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Forbidden Forests: Negotiating Censorship in Children's and Young Adult Literature During a New Era of Conservatism in 2022 and Beyond

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DR. AVILA HENDRICKS, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION - LINCOLN UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI - JUNE 29, 2022

An aerial photograph of Atlanta, Georgia, showing the city skyline in the background and a large green park area with a winding river in the foreground. The skyline includes several prominent skyscrapers, and the park area is filled with lush green trees and a small body of water.

Forbidden Forests: Negotiating Censorship in Children's and Young Adult Literature During a New Era of Conservatism in 2022 and Beyond

Conference Proceedings Report from
The Children's Literature Association 2022 Annual Conference: June 2 - 4, 2022
Theme: "City In A Forest"
Atlanta, Georgia

Conference Proceedings Report Introduction

“Harambee!”

In Swahili, “Harambee” means “All pull together!”

The impetus for this conference proceedings report grew out of a unifying discussion with other 2022 Children's Literature Association (ChLA) conference attendees.

These discussions led to the decision to “pull together” against the rise of “extreme” conservatism and the increase of banned books across the United States.

This report offers insight into some of the issues surrounding the increase in censorship in children's and young adult literature. It includes a brief review of the recently challenged book, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, and it concludes with some recommendations for negotiating censorship in conservative communities.



CENSORSHIP PRACTICES

Redaction - crossing out or removing a word or phrase.

Relocation - moving literature from one location to another less accessible.

Restriction - literature access is limited by certain conditions such as placing age and grade level restrictions, or requiring parental permission.

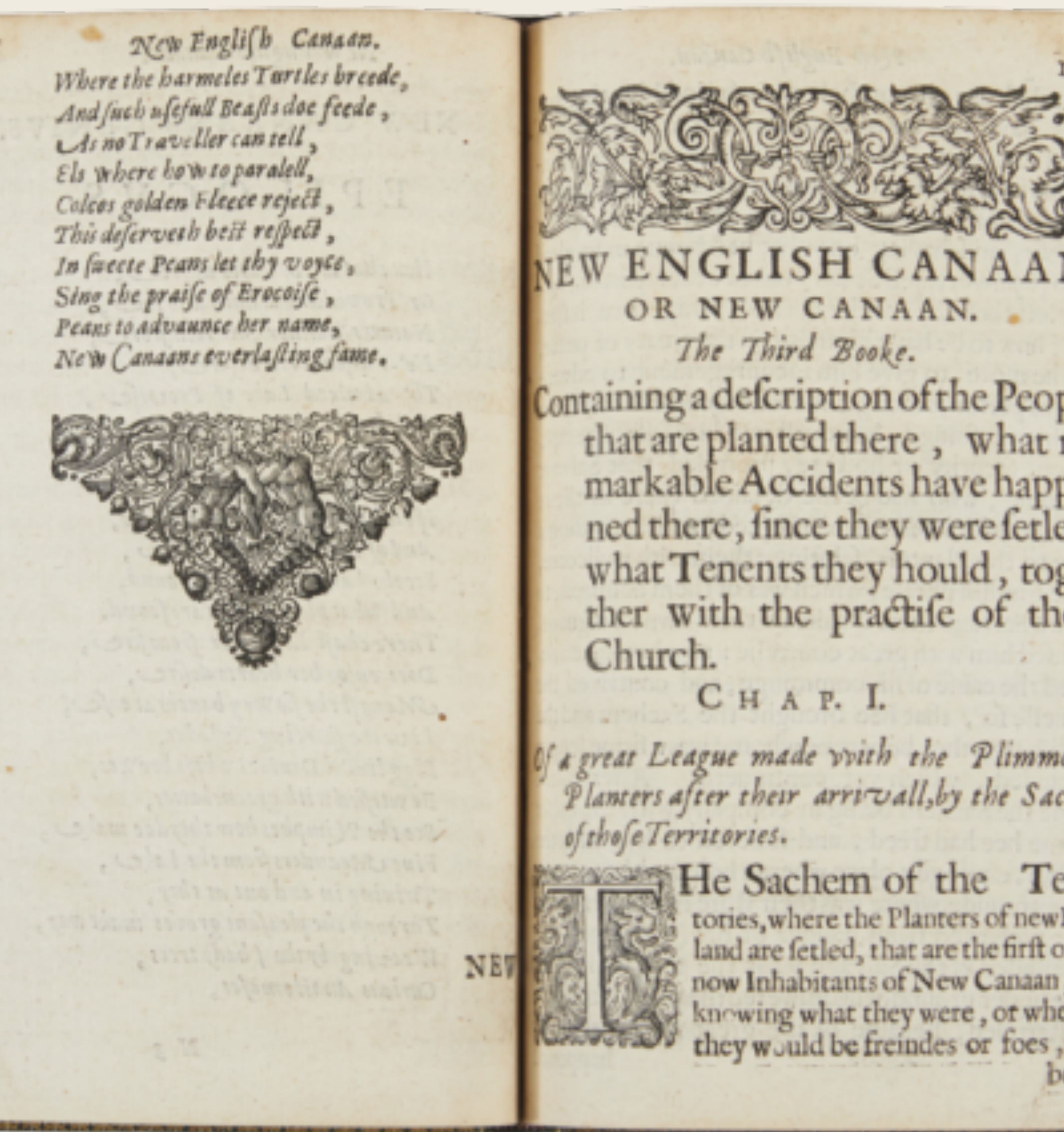
Removal - the literature has been “banned” from the library and/or curriculum and is inaccessible to everyone.

