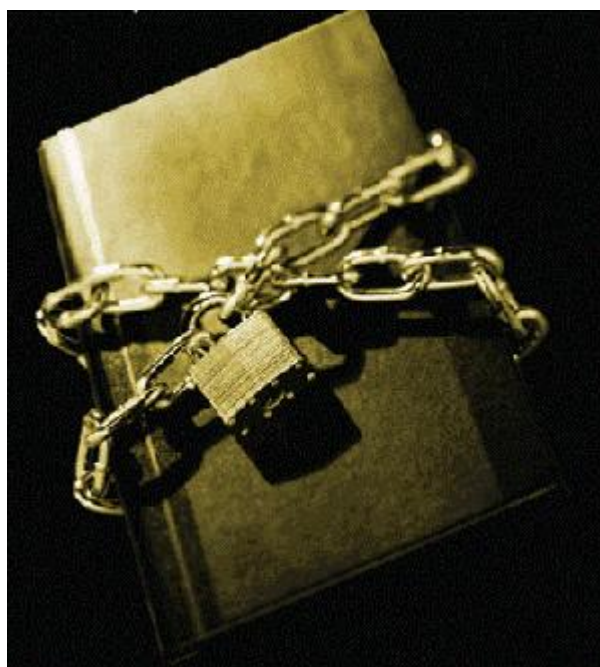


# Censorship of young adult novels:

## Locked up literature



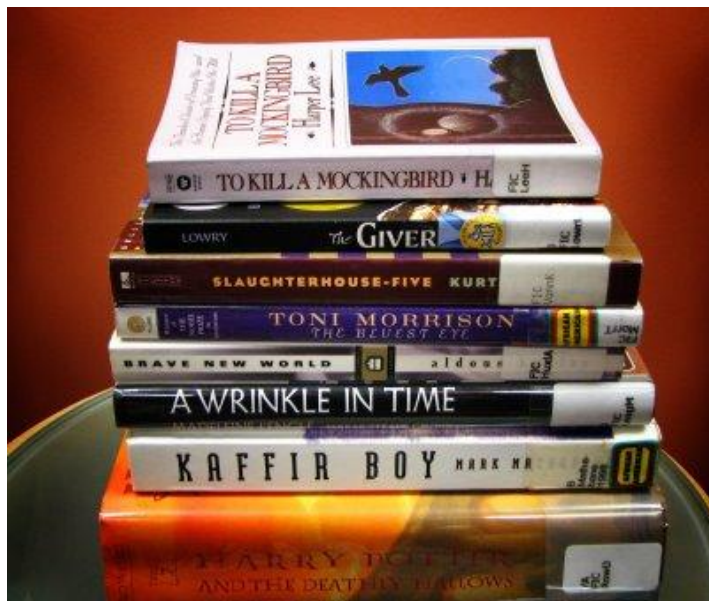
Picture provided by [greatneck.k12.ny.us](http://greatneck.k12.ny.us).

Chelsea Miles

Brother Brugger

Eng 252

12 February 2010



Picture provided by hrlonlinenews.blogspot.com

A concerned mother announced on a radio talk show in Connecticut, in 1991, that she believed controversial literature was not appropriate for the classroom. She and her supporters were currently objecting to a series of books that were on the eighth grade reading list at a local middle school. The previous year, she failed to have *Bridge to Terabithia*,

a novel by award winning author Katherine Patterson, removed from her sixth grade son's reading list. Her argument: she did not want her children reading books that "contradict the values" she was trying to instill in her home (Simmons 118).

In 2005, author Lois Lowry returned home from a Caribbean vacation to find that her novel *The Giver* was being considered for removal from school libraries in Kansas City, Missouri. She faced a number of comments from protective, emotional parents. She relates this story in a speech given at the University of Richmond in 2005:

One morning I checked the Kansas City newspaper to see what frenzied outbursts had newly appeared, and I read this, from a woman who wanted to ban *The Giver*: "The lady (that would be me) writes well, but when it comes to the ideas in that book, they have no place in my kid's head." And from another: "Everything presented to kids should be positive and uplifting..." (3-4)

She continues to state that she had previously titled her speech “How everything turns away,” and that as she read these articles, this title came to her mind because people tend to turn away from something that is painful or not easy (5).

Recently, novels written specifically for a young adult audience have been banned from public schools because the themes within them have been deemed "inappropriate," despite the efforts of young adult authors to present themes and ideas that they think their readers need to be aware of and think about. These books typically present themes or have instances of sexuality, profanity, abuse, drugs and alcohol, and other ideas that parents believe are objectionable. However, young adult authors recognize that these are just a few of the obstacles that a teenager will face in his or her life.

Teens want to read novels that are more modern and relatable to them; young adult authors understand this want. However, with censorship, sometimes this isn't possible, because parents and administrators want to shield their children and students from what they believe to be inappropriate.

