

POLICY DIALOGUE

# Policy Dialogue on Twenty-First-Century Book Banning in the US

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## Abstract

Book banning is a topic covered in many US history classrooms. Students learn that in the first decades of the twentieth century, fights over the teaching of evolution led to restrictions on science texts. Meanwhile, fears about the spread of communism sparked campaigns to limit access to “subversive” ideas. Well into the 1960s, textbooks usually explain, Americans remained at odds about what schools should be free to teach.

What’s old is new, it seems. And tomorrow’s textbooks will have to be updated with stories from the present. As this issue goes to press, conservative groups across the United States have sought to remove hundreds of titles from schools and libraries. Such attempts range from challenges filed by individual parents—often inspired by the list curated on BookLooks.org—to statewide legislative efforts to recall books from schools. Thousands of books have been removed from libraries and classrooms, and the chilling effect has led cautious educators to self-censor even further.

For this policy dialogue, the *HEQ* editors asked Adam Laats and Kasey Meehan to discuss book banning in the US, focusing particularly on the motivations of groups seeking to limit what young people can read. Adam Laats is a professor of education and history at SUNY Binghamton. A leading scholar of conservative activism in education, he is the author of several books including *The Other School Reformers* (Harvard University Press, 2015) and *Fundamentalist U* (Oxford University Press, 2018). Kasey Meehan is the director of the Freedom to Read program at PEN America, where she leads initiatives to protect the right of students to freely access literature in schools. Founded in 1922, PEN America is the largest of the more than one hundred centers worldwide that make up the PEN International network. PEN America works to ensure that people everywhere have the freedom to create literature, to convey information and ideas, to express their views, and to access the views, ideas, and literatures of others.

*HEQ* policy dialogues are, by design, intended to promote an informal, free exchange of ideas between scholars. At the end of the exchange, we offer a list of references for readers who wish to follow up on sources relevant to the discussion.

**Keywords:** book banning; freedom to read; school protests; sex education

**Kasey Meehan:** One of the greatest threats we're facing in the US today is book banning. My role at PEN America is the Freedom to Read program director. PEN America is a large nonprofit that sits at the intersection of human rights and literature and the defense of free speech and free expression. The Freedom to Read program was designed out of increased awareness of book bans and censorship happening in educational spaces and places. We have two to three teams that are tracking threats to people's freedom to read, their freedom to learn. The biggest threat now is book bans, but we also look at the many ways free expression is being challenged, restricted, or suppressed in public schools and public libraries. And one of my colleagues is also focused on higher ed.

Our work involves research, tracking instances of book bans happening in public school classrooms and public school libraries across the country, and making sure that information is out and accessible and digestible. And then from there, we have a communication strategy where we are putting out statements, or working with authors to put together sign-on letters that we're sending to school boards, or putting together a large petition for a statewide campaign in a given context. And then, as a national organization, we also work with lots of partners locally as part of a coalition and mobilizing strategy to help folks as best we can. We provide some resources and talking points regarding a principled approach to free expression and how they can go about opposing book bans, and hopefully, we help them turn the tide locally in addition to some of the work that we do at the state and national levels. So that's us.

**Adam Laats:** I'm just a run-of-the-mill historian. I study US history, especially the history of culture wars in education. I'm interested in things like book bans and the turbulent politics that includes them. Take a group like Moms for Liberty—historically, it's sometimes eerie how much the rhetoric of Moms for Liberty echoes stuff Americans heard throughout the twentieth century. I look at things like that and other things that aren't usually associated directly with book banning, like the history of creationism, for example. I'm interested in creationism, because in my opinion, like book bans, it's one of these core elements of school culture wars—struggles over who gets to make decisions about what goes on in schools. These culture wars are about sexuality; they're about race and history. But I think the core issue, at least the one that I'm most interested in, is this long history of really heated and even bloody fights over the ability to dictate or influence how we decide, how the United States decides what is the right way to organize schools. So that's where my interest in sex ed and book bans comes in.