SOURCES: (Knox, 2022), and
(Children’s Literature Assoc./ChLA Conversations 2: Banned and Challenged Books [YouTube Video] 2022).

- **Censorship** - control over the creation, production, distribution and circulation of texts and cultural goods. (Knox, 2022)
- **Self-Censorship** - occurs when fear of controversy leads librarians and teachers to restrict or remove literature from circulation or the curriculum in order to avoid challenges from parents or community members.
- **The First Amendment** - guarantees five freedoms: religion, press, speech, assembly, and the right to petition the government. Freedom of speech means that the government cannot prohibit citizens from expressing themselves in words or writings.

Words and Terms You Should Know

- **Intellectual Freedom** - Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored. (American Library Association, "Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A", 2007).
 - **Confirmation Bias** - A preference for information that supports one's preconceived notions, beliefs, politics, values, attitudes, or morals.
 - **Extremism** - The holding of extreme political (can be liberal or conservative) or religious views; fanaticism. Extremists may seek more power or control over individual freedom of choice. Their need to control or unwavering beliefs may also lead to violent behavior.
 - **Harambee** - Means, "All pull together!" in Swahili. In the context of this report, "Harambee" is used as a calling to "unite" against the increase of extreme conservatism which may lead to censorship and book bans in our communities.
-



A Brief History of Censorship Practices in the United States

A well-educated and connected, free-thinking Englishman, **Thomas Morton** came to America in 1624 for business reasons. He settled in the New England colony and began trading with the Indians for furs. However, Morton didn't want to abide by the strict Puritan rules and values that made up the new American society.

When Massachusetts Puritans threw Morton in jail, he retaliated by writing the *New English Canaan* in 1637, a harshly critical, but witty composition that attacked Puritan customs and praised the wisdom and humanity of the Indians.

The *New English Canaan* angered the Plymouth Puritans so much— the book was banned! Consequently, the *Canaan* has the distinction of being the first book explicitly banned in what is now the United States.

Source: "America's First Banned Book Really Ticked Off the Plymouth Puritans" (Taub, 2019)

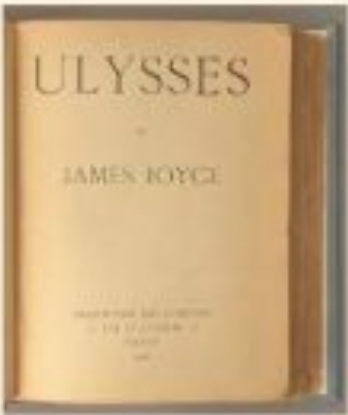
BRIEF TIMELINE OF BANNED BOOKS



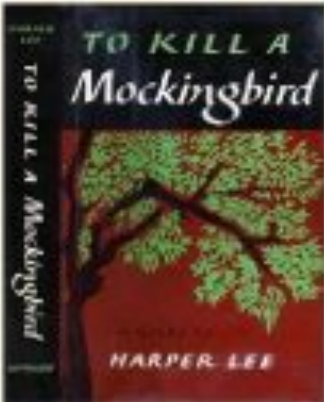
According to Historians, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was the first book in US history to be banned. Stowe's novel was banned by the South because of its pro-abolitionist ideas, which inspire debates on slavery. This action brought in a new wave of censorship to the first amendment.

1852

Ulysses by James Joyce was banned because the United States thought that the book might cause American readers to entertain impure thoughts. Luckily, because of the court case, *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*, John M. Woonley decided against the book being considered obscene, which opened the door to serious works of literature that could contain coarse language.



1933



To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee was banned because of the topics it tackles, such as racism and prejudice. More specifically, it was banned because the book contains some racial slurs and a "white savior".

The Hate You Give was banned in many schools and communities because it was thought to give young readers the idea of "anti-police messages" causing kids to go against the police and not believe in them.

1960



2017



Maus was banned because of the "Nudity of the Jewish people," parents have complained that their middle school aged children will be disturbed by the images.

2022

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CENSORSHIP PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES

Censorship Progression Perspectives in the U.S.

- **1852** - Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***, was banned by the South because of its pro-abolitionist ideas, which inspired debates on slavery. This action brought in a new wave of censorship to the first amendment.
- **1873** - Congress passes the **Comstock Act**. The law makes it a misdemeanor to sell, give away, or possess any literature that may contain inappropriate "obscene" pictures, drawings, or advertisements.
- **1933** - Comstock Act challenged when the ban on James Joyce's book ***Ulysses*** is questioned. For several years the book had been criticized for promoting obscenity and impure thoughts. The favorable ruling ushered in a new era of legal interpretation of the First Amendment and more literary freedom of expression.
- **1957** - The Supreme Court tried **Roth vs. The United States**. The plaintiff was Samuel Roth, a writer and bookseller convicted for mailing pornographic magazines to subscribers. The case narrowed the definition of "obscenity" making it easier for books depicting sex and violence to be written and read.