### **“Problem” Novels**

In the 1970s, young adult authors started to realize that the world was changing, as were their readers. To meet the needs of their readers, they wrote novels about social issues that were relevant during that time period. These issues were controversial, as they dealt with subjects that had not previously been addressed in young adult literature: drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS, rape, and abuse are just a few examples (Hart par. 3). These novels became known as “problem novels,” because the protagonist in the story usually had a certain complication that they had to endure (par. 4). This is the type of story that is attractive to teens today. According to Melissa Hart, an author and high school teacher, teens “want books centered around engaging

protagonists and compelling narratives” and “crave stories with no holds barred and characters who are real, inspiring and flawed” (pars. 5-6).

Teens do not want to read novels with these ideas just because they are interesting to read, but because they are applicable to their lives. In an e-mail interview, Teresa Koberstein, the communications and youth programs coordinator with the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), said “The fact is, young adults experience a variety of things that parents may or may not wish were happening—but they happen.” This is why teens turn to novels that contain such ideas. Koberstein said, “they need to identify with characters who are also going through those experiences. Many times, those books show young adults how to get through very tough circumstances in ways that few other people have been able to show to them.”

### **Authors vs. Parents**

Young adult authors realize this need for literature that reaches their intended reader. Lois Duncan, author of the novel *Killing Mr. Griffin*, said that in her novels, there is usually a strong presence of “resisting peer pressure and taking responsibility for your actions” (546). Laurie Halse Anderson, author of the novel *Speak*, believes that reading is the best way for teens to see the world around them. She said “Literature is the safe and traditional vehicle through which we learn about the world and pass on values from one generation to the next” and young adult literature needs to “be honest in order to connect to the teen reader” (211). Hart also tries to be honest to her readers. She said that “as a young-adult novelist, I feel obliged to portray the world as they experience it, in all its glorious controversy” (42).

Although these authors may have their readers’ best interests at heart, many of the parents of the readers are skeptical that their children should be reading these novels. Instead of showing the world to their children, they want to shield them. Koberstein said that for parents,

“the number one prerogative...is to protect their child for fear that something awful might happen.” Anderson understands why parents are protective. She said, “The world is a very scary place. It is a terrifying place in which to raise children, and in particular, teenagers” (211). According to Koberstein, this leads parents to become overprotective. “Censorship, then,” she stated, “is often the consequence, unintended or not, of this protection.”

### **Challenging Books**

The American Library Association (ALA) defines censorship as “a change in the access status of material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives” (Terms par. 1). Censorship has been a heated topic since the fifth century—when Plato wrote against banning poets—to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where not only classic literature is under attack, but contemporary young adult literature, novels that are supposed to be written specifically for young adults, are being “banned” or removed from public schools and libraries (Nilsen and Donelson 390-92).

The three most popular reasons why books are banned are the books contain instances of sex, offensive language, or they are unsuitable to the age group; the number one censor group is parents (Challenges). However, books are censored for many different reasons, by other people besides parents, and are banned in places other than public schools and libraries. For instance, prisons have also books censored occasionally, although not as often as in schools (See Appendix A).

Any subject that parents think would not be appropriate for their child to read could be the reason why a book would be pulled from the shelves of a school library or removed from the curriculum. Melissa Hart said that in her experience as a teacher, parents are more skeptical of

young adult literature because they do not want their teens “to be inspired to experiment with drugs or sexuality” (Hart par. 31).

As Anderson said, parents should be protective of their children and be concerned about what their children are reading. Donald R. Gallo, a professor from Central Connecticut State, said that according to the law, parents are to be protective of their children and keep them from harm; they should not try to protect all of the children in the school system by restricting teachers to what they can and cannot teach (Simmons 118).

### **Banning Incidents**

There have been many instances where parents have ultimately ended up protecting the entire school as well as their child by getting administrators to ban books. In El Paso, Texas in 1991, a parent asked that *A Wrinkle in Time*, a Newberry Award winning novel written by Madeline L'Engle, not be used in sixth grade classrooms because it would confuse good Christian children. He believed that it had “anti-Christian values”, despite the fact that one of the major themes of the book is the power of love (Foerstel 170).

In Kansas City in 1994, Jane Yolen's novel *Briar Rose*, a retelling of the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* set during the Holocaust, was not only banned from the schools, but was burned on a hibachi grill by a local minister. He objected to the book not because it talked about the discrimination of Jews, but because it also included descriptions of the treatment of homosexuals during the Holocaust. He thought that the book had too many gay references (Boyd and Bailey 654).

Lois Duncan said that there were many incidents in which *Killing Mr. Griffin* was banned from schools. She said that in one case, “five men in business suits stormed in, ripped the books out of the kids' hands, tore down the bulletin board, and left the teacher in hysterics” because

one of the characters uses a swear word in the book. In another instance, parents not only wanted the novel removed from the classroom, but they also wanted the teacher fired all because of the title of the novel (Duncan 546-547).

Despite their popularity with children and teens, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling was the number one banned book series in 2001 and 2002, and was second in 2003, the reasoning being that they promoted occult and Satanism (Frequently Challenged). Rowling, however has said that after meeting children over the many years, “not even one time has a child come up to me and said, ‘Ms. Rowling, I’m so glad I’ve read these books because now I want to be a witch’” (Nilsen and Donelson 425).