**Kasey Meehan:** I want to ask you a question we get asked all the time at PEN America: "Is this worse?" Or, "How is this different from episodic moments of book banning from America's history?" Many people are aware that we've had moments of suppression and moments of book banning in our past, but there's always that follow-up question, "How do you compare current to past?" And I think maybe they're not comparable, but we'd be interested to hear what you have to say.

**Adam Laats:** Well, I'm not joking, I'm not exaggerating when I say this type of fight is the default setting of American school politics. When my wife wants to mess with me, at 11:30 at night, she'll say something like, "Adam, hey, look, the *New York Times* says

this school board stuff is *unprecedented*.” Because she knows that will keep me up! And I’m not the only one—I think any US historian of education would not be able to sleep for hours after that, because the statement’s not factual.

I certainly don’t mean to downplay the severity of the kind of conservative activism that’s going on right now. In my opinion, it’s bad for schools. It’s bad for kids. It’s bad for America and for democracy. It’s very bad, but it is also a chronic condition. The United States has never figured out how to answer this stuff. Americans have never agreed about what books should be read, what ideas should count as mainstream ideas, what textbooks kids should use, how old kids should be when they’re allowed to engage with certain ideas. We’ve never been able to answer that.

The fights occur whenever there’s stress, whether from a pandemic or a turbulent presidency. There’s stress on the system now, and there was stress earlier, in 1974, or 1954, or 1924. And in all those periods of stress, we see these fights burst into what we’re seeing today. Some of the journalists I talk to these days are surprised to find that in the 1970s, in one of the most famous book fights, conservative boycotters in West Virginia dynamited the school district headquarters. The superintendent moved his family out of town. He didn’t sleep at the same house two nights in a row because he was legitimately frightened by very credible death threats. And then if you go back to the 1920s, you have groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Ku Klux Klan involved. The Ku Klux Klan has always been very into book banning, especially during the 1920s when they were in their heyday. A big part of their public message was that the books in schools were dangerous for American kids.

**Kasey Meehan:** Sounds familiar.

**Adam Laats:** It’s eerily familiar. The language of book banners has been the same for a century: “We have parents’ rights and we demand to exert those rights to dictate what goes on in schools.” I don’t mean to downplay the severity of our current crisis because it is severe and it is dangerous, but it’s also a chronic condition.

**Kasey Meehan:** And PEN America has taken positions on both sides of the political spectrum. So, in the last two or three years, we have seen challenges from more progressive students or parents or schools that are wanting to remove books that have bad racial stereotypes and tropes or continue to include the N-word in books. We’ve seen those challenges, and PEN America—a principled organization devoted to keeping books in schools—has opposed the removal of those books. And then today, we’re also encountering signals from groups that are espousing more conservative viewpoints and ideologies around the books that they would like to see removed. And so I’m wondering—how do you see the political back-and-forth of these moments? I mean, some of the moments that you just mentioned were more driven from a conservative viewpoint.

**Adam Laats:** Yeah, absolutely. And it’s partly because the issues of banning sex education and sexuality—and particularly the issue of talking about sexuality in K-12 schools—those kinds of bans have come very lopsidedly from the right. So today we’re seeing really angry politics about LGBTQ inclusion. And we’re also hearing from

groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom, an organization where Mike Johnson, the new Speaker of the House, started his career. The Alliance Defending Freedom takes a back seat to nobody in its opposition to LGBTQ inclusion in schools, seeking to ban books like *And Tango Makes Three* and others. And this group also wants to ban sex ed. When it comes to teaching children about reproductive health, about HIV, AIDS, and other STIs, the official line of the Alliance Defending Freedom is that schools shouldn't get to say, that only parents should get to say what kind of sexual information a young person can have. And it's an unusually hard line. A lot of other groups don't take such a hard line and say, "No, the schools shouldn't have anything to do with it." But that's the ADF line. When it comes to sex education, there does seem to be one side that wants to include more information and more inclusion, and the other side thinks those things are not appropriate for schools to provide.