Censorship Progression Perspectives in the U.S.

- **1960s and 70s** - Witnessed a simultaneous drop in book bans and a rise in more explicit “sex” laden art and literature such as novels written by John Updike and Erica Jong.
 - **1966 - *To Kill A Mockingbird*** - The novel by Harper Lee, published in 1960, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, but was also banned from some schools because characters use racist language and the plot centers on an allegation of rape.
 - **Mid-1990s, *Song of Solomon*** by Toni Morrison was repeatedly challenged in school districts in Colorado, Florida, and Georgia for “inappropriate” and “explicit” material.
 - **2006** - Other Toni Morrison books: ***The Bluest Eye*** has appeared on the banned book list several times, in 2006, 2013, 2014, and 2020. ***Beloved***, Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1987 novel, is also on the 2006 and 2012 banned book lists. Scholars say one of the reasons Morrison’s books are controversial is because they address race, sexuality, identity, and/or they center on dark moments in American history that can be uncomfortable for some people to discuss.
 - **2017 - *The Hate U Give*** by Angie Thomas follows a 16-year-old black high school student who witnesses a white police officer shoot her unarmed best friend. The first two pages include expletives and depict a party “smelling like weed” where guys “grind so close to girls they just about need condoms.” A Springfield, Missouri middle school removed the book, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, after complaints about its profanity and sexually suggestive content.
 - **2022 - *Maus*** - is the only graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize. Written by Art Spiegelman, the story tells about Spiegelman’s father, a Polish Holocaust survivor. The book was removed from the 8th grade curriculum by a school district in Tennessee for violence, profanity, nudity and its depiction of suicide by a Jewish woman.
-

TOP BANNED BOOKS IN SCHOOLS



HEY DAD!

Brian Doyle

Doyle's publisher received a letter from the principal of a rural Ontario, Canada school stating that copies of the book were being returned because they promoted negative views and did not contain the values of "positive citizenship."



ASHA'S MUMS

R. Elwin & M. Paulse

Banned in British Columbia, Canada for promoting homosexual life. Ban overturned in 2002.



HARRY POTTER

J. K. Rowling

Banned in some Christian schools in UK – e.g. St Mary's Island Church of England Aided School in Chatham, Kent.



TWILIGHT

Stephenie Meyer

Banned from some primary schools in Australia, 2009.



ROMEO AND JULIET

William Shakespeare

The "No Fear Shakespeare" version of this classic play was challenged by parents in South Carolina. Complaints said the easy-to-read version of the play is "too mature" for middle-school children because it has mature themes about sex.

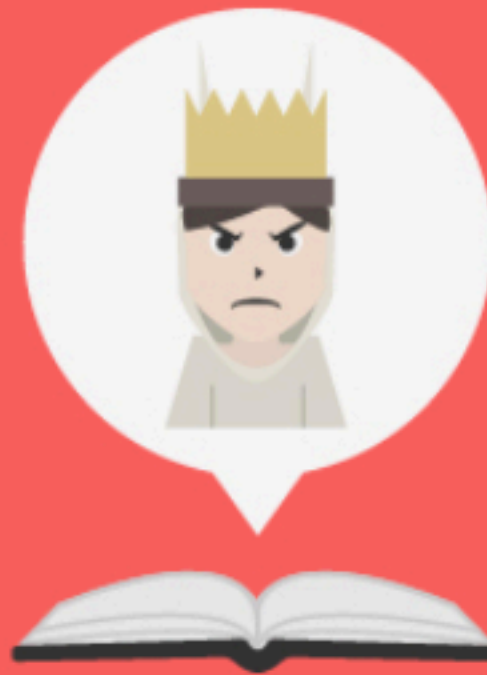
BANNED CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND THE RIDICULOUS REASONS WHY



CHARLOTTE'S WEB

E. B. White

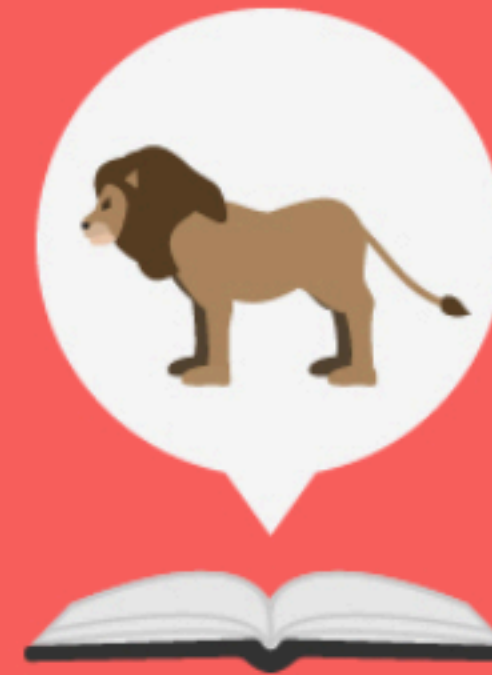
2006, Kansas: "talking animals are blasphemous and unnatural; passages about the spider dying were also criticized as being 'inappropriate subject matter for a children's book'."