### **Challenging Censorship**

Because of the censorship of their novels—the novels that have specifically been created and crafted for young adults—authors have spoken out against the censorship of their novels. Hart says “I become even more irate when ‘edgy’ young-adult fiction becomes synonymous with ‘banned’” (Hart par. 34). Fencie B. Boyd, an associate dean for teacher education at the Univeristy at Buffalo, and Nancy M. Bailey, an associate



Picture provided by [www.marshall.edu](http://www.marshall.edu)

professor of adolescence education at Canisius College, describe censorship as being a barbed wire fence around the access to knowledge and the development of critical thinking. They argue that censorship is a just a way of “hiding the unpleasant or unjust” and that it doesn’t protect teens, “it merely makes them unprepared for what life will present in the future” (655-657).

Young adult authors write about what they think teens need to know. By censoring these novels, teens are not able to read stories in which the main characters are affected by the same

problems that teens face today. Anderson said that “censoring books that deal with difficult, adolescent issues does not protect anybody. It leaves kids in darkness and makes them vulnerable” (211).

Some authors are also worried about what censorship will do to future authors and their novels. Judy Blume, a young adult author whose novels are frequently on banned books lists, has expressed this concern, saying “It’s not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers” (Hart 36).

### **Slowing Censorship**

Teresa Koberstein doubts that there will ever be a day when censorship will not exist. However, she does think that there is a way to prevent censorship. She said, “the more we shine a light on the problems and all the insidious forms of censorship, the more equipped we will be at preventing them.” She mentions that there are professional educators and book reviewers that are “particularly skilled at determining which books are appropriate for which age group,” therefore making it possible for parents, teachers, and even teens to decide when they are old enough to handle some of the material in a novel, therefore preventing the novel from being censored or banned.

Censorship can further be prevented if school districts have a censorship policy in which those wishing to censor must put their complaints in writing. Another way is by keeping the parents informed about what their children are reading and encouraging them to also read the book and discuss it with their children (Freedman and Johnson 366).

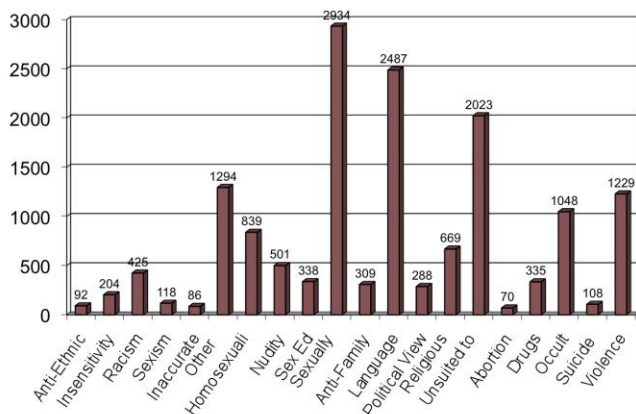
Book banning, according to young adult authors, may initially be a way to protect children and teens from reading about something that is objectionable and controversial, but it is



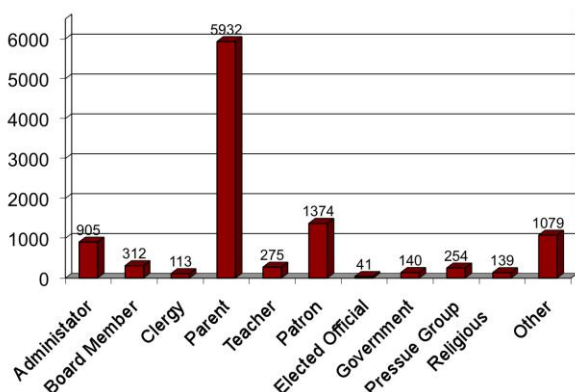
also a way of keeping teens from truth and sheltering them. Parents may not want their teens to read about sex, drug abuse, and read offensive language, arguing that there will be “plenty of time to learn about bad issues later” (Hart 31). Young adult authors, however, understand that these are just many circumstances that teens face every day, and by reading about a character that is going through the same problems, teens might find a way to cope and overcome some of the harder things in their life that they are going through.

## Appendix A

### Challenges by Reason



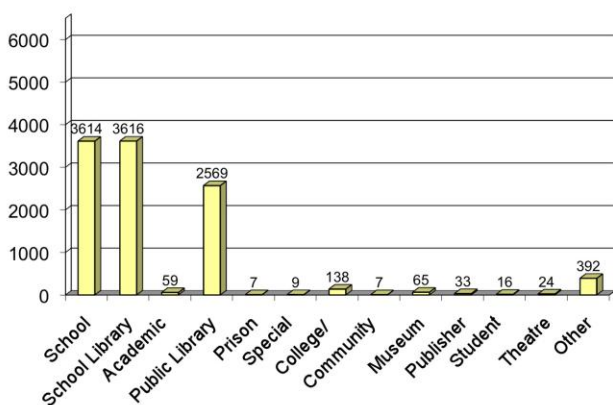
### Challenges by Initiator



Graphs provided by the American Library

Association ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org))

### Challenges by Institution



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