**Kasey Meehan:** Yeah. And that brings us right to what we're currently watching. I mean, just last week, we—well, a few things. One, there's legislation in Iowa that we have been following known as the "parental rights" or "book banning" bill. It prohibits any "age-inappropriate material" in a book, and the law defines age-inappropriate as having any sexual content. The books that are being pulled in response to that legislation takes what we've seen in Florida and in other states, and extends it, because the language of the ban has gotten broader and vaguer. And it does ban any form of reference to sex. So, it includes Shakespeare, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and young adult books that portray young people just thinking about what that future experience might be for them, whether it's their first kiss, or their first hand-holding, or their first partner. The bans have really expanded. I do think that in the movement to remove certain types of materials, that line is getting sharper. It's growing more and more clear and more and more narrow, focusing on prohibitions around any discussion of sex in schools, and also, of course, any discussion and representation of varied sexual orientations and gender identities.

**Adam Laats:** Right. So, the language in the Iowa bill was specifically depictions or descriptions or visual depictions of a "sex act."

**Kasey Meehan:** Sex act, yes.

**Adam Laats:** Right? And the word from Texas that became so difficult was depictions of "nudity."

**Kasey Meehan:** Yep.

**Adam Laats:** In David Shannon's children's book, *No, David!*, a boy named David runs down the street with no pants on, in Donald Duck style. It's very innocent. He just doesn't have pants.

**Kasey Meehan:** *The Paper Bag Princess* was another one, where the princess fights the dragon, and the dragon burns her clothes and then she's a naked cartoon of a princess. But it's the same sort of idea.

**Adam Laats:** I think that the through line between what we're seeing now and what happened in the twentieth century is the naïveté that arises over and over again during these debates. People say, "Okay, okay, okay. We're going to come up with a rule! What is it that we don't want?" In Iowa, it's "sex act." But wait a minute—that's no good, because there's sex in the Bible, in Shakespeare, and in almost all the literature that is considered important for high school students to grapple with. It's a big part of what's valuable about literature. And over and over again, we see the attempt to impose a line about what's acceptable and what isn't.

But it's always a struggle, because in the United States, there is no consensus about what role schools should play in sharing information, not only about the mechanics of sex, but also about human sexuality. People muddle along, and the public schools have all the old sex ed workarounds, such as teaching sex education in fifth grade while simultaneously allowing parents to have their children opt out of the lessons. If you don't want Coach Kelly to tell the girls about one thing while someone else tells the boys about something else, as a parent you can refuse to have your child participate. The system accommodates parental rights, but at the same time, everyone is thinking about what our society wants kids to know as well as what students have a right to know. I think this kind of muddiness creates a crisis moment. Many people, acting probably in good faith, want to clear it up. But clearing things up doesn't work. It didn't work in the 1920s, '50s, or '70s, and things are still muddy now. Today, with LGBTQ inclusion, "What is sexuality?" is a new question for the sex ed debates. But in a society where there is no consensus, attempts to clarify things in school aren't any good, because there's no clarity outside of school either.

**Kasey Meehan:** Yes. The language that's being thrown around, whether it's intentionally vague or accidentally vague, we see this all the time. We'll watch legislation pass, and while not every district in the state is responding, some are. And what pushes districts to respond and start removing and censoring some books or content over others isn't clear, and so there's something else happening. Something is creating an opening for a movement to censor certain types of books that people already perhaps are feeling uncomfortable with. We've been tracking book bans since 2021 at PEN America, and we'll do content analysis. And we've seen one thing in our data over and over again. Over the last two years, nearly 37 percent of all books removed have LGBTQ+ themes. You mentioned *Tango*. The book *And Tango Makes Three* is a true story about two male penguins from the New York Zoo that take care of a baby penguin that was orphaned and brought into the zoo. And that is a book that is banned. I think some of what we see, too, is the way in which so many terms are being conflated. People will say one thing and maybe it sounds like common sense to some people, and yet the reality of what's happening is the removal of books, books that are cartoons of two male penguins, or books that represent a same-sex couple holding hands while taking their kids to school, or *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, a story about two males getting married told from the viewpoint of their niece. We also are seeing so much mischaracterization and mislabeling of certain types of identities and certain types of books in order to characterize them as something to be removed under legislation or district policy, similar to what we saw during the anti-critical race theory movement, too. And now we're seeing, perhaps