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Maurice Sendak

1969, American South: "A boy throwing a tantrum was considered dangerous behavior and Sendak was accused of glorifying Max's anger, prompting psychologists to condemn it as 'too dark and frightening'."



THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ

L. Frank Baum

1957, Detroit Public Library: "no value for children of today; bringing children's minds to a cowardly level."

Sources

49thshelf.com
ala.org

dailytelegraph.com
en.wikipedia.org



anti-ban





The number of challenges to books made by school boards and libraries has risen dramatically.

- 1990s books were challenged primarily because of sex and language.
- 2022 books are being challenged because of issues of diversity such as: racial inequalities, gender rights, sexual identity or alternative life-styles/LGBTQ, or religious beliefs.
- Books by or about people of color, or on issues impacting cultural minorities, are especially vulnerable to challenges by conservatives.

Take a look at some of the challenged or banned book titles above.

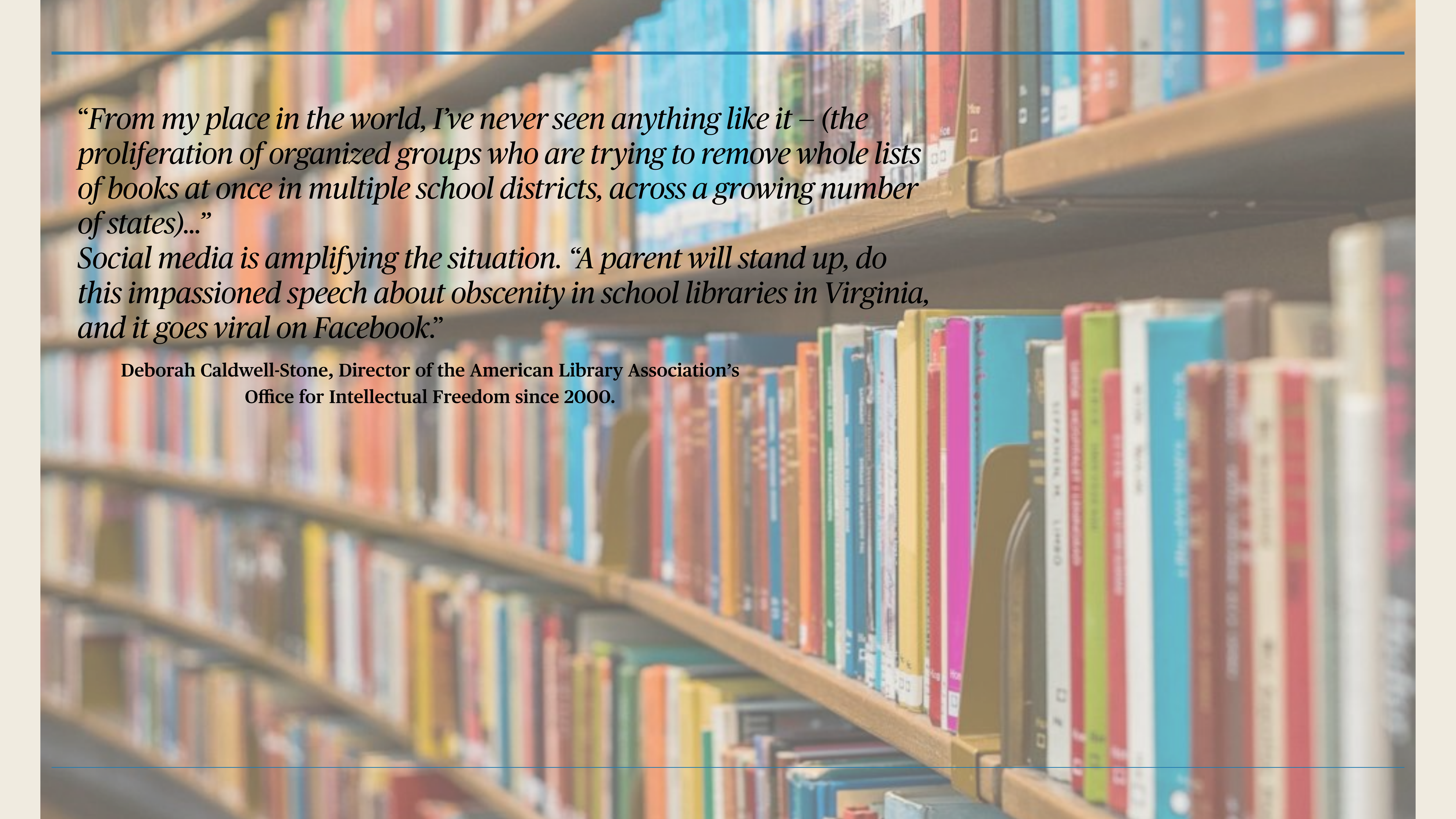
Researchers and analysts at *PEN America have collated an *Index of School Book Bans*, offering a snapshot of the trend on decisions to ban books in school libraries and classrooms in the United States

