by AFI to use the American Library Association’s process for reconsideration of materials, so the challenger will have to fill out a form and hand it in. The library will put together a diverse committee, obtain multiple copies of the book so that each committee member can read it in its entirety, and then the committee will discuss whether or not the book meets the library’s selection criteria. If it does, the book will go back on the shelf. If it does not, the book will be removed. Sometimes, if the book was mis-cataloged by mistake, it might be moved from one collection to another (like from children’s to young adult), but putting all the books someone has objected to in a particular area where they can be kept away from children is not in keeping with the American Library Association’s policies.

### **Why is it against policy to put all the books about potentially objectionable subjects in a special area?**

Special treatment for certain books based on whether a segment of the population finds them objectionable is still considered censorship. It makes access more difficult. Also, when a young person discovers that all the books about people like them are isolated and kept away from the other books, it can be almost as psychologically damaging as not having those books at all because it sends the same message that they are not acceptable. The books and the people they are for can’t be treated equally if they are separate.

### **Can I ask the library to not check out a certain kind of book to my kids, or any kids?**

Libraries are not *in loco parentis* which means that we can’t make parental decisions on behalf of parents. Or in other words, it’s not our jobs to decide what your kids can and can’t read. That’s your job. We can guide and provide recommendations, but we can’t stop anyone from checking anything out unless it’s a case of someone checking out more of an item type than allowed or if they have long overdue materials. We can’t stop them based on content. It is part of our professional ethics not to judge people based on what they check out. Also, it isn’t an uncommon practice for a family to send an independent bicycle-riding child to the Library to pick up books for the whole family, so we can’t be sure that the kid checking out a particular book is also going to be the one reading it.

We also don’t actually know the exact content of all of our books. While I’m sure a lot of people would love to just read as a job, that’s not actually what we do. We spend our time interacting with the public; selecting, cataloging, processing, and shelving materials; and putting together programs and displays. The only time we

usually read the books in our collection on the job is when we're preparing for a story time program. We would have to hire a lot of extra people if we had to be familiar with everything in every book. Instead, we judge books based on professional reviews and publisher descriptions. If neither says a book contains a particular swear word, for example, then we have no sure way of knowing if it does or not. Most of us read some of the books in our collection on our own time, but we can't possibly read them all.

### **What should I do if I'm worried about what library books my kids might be exposed to?**

We've worked with a lot of families with similar concerns and can pass on some of their most effective methods. Some parents with younger kids read all the books they check out themselves before they read them to their children. Some parents with older children talk to their kids about their expectations. The kids tell us their parent's expectations when they ask us for book recommendations, and we do the best we can to find the right books to recommend. Parents also often encourage their children to stop reading a book if they don't think they should be reading it or if it makes them uncomfortable.

Several parents have told us that they use a website called Common Sense Media to pick books for their kids. The most useful thing about it is that it is very specific about what potentially concerning content various books contain including swear words, sexual content, references to drugs, and more. The star ratings and age suggestions don't seem to be consistent across the site, so they are less helpful. Also, again, age recommendations are not always good indicators because different kids have different maturity levels. The site also doesn't include all books, but it does include most of the popular ones.

Finally, many parents visit the library with their kids so that they can guide their children's book selection process. Most books meant to appeal to certain audiences or deal with certain issues mention those audiences or issues in the book description, usually found on the back cover or on one of the panels on the inside of the cover. The descriptions for most books can also be found in the Library catalog together with a list of subjects that let you know what the book is about.

### **Why doesn't the library have books about \_\_\_\_\_?**

Libraries, especially small libraries like ours, can't have all the books that we'd like because we can't afford them or fit them all in the Library, so we have to be selective. Our selection is further limited by the way we are funded. In order to be able to get new books all year round instead of just at the end of the year, we have book plans where the Air Force purchases a certain number of points all at once that we can then use to get books for the rest of the year. While this allows us to get people new releases when they are released instead of months later, it does limit us to the publishers that work with the company that provides the book plan. This makes it very hard for us to get small press or privately published books. We also try to select books that will interest our community, and we do that by looking at what kinds of books are being checked out at our library. We order more of the books that appeal to many people in our community and avoid the ones that don't. For example, we generally don't buy political books, other than some political biographies, because they simply do not check out here.