more forcibly under this larger umbrella of anti-LGBTQ+ representation and content in schools, prohibitions on sex and sex education as well.

**Adam Laats:** So, can I ask you a question? When I was in the archives researching a 1970s book boycott and protest in Kanawha County, West Virginia, I watched some of the national tape from NBC News. The school protest was bloody and violent—there were fire bombings of schools, school buses shot with rifles, two people shot—not killed, but shot. So NBC News went down there with the big cameras and they interviewed people. And one of the leaders of the protest, a woman named Alice Moore, was very much like a proto-Mom for Liberty. She ran for school board because she thought that schools were moving too far to the left and teaching kids anti-American, anti-Christian values. So she ran for school board as “just a mom.” That was her line. And on the school board, she was the first to protest against a new set of literature textbooks. And sex was involved, but I think, all of these book bans—if we want to understand them—never really focused on just one thing. It wasn’t ever only about sexuality, or about race, or about Christianity or science. Historically, it’s been about all of it, all at once.

What struck me about Alice Moore’s conversation with NBC News in 1975 is that her portrayal of the events was clearly not factual at the time. In fact, the biggest group of protesters back then was *in favor* of the books. The high school students led a huge march that attracted national support against the boycott, against the ban, in favor of these books. So, when NBC News came down to Charleston, West Virginia, to interview Alice Moore, what jumped out at me was the way she portrayed her views as those of the mainstream. She said, “Look, the educational establishment is out of touch. The people who are sending us these literature textbooks with e.e. cummings poems, you know, where he writes, ‘I like my body when it’s with your body.’ And Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, excerpts from his memoir, the Black militant in prison. And Evel Knievel, the guy who jumped over the Grand Canyon and stuff. The people who want to include that literature for our K-12 schools, they’re out of touch.” She said, “We represent the mainstream.” It’s that line that interests me, in which Alice Moore depicts the students, book authors, the publishers, and the schools as holding a minority point of view. I think her accusation was incorrect, but I think the accusation gets to the heart of the kind of book bans we’re seeing today and the confusion about them, because she wasn’t just saying, “I’m against this book.” She was saying, “Me and my friends are against this book, and we represent the ‘real’ America.” She had seen with her own eyes that more people were in favor of the books than those on her side, which opposed them. But she still clung to this idea that she and her friends represented the “real America,” the mainstream, even though their perspective might be a minority viewpoint right there in her town. She felt that by rights, they weren’t just fighting for their kids, they were fighting for the rights of all American parents who had what they believed were the right kind of mainstream values.

I think that Alice Moore and her friends were incorrect about the mainstream back in 1975, just as I think people in favor of book bans now are incorrect about the mainstream today. They use the word *mainstream* because they believe that they somehow have a special right to speak for America. But the idea of “the mainstream” is really hard to put your finger on. Because today, conservative activists are against things like

Disney, Anheuser-Busch, Target, and NASCAR, which are fairly mainstream institutions. I think that among those who seek to ban books, there's a sense that they somehow represent a usurped America and the "real America" that's been unfairly marginalized. Does that resonate with what you see these days?

**Kasey Meehan:** Yeah. And the counter-question is, "Who is included in their vision of the real America?" It's a very narrow viewpoint that they continue to hold, and it looks like a certain subset of our increasingly diverse and pluralistic society.