PEN America's findings:

- There were 1,586 instances of individual books being banned during the nine-month period from July 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022 affecting 1,145 book titles.
- Texas had the most bans (713), followed by Pennsylvania (456), Florida (204) and Oklahoma (43).
- Of all bans listed in the *Index*, 41% (644 individual bans) are tied to directives from state officials or elected lawmakers to investigate or remove books in schools. An unprecedented shift. Typically, PEN America sees a pattern in which demands for book removals are initiated by local community members.

* PEN America is an international organization founded in 1922 with the mission of uniting writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend intellectual freedom.

SOURCE: *Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights* (PEN America Index, 2022: <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>)



“From my place in the world, I’ve never seen anything like it – (the proliferation of organized groups who are trying to remove whole lists of books at once in multiple school districts, across a growing number of states)...”

Social media is amplifying the situation. “A parent will stand up, do this impassioned speech about obscenity in school libraries in Virginia, and it goes viral on Facebook.”

**Deborah Caldwell-Stone, Director of the American Library Association’s
Office for Intellectual Freedom since 2000.**

Seven Reasons Why Censorship Efforts Are Increasing Across the United States

1. Conservative "extremist" groups, fueled by social media, are now pushing book challenges into statehouses, law enforcement and political races.
 2. Topics such as "family values," morality, obscenity, and a parent's right to choose have been politicized. Partisan politicians have driven legislation that has narrowed First Amendment rights.
 3. More books about race, sexuality, gender, and the addictions of young people are being written. Authentic use of language, including profanity, may be prevalent.
 4. Real-life experiences are being addressed in books for children and young adults, in an effort to publish and circulate more diverse books.
 5. Historical "facts" are being questioned and re-evaluated in light of past social justice inequities. Efforts to "reframe" history have come under attack by conservative and patriotic groups.
 6. More parent organizations and censorship advocacy groups such as, *No Left Turn in Education*, are aggressively policing books for inappropriate content, and maintaining lists of books it says are "used to spread radical and racist ideologies" to students.
 7. Confrontational discourse is becoming more politically correct and socially acceptable, rather than tolerance for civil conversations.
-

The most banned book titles are:

- Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe (30 school districts)
- All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson (21 school districts)
- Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison (16 districts)
- Out of Darkness by Ashley Hope Pérez (16 districts)
- The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison (12 districts)
- Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin (11 school districts)

SOURCE: Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights (PEN America Index, 2022: <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>)

There are 43 authors who have been banned at least 5 times, in at least 2 school districts. Some authors have had more than five different titles banned.

A few of the most frequently banned authors are:

- Kobabe, Maia - 1 title - 29 bans - 29 school districts
- Hopkins, Ellen - 14 titles - 27 bans - 9 school districts
- Johnson, George M. - 1 title - 20 bans - 20 districts
- Evison, Jonathan - 1 title - 16 bans - 16 districts
- Morrison, Toni - 3 titles - 16 bans - 13 districts
- Kuklin, Susan - 1 title - 11 bans - 11 districts
- Peters, Julie Anne - 8 titles - 11 bans - 3 districts
- **Stone, Nic - 2 titles - 6 bans - 5 school districts, including some in her home State of Georgia.**
Dear Martin, by **Atlanta native Nic Stone** - follows the story of a black boy named Justyce McAllister who writes letters to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a way to cope after he has a dangerous run-in with a white cop. It was banned because of its use of profanity and reflections on police brutality. *Dear Justyce*, the follow-up story to *Dear Martin* has also come under scrutiny.

SOURCE: Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights (PEN America Index, 2022: <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>)


**An Evening with Nic Stone in Collaboration with
The Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History**

Friday, June 3 at 6:30 pm ET

As part of the 2022 Children's Literature Association Conference, we proudly invite conference attendees and the general public to a free conversation with best-selling young-adult author Nic Stone.

The Children's Literature Association invites you to

**An Evening with Nic Stone in Collaboration
with the Auburn Avenue Research Library
on African American Culture and History**



The Children's Literature Association (ChLA) invites you to join us for a conversation with Nic Stone, moderated by the Auburn Avenue Research Library, to discuss her books for young adults, Atlanta, and social justice.