If you want the library to have a specific book, you can request we try to purchase it. Again, we might not be able to if it is not available from our book vendor, but we will try, and your request allows us to be on the lookout for similar books. If we can't get it, we might be able to borrow it temporarily from another library through a process called Inter-Library Loan so that you can read it.

You can also donate materials to the Library. We will evaluate them and add them if they fit our collection development criteria and fit in our collection. In other words, if you donate fifty books on a single topic, we

may add a few of them, but not all fifty because we can't fit them and because it's our goal to have a few materials on as many topics as we can rather than to focus on having a lot on one particular topic, except of course those topics that are of widespread interest to our community, as demonstrated by past book request and circulation figures.

### **Why does the Minot AFB Library have a banned and challenged book program?**

Most libraries put up book displays during the American Library Association's annual observance, Banned Books Week, each September. The goal of Banned Books Week is to educate and inform the public about censorship. Prior to our first Banned and Challenged Book program in 2012, the Minot AFB Library, too, just did book displays, but we received feedback from a number of people that they wanted us to provide something more interactive, and, in the words of one commenter, "a week isn't long enough for me to read a whole book," so we started experimenting with creating a reading program for banned and challenged books for those interested in participating in one. In 2014, we hit on the basics of our current program, but at that time we only included books of over 100 pages. We had a number of people request a program for picture books so that their younger kids could participate, so, we added a picture book challenge in 2018. Why did it take so long to add picture books? In 2017, the DoD switched Summer Reading Program software vendors, and the new one allowed better scope for setting up a picture book program while running the 100 page plus program at the same time. By 2018, we were familiar enough with the new software to make it work.

### **Why does the American Library Association have a Banned Books Week observance?**

The American Library Association founded Banned Books Week in 1982 to bring attention to censorship and attempts to remove materials from libraries, schools, and book stores. Censorship in America has surged and declined in waves over the years. Like today, the late-1970's and early 1980's experienced a surge of book challenges. The ALA's 1953 Freedom to Read Statement came out during another censorship high point during the time of the anti-communist red scare and McCarthyism.

Libraries in general, and the American Library Association in particular, oppose censorship because the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights protects an individual's right to access information from multiple viewpoints. Because libraries provide information to everyone, whether or not they can afford to pay for it, they play a big role in the implementation of the First Amendment.

### **Why should I consider participating in the Banned and Challenged Book Challenge?**

The Banned and Challenged Book Program attracts readers who want an extra impetus to venture outside their reading comfort zone and think critically about books in general. Participants have said that the program helps motivate them to read the books that they feel they should be reading in order to challenge and expose themselves new ideas but often skip in favor of more comfortable reading during most of the rest of the year. The program doesn't appeal to everyone, but everyone is free to elect to participate or not participate. Participants are also free to choose which book(s) they want to read. We have lists of books that have been banned or challenged somewhere at some time that we have in our collection, but participants can read books that are not in our collection too, provided they have been banned or challenged.

This program is all about reading critically, an important skill and part of higher education. It's an opportunity for adults who already read critically and youth who are just learning to do so to practice that skill. The

program is almost a mini DIY literature class where you get to choose what to read instead of having a book assigned. To complete the program, simply sign up, pick and read a book, and submit a review.

### **Is there anything I can do to oppose book banning?**

The publisher, Penguin Random House, recently released a list of suggestions as part of their support of Banned Books Week. Their suggestions were:

- Attend a school and/or library board meeting.
- Write or call your local, state, and/or federal representatives.
- Donate to anti-censorship orgs like EveryLibrary, Pen America and NCAC.
- Read, share, and support books being challenged.

Book Riot, an editorial website about books and writing, further suggests that you can also vote (including local and school board elections), serve on a school or library board, and speak up when you hear misinformation about libraries.