Here's the piece we talk about all the time at PEN: Who gets to decide whose stories can be told? Whose identities can be represented in schools? Who is included in this vision of America? And where it's become more and more complicated, I would say, is in the increasing politicization of school boards. Where are the school boards that could fairly represent the voice of their communities and adjudicate whose stories get included? We see that we can't talk about that without also talking about the political action committee money that's funneling its way down to school boards, and the way in which school board elections have become politically partisan, as opposed to politically neutral. So I think the infrastructure is also being challenged.

If the ideal vision of public school is one that really serves everyone more broadly, how can we explain the fact that certain voices are having an outsized effect on the content and curricula in the schools? Where is that coming from? The movement to ban books is certainly at odds with the countermovement to provide more diversity in our classroom and school libraries to ensure that the content and curricula speak to the many experiences and histories of students in a given school district in the US. And the answer is that there is a very well-coordinated, well-resourced movement that is influencing the way that our public schools are shifting. I heard from one of our partners in California that there was a donor who supported two Moms for Liberty candidates with \$50,000 donations to run for school board. \$50,000! That's insane for a school board race. Probably because I'm so deep in this current moment, I'm constantly feeling a little sense of alarm as to where we are headed and how far this movement is going to push and ultimately just change the way public schools exist in the US.

I've worked in education before. I was a policy researcher for another research organization before I joined PEN America. And I don't think anybody would say that public school has met its ultimate vision. We've been pushing public schools to evolve from all sides for years, whether the focus is funding, or whether it's thinking about curricula and different ways of supporting and developing student literacy and academic success in general. But ultimately, public schools are important, because democracy is really at stake. The book-banning movement in public schools, in public libraries, and in public universities is threatening multiple sectors of public institutions that are foundational to information sharing and knowledge building. They have been the cornerstone of our democracy, and ultimately, we need these places and spaces to help continue to push our democracy forward.

**Adam Laats:** So what does the future look like? From your perspective, as you mentioned, democracy clearly seems at stake given the actions of these local groups that are



funded by deep-pocketed national activist groups. That's terrifying. When you look at the future, what do you worry about? And what do you hope for?

**Kasey Meehan:** I do worry about the disruption to public education. That's going to be hard to come back from. We know there are teacher shortages; there are schools without libraries. There was a report just this week saying that the public school district of Philadelphia has only one librarian across the district. It's massive. One librarian can't possibly serve that many students in a given school district. So, I worry that the efforts to disrupt—could they be strong enough that we can't bounce back? I heard a quote from Kathleen Low, president of the Berkeley County Education Association in South Carolina, that really stuck with me. She described book banning as a distraction given that her district is short more than a hundred teachers. She said, "Book controversies are 'like trying to discuss the feng shui of the furniture in a house that is on fire.'"<sup>1</sup> I totally get that. There are so many things that public schools are already having to juggle, and when we layer on efforts to remove books and reject the content that's being delivered, it's just yet another burden and another challenge for administrators and librarians and educators to navigate. And that's the piece that always stands out to me. We hear from so many folks and school districts across the country that the emotional toll, the professional toll, and the financial toll that this movement is putting on public schools is quite real. So, that's my big concern.

But—and there's always a but—where we see book bans, we also see so many individuals mobilizing in opposition to book bans. This supports the point you made earlier. The majority is truly opposed to book banning. We see students organizing morning protests or showing up at school board meetings and staying until they end, as late as 10, 11, or midnight. And there are parent groups and advocacy groups like PEN America and others that are doing all they can to raise awareness. We're all trying to galvanize the public to oppose what's happening, to encourage people to use their voices, to write to their legislators, and show up at board meetings. We hope in some places to get ahead of the book-banning movement before we see it spreading and showing up in new school districts in different states. What do you think as a historian? How do we get out of it?