Friday, June 3, 2022
Hyatt Regency Atlanta | International Ballroom

Doors Open at 6 p.m.
Event is Free and Open to the Public

Book Signing to follow the discussion

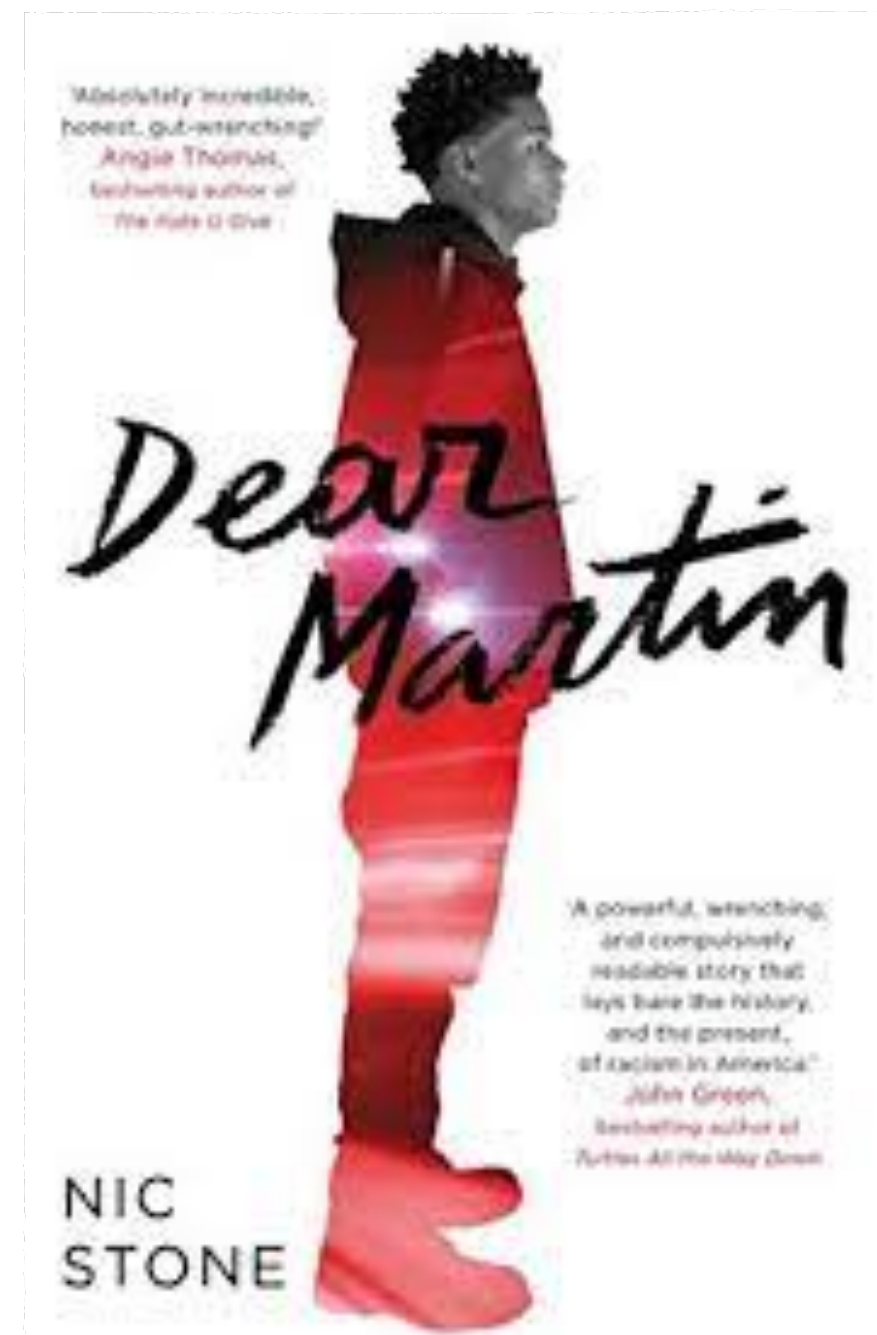
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Nic Stone was born and raised in a suburb of Atlanta, GA, and the only thing she loves more than an adventure is a good story about one. After graduating from Spelman College, she worked extensively in teen mentoring and lived in Israel for a few years before returning to the U.S. to write full-time. Growing up with a wide range of cultures, religions, and backgrounds, Stone strives to bring these diverse voices and stories to her work.



CENSORED SUBJECTS, CENSORED MINDS!

Dear Martin

a novel by Nic Stone

Synopsis from Ember/Random House, publisher:

Justyce McAllister is a good kid, an honor student, and always there to help a friend—but none of that matters to the police officer who just put him in handcuffs. Despite leaving his rough neighborhood behind, he can't escape the scorn of his former peers or the ridicule of his new classmates.

Justyce looks to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for answers. But do they hold up anymore? He starts a journal to Dr. King to find out.

Then comes the day Justyce goes driving with his best friend, Manny, windows rolled down, music turned up—way up, sparking the fury of a white off-duty cop beside them.

Words fly. Shots are fired. Justyce and Manny are caught in the crosshairs. In the media fallout, it's Justyce who is under attack.

Conference Reporter's Note:

When I went to the ChLA conference, I had not read *Dear Martin*, nor had I heard of the author Nic Stone. While waiting in line to purchase the book in anticipation of that evening's special keynote by Ms. Stone, I overheard several conference attendees talking about how a group of Georgia Librarians "pulled together" to garner community support and donations to purchase hundreds of copies of the book, *Dear Martin* after it came under attack and was banned in several Georgia school districts in 2018 and 2019.

The copies were then distributed to local libraries, churches, schools, offices, and community centers. It was a successful grass-roots campaign against censorship that I found intriguing!

Needless to say, I was even more eager to meet the author and hear about her reactions to subsequent bans of her books in other states, including my state of Missouri in January 2022. Unfortunately, I do not have transcripts of the conference keynote presentation by Ms. Stone. However, because the questions and answers were very similar, I have included highlights of an interview conducted by blogger Edith Campbell in 2022 with Nic Stone for the readers review.

For more information on this interview contact E. Campbel at crazyquilts@hotmail.com

- **EC: You wrote *Dear Martin* years ago and it was soon challenged right there in your home state, Georgia, for being "unacceptable" because it contains "extreme content and explicit language". Should books mirror real life our should they be made up stories? How do we use literature to inform us of better and other ways of being?**
-

NS: You know, the most interesting thing about having books challenged in this way is the fact that I have memories of reading what felt to me like "ban-able" content in the books I was assigned in high school. Angela's Ashes for instance. The Scarlet Letter (like homegirl got knocked up by a preacher!). Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Oedipus Rex (that was certainly a wild one!).

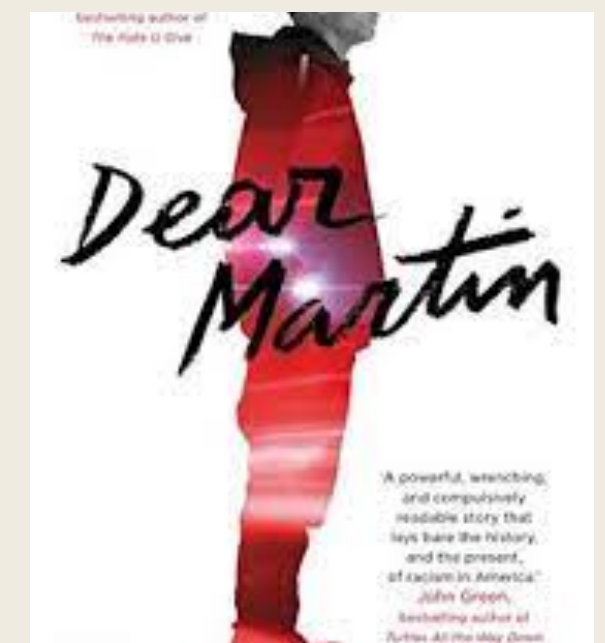
But I think it safe to say most, if not all, of these texts, mirrored life at the time they were written. Stories have always been the source of information about how to live life, and literature is the only medium that gives us access to a myriad of experiences while leaving room for us to think critically and interpret things according to the way we each see the world. The best way to use it is to merely engage with it. It does its own work.

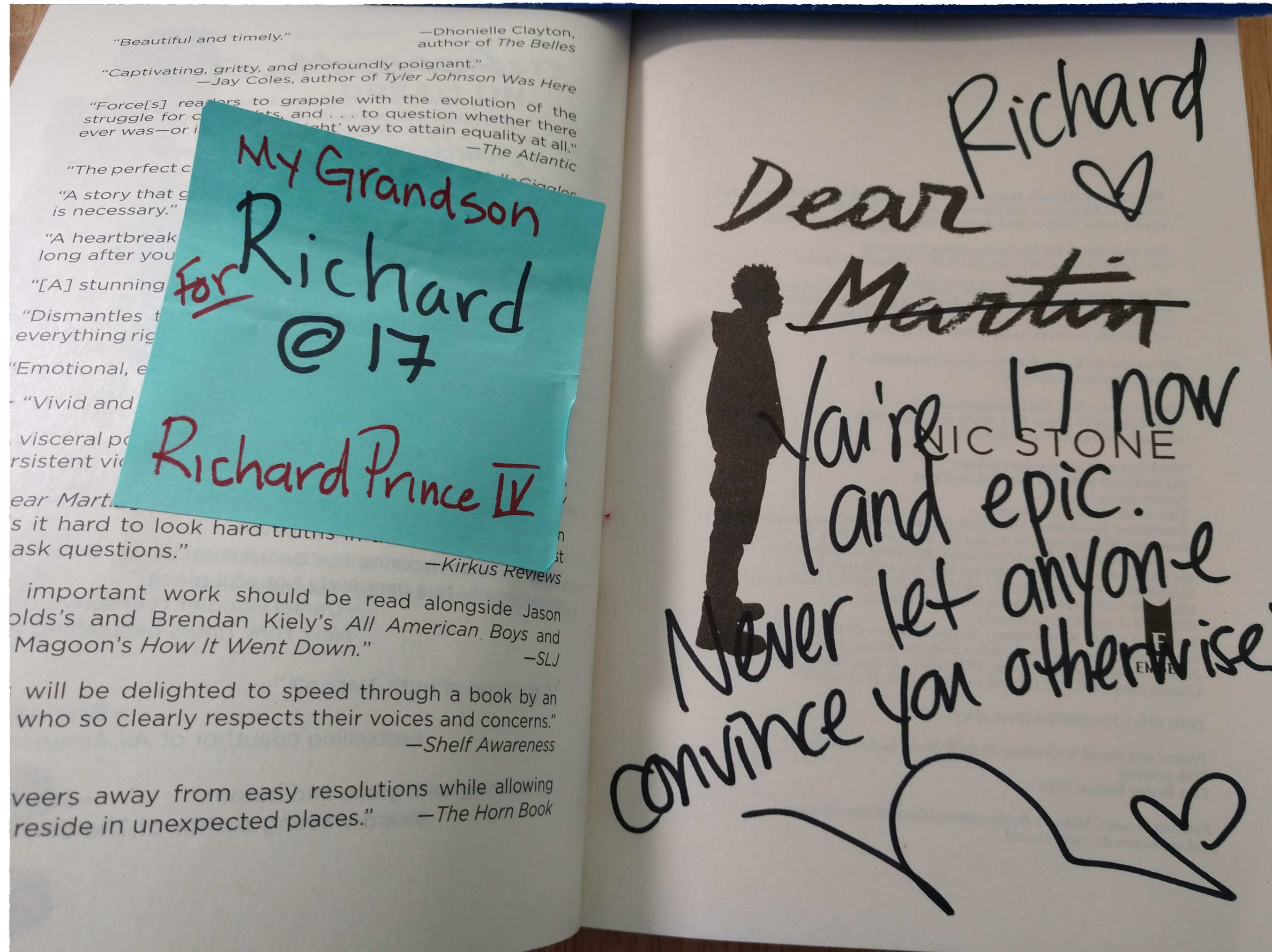
- **EC: And, what did you learn about why and how people challenge books?**