**Adam Laats:** Well, so, here's an idea I want to run by you. I wonder if it would take another "Sputnik moment." In the fifties, it wasn't just democracy that was of concern, it was societal and military competitiveness with other countries, especially with the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union put Sputnik, the first satellite, in orbit, that moment led to changes in the school curriculum. That's how sex education and evolutionary science entered a lot of communities for the first time. After Sputnik, the federal government poured big money into producing better social studies and science curricula, including the Biological Science Curriculum Study (BSCS) books. The

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<sup>1</sup>Linda Jacobson, "Chiefs Out in Half of Districts Where Moms for Liberty Flipped Boards Last Year," *The74*, Oct. 5, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/chiefs-out-in-half-of-districts-where-moms-for-liberty-flipped-boards-last-year/#:~:text=Book%20controversies%20are%20like%20trying,calls%20or%20emails%20seeking%20comment>.



Fed's response was, "Oh no, we are losing to the Soviet Union! We don't have the luxury anymore to pander to the politics of school localism and, especially, intellectual citadel-building. You can't just sit in your local county anymore and say, 'We are not going to teach our kids about science.' It's not just about your kids, it's about our whole society." The new science books taught kids about evolution for the first time. But they also taught kids about reproductive systems. And of course, there was opposition. For instance, In Dade County, Florida, they tried out these new science books in 1961. And the Dade County people said, "Oh, no!" because the books had diagrams of human reproductive systems. But the state of Florida said, "Oh, you have to. These are federally funded. This is where we're getting our money. The federal government is going to pay for all this. We can't say no to the money." So what Dade County did is they called in teachers over Christmas to black out by hand every diagram in each textbook. Dade County said, "Okay, you can make us use these books, but you cannot force us to let children to see those diagrams with the body parts."

I bring this up because I wonder if we are getting near a Sputnik moment where somebody—and it doesn't have to be the federal government—but somebody could say, "Hey, what about all these kids in Florida who want AP Psych? What about all these kids in Oklahoma who want to learn about what happened to the Osage Nation in the banned book, *Killers of the Flower Moon*? They want to know what that's about. What about all these kids who are having questions about sexuality and gender but can't get access to books with information?" Is there someone besides PEN America who could really be a force, when in the past it's been the federal government? It would be nice if the federal government were trying to foster a real sense of communitarian democracy. But I don't see that happening in this case.

**Kasey Meehan:** I know. And it's interesting to think about. We haven't seen a lot of response from the federal government, though maybe it'll come after an election cycle. Who knows? But it's a good question.

You are talking about a unifying moment, where we as a people step forward, regain trust in our public institutions, and agree that our children need to learn and need to read. I do wonder about what that moment would look like. Is there something that unifies what feels like a very polarizing culture right now? I don't know. I mean, it's a great question.

Perhaps there will be a literacy moment. The topic of literacy comes up all the time. Specifically, the way in which literacy is declining. And more and more, I've seen research studies and articles about how students are more engaged when they can see themselves in the books they read and can understand and identify with the experiences of the characters. And so, I do wonder if there's going to be a literacy moment.

The other hot-button thing that I have wondered about myself is whether the fallout around Scholastic Book Fairs could be a part of that moment, too. I mean, I think that many of us can remember Scholastic coming to our schools when we were kids growing up. It was such a fun experience. And the idea that Scholastic, a massive company with multimillion-dollar revenues, felt that it had to partition certain books into an "opt-in section," because it thought those books could get educators in trouble or could lead to book bans at a district—that was shocking. Scholastic partitioned certain books that

had characters of color or were written by authors of color, including the story of Ruby Bridges, written by Ruby Bridges herself, as well as books that included other ethnic minorities from different cultures and, of course, authors of LGBTQ+ identities and books that included LGBTQ+ characters. They put those into a separate section called, “Share Every Story, Celebrate Every Voice.” And when Scholastic did that, they faced so much backlash that in late October 2023, the company apologized and announced that they were reversing course.<sup>2</sup>

When we see Scholastic’s response, I do wonder if this could be an “aha!” moment for many. I hope Scholastic’s response becomes the Sputnik moment that leads others to say, “No, we messed up and now we’re not messing up again; we’re keeping our books and we’re not wavering because, honestly, we’re bigger than these pressures to censor.” I do wonder if we might see that happen. We need a moment that will help reorient us to the idea that these books are made for the students, and that representation is not harmful, nor is it dangerous. Let’s keep the books where they belong and bring back the guiding principle of access for our students.