NS: Oh man, this part was truly enlightening, especially from 2016 through the present: people, especially those in positions of power who are accustomed to being prioritized (even if they don't realize they're accustomed to it) really dislike things and ideas that challenge the beliefs that serve as the foundation for their elevated status.

Discomfort is the root of pretty much all book bans. Discomfort with who the books are about. Discomfort with what the books might reveal. Discomfort with the possibility of being wrong. Discomfort with the notion of uncertainty or loss of control.

Those with power wield it mightily when it comes to what their children may or may not be exposed to in school. And it's such a curious thing to me... Like take the pushback against books that mention or discuss human chattel slavery in America. Nobody alive today owned slaves. So why is there so much opposition to learning about people who did and seeing/believing the documentation that supports slavery's existence?





Conference Reporter's Note:

I want to thank author Nic Stone for autographing my book to my grandson Richard Prince IV, now 5 years old. I intend to present *Dear Martin* to him on his 17th birthday.

As an author and mother of boys, Nic Stone is acutely aware of the the trials and tribulations that Black boys and men face in this country, and so she wrote:

Dear Richard,

You're 17 now - and epic. Never let anyone convince you otherwise. Nic Stone



Negotiating Censorship in Conservative Communities

Since 1982, **Banned Books Week** has become an annual event celebrating the freedom to read.

Typically held during the last week of September, it spotlights current and historical attempts to censor books in libraries and schools.

It brings together the entire book community – librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types – in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those some consider unorthodox or unpopular.

A **Book Challenge** is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group.

A **Book Banning** is the removal of those materials.



STEPS FOR NEGOTIATING CENSORSHIP IN CONSERVATIVE COMMUNITIES

1. Harambee! Join “Unite Against Book Bans” campaign
2. Be Informed - Participate in “Banned Book Week” every September
3. Gather Support
4. Raise Awareness
5. Contact Decision Makers
6. Create, Circulate, And Successfully Deliver A Petition
7. Seek Media Attention: Social, Radio, TV and Print Media.
8. Report The Incident To the American Library Association (ALA)

For more tools and tips to help you or your organization fight book bans in your community, go to the Unite Against Book Bans website and download the UABB PDF Toolkit:

<https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/toolkit/>



CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON “FORBIDDEN FORESTS” AND THE “MIGHTY WINDS” OF CENSORSHIP

THE OAK TREE

A mighty wind blew night and day. It stole the Oak Tree’s leaves away. Then snapped its boughs and pulled its bark until the Oak was tired and stark. But still the Oak Tree held its ground while other trees fell all around. The weary wind gave up and spoke, *“How can you still be standing Oak?”*

The Oak Tree said, I know that you can break each branch of mine in two, carry every leaf away, shake my limbs and make me sway. But I have roots stretched in the earth, growing stronger since my birth. You’ll never touch them, for you see they are the deepest part of me.

Until today, I wasn’t sure of just how much I could endure.

But now I’ve found with thanks to you, I’m stronger than I ever knew.

Poem by Johnny Ray Ryder Jr.



If we all pull together to resist the might winds of censorship we can be the roots that enable the authors of our Oak Trees to survive.

May they resist the winds of censorship and never stop writing. May we never stop reading! Dr. Avila Hendricks, Professor of Education (June 2022)