**Adam Laats:** Yeah. You mentioned the idea that there’s this cresting wave of attacks on books and then it recedes; and the tide, when it pulls back, leaves people with the sense that, *hey, these books aren’t bad—they’re okay*. We were told they were going to turn our kids into communists or make them want to have sex with animals, take your pick. (I wish I were exaggerating. I’m not.)

**Kasey Meehan:** Yeah, I know you’re not. I’ve read the challenge forms.

**Adam Laats:** Right? We see attacks describing teachers as groomers and pedophiles. I mean, it’s not just hateful, it’s really dangerous. I don’t mean to downplay the severity of the moment when you have those attacks, but at least in the twentieth century, and I wonder if we will see it today, when the tide recedes a little, you have a very different sort of moment. I think Americans generally tend to agree that schools should be safe places for students. And if someone can just post a threat on the internet, saying, “Hey, if your kid reads this book, bad thing X, Y, or Z is going to happen to them,” that’s frightening. And it’s very easy to say, “Well, then, just get rid of that book.” This happened in Tennessee, when a local school board banned Art Spiegelman’s book *Maus*, saying it was full of profanity and nudity.<sup>3</sup> But then when people found out more about it, they were like, “Oh, actually, *Maus* isn’t a book full of profanity and nudity, it’s a really good book for kids about the Holocaust.” So, I’m not cheerful, but I am—long-term—optimistic that when people discover that these books are not actually as dangerous as they were told, although there may never be an apology, an “I’m sorry, you guys were right,” the antagonism will just fade away, as happens in a family feud.

<sup>2</sup>Rachel Treisman, “Scholastic Backtracks, Saying It Will Stop Separating Diverse Books for Fairs in 2024,” NPR, Oct. 25, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/25/1208419749/scholastic-book-fair-diverse-stories-apology#:~:text=Food-,Scholastic%20will%20stop%20separating%20diverse%20stories%20for%20book%20fairs%20in,and%20working%20to%20reverse%20course>.

<sup>3</sup>Sophie Kasakove, “The Fight Over ‘Maus’ Is Part of a Bigger Cultural Battle In Tennessee,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/us/maus-banned-books-tennessee.html>.

It fades into an uncomfortable silence for a little while; people just stop talking about it, and then by default, the books are back in school. So it's not pretty. It's not cheerful. But I do think that once people realize that the great danger they've been warned about is actually not a great danger, it is rather our familiar school librarian, or it's Scholastic Books, these very trusted individuals and institutions in our culture, when we realize that that's who we were being made afraid of, when they're not actually scary, things do fade away.

**Kasey Meehan:** I think that's right. I mean, PEN America also has a team that works on myths and disinformation. And so, we have a sense that so much of this is intentionally misleading from the top. It starts with Governor DeSantis holding up some explicit images on a press conference and then saying, "There's porn in schools. Look at this image. It's everywhere." When the reality is so far from that. It starts there, and then I think people do respond through fear. That message is shared widely enough that all of a sudden you see people talking about wanting their kids to be safe. Parents do want to protect their kids. Of course, they do! That's all very valid. So I think part of our work at PEN has really been to disrupt the myth, that some wonderful, professionally trained librarian snuck in all this porn while you had your eyes closed. And now it's accessible to all your students. I mean, our work at PEN is like that of a myth buster, helping people understand that this is not the case. I do feel like that consistent message is getting stronger and more unified, where we're having to repeat, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, what you're hearing is not actually what's happening. These books have been brought into schools through a professionally trained educator or librarian. Publishers have so many ways of putting general, sensible measures on books to help them filter into different grade levels. There's a whole industry devoted to reviewing books and making sure that books are appropriate for kids. There are many kinds of checks along the way before that book shows up."

And on the positive side, there's another thing we hear time and time again. Take Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, which is one of the most commonly banned books. It's a memoir about a nonbinary individual navigating life. And we have heard countless times that when principals or school board members sit and read the book because some people in their district want to ban it, they ultimately decide to keep the book in the school library. After reading it, they say things like, "Oh, yes. I see how this image taken out of context could be quite provocative, but if you flip to the next page, actually, it's a conversation about consent. You know, there is no sex in the book. There's a conversation, and the individuals in the book kind of navigate this very real young adult experience."

So here's a question: How do we flip and disrupt some of the messaging that leads people to fear *And Tango Makes Three*, when the book is not scary?

**Adam Laats:** No, it's adorable.

**Kasey Meehan:** Yeah, it's adorable.

**Adam Laats:** Historically, messages like the one you just described have turned the tide. For example, in Binghamton, New York, where I am right now, we had a book

burning in 1940. Right when the Nazis were burning books, we had a book burning here in Binghamton, and the school superintendent did just what you said. He told the school board, “Hey, I like these books,” and the school board said, “Let’s burn them.” And he said, “Not only do I like these books, I read these books to my children. You know me, these are good books, I read them to my children. They’re not dangerous.” No one else in the room had actually read the book except him. And I think that, at least historically, that has turned the tide over and over again. Like the Red is not actually under the bed. There’s the monster in your closet, open the door, turn on the light and see—it’s not a monster! That’s what has happened historically, and fingers crossed, this same ending will follow what we see today.

**Kasey Meehan:** Yes, I think that’s right. Sometimes I go back and forth. I think book bans in some ways are a bellwether for a deeper effort to disrupt and destabilize our democracy and public institutions. But then I also firmly believe, as you said, that people who eventually read the books will keep the books, rather than ban them. And I think things might get a little messier before they get better.

**Adam Laats:** It’s been a real pleasure talking with you. I’m a big fan of your organization and the work. As a historian, I’m usually stuck in the 1920s, so I don’t do anything useful for any actual people. I admire what you do in the 2020s. It’s appreciated!

**Kasey Meehan:** I could go back and revisit many things that we’ve talked about in this hour. I appreciate the way you bring a context and a spotlight to the history that we share here and how it can inform us.

One of our talking points at PEN is that everything has a history. There was a great article in the *New York Times* recently about the Osage Nation in Oklahoma and Martin Scorsese’s movie, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, and the books that have been removed and prohibited in Oklahoma schools.<sup>4</sup> And PEN has a clip from a thirteen-year-old on our website that really drives home the point that we can’t learn if we don’t know. And so, why would we not want to just fill our schools with stories and histories and all sorts of information and knowledge? Because that’s how we learn. And that’s not a bad thing.

**Adam Laats:** I work with teachers at my university, and they’re great. They give me so much reassurance and calmness, because they say, “How can we teach history or literature without using history or literature?” Those are key elements of what we need. How can we teach kids about race if there’s no anguish to the story?

**Kasey Meehan:** Of course—if we can’t make anybody feel a little uncomfortable, it’s hard to see how they’ll learn anything.

I’ve learned a lot from this brief conversation. Through the long arc of history, we as a people have weathered these moments and eventually realized the US is not a place

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<sup>4</sup>Jim Day and David Grann, “The True Story Behind ‘Killers of the Flower Moon’ Is Being Erased from Oklahoma Classrooms,” *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/20/opinion/killers-flower-moon-oklahoma-history.html>.

that bans books. And I think that's important. And ultimately, I'm hopeful that's where we'll land.

**Adam Laats:** Fingers crossed.

### Additional Readings

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